Recursion Error

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"I mean, my life was pretty great until I got shanghaied into the global furry resistance from another universe."

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Chapter 1

A/N- I can explain.

I know what you're thinking. "Writer's Domino, what're ya doing? Ya went from writing anime to Sonic? How could you go so low?" Just let me explain.

So I was never really a Sonic buff. I played, like, one of his games as a kid and saw a few episodes of a cartoon when I had the TV on for white noise in the background. Otherwise anything I knew was just general osmosis due to the fact he's so prevalent in internet and video game culture. So overall I had a pretty good gist of who he was.

Fast forwards, and the live-action Sonic movie trailer comes out. Me, being pessimistic due to the low success rate of video game films, ragged on the trailer like everybody else. "The Sonic model looks like a nightmare, movie'll sink, ha ha Gangster's Paradise," and that was that. Fast forward a bit more and the model goes from being a Lovecraftian abomination to something reasonable, and that spark of hope that the movie'll be good gets lit.

Movie comes out. A couple of weeks go by, I see the reviews, and I see that they're positive for the most part. So I decide to go see the movie despite not really knowing a lot about Sonic. Was pleasantly surprised to learn that the movie was decent, to the point I'd go as far as to say that it was good. Left feeling better than I thought I did.

More time passes afterwards, and as I'm watching more reviews on the movie the Unseen YouTube Algorithm Gods decide to pop a video in my feed that talked about the Archie Sonic comic series. Now, I'd heard whispers about the comic, but I didn't know jack about it. I watch the video, and thirty seconds in I

begin to mentally tune it out and go to the comment section to look for funny comments, as is to be expected, when I notice one of the top comments talking about a character in the comic that died to a LCD-laced chili-dog.

"That can't be real," I think, "there's no way they'd put something like that in a kid's comic about Sonic the Hedgehog."

I do some research. By that, I mean I look up some stuff on Google Images. I'm scrolling through a bunch of Archie comic covers when one catches my eye: one of the covers for the Knuckles side series that went on for thirty-ish issues, and, due to me not having any context for what I was seeing, I immediately saw the cover as "Knuckles the Echidna and a ripped version of Bonzi Buddy fighting Kraven the Hunter from Spider-Man." It wasn't really that, but if you read it you know what I'm talking about.

"Okay," I say, "I gotta go deeper."

Now, it's around the same time quarantine due to the pandemic hits, so I'm stuck at home without much to do. That in conjunction to all this solidifies my decision to go ahead and read the whole comic series based on no other reason than I had literally nothing better to do, especially since I was close to finishing Monochromatic Ideals at the time.

So I read it. I go to a legally-dubious comic website and read it. The full 290 issues, all the side comics and series that are related to it, the whole shebang. And then I wiki-read the plot of a lot of the games so I had context to a lot of things.

Overall, it was... decent, I guess. Characters were kinda all over the place, plot was out there and really wild, and the first, like, whole quarter has that weird comic-humor thing that eventually gets completely dropped in favor of being a bit too serious for what the comic is, but for a comic series about Sonic it was decent enough.

But then 252 happens.

But then that damn Mega Man crossover happens and Eggman pulls a Pucci and resets the Archie Sonic universe.

You really get to feel what Emporio felt, too, because that's how bad the reset was. Whole characters are straight-up deleted from the story, whole plot threads, plot points, and story arcs are erased, issues upon issues of characterization are undone, whole new alternate histories that are almost never touched on replace the old, invalidating any time learning that, and some characters that did survive are replaced by alternate versions. It's to the point that I felt like Emporio at the end of Jojo Part 6, like I'm really in the back of the car along with these weird alternate versions of Sonic characters and as we're driving away I look up at the sky and ghostly apparitions of the previous characters are looking down at me from the clouds and are giving me thumbs-ups. This was done because the fine people at Archie wanted to incorporate the plot of the Sonic games in the story, so they decided to rehash the whole thing. This made it so that half of the whole story gets snapped out of existence, and the other half gets turned inside-out into an unrecognizable mess just to fit the plot of video games into the continuity.

(Edit: I was informed by a couple reviewers that the real reason for the reset was due to some legal issues Archie had, which I confirmed with some light research after the fact. It's way more understandable what happened with context, but my point remains the same.)

As a reader, I felt affronted. I felt like the extremely large time investment I just spent on this story was thrown out the window because the whole thing was reset and therefore completely invalidated. As a amateur writer I felt outraged, because it was such a nonsensical writing decision that was a single step away from destroying the story as a whole that I had to wonder what the hell the story writers were thinking.

But I mean, hey, I'm a fanfic writer, so what do I know?

Anyways, in response to my outrage, I decided that my next project was gonna be this. I'm writing this story more out of spite than anything else (a terrible decision, really, but I already planned the whole thing out and everything, so hey), but also to fix the story that I spent so much time on that got butchered while also writing something with an overarching theme of actions and consequences, 'cause, y'know, the meme (thanks Sammy), using the one method I do best: make a OC and write a story around him.

So this is that. OC-man and a theme, because themes are something I didn't really do that well with Monochromatic Ideals and am experimenting with, and OCs because they're my specialty. All together in a journey that'll span hundreds of thousands of words because I'm salty over a comic.

... Can't believe this is what it's come to. Sonic fanfiction. That thing everyone on the internet makes jokes over. I really am scraping the bottom of the barrel here.

P.S. There's never gonna be a A/N as long as this one. This is more or less me trying to make justifications to myself for writing this, because I'm still in disbelief that I'm going through with this. But a lot of books have that one page in the beginning that's basically just a author's note, so just treat this as that.

Recursion Error

Episode 1- Prologue

The Special Zone. A whole universe whose composition was in constant flux at the will of its one, singular ruler. There was no ground, sea, or sky, as in place of all that was an infinite abyss spanning in all directions that glowed a spectrum of colors beyond

imagination. What structures did exist all existed at the whim of its sole inhabitant. A completely shapeless place beyond imagination, where the ruler was all but omnipotent. A true god.

That same individual, whose size rivaled mountains, was leaning against a structure of purple shapes piled onto each other as a mountain, his body littered in large, bleeding gashes. His body was completely still and lacked breath, was bled to the point that his wounds no longer bled, and his gargantuan left arm was missing entirely.

"God, huh? Didn't feel like it to me."

On a small, grass-filled floating platform below the god's body was a single individual that was looking up at the large body. His body was entirely covered by a red cloak, and a red hood over his head obscured any visible features. Over his shoulder he held a small duffel bad, which he threw on the ground under him. The top of the bag opened upon landing, and inside was a large, gray, diamond-shaped gem that glowed brightly inside the darkness of the bag.

The light it gave off illuminated the obvious bloodstains splashed on the gem, and the cloaked figure gave a sigh at the sight.

"I didn't wanna do this, Feist. Really. But you just wouldn't give me the damn rocks." The man looked to his side, where six similar gems, each glowing a different color, were piled next to him. Pale, human hands, the only visible feature on the figure, reached over to grab the gems and toss them all inside the duffel bag. "We just met, but... yeah, you didn't really seem like that great a guy. And I heard stories. But I didn't wanna kill you, damn it."

As if in response, Feist's body slipped off the makeshift mountain and fell into the endless abyss below. The cloaked man walked to the edge of the platform he stood on, duffel bag slung over his shoulder, and watched the giant panda's body fall far enough that it soon disappeared out of sight.

The second the body disappeared, everything shook. The platform, the rapidly-collapsing mountain, the ever-shifting structures dotting the distance, and even the space that comprised the world itself began to waver and shake. "Looks like the zone's disappearing due to his death. Sounds about right," the man muttered before turning around. "Well, whatever. Just gotta drop these things off. Then after that..." He paused, and began to walk forwards. "Yeah, and after that I still got a million things to do."

The shaking increased, and objects began falling all around. A particularly large piece of debris fell towards the grass-filled platform, but by the time it crashed into and destroyed the platform, the man had disappeared entirely.

And soon after, the Special Zone disappeared forever.

Shorty after the destruction of the zone, the man found himself sitting on a pipe with his legs dangling off the edge. In his left hand was the duffel bag containing the gems. In his right hand was a large claymore with a blade as long as he was tall, which he continually bounced off his shoulder in an almost anxious manner as he looked below him.

The room he found himself in was vast and dark, with metal walls found no matter where one looked. Metal pipes, large wires, and other loose electronics hung from every surface, and the ground below was so far down that it almost couldn't be seen. In the middle of this room was a large, raised platform with a walkway in its back that lead to a door at the back end of the room. This platform housed dozens of computer monitors, each of which were connected to cables and wires that hung from the walls and ceilings, and in front of those computers sitting in a large, round chair, was a man.

A creaking sound was heard as the cloaked man tightened his grip on his sword's hilt.

In front of those computers, in that chair, was a human man with wildly disproportionate appendages. His body was large and round, but his arms and legs long and spindly. His head was also rounded, with a pointed nose, a bald head that cleanly reflected the light of his computers, and a ginger mustache that was almost as wild as the manic grin on the man's face as he tapped away at his computers.

"Hey. Eggman. Up here."

The calling of his name caused the round man to sit up straight in his chair and look around wildly. His chair eventually swiveled around, and after some more looking Eggman looked up at the pipe that the cloaked man sat on. Though his eyes were hidden behind a pair of blue-tinted spectacles, Eggman's expression was easily readable as his mustache bristled and a pointed a gloved hand up at him in an overly dramatic manner.

"What the- hey! Just who are you!?" he demanded. His almost high voice that was roughened with age was enough to make the cloaked man twitch. "And just who do you think you are, sneaking into my perfectly-reputable secret lair without so much as a heads-up!? Do you realize just how discourteous-"

"You don't know how much I hate you, Eggman," the cloaked man interrupted, which quieted Eggman. "You couldn't comprehend it even with all your intelligence. I didn't even know it was possible to hate somebody this much until I started hating you. I can barely even think straight when I look at your face. Your voice makes me want to tear my ears off. You're the worst person that's ever existed, Robotnik, and I'll never forgive you for anything you've ever done.

"... Anyways, here, have all seven of the Chaos Emeralds."

And just like that, the duffel bag the cloaked man held was tossed down to Eggman's level. The bag bounced off the ground once before touching down and sliding to a stop near his feet. Surprise flashed through Eggman's features before his mouth pursed in suspicion, and his head bobbed up and down from the man with the

red cloak to the bag a total of four times. Slowly, be bent down while maintaining his gaze on the hooded man while pulling the bag near him. It was only when he had both hands on the bag did Eggman look down and open the bag.

Surprise once again spread over his face as bright colors flooded out from the bag, all originating from seven gems piled right into the bag.

Eggman looked back up at the hooded man, who continued to silently observe him, and then scrambled back to his chair. He grabbed the handle of a small, rectangular device off his chair and brought it back to the bag, and then proceeded to wave the device over gems. The device soon let out a loud, whirring sound, and when Eggman turned it over to examine the glass screen on its front, he began to madly cackle as he carelessly tossed the device over his shoulder.

"I didn't believe you for a single second there, but these readings don't lie!" he gleefully exclaimed as he opened the bag further to examine the gems within it. "How in the world did you even manage to acquire these!? Last I checked six of these puppies were sequestered away in that infernal Special Zone, and one was locked away in Castle Acorn!" He paused, and then grimaced when he came to the gray, bloodstained gem. "Oh, what is this?" he asked, voice annoyed. "You couldn't have bothered to clean this one before delivering-"

There was a flash of metal, and the edge of the cloaked man's sword was pressed up against Eggman's neck. Eggman, who hadn't even seen the man move from the pipe to right in front of him, froze up and slowly rose up to his feet while raising his hands. Though the man was significantly shorter than him, the sword more than made up for it, and even as he rose to his full height Eggman found that the sword's tip was still pressed against his throat.

"It kills me that I could end it all right now, but can't. It kills me even more I have to give you these things," the cloaked man told him. "It'd be so easy, too. One cut and your head comes right off. How many

people on this planet would praise me if I did it? How many problems would I solve at this very moment? It's the most tempting thing in the world, killing you right here and now."

As he talked, the hooded man pressed the tip of the sword harder and harder into Eggman's throat. The doctor, for his part, actually began to sweat but otherwise remained stoic at the sight of the blade pointed at him. He held his breath when the sword dug deeper, and then exhaled the breath when it was lowered away from him.

"Ah, well. It's all in accordance with His will, and it'll all work out in the end anyways. So I guess I can let it slide." The cloaked man's posture became more relaxed as he rested the large sword on his shoulders, and he went as far as to roll back and forth on his feet. "Congratulations," he said in a light tone of voice, "you get to get off scot-free. Enjoy."

"... Right," Eggman mumbled as he took a step backwards away from the other male. "I've eternally subjugated people for doing far less, you know," he threatened, one hand rubbing at the spot on his neck the sword had pressed into.

The cloaked man shrugged. "You could try," he agreed, and then bounced the claymore up and down off his shoulder. "Be a waste of robots, though."

"Hmph." The doctor looked down, and an interested hum escaped him. "Your hands," he noted. "They're human. Or are you an Overlander? So hard to differentiate the two, I tell you."

A bemused chuckle left the hooded man. "I'll be real. I don't even know anymore," he admitted.

"Huh. That's rather vague," Eggman commented. "Just what is it you're trying to accomplish here? I would say you giving me the seven most powerful items in the known universe is a sign you wish to join me all-powerful and illustrious empire, but that just isn't your intention, now, is it?"

"Pfft. Hell no," the cloaked man said. "I wouldn't be caught dead joining you. The fact we're both wearing red right now is purely coincidental." He gestured to his red cloak and the black and red outfit Eggman wore, and then spun on his feet and turned his back to the doctor. "Look, I just handed you over literally unlimited power with no strings attached," he told him as he began walking away. "Don't worry too much about the details. They're yours now, seriously. Now go build up your war machines so you can carry out your evil plans for world conquest or whatever. I don't care."

The distance between them began to grow, with Eggman clutching the bag of emeralds to his chest while the hooded man continued to walk away. It was when the cloaked figure was halfway down the walkway did the doctor choose to open his mouth and shout "Who are you, anyways!?" to the man, but he didn't so much as slow down when the question reached his ears.

Right as he neared the door leading out of the room, the door opened and a human even shorter in him scrambled through, with his long nose pointed downwards as he squinted at a small, digital screen he held in his hands. "Doctor, I really think we oughta discuss our production quotas at site C," he called out. "I've done a little resource inventory and after crunching some numbers-" He looked up, and then did a double-take when he saw the cloaked man right in front of him before coming to a stop. "W-who are you?"

Thwack!

Instead of answering him, the cloaked man punched the small man in the face. He cried out in pain and fell onto his backside on the platform, and the cloaked man released a satisfied sigh as he shook his left hand. "Never gets old," he said in a wistful tone before walking past the short man and disappearing through the open door.

All of this was largely ignored by Eggman, who continued to examine the bag of gems in his hands. He'd eventually glanced up at the bag to see if he could catch one last glimpse of the man, but by then he

had already left. The shorter, long-nosed man on the ground and rubbing at the growing bruise on his face was still ignored.

"I'm not one to question a gift, but even I have to admit that this is too good to be true." He shrugged, and then turned around to his chair and began to climb in. "Well, doesn't matter now!" he claimed as his chair spun towards his computer monitors. "Pick yourself up off the ground, Snively! All the power in the world just fell into my lap and I aim to use it!"

A groan followed by approaching footsteps reached his ears as Snively stepped next to his chair, still rubbing at the bruise on his face. "So we're scrapping *that* plan, then?" he asked. "The big plan involving the whole fleet and the mechs and all the bombshells we just produced?"

"Small potatoes in the grand scheme of things now that all seven Emeralds are in my possession!" Eggman claimed with a wave of his hand. "Let that rodent continue his resistance in his cozy little kingdom. My ultimate victory against him will be all the sweeter if I conquer the whole of the world utterly and completely before ending him! It would be definitive proof of my victory against him, and it's only after I see the light of hope leave his eyes will I finally end him. And with these Emeralds, I can make it all possible." He smiled, and his fingers began to fly over the keyboard. "Time to draw up the battle plans, Snively. We have a lot of work ahead of us."

A/N- This is technically Episode 0, but if I do that then the episode numbers don't line up with the chapter numbers and it would drive me crazy. You know how it be.

Chapter 2

Recursion Error

Episode 2- Orange juice ruined my life

"You're out? What do you mean you're out?"

"We're, uh... we're out. I don't know what else to tell you." The man wasn't anybody overly special. He had on the same store uniform the rest of the employees did, and just like the rest of the employees he had that vapid look in his eyes as he addressed the teenager right in front of him who was currently and angrily gesturing towards an isle of juices. "Most days we have orange juice. This isn't one of those days. You know how it is."

The teenager, mouth open wide in disbelief, shook his head and fully turned to the refrigerated isle. "You're telling me you're carrying all this milk, all this lemonade and all this iced tea... but orange juice? Possibly one of the most common commodities to ever exist? You're out of that?" He turned back to the store employee, shoulders slumped and eyes full of desperation. "C'mon, man, I'll even take that gross extra-pulp stuff. I'm desperate here."

"Kid, I'm telling you, we're out." The aged store employee, who had a large, sweeping mop in his hand, scratched the side of his head as he looked around. "Look, what was your name again?"

"My name is Sorun," the teen answered. "It's for my mom, man. You can't at least check the back or something?"

The store employee's eyes narrowed in a scrutinizing manner as he stared down the teen in front of him. "Is it?"

Sorun fidgeted under the sweeping man's eyes, and after a few moments sighed and turned his head away. "Alright, no, it isn't. She's

fine and doesn't touch the stuff. I just really want some orange juice." He nodded his head to the store shelves behind him. "But you're out."

"Ah." The employee nodded his head, and then glanced down at the watch on his wrist. "You came all the way to the store this late at night for orange juice?"

"I didn't have anything better to do," Sorun grumbled in an indignant tone. "You're seriously judging me for biking all the way here for orange juice?"

"... How old are you again, son?"

Sorun quirked an eyebrow at the older man, but decided to indulge him and answer. "Sixteen. Why?"

"You're sixteen and you're still using a pedal bike? Don't most kids your age have a car by now?"

At this, the teen threw his hands up in frustration. "Are you seri- are you gonna help me or not?" He pointed to the white, tiled flooring around them. "You really so bored sweeping the floor that you'd rather mess with me than do your job?"

"Eh. Pretty much," the employee answered with a shrug. "Spend five years in my shoes and you'd be doing the same." He placed the head of the wet mop on the floor and began to sweep away from Sorun. "Now I'd be glad to help you, but I don't want to. Because I have to get to these floors. Thank you and have a good night, sir."

Eyes wide in disbelief, it was all Sorun could do to not let his jaw drop as he waved the sweeping man away. "Yeah man, yeah, sure, thanks... dick," he whispered under his breath before turning back to the shelves.

It was a depressing sight, really. Seeing a shelf that spanned from one end of the store to the other, fully lit and refrigerated and stack

from bottom to top in every single refrigerated store-bought drink one could ever want for. All except for orange juice, accentuated by the fact that there was a section in the middle of the shelves that was completely bare.

For Sorun, it defied belief. Doubly so considering it looked as if every single other item on the shelf was fully stocked to the point they were practically brimming off the shelves. He didn't even think there was ever a time he'd walked into a grocery store and they were out of *anything* , let alone orange juice.

"Maaaan," he moaned, "you gotta be kidding me." He went as far as to close his blue eyes, as if trying to will away a bad dream. But when he opened his eyes, the shelves were still empty. "Yeah, you're not kidding," he mumbled. "What time is it, anyways?"

He dug into his pocket, found his phone, and brought it up to his face so he could read the screen. He couldn't suppress his groan when he saw the time.

9:06 P.M.

Out so late and he didn't even have so much as a carton of orange juice to show for it.

It was at this moment that Sorun's phone decided to ring, and Sorun, who hadn't expected it, flinched from the phone vibrating and nearly dropped the rectangular device. He managed to catch it right after it slipped out of his fingers, and as he brought it up once more to read the caller ID he could feel his heart beating heavily in his chest. But after reading the screen and realizing that it wasn't his mother calling him, he breathed a sigh of relief and answered the call.

"Ugh, David?" he greeted as he held the phone to his ear. "Whaddya want, man?"

"Yo, Sorun," a male voice answered from the other end of the phone. *"Dude, we doing Bloody Palace tonight or not?"*

Sighing, Sorun rubbed at the bridge of his nose with his free hand. "You seriously called just to ask me that?"

"I'm super bored," David explained. *"C'mon, they finally fixed the LAN connection issues so the co-op mode actually runs smoothly now."* The voice on the other end grew teasing. *"I'll let you main Vergil. I know he's your favorite."*

"David, I'm not even home right now, and I don't have my Switch on me," Sorun said. "Plus I deleted 'Devil May Cry 3' from the Switch."

"You did WHAT!?" the phone yelled, and the volume was so great that Sorun winced and held the phone away from his ear. *"One of the best, nay, THE BEST game you can get on the Switch and you decide to delete it!? What were you thinking!?"*

"I was thinking that DMC was taking up too much space on my Switch and I had other stuff I wanted to install," Sorun answered, bringing the phone back next to his ear. "Give me a break, man. We already cleared all the floors of co-op Bloody Palace. Twice. We played the damn game to death and back. You really trying to tell me you don't wanna play anything else?"

David's voice on the other side of the phone paused, and then gave a non-committal grunt that barely carried through over the speakers. *"Not really,"* he said.

"Of course." Sorun rolled his eyes, but then froze when he heard something coming from the phone's speakers. A musical melody that he swore he could faintly recognize. "Wait, is that...?" He listened closer, and after a few seconds he finally managed to realize what he was listening to. And as a result, he rolled his eyes again. "What are you doing right now?" he asked David.

"Hm? Studyin'," he said. *"We got that biology test tomorrow."*

"Studying, huh?" Sorun dryly remarked. "I hear that opening song in the background, David. Watching 'Cells at Work' doesn't count as

studying."

There was a scoff from the phone. *"Says you,"* David replied. *"It uses the same exact science we've been learning in biology class. I can either read a book on it or I can watch it in a beautifully animated format. What was I supposed to pick?"*

"I'm not even surprised," Sorun muttered.

"I'd be disappointed if you were." There was a pause. *"Wait, what are you doing if you're not at your house right now?"*

"It was the weirdest thing, man." The teen turned back to the shelves that had given him so much ire, and couldn't help but glare at the empty space before returning his attention to the phone. "I just got a craving for orange juice and I went to the grocery store to buy some." He tilted his head up to the ceiling. "Except, guess what, they're out!" he shouted.

"... How does a grocery store run out of orange juice?"

"I know, it's outrageous." The teen found himself lowering to the ground until he was sitting down and pressing his back against the shelves. "Dunno what I'm gonna do," he admitted. "Any ideas? ... David?"

There was nothing from silence from the phone, and when Sorun called David's name again, there was no reply. He stared down at the phone in confusion, and was about to call his name a third time before he heard rustling from the other end followed by David's hushed voice.

"- Get off! Uh, sorry about that, dude. Cat jumped on my laptop. What were you saying?"

"I was saying how I don't know what I'm supposed to do," Sorun repeated.

"Ah. Hm... hey, isn't there that one organic store across the way? They'd have orange juice, right? Or at the very least some oranges. Just go there."

"You mean that one store clear across the other side of town?" Sorun asked in an incredulous tone. "Dude, c'mon, it's a school night and my mom's already gonna kill me for being out so late. I don't wanna bike all over town for orange juice."

The sound of air being blown into the phone's speakers sounded from the phone. *"Then dude, I got nothin' for ya,"* David said. *"Listen, I gotta go. Seeya tomorrow, shorty."*

"Yeah, sure, see you- hey." He tore the phone away from his ear and stared angrily at the screen, and his eyes widened when he heard mocking laughter from the phone before the call disconnected. "... Three-and-a-half feet isn't even that short, asshole... eh, who am I kidding?" he muttered as he put the phone back in his pocket. "'Kay, what am I doing?"

He picked himself up off the ground and turned once again to the shelves. An annoyed whine escaped his throat when his eyes wandered to the empty space, but otherwise he managed to keep himself calm as he scratched at his cheek in thought.

"I really *don't wanna go and spend practically half the night running around town. I got school tomorrow. On the other hand, I really want that orange juice. I'm seriously gonna go all that way just to get some juice, though?"* He focused on the empty spot on the shelves one more time, and then sighed. *"Alright, screw it,"* he thought, *"I really want that orange juice."*

It wasn't the wisest choice he had ever made, and he was sure that he was going to be paying for it later, one way or another. But that peculiar craving he'd all of a sudden gotten just wouldn't go away, and he honestly didn't know if he could bear to go through it a whole night. But his mother would understand.

He hoped, at least.

Shoom!

Sorun went straight upon hearing that sound. It was a strange sound- the high-pitched whirring of thrumming energy- and a sound that was completely foreign to Sorun's ears. He slowly turned around from the shelves to the space behind him, and he nearly lost his footing when he saw what was making the noise.

For lack of a better term, it was a hole. Between the shelves he stood next to and the back wall of the store, there was a large, green hole floating just off of the floor. The hole was constantly thrumming with energy, and the inside was a constant, swirling mass of green tendrils of energy that occasionally stretched out of the circular aperture of the hole.

A strange sight, to be sure, and one that left Sorun completely baffled.

"What the...?" he muttered. He tilted his head in confusion at the sight of the strange, green thing he was staring at, and blinked heavily a few times just to make sure he wasn't seeing things. But no matter what he tried, the green energy vortex remained hovering above the floor. "Uh... sweeper guy?" Sorun called as he turned his head to the side. "You, uh, you there? Guy? Anyone?"

He looked to the left and then right side of the area he was in, but there was nobody else around him. Not a single shopper or employee, and not even that man with the mop. An uneasy hum escaped his throat, and he took a cautious step towards the green, swirling hole while maintaining eye contact with it.

"The hell is this thing?" Sorun asked himself. Each slow, steady step was filled with more trepidation than the last, and it was only when he was a few inches away from the portal did he crouch down and waved his hand over it. "Some kind of weird... thing, or... wh-what is this?"

He decided not to touch, for fear of what would happen if he touched it. The little arcs of green electricity that would occasionally spark out from the vortex-like hole didn't look all too inviting, either, and when a particularly big electricity spark hit the ground near him he decided to back up a step. And by then he wanted to walk away entirely.

But then a voice came out of the hole.

"H-hello?" The voice that came out of the portal sounded broken and warbled, but even through the distortion Sorun could make out that it was a rather high voice. "Is anyone there? Hello?"

"... I really gonna do this?" Sorun thought to himself, but when he looked around once more and saw that nobody was still around, he sighed. *"Yeah, guess I am,"* he decided and stepped next to the portal. "Umm... hey," he greeted, voice unsure.

"Oh, there's someone there!" the voice cried out, sounding much more excited. "You're the one, right? The person that the tablet was talking about?"

Sorun looked to the sides once again. Still nobody. "Uh... no?" he answered.

"Huh? Y... you're not?"

"I'm pretty sure? I don't- what's going on here?" Sorun asked, and then gestured to the area around him. "Is this, like, some kind of weird store promotion or something? Seriously, what is this?"

"... No, you have to be," the voice declared. "The coordinates pointed to... no, this has to be right! Please, I need you to come with me!"

Sorun frowned, and he pointed his index finger at the green hole. "You want me to go in there?"

"Yes! Please! I can't keep this open for much longer and, and we really need your help! Please!"

"Uh..." The voice certainly sounded sincere, or at least as sincere as a strange, distorted voice coming out of a random green vortex could sound. On the other hand, Sorun was so off-put by what was happening in front of him that he'd unconsciously taken a step backwards when the voice had asked him to go into the hole. And the more he thought on it, the more he realized that he didn't want to be there. "Yeah, no, I'm not gonna do that," he told the voice. "So... yeah. Gonna just... go away. Bye."

"W-wait, no, just hold on a second!"

"This is too weird. I'm not dealing with this," Sorun thought as he turned his back to the vortex and began to move away. *"I don't know, I don't care. Just gonna leave, get my orange juice, go home-"*

Any further thoughts were cut off when he felt something grab his left ankle and pull. He lost his balance and fell onto his back with a grunt, and as he leaned upwards he saw what had grabbed him: an arm. It was an incredibly thin arm, and for some reason it was yellow, but there was no mistaking the gloved hand attached at the end that was gripping his ankle.

And then he began to panic when the arm began to drag him towards the vortex.

"What the- hey!" he screamed. "Let me go!"

If the voice on the other side of the portal heard him, they didn't make any indication, and instead continued to drag Sorun towards the hole. Sorun, feeling the fear increase exponentially the closer he was brought to the vortex, was trying and failing to grab onto something to halt his progression. But all his hands could do was slip off the linoleum tiles that made up the floor, and he couldn't so much as gain enough traction to try and drag himself away. In a move of desperation, he went as far as to try and kick at the arm that was dragging him, but he only got as many as two kicks in before his feet were dragged into the hole.

Sorun's scream began shrill when his feet disappeared entirely in the green vortex, followed by his legs as he was dragged in further and further.

"Hey, come on, stop!" He'd been dragged all the way up to his torso, and by this point the teen was grabbing around wildly in an attempt to grab at something to try and drag himself out. "Stop!" he screamed out as his left arm vanished into the vortex. By the time it reached his shoulders, he'd turned onto his stomach and reached a hand out in a final attempt to save himself. "Stop, stop, STO-AAAAH!"

His fear-ridden screams cut out right as the last of his body was pulled through the vortex, upon which the green portal disappeared entirely to leave a clean, untouched floor in a quiet store. It was five minutes later that the store employee had walked by and had mopped the exact same spot on the floor the portal had been on.

"Oh... oh, man, what the hell..."

Everything was sore. Sorun didn't even know why; the last thing he remembered was being dragged through that green hole, and now he was here. Where "here" was he had no idea, because he was so nauseous that he couldn't even go as far as to open his eyes. And even if he wasn't he was so riddled with fear he couldn't even move.

What he did know was that he was lying flat on his back. Somewhere. And that there was an almost earthen smell going into his nose that he was barely able to register because his own thoughts were so sluggish and confused right now.

"There was... weird, green thing, then that hand..." The teen rolled his head to the side to side, and then froze again when a wave of nausea hit him. *"Oh, I'm gonna throw up. I feel awful."*

It was after he was lying down for what felt like minutes did he notice that there were sounds going into his ears. The more he tried to

focus in on these sounds, the more he realized there was a loud ringing in his ears that was slowly beginning to fade away. So, without much else to do, he strained his ears as best he could to try and make out some of the sounds he was hearing. He grew even more still when he recognized them as voices.

"Sure... right... this one?"

"Looks... alright... you guys?"

"Isn't... a human...?"

He could only make out bits and pieces, and even then he couldn't make sense of what little bits and pieces of conversation he could pick up. On the upside, feeling started to come back to his limbs, along with the relief that, yes, he still had his limbs. He flexed his fingers, flexed his toes, and when he found a satisfying amount of articulation in his appendages, began to move.

"Oh, man. It all feels awful," he groaned as he slowly began to move, his eyes still screwed shut. "I need... I need a second here."

"Um... sir?" A voice he was actually fully able to understand reached his ears, and he felt a pair of hands grab onto his shoulder and back to help him sit up. "Sir, are you okay?"

"Ugh, man, uh... wait." Once he reached a seated position, the hands left his body, and Sorun froze as a spark of recognition went through his mind when he heard that voice. "Wait-wait-wait... that voice..." His eyes were still closed, but he turned his head towards where he heard the voice and did his best to create an accusing expression on his face. "You're that guy-slash-girl that pulled me through that weird green thing!"

"Er, I'm a guy," the voice corrected, "and I'm really sorry-"

The second Sorun registered the word "sorry" being said to him, a lance of anger shot through him and caused him to instinctively open

his eyes at the voice. "If you're sorry then why did you-!?"

Any voice that was left in his throat died right there the second his brain registered the images his eyes were receiving. His vision was slightly blurred, and at least was gradually clearing, but he had just enough vision to be able to perceive the thing kneeling on a single knee right in front of him.

The problem was that he didn't know what he was looking at.

It was bipedal. He could tell that much at a first glance. It was also yellow and white, and, indeed, had the same kind of limbs as the one that had pulled him through the portal. But his greatest confusion came when he reached the head, and found a large, fur-covered head staring at him with large, blue eyes.

"... Eh?" It was the only response Sorun could think to make as he stared at the thing in front of him. He stared intently at its eyes, and then at the white gloves, and then the red shoes it wore, and then he looked back up to the eyes. "Is this like... some kind of hyper-realistic plush doll somebody left lying around?"

He could have sworn he felt his heart stop when the plush thing blinked and changed its facial structure to look offended. "Hey, I'm not-"

"JESUS, IT'S REAL!"

The panic was back. The same panic he felt when he was being pulled through that portal, magnified tenfold the second a little monster began talking in front of him. Any feelings of nausea instantly washed out of him as he scrambled back away from the yellow thing, screaming all the while. The yellow monster went as far as to try and reach out to Sorun, but all that did was make him scream louder, bolt up to his feet, and turn around to try and run away.

But there were more. A lot more monsters, right behind him, and all of them colored with so many colors that Sorun wasn't even able to so much as count them before physical pain assaulted his eyes from all the color. This caused the tenfold panic he was experiencing to transition into hundredfold panic, and the fact he was blinded from his eyes hurting only increased his terror.

So he turned away in a third direction, and was relieved to find when he opened his eyes that there weren't any other monsters. What he did see was a door. It was a door he could barely see since the fear coursing through him was blurring his vision, but at the very least he could make out the outline of a door. So he sprinted to the door, opened the door, and slammed it right behind him.

"Oh my god, oh my god what the hell...!" As soon as he'd closed the door Sorun had pressed his back up against it and spread his limbs out across the frame. *"The hell were those things back there!? Where am I!?"*

His heart was throbbing so hard in his chest that it was beginning to physically pain him, and the fear going through him was making him exhausted to the point that he was panting heavier than he ought to have, but the fear of the room full of *things* being on the other side of the door he was keeping closed was keeping him glued right to the frame. He shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind, or at the very least to try and calm himself down to think comprehensive thoughts, and after doing this and taking a few deep breaths his breathing began to even out and his vision began to straighten.

"Okay... okay, okay what are we doing?" he thought to himself as his eyes darted around the room he found himself in. *"I'm... somewhere, dunno where. There's a bunch of monsters behind this door. Don't know how many, but they're really colorful."* He shook his head. *"Alright, focus! Gotta get out. Gotta get away from here. Where am I... wait, where even am I?"*

After becoming collected enough for rational thought, Sorun took a look around the room to see that, to his surprise, he was in a

bedroom. It was modestly furnished, but it was definitely a bedroom if the bed on the side said anything. There was a desk, too, and a closet that, for whatever reason, only had pairs of socks and gloves spilling out of it.

What the room didn't have, to Sorun's mounting horror, was a window. Or even another door that lead somewhere. Not even an air vent, now that he looked. There was no other exit aside from the door he was leaning on.

"Aw, shit, I boxed myself in."

And then someone knocked on the other side of the door he was pressed against, and Sorun went rigid as fear began to creep back into him.

"Hey, buddy?" It was a different voice from the yellow monster that dragged him into this nightmare. Deeper, but still boyish. Slightly nasally if Sorun really focused on it. "Er, that's just a bedroom, and we're underground, so... there's not really anywhere to go. Think you could come out so we can talk?"

"Just talk?" Sorun asked through the door. "We're just gonna talk? No biting or anything? Just words?"

"Yeah, totally! Nobody wants to hurt anybody here. Alright? But we really need to talk, so could you please come out?" When no response was given, the voice continued. "Look, I promise that nobody is gonna hurt you. We just wanna talk. Honest."

It sounded like a legitimate offer, but Sorun was sorely tempted to take it due to him not trusting the colorful creatures on the other side of the door. This was mostly based on the basis that he didn't trust anything they said. That, and he was too scared to actually open the door.

But then the rational side of his mind told him that he had to leave this room eventually, and they likely weren't going to go away before

he did. And that there were so many of them out there they could probably force the door open if they wanted to. Or at the very least wait until he dropped from exhaustion and dragged him out.

"Ugh, man... I gotta," he realized. "Okay. Okay, I'm opening the door, and I'm coming out."

He backed up off the door and looked down at the doorknob. He didn't want to- he really, *really* didn't-, but there wasn't much choice all things considered. *"Okay, play it cool,"* he thought as he reached for the door knob. *"Just... open the door and find out what happened. And if they eat you, well, there wasn't a lot you could have done. If I'm screwed, I'm screwed."* He gripped the door knob with sweaty palms and slowly began to turn it. *"Oh man, please let them be honest when they said they aren't gonna hurt me..."*

Slowly, the door swung open, and Sorun, with his eyes closed, stepped out. He took a few steps out, squared his shoulders, and took in a deep breath. And then, right after he slowly exhaled, he opened his eyes to look at the crowd in front of him.

He immediately groaned and had to close his eyes again.

"Agh, I'm seein' every color of the rainbow and then some," he groaned as he rubbed at his eyes. He still wasn't able to make out any details on any of the things there, or even how many there were. "Okay, could you all just, like, spread out a bit? I can't- there's too much color. I can't see."

"Oh!" the boyish voice realized. "Er, um, you wanna sit down? Help get your bearings?"

"Sit down? Uh, sure. Sure, yeah." He felt a tap on his arm, and he relaxed as a pair of hands grabbed at his arm and guided him away from where he was. Eventually he heard the sound of a chair scraping against the ground and was guided towards it, to which point Sorun sat down and felt a circular table in front of him. He

leaned forwards on the table, rubbed at his head, and ventured to open his eyes once again to get his bearings.

After looking around a bit, he saw that he was, indeed, sat down at a circular table. Inside of what seemed like an open kitchen, outside of which seemed to, in fact, be a large room that looked like it was underground if the dirt walls said anything.

And standing right next to him and between the colorful crowd in the back was one of the monsters themselves. A blue one- a really blue one with the same lean limbs and beige coloring on his stomach, arms, and mouth. But the only thing Sorun was able to focus on was the blue spikes it had on the back of its head that he could swear were actually sharp enough to cut.

He was suddenly more nervous.

"Er... hi!" He smiled at Sorun and blinked his green eyes- eyes so large that they practically took up half his face now that Sorun looked- in a friendly manner. "So what's your name? I'm Sonic. Sonic the Hedgehog."

"... Sorun," the teen mumbled as he looked Sonic up and down. "The Hedgehog?" he repeated. "I'm not seein' it."

"Huh?" Sonic tilted his head to the side, and Sorun could vaguely make out the two, triangular ears on top of his head twitch. "Whaddya mean? 'Course I'm a hedgehog."

"Nooo. The hedgehogs I know are, like, this big-" Sorun spread his hands a couple inches out from each other, "- aren't colored blue, and they sure don't talk. Where I come from, at least." He turned away and leaned on his arms which he rested on the table. "I got a feeling I'm not where I'm from, though. So yeah."

"Ah," he heard from the side. "So, do they not have Mobians where you come from, or-"

"No, man, they don't," Sorun snapped as he turned back to Sonic. "I don't even know what that is. The *only* thing that walked and talked where I came from were people like me, so you'll have to excuse me for panicking when I get pulled through your stupid green hole of mystery and end up in an underground grotto of animal people!"

The hedgehog flinched back from Sorun's wording, and then looked away as he rubbed at his arm. "Yeah, I guess it... kinda makes sense you'd freak out if you've never seen or heard of a Mobian, huh? You want to meet the others?"

Sorun groaned, brushed a few locks of black hair away from his face, and then pressed his face against his arms. "No. I don't. My eyes are still adjusting to the messed up colors here."

"Messed up colors? What do you mean?"

"I dunno, man." Sorun lifted his head up and looked around. "All the colors are all... sharper than I'm used to and- look, it's getting better, so don't worry about it." He turned his head to Sonic. "What am I doing here?"

Sonic's eyes continued to avert his gaze from Sorun. "Well... we brought you here."

"Yeah. I figured. I'm asking why you people decided to go pull me..." Sorun trailed off, and then shook his head when he remembered he had no idea where he was. "Where even am I?"

"Right. About that." A nervous chuckle left Sonic as he rubbed at the spines on the back of his head. "If I told you we opened a portal to a different universe, your universe, and pulled you from that world to this one, what would you say?"

"I'd ask when I wake up from the fever dream, but I'm not that lucky." The teen looked closer at the hedgehog's eyes, but his awkward smile seemed sincere and his eyes honest. This caused Sorun to

groan out loud and plant his face back into his arms. "Jesus, you're serious," he realized. "Dude. *Why* ?"

"Got time to let me explain?"

Sorun exhaled an exasperated breath. "Sure, go for it."

"Great!" He felt the table vibrate, and Sorun looked up to see Sonic sitting on the edge near him as he looked down at him with a big grin on his face. "So generally speaking, things on our planet Mobius are pretty awesome. All except for one guy who decided to go and ruin things for literally everybody on the planet by trying to take it over with an army of robots he built." He raised up a single finger. "Dr. Eggman."

"Jesus, you people got subjugated by an anthropomorphic egg?" Sorun gasped out. "You're an even bigger loser than I am."

"He's not an actual egg, Sorun. 'Eggman' is a nickname. His real name's Robotnik," Sonic explained in a flat tone. "He's a human. Like you. Sort of- long story- but... yeah, he's a pretty bad dude," he admitted. "We've always been fighting him for years, but no matter how many times we kick his butt and break his toys he comes up madder and better than before!"

"'Kay, yeah, sure, but what does this have to do with me?"

"I'm getting there," Sonic said. "Things usually go back and forth between Eggman and everybody that fights him, us included, but..." His expression saddened. "Things, got really bad a couple months back when he somehow got his hands on all seven of the Chaos Emeralds."

A beat passed as Sonic stared at Sorun in an expectant manner, to which Sorun blinked and tilted his head in confusion. "Sonic, I don't have any context on what Chaos Emeralds are."

"Really? You didn't have those in your world?" he asked in a surprised tone. "Okay, uh, wow. So Chaos Emeralds are, well, these gems. Seven in total. And each and every one has limitless energy inside of it. You following me so far?"

Sorun waved a hand to the side. "No, this is all complete nonsense to me, but keep going."

"Aw, great! So," he continued, "nobody really knows how he got all seven Emeralds, because we had one, and the other six were locked away in the Special Zone- er, 'zone' being another word for a universe," he clarified. "Somehow, Eggman managed to get all the Emeralds from the Special Zone while the one we had was stolen by somebody. And he used them to seriously juice up his forces and take over almost the whole world in weeks!" He balled up one of his hands and slammed it into his open palm. "But, after a ton of fighting from us, we managed to steal the Emeralds back from Eggman. But even after taking the Emeralds, we haven't been able to shake his hold." He turned his head and awkwardly coughed. "We decided we needed help. So we used the Emeralds and got you."

The human teen almost fell out of his chair entirely at that. It was such a shocking statement he sat up ramrod-straight in his seat, and looked Sonic dead in the eyes with disbelief written in his own. He even opened his mouth, but nothing but a gasping breath came out in lieu of words.

"Are you... completely serious?" he finally managed to ask after he cleared his throat to compose himself. "Lemme get this straight, lemme process this," Sorun muttered as he rubbed two fingers at each side of his head. "So, you get these seven rocks. Seven rocks of *unlimited power* , 'cause I guess that's a thing here. You get the Emeralds, and you decide that the best way to use the *infinite energy gems* is to summon... me. Me, a random teenager from Earth." A loud slap resounded across the room as Sorun smacked his own forehead. "What was actually going on in your head that gave you such a 'genius' plan?"

"Hey, we didn't mean to get you specifically," Sonic defended. "We just... so, there was this tablet we had. This wooden tablet. And it had a kind of prophecy thing etched in it-"

"Jesus, here we go..." Sorun sighed as he leaned back in his seat.

"- And this tablet, it's been in the Acorn family- oh, that's the, uh, royal family, basically. Sally over there is part of it. Sally, say hi to Sorun!"

Sonic pointed to the group behind Sorun, and he turned around in his chair towards the person he was pointing too. He was thankful that his eyes had finally adjusted to the colors, but he still found it difficult to look at the group of sixteen-odd animal people- Mobians Sorun had to remind himself- of various shapes and colors that all were staring at him. One in the group, a red-haired Mobian, awkwardly waved to Sorun. Wordlessly, Sorun ignored her and turned back to Sonic.

"So. Wood tablet," Sorun said.

"Yeah, wood tablet," Sonic confirmed. "It had some specific stuff written in it. Like, *really* specific stuff written in it that matched up with things that happened to us while we were gathering all the Emeralds while fighting Eggman. And there were these, er, numbers in there, too, that I didn't really understand but Tails managed to figure out. They pointed to your zone, and it was a zone so far away that we needed the power of all seven Emeralds just to open a portal there. It said that we'd be able to find someone that would help us and would have the power to finally help topple Robotnik's stranglehold on the world. So that's what we did. We used all the Emeralds to get you here on Mobius." The hedgehog clapped his hands together, and the sudden noise made Sorun jump up in his seat. "So! What do you say, Sorun?"

"I say you're a complete fool."

His statement caused the whole room to go quiet, which was only broken momentarily when someone in the crowd near the back coughed. Sonic, who was stunned by Sorun's words, blinked at him in confusion. Sorun, for his part, was staring up at Sonic with wide eyes as he began to run a tired hand down his face.

"Erm... what do you mean?" Sonic asked.

Sorun, who was mentally exhausted at Sonic's explanation, rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Oh, man, Sonic, where do I even begin? You used seven all-powerful gems to summon some random dude from another world to help out with, with what, the robot occupation here? Are you serious!?"

"It seemed like a good bet!" he argued as he hopped off the table and stepped up to Sorun, who turned his chair to face the hedgehog. "Look, I know you're... justifiably a little mad at what we've done, but we seriously need help here, Sorun. We're not making any progress at the rate we're going!"

"And what do you want me to do about it? Look at me," Sorun said as he frantically gestured to himself. "I can't do anything. I-I-I'm a high school student, Sonic. I'm a normal dude!" he shouted, his voice beginning to become shrill. "I don't know how to fight! Jesus, Sonic, I've never even *been* in a fight! I don't have any special skills, or-or special powers or anything like that! I'm not even that strong! I'm below-average if anything!" Sonic opened his mouth to argue the point, but Sorun leaned forwards in his chair and held a finger out to stop him. "No, shut up and listen. I can't help you. There is not a *thing* I can do to help you and your friends, Sonic. I'm the kind of guy that'll die twenty seconds in if you throw me into a live combat situation! I'm useless!"

"Aw, don't say that." Sonic flashed the human teen a warm smile, reached over, and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "You're plenty special as you are right now! And just 'cause you're not super-strong doesn't make you a useless person. I'm sure there's something-"

"No, no-no-no, dude, you're not listening to me." Sorun brushed the hand off his shoulder, and then rose up off the chair so that he could grab Sonic's shoulders and shake him slightly. "I don't *want* to help you. I don't wanna do any of this nonsense you're asking me to do! I don't wanna go out there and put my life on the line for a world I've never even heard of until ten minutes ago! I don't want to go to literal *war* ! I just want to go home! The home you literally stole me from!"

Sonic, who looked utterly shocked from Sorun's claims, opened his mouth to say something, but his jaw just hung open limply. A quiet breath escaped him after, and the shoulders Sorun was holding went slump and he looked down at the floor.

"We... w-we can't, Sorun. I'm sorry."

In response, the teen shook Sonic again. "'Can't' isn't a very positive word given the context to the current situation, Sonic," he hissed at the hedgehog.

"I'm serious, we can't!" Sonic pushed Sorun's arms off his shoulders, which caused the teen to angrily scoff and hop back into his chair. "We need all seven Chaos Emeralds in order to open the portal back to your zone up, and we don't have them. They got scattered all over the world after the portal we opened closed. It's what happens when you use them."

"Then go get them back!" Sorun shouted. "You got them once! What's stopping you from running around and getting them again!?"

"We *got them* the first time around when we took them all from Eggman while we were dismantling his operations!" Sonic said in a loud, heated tone. "We can't afford to go running around the whole planet looking for Chaos Emeralds while dealing with Eggman at the same time!" He paused, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then opened his green eyes again to look Sorun in his blue. "Look, I-I get it. You don't want to be here. I understand, but... ah." His foot began to nervously tap on the ground as he rubbed the back of his

head. "Sorun, I *really* want you to join and help us. I know we're coming off as a bit selfish here-"

"OH, oh, you think!?"

"- I'm practically begging you here, Sorun, and that's not something I do for a lot of people. And it's not just for my sake. It's not just for my friends' sake. I'm talking about the sake of the whole world here." He took a step forwards, clasped his hands together, and sent Sorun a pleading look. "You can be helpful. I promise. I can help you. We can all help you. I'm just asking you to trust us and help us see this through." He gave the teen another smile and held a hand out to him. "Come on, Sorun. Join the Freedom Fighters."

It was amazing to Sorun just how much sincerity he saw in Sonic's face and his eyes. It was an offer given with such genuine warmness that he had paused while staring down at the offered hand, and he felt his breath stop as the hedgehog's words repeated in his head.

And then he roughly slapped the offered hand away, and the look of hurt became very apparent in Sonic's eyes.

"'The Freedom Fighters.' Is that supposed to be some kind of sick joke?" Sorun demanded as he rose off his chair again. "You take me from my world- against my will, I might add- and drag me across the whole multiverse that apparently exists only to drop me in this nightmare-bizarro world, and then you tell me you're literally going to hold me hostage here unless I help you fight a guerrilla war against some megalomaniac robot dictator or whatever! And you want me to join a group called the Freedom Fighters? Are you for real? You want me to risk my life and fight for the freedom of some random planet when you're taking away my own freedom, you psychopath!?"

"We didn't know somebody like you would come through the portal!" Sonic shouted back. "We thought... the tablet made it sound like the one we brought through would be willing to help! We didn't mean to-"

"Oh, you and your mystical, magical, prophetic tablet!" Sorun yelled. "It's not happening, Sonic! I'm not joining your resistance group, I'm not joining anything, and I'm not gonna go out there and get killed fighting robots! It's not happening!"

An explosive sigh rang out from Sorun's throat, and once more he collapsed in the chair, turned around, and folded over the kitchen table. Sonic attempted to approach him once more, but when he got close Sorun turned around and gave him a glare that gave Sonic pause and caused him to step back. It was only after Sonic widened the distance between them did Sorun go back to burying his face in his arms, causing the hedgehog to turn away from him and towards the group of Mobians across the room. "I'll... leave you with your thoughts," he told Sorun. "We'll talk again in a bit, okay?"

Even as he began to walk away, Sorun didn't stir from his spot.

When he arrived at the group in the back, most everybody had split off to talk about the situation among themselves. One of the only ones left alone was a red-haired, chipmunk whose attention was divided between looking at the human sitting at a table across the way in concern and looking at the gloomy-faced hedgehog in front of her in concern.

"He's not very thrilled about all this," Sonic mumbled to her. "Actually, to be honest with you, Sal, the only other person I've ever seen blow a fuse that bad is Egghead. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with that."

"Well, you heard him, Sonic. He thinks we've stolen him from his world," she responded to him. "And to be honest, he's not very far off the mark. I think we've made a mistake."

"But it seemed like such a sure thing!" The blue Mobian began to pace back and forth in front of her as his eyes focused in intense thought. "I mean, we studied that thing up, down, and sideways! The wording was the most clear thing in the world! The tablet really made

it sound like some kind of hero would come through! Instead we got Sorun, and... well, you know." He stopped and glanced at the human. "He really doesn't wanna help," he said. "Which is bad, 'cause, well, we were really banking on this."

"This is precisely why I voted against wasting all of the Emeralds at the behest of a piece of wood."

Both Mobians paused and looked towards the space next to them, where a black-furred hedgehog was leaning his back the wall while crossing his arms over his chest. Sally held a hand to her mouth in a contemplative gesture while Sonic rolled his eyes.

"I don't wanna hear it from you, Shadow," Sonic said as he turned away.

"Yes, you didn't want to hear anything from me when we were deciding on what to do back then, either. Look where that got us."

"... You're not gonna let this go, are you?" the blue hedgehog sighed out.

"Of course I'm not," Shadow snapped. "We had the Emeralds, all seven of them. After all this time we finally had a definitive edge against Dr. Robotnik, and instead of choosing to use them for something practical you all madly decided to go along with the whimsical writings of an ancient piece of driftwood held in the Acorn family for generations." He cast an accusing glare at Sally. "A piece of driftwood you didn't even know existed until your father brought it to your attention a week ago." He sighed and looked away from them both. "I just can't help but question the wisdom in such a choice, especially considering *that* -" he nodded his head to Sorun, "- is the end result."

There was a hum from the sole female in the group as Sally rubbed at her forehead and glanced at Shadow. "Maybe, but even you have to admit the writings on the tablet were too specific to be marked off as coincidence," she pointed out. "There were literal illustrations of a

battle we had last month of all things etched in the tablet. We couldn't just write such a thing off. And aside from you, everybody voted for using the Emeralds to make that portal." She lowered her hand to her side. "What's done is done. No point arguing about it now."

"That may be so," Shadow agreed, "but that still leaves us with a worthless human that can't even so much as attempt to put up a fight." His crimson eyes scrutinized the human sitting on the other side of the room, and he couldn't help but scoff and shake his head at him. "And based on my observations, he wasn't exaggerating when he said he'd die twenty seconds into a combat scenario." He turned to Sonic. "You'll end up killing him if you let him into the Freedom Fighters, hedgehog."

"Hey, you don't know that," Sonic argued. "He could be great and we just don't know it. Maybe it's a self-esteem issue or something. We're not gonna know if we don't try!" He gestured towards Sorun. "Even if he can't fight there's gotta be something he can do! I mean, the poor guy's stranded here away from his home, and I wanna help him, but with Eggman-"

"We wouldn't even have to deal with this issue if you hadn't wasted the Emeralds."

"We were almost all in agreement-!"

The argument would have continued if Sally hadn't intervened by stepping between the both of them, which quieted them both immediately. "Boys, quit it. Both of you," she said in a commanding tone. Sonic's response was to chuckle nervously and shut his mouth, whereas Shadow grumbled under his breath and turned his head away. "Whatever we're gonna do with Sorun, there's a slight problem we have to deal with. Where is he gonna sleep?"

Sonic's paused when the question reached his ears, and then he slapped his forehead when he thought it over in his head. "Oh, right, we totally didn't think of that, did we?" he asked himself. "Yeah, all

the spare rooms in Freedom HQ here are kinda full up since Knuckles and his whole team, Shadow, and Rouge are bunking here, huh? Hm... hey, Shadow-"

"I will blast you through the ceiling if you even consider asking me to bunk with the human, Faker."

"Shadow's right, Sonic," Sally said, which caused Sonic to turn to her in surprise. "The rooms here are only big enough to accommodate a single person, and as it stands they're all spoken for at the moment. He can't stay here."

"Hm... yeah, guess that is kind of a problem," Sonic agreed. He began tapping his foot on the ground rapidly as he rubbed his chin, and as an idea came into being he let out a soft hum. "You know, I still have that spare bed in my room ever since Tails moved in with his parents," he realized. "Sorun could-"

"Oh, I don't even wanna talk to you!"

The sudden raised voice caused everybody in the vicinity to flinch, and all turned towards the source that was the table Sorun sat at. Sonic's eyes were immediately drawn to the human, but they were soon diverted when he noticed to the yellow form standing right in front of him. And then he began to grow concerned when he saw the fuming look of anger spread out over Sorun's face.

"Uh-oh. Tails..."

There were so many emotions going through Sorun at the moment that he couldn't sort through them all if he tried. So much information that he couldn't even begin to process it all, and though he had a basic understanding of the situation his mind was in such a muddled mess that he could barely even think straight, let alone process all the emotions running through him.

The disbelief that he was in a whole universe. The fear that had begun to subside when he discovered the Mobians weren't going to eat him, but then resurfaced when he discovered he was trapped here. The despair at knowing he was apparently in some war-torn world under siege by a madman who used robots. Worry at what would happen to his personal life at home if he was gone too long, and at those who would wonder where he disappeared to. The sheer confusion at the absurdity of the situation. The *everything* . It was all too much.

But then the yellow Mobian with the fox-like features approached him. And all those emotions and thoughts were, in that moment, overridden with anger. Anger at the unfairness of it all. Anger that he, out of the billions of people on Earth, had been dragged away. Anger at the Mobian in front of him who had personally done the deed and dragged him here.

He was honestly so mad he couldn't see straight, let alone think.

"Oh, I don't even wanna talk to you!" he yelled at the fox, which immediately made the smaller male step backwards. But, even after being yelled at, the fox took a deep breath and looked up at Sorun's eyes before he began speaking.

"I just wanted to apologize to you," the fox told him. "We really didn't-
"

"I was walking away! I didn't want to get involved!" Sorun continued, interrupting the yellow fox's apology and causing him to freeze in place. "I try to leave, and what do you do!? You drag me! You physically drag me through the portal!"

"I... I'm really sorry, Sorun," he mumbled as the corner of his eyes began to grow wet. "It's just... the last month alone has been really horrible, so when the coordinates on the tablet-" he sniffed, "- when I decoded the coordinates and made the machine that produced the portal I just, I just really hoped that the words the tablet said were

true and that somebody would come and help us, and everybody agreed and-"

But Sorun couldn't let him get any more words in, because the frustration had built up to a feverish level. "Kicking and screaming! I was literally kicking and screaming and trying to get away from you, but you wouldn't let go!" Sorun continued, and by now tears were beginning to freely fall from the fox's face. "What kind of person-!?"

There was a blur of blue, and before Sorun knew it Sonic was standing between him and the fox. And there was anger in Sonic's eyes, too- a certain anger that immediately made Sorun wary and had him step away from the hedgehog.

"Sorun. He gets it. You made your point." He turned towards the openly-crying fox, and his features softened instantly when the top of his head to get his attention. "Hey, li'l buddy. I'll finish up here, okay? I'll finish up here. Don't you worry about a thing."

The fox looked up at Sonic with a thankful look in his eyes, and after sniffling a few times he gave him a jerky nod, cast one more sorrowful look at Sorun, and then turned around to walk away from them. It was only once he was a fair distance away did Sonic turn back to Sorun with an expression of anger mixed with pity in his features.

"Hey. Don't do that to him again," he warned Sorun. "He feels awful enough as it is. I don't need you screaming at him and making things worse."

"Oh, yeah, you're right. What was I thinking? It's not like he stole me away from literally everything I've ever known and loved or anything," Sorun bitterly mumbled, which caused Sonic to breath out a sigh. "What do you want, man? I already told you I'm not joining your freedom clubhouse."

"We'll get to that later," Sonic said to him. "First we gotta talk about where you'll be sleeping."

"Sleeping? Oh." That was a problem now that he thought about it. His bed was a whole universe away from him. "So what were you thinking?"

"Well, that's the thing." Sonic rubbed at the back of his head while giving Sorun a side-gaze as he turned his side to him. "Space is kind of at a premium right now, so... it looks like you're going to have to stay with me."

It was already growing too awkward for Sorun's liking, and it made itself evident on his face when he blanched.

"That said," Sonic continued, "it's getting late, and I think we all need a breather. So how about this? We'll go to my house, you can see the sights, and we can talk more about the Freedom Fighter thing later, alright? The fresh air and time will do you good."

He wanted to object- mostly just to spite Sonic- but the problem was that he legitimately was tired. And hungry. And the nausea from earlier hadn't gone away entirely. And the more he thought on it, the more he just wanted to collapse somewhere, close his eyes, and just stop thinking for a few hours.

So it looked like he didn't have much of a choice.

"Alright, fine. Sure. Yeah. Fresh air sounds good." Sorun nodded at the hedgehog, and relief made its way onto the Mobian's features. "Let's go. I don't really wanna be down here any longer."

A/N- I didn't want to make Sorun so short, but at the same time I didn't want him to be this super-tall weirdo walking around with a bunch of short people. He was originally taller, too, but a day before I began writing I actually bothered to look up Sonic characters' heights and, wow, these things are literal munchkins. You don't see it in the comics and games since everything is to their scale but they're all super short.

Chapter 3

Recursion Error

Episode 3- Sonic the Hustler

Sorun was almost blinded once again when sunlight finally hit his eyes. He just couldn't place his finger on what the problem was; it was almost like this world itself had more vibrant colors than the one he was from. Like every image he saw was sharper with colors that contrasted each other more heavily than things in real life ought to have. And while his eyes were still adjusting, it wasn't until he and Sonic had walked a long distance did he finally stop squinting.

"Maybe colors are just different in alternate universes," Sorun reasoned to himself. *"I sure as hell don't know how this shit works. I didn't even know multiverse was a thing until today. How do colors work, anyways? Wavelengths or something like that? Shoulda paid more attention in science class."*

The underground room they had left had, indeed, been an underground room, and upon exiting it Sorun had glanced behind him to see that, on the outside, it was little more than a small hill with a metal door on its side. He chose not to question it, and then decided to walk alongside Sonic in what proved to be minutes upon minutes of awkward silence.

Awkward silence that continued on as they seemingly walked whole miles until they finally reached civilization.

"Well, here we are," Sonic announced as they neared civilization's edge, stopping on a hill that overlooked the city below. "Knothole City. Our own little slice of heaven."

"It's... very wooden," Sorun commented.

"We live in a forest. What else are we supposed to use?"

It was a point that Sorun had wordlessly conceded to.

The place was certainly large enough to be a small city, or at the very least a large village. Wooden houses and buildings lined everywhere, with a giant castle right in the middle of it all. And on the outside of the village, and almost all sides, were trees upon trees that marked the dense forest the city was in. The only exception was the side near the back, in which dense forests gave way to large, rolling plains of grass that ran all the way out to the horizon where Sorun could see the sun beginning to set.

And down below Sorun could see that the place was packed with more Mobians. Mobians of so many colors and species that he gave up on trying to classify them all at a first glance. All of them milling about, playing around, and getting on with their lives with happy grins and smiles.

It looked so happy that, to Sorun, it was downright unsettling.

"Isn't there supposed to be a global war going on right now against that egg guy?" Sorun wondered as the two walked towards the city. "Everybody here seems... really happy, given the current state of the world."

"Eh. Fighting Eggman's a Tuesday around here," Sonic answered with a shrug. "'Sides, the Freedom Fighters keep most of that war away from here, and we do what we can for any other villages or settlements around that are under threat by him." The light grin on his face became slightly downcast. "But that's still a lot of people for us to help, and there's only so many of us. That's why we need help."

"I still don't think a random sixteen-year-old will be any help," Sorun said, but this only caused Sonic to look at him with a confused look in his eyes.

"What does age have to do with it?" he asked. "I'm sixteen, too, and me and my friends have been fighting Eggbreath since I was five. You get used to it."

It took a few seconds for Sonic's words to finally register in Sorun's mind, but when they did he actually stumbled in his footsteps. Sonic looked to him in concern, but stopped when Sorun held a hand up, straightened his composure, and then looked to Sonic with shocked eyes.

"Are you... you're serious?" Sorun gasped out in disbelief. "W-wait, so you're, like, some kind of child soldier? And this Eggman guy has seriously been a problem for over a decade?"

"Ehh... I wouldn't go as far as child soldier," Sonic corrected. "Me and my friends just fight for the people. That's all there is to it." His face grew serious. "And, yeah, we've been fighting him for that long. Technically. At some point down the line our old Eggman got swapped out for a new Eggman, but the threat's been there all the same. He's... really crafty. And while he sure doesn't sound like it, he really is an evil genius."

Sorun quirked an eyebrow in confusion. "Swapped out? What does-eh, don't answer, I don't care." By now the pair had finally crossed the edge of the city, and began walking past wooden houses and Mobians that, to Sorun's discomfort, began to stare at them as they walked through the city. "Don't you people have a government or an army or something to take care of the problem?" he asked the hedgehog. "Why in the world do a bunch of teenagers have to go and save the world?"

"Yeah, well, we *used* to have something like that, but Egghead's first act of ultimate evil was overthrowing the kingdom and dismantling it entirely over a decade ago," Sonic answered him. "And the thing is, the Kingdom of Acorn is pretty much the only real, official Mobian kingdom on the whole planet. Anywhere else is self-contained Mobian villages and cities with their own rules and pockets of Freedom Fighters."

"Oh, so you guys're pretty much all there is," Sorun said in a dejected tone. "This is making me even less confident, and I was already starting out at zero here."

Sonic just chuckled and elbowed Sorun's side softly. "Hey, no negativity here. Won't get anywhere with that attitude."

The human teen brushed the hedgehog off of him, but otherwise said nothing as the two of them continued to walk through the city.

"... Could be worse. At least everybody in this world is short like I am," Sorun thought as he looked around at the Mobians they passed. He went as far as to look at Sonic, and was pleasantly surprised to see that even the hedgehog was a few inches shorter than he was. *"So this is what it's like being tall. Wonder what David would say if he saw me now. Probably something-"*

Crack!

Naturally, a rock being thrown at Sorun's face interrupted his thoughts and caused him to crumple to the ground.

Groaning, Sorun held a hand to his forehead as pain spike through his whole head. He felt something warm and wet in the palm of his hand, and when he pulled his hand backed he saw a patch of blood right on his palm. Outraged, he looked up at the direction the rock had come from, and almost sputtered out in outrage when he saw what was- what he assumed due to their height- a group of Mobian children.

"Get out of here!" one of the children shouted.

"Yeah, get out you stupid human!"

"We don't want you here!"

"What the- Sorun! You ok-!?" Sonic had crouched down to Sorun's side to see if he was alright, but when the human teen looked up at

him with wide, angered eyes, the hedgehog flinched back and nervously glanced between him and the children. "I'll go and deal with them," he said, "just stay here."

Sorun didn't even bother to see Sonic off before he looked down to nurse the throbbing head wound he had. *"Hasn't even been a full day and people are already throwing rocks at me."* He dabbed at the wound on his head again, and he felt more anger spike in him when he saw even more blood than last time. *"Goddamn fucking kids, what the hell..."*

The vast frustration he'd been feeling ever since he'd been thrown in this terrible situation had just begun to dull, too. He still felt it to an uncomfortable degree, but it was manageable at least, and he was able to keep it under control. But now there were people throwing rocks at him, screaming at him to leave, and he wanted to but nobody would *let him leave* -

"Sorun? You okay?" He felt a hand try and help him up, but Sorun, in his anger, growled out and shook the arm off him. "Hey, Sorun, come on, let me help."

"I've only been here an hour and I already hate this world and everything it stands for," Sorun angrily hissed as he rose to his feet. "I do absolutely nothing and the first thing that happens when I walk in your city is I get stoned? Are you for real?"

"They were just a bunch of kids," Sonic said, reaching out to help Sorun steady himself when his feet wobbled under him. "They're... Eggman doesn't really do your kind's image any good, you know? They're just frustrated."

"Yeah, you know who else is frustrated!?" Sorun yelled at him, but stopped himself from going further when he saw Sonic's eyes widen in concern. He took a deep breath to calm himself, and then faced his head forwards. "Whatever. Let's just go."

"Do you-"

"Let's *go* , Sonic."

He didn't bother to even turn around and look at whatever expression Sonic was making, and he made it a point not to look at him the entire rest of the walk to his house.

"Aaaand, there it is. Home sweet-"

"Don't finish that sentence."

The words died out on Sonic's tongue, while Sorun examined the domicile right in front of them. It was made of wood, like everything else, but what really intrigued him was the architecture of the structure. It resembled more of a wooden hut than a house, but was still house-sized and had modern implements like windows, a door, and even a chimney up on the roof.

It wasn't like anything he'd ever seen, and yet, he almost liked the niche aesthetic.

"It's not the worst-looking place in the world," Sorun admitted after a few seconds of silence.

His statement must have surprised Sonic, as he saw the hedgehog give him a surprised look from the corner of his eyes. This was followed by him forming a wide grin as a sauntered up to the front door, opened it, and then did a little wave with his arm before gesturing for him to go in. "Then by all means, come on in."

"So courteous," Sorun remarked while walking past Sonic and going into the home.

"Wow, it's... yeah, it's a house," Sorun thought as he heard the door shut behind him. *"I mean, I don't know what I was expecting, but yeah. House."*

The interior looked even more homier than his real home in his own universe, which admittedly wasn't saying much as his mother was never one for decoration, but this was genuinely impressive to Sorun.

He'd heard Sonic call out to his parents and heard the sound of his feet disappear deeper inside the house, but this was mainly ignored by Sorun as he wandered to the other side of the house and ended up in what he was fairly certain was a living room, as it was loaded with the works: rugs, chairs and sofas, bookcases, a fireplace, *wallpaper* of all things. It was such a different world on the inside compared to how humble the outside looked that it almost took Sorun's breath away.

"Okay, so maybe mom was crazy for being this weird minimalist-furniture person. I feel like I've been missing out now that I've seen all this." He lightly bumped into a table after doing some more walking, and he looked down to see a small drawer with a framed photo on top of it. *"Family photo, huh?"* he thought. *"Let's see what we got here."*

He brought the photo up to his face and flipped it around, wincing slightly when a bit of sunlight glinted off the frame and into his eyes. There were a total of four individuals in the photo, all blue hedgehogs that were smiling directly at the camera. And a dog, too. A completely normal-looking tan dog.

"Wait, so normal animals are a thing here? Huh." Strange, but good knowledge to have. *"So we got Sonic, Sonic but he's old and has a mustache, Sonic but with hair and breasts, and Sonic but he's- what the fuck?"*

Now, he wasn't an expert on Mobians. It was a word he'd learned about an hour ago, and a term that related to a species he had just now learned about. And based on his observation, "Mobian" seemed to be a large umbrella term that referred to any of the talking animal people here, because he was fairly certain most of the Mobians he saw outside weren't hedgehogs.

He was also pretty damn certain there weren't any animals in nature made of metal, which was why Sorun was struggling to understand why the fourth blue hedgehog in the photo he was looking at looked like a robot shaped like a hedgehog.

"... Yeah, no, I don't get it," Sorun decided. At the same time he thought this, he heard multiple pairs of footsteps begin to approach, so he decided to set the family photo down and turn towards the sound of footsteps.

"Sorun?" he heard as a blue, spiked head appeared around the corner. "Sorun, where'd you- oh, there you are. So how are you finding the place?"

"It's fine," Sorun answered, and he could help his eyes momentarily flicking down to the family photo before going back up to Sonic. "So why did we come all the way to your house?" Sorun asked him. "I get you wanna pick the 'join the Freedom Fighters' thing back up after I calmed down, but you seriously brought me all the way to your house for that?"

Sonic nodded, and then pursed his lips as he clasped his hands together. "So here's the thing," he said as he extended both of his index fingers at Sorun. "Like I said, you need somewhere to stay for the time being, and we don't really have a lot of space lying around."

"You were serious about that? The 'sleeping at your place' thing you said?"

"Yeah, space isn't really a thing we have right now," Sonic explained. "But I just so happen to have a spare bed in my room."

"Oh, don't tell me-"

"So I thought you could get to stay with me!" Sonic finished while spreading his arms out to gesture to the whole house. "You know. Until we get you home. So I brought you here so you could get to know the place and meet my parents so they'd be okay with it, too."

Sorun sighed in response, and then rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "... Fair argument," he admitted. "Yeah, I don't really have anywhere else to go, so sure. Guess I'll stay. Your parents?"

"Oh!" Sonic snapped his fingers as realization hit him, and he ducked back around the corner before coming back a few seconds later. "Yeah, he's in the living room," he called out. "Come meet him!"

There were some shuffling sounds as three figures stepped into view, and Sorun recognized them as the same people as the ones he'd seen in the photo. The female hedgehog, the old hedgehog, and the robot.

It was the robot that Sorun focused on in particular, half because he didn't know what it was, and half from being genuinely curious at seeing a robot for the first time in his life, though his staring must have been noticeable as the others began to grow uncomfortable. It was the same size and proportion as the other hedgehogs, and even the same blue color, but metal. He had a spherical head, and his eyes were replaced with black sensors with red lights and a mouth that was more of a movable grill than a mouth.

But then Sorun's eyes wandered to the top of his head, and just barely managed to contain the chuckle that threatened to leave him when he saw metallic toupee bolted to his scalp. He masked his slip-up by clearing his throat, however, and then pointed to the robotic hedgehog with a questioning look in his eyes.

"I feel like I'm missing something here," he said. "Sonic, uh, what's... what's up with the robot?"

"Huh? Oh." Sonic turned to the metallic hedgehog, with continued to give Sorun a gormless stare, and then turned back to the human. "That's my dad."

"Ah." Sorun nodded, and then looked to Sonic. "So... you're half-robot, then? Wild."

A beat of silence went through the whole group, with the hedgehogs all looking nervous while Sorun continued to look between them all with increasingly-mounting confusion. He eventually opened his mouth to say something, but was beat to the punch when sound left the robot's mouth.

"He isn't half-robot." The smooth, metallic voice coming from he robot's mouth nearly made Sorun jump up in surprise, but other than his eyes widening, he managed to stay calm. "I was a full flesh-and-blood hedgehog when I conceived my son. I was turned into a robot afterwards." His metallic legs carried him forwards in front of Sorun, and he extended a hand tipped with sharpened, metal fingers to him. "I am Sonic's father, Jules."

Sorun was still lost, but managed to raise his hand to the offered one. "So you're, like, a cyborg? Or something or other?"

A long, distorted sigh rang out of Jules' speakers as his arm jerked up, down, and then lowered back to his side. "No. I'm not a cyborg. I was fully turned into robot when I was subjected to a robotocizer," he explained.

"... Mh-hm." Sorun blinked, slowly nodded his head, and then looked to Sonic for help. "Sonic, what's a roboti... whatever?"

"Oh, yeah, I probably should have warned you beforehand. Sorry about that," the hedgehog apologized as he stepped between the human and the robot. "So my dad," he began while gesturing to his father, "got put in one of these things called a roboticizer. It turns people into robots."

Sorun clicked his tongue in mild understanding. "You're skipping a few steps here. S-so it put his brain into a robot body?" he guessed. "Nah, man, that's still technically a cyborg."

"No, Sorun, it..." Sonic sighed, and then rubbed at his forehead as he took in a breath to try again. "The roboticizer turns you into a

robot. Completely. You go from being a normal person to a robot person in a second." He snapped. "Like that."

"... I need to sit down for that one."

The teen found himself collapsing into the nearest couch before holding a hand to his head to steady himself. He mentally took note of the unsure looks the others in the house were giving him, but they were largely ignored as Sorun mentally processed Sonic's explanation in his head.

"So the whole body? So just, the brain and all the neurons and blood and organs and... all that, into robot stuff? Man, that's just... man." Insanely impressive was what it was. He wasn't an expert on biology. *Boy* was he not an expert in biology. But he knew enough to know that an organic body was a host to a nightmarish amount of chemical releases and bio-mechanics and neurological functions to know that successfully converting all of that to an artificial state and having it still work was mind-boggling.

And that was even considering the chemical aspect of it! Turning the organic elements of the body to whatever elements Jules was made of right now seemed almost miraculous. Or the computing power needed to compute what was sure to be an absurd amount of data, or the energy required for that kind of conversion. It all seemed magical.

Just how technologically advanced was this world, anyways? There had to be some, considering they made the inter-dimensional portal that brought him here and he was staring at a real-life robot, but if there actually was amazing technology like that the literal wooden city he found himself in sure wasn't showing it.

"I'm sorry if I'm freaking out, it's just, I, I don't think my world's technology curve ever made it the same distance this one did," Sorun explained as he continued to rub at his head. "I mean, this is all just... I've been getting hit by stuff all day, so I'm kind of slow at

thinking right now, but I... it seriously turns you into a robot?" he muttered to himself. "That's crazy. This world is nuts."

"If my appearance is making you uncomfortable..." Jules started, but then paused when Sorun looked up at him. "I can step out for a bit," he offered, "at least until you-"

"No, no it's not- geez, I'm looking super insensitive now, aren't I?" Sorun asked himself to his growing embarrassment. "I've never seen a real robot, you know? My place didn't really have anything like that, so it's this on top of everything else I mean it really- ow!"

In his vigorous rubbing of his forehead, he'd accidentally aggravated the head wound he'd received when a rock had been thrown at his head. Now blood was beginning to flow down his forehead again, and the throbbing pain from having a wound on his forehead was beginning to return.

"Oh, my goodness!" The next thing he knew the female hedgehog of the bunch, the one he assumed to be Sonic's mother, was right in front of him and turning his head with her hands as she examined the wound on his head. "What happened to you!?" she asked in a shrill voice.

Sorun, who was too bewildered by the sudden action to even attempt to pry her off, only managed to respond in a dulled voice, "Some kid threw a rock at me."

"And you've been walking around with an open wound ever since!?" she screeched at him. "Ahh, we can't have that! What if it gets infected!?" She began to turn his head with more fervor. "Ugh, boys, I swear you're all the same. We're taking care of this right now."

"H-hey, wait a sec-" Sorun protested.

"I have a medical kit in the bathroom, so just stay here and we'll get this sorted in a jiffy."

"Hey-!"

While Sorun was being medically attended to in the other room, the other three hedgehogs had decided to migrate towards the kitchen in the next room to talk among themselves about the human guest in the house. Sonic had seated himself in a chair at the dining table, while the older hedgehog chose to sit down in the seat across from him. Jules chose to lean on the nearby counter while occasionally sneaking glances into the next room at the human sitting on his couch and his wife who was fussing over his head wound.

"So what do you guys think?" Sonic asked, which drew back Jules' focus. "About Sorun?"

There was a heavy sigh from the mustached hedgehog across from him. "Sonny, I'll admit that when you and the Freedom Fighters pitched this 'pull a mystery hero from another zone using the Chaos Emeralds' when you all needed my help with the portal, I was a bit... wary of the idea. And I'll admit that I certainly didn't think a young man like that would come through."

"What my brother is trying to say," Jules voiced, "is that he's a bit underwhelming. And a human to boot."

"Okay, yeah, fine, so he wasn't at all what we were all expecting," Sonic agreed. "I'll admit that much." He turned to the older hedgehog. "But come on, Chuck. I know he's looks really rough around the edges, and he hasn't been, well, the nicest guy ever, but I'm telling you it's just all the culture shock! We pulled him into a completely new world and he's just freaking out over everything, so it's making him all weird!" He pointed to his metallic father. "I mean, you heard him! He's never even seen a robot before! He's trying really hard to adjust to all this, and you two aren't giving him enough credit!"

A sound much like a contemplative hum came from Jules' speakers. "I'm trying to be objective here and not let personal bias get in the

way," he told his son. "That being said, we haven't had the best luck when it comes to trusting humans. Or Overlanders for that matter."

"We just don't want to see the same thing happen to you," Chuck supplied.

But Sonic just shook his head and held a hand to both of them. "I can understand why you'd have a hard time trusting anybody after everything Robotnik did, but Sorun's not like that!" he argued. "Plus I've met tons of cool humans and Overlanders in my time! Station Square was full of friendly humans. Hope made friends with everybody during the time she was staying in Knothole. Nate, you forget Nate?"

"We're not saying completely honest and nice humans and Overlanders don't exist," Jules said, "we're asking if you think Sorun is one of them."

Sonic made the motion to respond, but stopped himself halfway as an unsettled feeling overtook him. He made an unsure hum, and then leaned over on the table as his father and uncle patiently awaiting his response.

"He's... really not taking his situation well," he began. "He wants nothing to do with any of this and just wants to go home. And he's... he's *angry* , you guys, and this is coming from a guy who's friends with Knuckles." He let out a chuckle at the little joke, but it quickly tapered off into a sigh before he continued. "He screamed at me and Tails and wouldn't even look at anybody else. Those kids threw that rock at him and he had this look in his eyes that made me really worried."

"Did he do something to aggravate the children?" Jules asked. "If he starts attacking children-"

"He didn't do anything, dad. We were just walking when the rock hit him," Sonic answered. " *But* , he calmed himself down before he did anything bad. And he hasn't gotten physical with anybody yet, even

though I'm pretty sure he wants to. I know it doesn't look like it, but so far he's been really patient. He's been really temperamental and short with everybody, sure, but I think he's really trying. And at the very least he's not calling us all 'filthy animals' like most Overlanders would, so he's already got that going for him, especially since this is his first time meeting Mobians." He crossed his arms with a huff and turned his nose up. "That's good enough for me," he declared. "You'll see. I'm sure he's a really great guy. He's just a bit lost right now." He opened his eyes, and his head tilted down slightly. "And I want to help him," he added, "because it's our fault he's in this mess in the first place."

A beat passed between the three of them, and the two older males looked at one another before a collective sigh rang out from the both of them. "Do you think he would at least make a good Freedom Fighter?" Chuck questioned.

"Huh? Oh. Uh... eh-heh, 'bout that..." Nervously, Sonic began to tap the ends of his index finger together while looking back and forth between his father and uncle. "Sorun says he can't really fight. At all."

Chuck's limbs went limb and his head lolled back in disbelief. "Oh, Sonic...!"

"But-but-but! But! We don't know what he's capable of yet!" Sonic defended. "Maybe he's super smart like you or Tails or Rotor, or he's really good at doing... something, but just doesn't know it! And even if he isn't, we can, I dunno, train him up!"

"'Train him up'," Jules repeated. "Are you going to have time to do that in between all your missions battling Dr. Robotnik?"

Sonic's smile fell. "Well, not really," he said, "But he can... we'll... we'll think of something," he claimed. "Just give him a chance. It's the least he deserves."

The other two hedgehogs didn't look nearly as convinced as Sonic was, and it showed when Chuck sent a withered looks towards his mechanical brother. Jules' response was to give a shrug, which made Chuck roll his eyes and focus back on Sonic. "You've always tried so hard to see the good in people, Sonic, and it hasn't steered you wrong yet. So I suppose we can trust your judgement on this," he told him. The teenage hedgehog looked excited enough to jump up out of his seat, but Chuck held a hand out to stop him. "Just keep an eye on him for us?" he asked. "I don't want something bad to happen just because he lost his temper."

"Aw, Sorun isn't like that. It'll be fine!" This time Sonic did jump out of his eat, and his feet began to carry him toward the living room as he looked behind him and flashed his uncle a grin. "I'm gonna go see how he's doing. Guy's probably losing his mind hanging around mom for so long."

This wasn't how he pictured his day going.

Admittedly, *none* of what had happened in the last hour or so was what he pictured happening to him today, or ever in his life. He would have laughed off the very idea if he ever thought of it. But it happened, and while he thought he was coping well enough with it, it was also taking all the mental fortitude he could muster to not fall apart at the seams.

Even then he wasn't entirely confident he'd be able to avoid that.

But having a blue woman dote on Sorun while he fidgeted nervously on said woman's couch was a new one for him. Mostly because nobody had ever been this... attentive to him before. Not even his own mother. He loved the woman, but that didn't help the fact that she was as emotionally stinted as her own son. The most she'd ever done when he got hurt was throw band-aids at his face or drive him to the hospital.

Maybe there was something to genetics after all.

"I hope my son has been treating you well so far," Sonic mother asked as she continued to tend to his forehead. "He means well, really, but sometimes his enthusiasm can prove to be a bit much."

Treating him well. Was one of the people directly responsible for bringing him to this world treating him well? Sorun would have laughed if he didn't feel so flustered right now. On the other hand, even Sorun could see that he was trying really hard to make things easier for the human, so he couldn't blame him entirely. It didn't change the fact that Sorun blamed him a lot, though.

"That's a hard question to answer," he settled on.

"I see." She reached up to stick a bandage above his left eye where the cut was, and then stepped back with a satisfied sigh. "Well, you should be fine now. And Sorun?"

"Mm?"

"I know that you may be a bit frustrated at your current circumstances. I can't begin to imagine what you're going through, but try to give Sonic and his friends a chance? They mean well and are just trying to do the right thing. I just don't want what they did and what the children who threw that rock at you did to paint a bad light on us all."

"Don't worry, lady, it already has." Sorun's response caused her to grow a worried look in her eyes. Sorun, seeing the change in her expression, averted his gaze and sunk further into the couch while crossing his arms. "But you're not so bad," he added. "Thanks. For the... y'know, forehead," he mumbled under his breath.

He had looked away so much that he wasn't able to see how she reacted to what he said, but by the time he chose to look the female hedgehog had already walked away to a different section of the house. Sorun took it as a sign that he could finally be alone with his thoughts, but not even five seconds passed after receiving this idea before he felt something touch his angle.

Sorun breathed out a sound of surprise, and then looked down at his feet. His shoulders relaxed immediately when he saw that it was a small dog, the one he'd seen in the family photo, nudging his leg with its nose before looking up and panting happily at him. The teen leaned back into the sofa, and the dog took that as a sign to leap up onto his lap and bark lightly at him.

"You're the most normal thing I've seen since coming here," Sorun muttered to the dog as he scratched it behind the ears with one hand. "You're not gonna throw any rocks at me, are ya, buddy?"

The dog barked at him again.

"Good dog." He gave it one final pat on the head, and the dog yipped at him happily before turning around and leaping off the couch. At the same time Sorun felt the space on the couch next to him decompress as a blue hedgehog hopped next to him while giving Sorun another grin.

"I see you met Muttski," he commented, and Sorun scoffed out a single laugh at the name. "He says he likes you. Also says you smell kind of weird, too, but eh," he shrugged, "you're from another zone, so what are you gonna do?"

Sorun nodded in agreement, but paused halfway and slowly turned to Sonic. "Wait, he actually said that? You understood him?"

Sonic rose a blue eye ridge. "Yeah?" A beat passed, and he opened his mouth in an "oh" of understanding. "Yeah, no, talking to animals isn't something normal Mobians can do," he explained. "It's, heh, it's kind of a long story, actually." He pointed at one of his triangular ears. "You see, there was this one time I got lost in space, and these nice aliens I met installed this universal translator in me so I could talk to other aliens into helping me get back to Mobius. It doesn't really come out."

The black-haired teen's response was to give Sonic a deadpan stare as his mind tried and failed to catch up with the explanation. "I'm just

gonna pretend that made sense," he muttered. *"There's aliens too, now? Seriously? I mean, I guess this is all technically alien, but still... space aliens? Goddamn."*

It seemed like every five minutes now this universe was trying to break him mentally. And it was working.

"Sorun?" Sonic waved a hand in front of his face, and the sudden motion startled him out of his frozen stupor. "You okay?"

"... Not really," he mumbled. "Still coping with this all."

"Ah, right, right. Cool." Some moments of silence passed between the two of them. "Hey, Sorun?"

"Mh?"

"Could you, uh..." Sonic's hand went to the spines at the back of his head, and he began to nervously run his hand through them as he looked to Sorun's direction. "Could you at some point talk with Tails? And maybe, you know, apologize to him?"

Sorun's eyes met Sonic's gaze with a questioning look. "Tails? Which one was-" His expression soured. "Oh, you mean the guy that pulled me in?"

Sonic nodded. "I know out of everybody you're the most upset at him, and I can totally get that, but Tails was really hopeful in that tablet, you know?" He looked down as his pet dog hopped on the couch between them, and then began to absentmindedly rub at its back. "I think it's 'cause I was the one hyping everybody up about it," he elaborated, "and Tails really looks up to me, so he was really hopeful, too. He feels terrible about what happened with you, and as strong as he is, he's just eleven, so... could you just talk to him? Say sorry for yelling at him and forgive him over the whole dragging thing?"

"So you want me to lie to him?"

Sonic's face fell. "You're really that upset at him over it?"

"A *little bit* , yeah," Sorun replied in a sarcastic tone, though he sighed when Sonic's mouth downturned even lower. "... He's seriously only eleven?" he asked.

Sonic nodded. "Yeah. Eleven."

And suddenly, Sonic looking so mad when he went off on Tails made sense to Sorun. He screeched at a child. The knowledge alone made Sorun cringe on the inside. "Okay, I admit that screaming at an eleven-year-old wasn't my... smoothest move." By far probably one of the worst moves in his life now that he really thought on it. "I guess I should go talk to the guy. Eventually. When I feel like it."

He'd would never feel like it, but Sonic didn't know that.

That caused the hedgehog's face to brighten up considerably. "Aw, that's great! Thanks!"

"Don't mention it. Seriously, don't." With a slight groan, Sorun rose up off the couch and stretched his arms above his head. "Could you, uh... show me that bed? I'm super tired from the everything."

"Oh! Oh, yeah, of course." Sonic jumped off the couch and waved for Sorun to follow him. "Yeah, it's just down the way over here. Come on."

He didn't really know what to expect after going into Sonic's room. Half of him expected for tentacles or something to come out of the door and grab Sorun, because really, that would just be par for the course with how today was going.

But no, Sonic's room was, by all means, a normal room. So normal that it looked even more normal than his own room on Earth, which to Sorun felt like the first breath of fresh air since he got pulled into a new universe.

It was certainly messy like his own room, that was for sure. Random comics, sports balls, and other odds and ends were randomly scattered all around the floor, and there was a study desk int the corner with so much dust on it that Sorun had to wonder if it was ever even used. And a closet that was full of disorganized clothes, even if those clothes were just pairs of gloves and socks.

"I really gotta ask about the whole 'they only wear shoes and gloves' thing eventually," Sorun thought to himself as he looked around the room. *"I get they have fur that covers everything, but damn, it feels super awkward hanging around with a bunch of naked people. And I swear I saw a couple people out there with a shirt or something. I KNOW clothes exist here."*

But those were questions for later. Because right now he was too tired to deal with anything else.

"Yeah, it ain't much, but it's mine," Sonic said as he flopped onto- Sorun barked out a laugh- a blue race car-shaped bed, and then pointed to a normal bed on the other side of the room. "That one's yours," he said.

"Race car bed, huh?" Sorun asked as he trudged towards the bed. "You didn't strike me as the type."

"I like anything fast," Sonic answered. "And race cars are cool."

Sorun hummed, and then flopped down on the spare bed. He laid still for a moment as his body sunk into the mattress below him, and then he turned his head to Sonic's direction.

"It's great all the furniture is my size," he commented. "I was kind of worried about that."

The hedgehog looked at him, and then made a sound of understanding. "Yeah, I was kind of wondering about that. You're kind of short for a human, huh?" he asked. "I've seen a ton of humans, and they're usually way taller than Mobians."

"... Oh, they aren't short here, huh?" Sorun mumbled, a disappointed lilt to his voice. "The short thing's, uh, just locked in for Mobians. Great."

"Yeah, they're-" Sonic stopped, and a wry grin began to grow on his face. "Wait. I thought all humans from your zone were our size. Are they not?"

"Shouldn't have opened my mouth..." Sorun groaned, but it was too late as Sonic had already sat up in his bed.

"Are you just a short human?" he teased.

An indignant groan left Sorun, and he turned his back to Sonic while placing his pillow over his head. "You can't talk. I still have a few inches over you. I'm going to sleep."

He could close his eyes, but he could close his ears to the teasing laughter that resounded off the walls of the room.

Sleep never came to Sorun that night.

It wasn't like he didn't make an effort of it. He'd been as still as possible, he'd kept his eyes closed, and he tried to clear his mind to calm himself down so he could go to sleep.

But he couldn't become calm. He couldn't go to sleep when he was already living in this nightmarish situation he found himself in. So when hours had passed and he couldn't find himself being able to sleep, he'd turned to staring up at the ceiling he could barely see because it was so dark.

Thoughts of home and Earth hit him. Those were followed by him replaying the events that had brought him to this bed over and over again, and his mind kept going to the Freedom Fighters who decided to drag him to this world. To Tails, who had been the one who actually physically dragged him to this world against his will. To

Sonic, who kept trying to convince him to join the Freedom Fighters when he didn't want to.

He really, really didn't want to. He didn't want to fight. He didn't want to risk his life. He didn't even like these people. In fact, it may have been more accurate to say he disliked them, and that said a lot considering he only knew a few of their names.

"'Ah, it's fine, Sorun. Fight the robot army. It'll be fun!' Pfft. Right." His head rolled in Sonic's direction. He'd fallen asleep shortly after Sorun attempted to fall asleep, and was resting motionless in his race car bed. *"Hah... yeah, I'm not doing this,"* he decided. *"I'm getting out of crazy town."*

Sorun's feet swung out from the bed and slowly pressed against the floor. He tensed up in preparation for the floorboards underneath him squeaking, but let out a silent sigh when no squeak ever came. He tiptoed his way towards the door of Sonic's room, looking back at the sleeping hedgehog every five seconds to make sure the hedgehog was still sleeping before making it to the door. The door knob was turned, the door was opened just far enough for Sorun to slip through the crack, and once he was on the other side the door was left as it was for fear of making too much noise.

The rest of the house, just like Sonic's room, was completely dark. Across the hall he exited into, Sorun could see another door that was completely closed, and automatically assumed it was the room Sonic's parents were sleeping in. He didn't see where the other, older hedgehog was, but seeing as the entire house was dark he figured it was safe to assume the entire household was asleep.

Perfect for him. Nobody being awake meant that there was nobody to stop him from leaving. He just had to get out of here.

Fortunately, he had a solid memory of the house's layout, and, being a small, one-story house without a attic or basement, it was fairly easy to navigate past the small halls in order to sneak his way towards the house's main entrance, all while making slow,

methodical steps and keeping his stance wide and crouched to make as little noise as possible.

The problem came when he passed a corner that lead into the living room, when the exit he sought was right in front of him. The problem was he caught Sonic's dog, Muttski, sitting on the dog bed in the living room. And the dog was staring right at him.

"Aw, that ain't good," Sorun thought as concern began to well up in him. *"If he barks, it's over. Is he gonna bark? I don't know! Maybe he'll just ignore me if I leave and- hold up. Is that...?"*

There was a small shelf nailed to the wall near the ceiling above him that Sorun's eyes just so happened to wander to. There were a few photos and other knick knacks on the shelf, but what drew his eyes was a small, purple cardboard box with an illustration of a happy dog and and a small, artificial bone.

"Jackpot..." he whispered, and then reached towards the box. His suspicions were confirmed when Muttski's ears rose up and he tilted his head to the side. Sorun grabbed the box, rattled it to the satisfying sound of hearing objects bounce around inside, opened he box, and reached in to grab the first thing he felt before pulling it out.

Upon closer examination once he put the box back where he found it, he concluded that, yes, it was a dog treat. A small, bone-shaped treat made out of something he couldn't care less about as long as it would distract the dog long enough for him to get out of this mad house. Just what he needed.

"Tactical treat toss," Sorun hissed silently as he lightly tossed the dog biscuit. It hit the ground right in front of Muttski, who began to wag his tail as he got up off of his bed to assault the treat that had been offered to him. The dog let out a little yip as it began to eat the treat, and while this happened Sorun sneakily walked his way to the door, opened it as quietly as humanly possible, and then closed it behind him while making sure to keep the knob turned to make sure it didn't click upon the door closing.

After releasing the doorknob so it silently closed the door, Sorun took a shaky step backwards from the house's front porch and into the lawn, looking at the windows to make sure no lights would come on to signify somebody knew he left. When the house remained dark, he looked to his left to make sure there was nobody there to see him, and then to his right. Nothing but silent houses all around where he looked and empty streets.

"Huh. I'm home free," he thought to himself. *"Neat."* A small laugh left him, and his head tilted up to the sky. *"Now I just gotta get out of- wait wHAT HAPPENED TO THE MOON!?"*

He hadn't seen it before, as the sole window in Sonic's room hadn't had an adequate angle, but now that he was outside and looking up Sorun got a full view of the moon hovering up in the sky. He also got a great view of the fact that a large chunk was missing out of its side, like something had punched a piece right off of it.

"... Yeah, I'm making the right choice here. This world's insane. I'm getting out."

It was without any fanfare or celebration whatsoever did he turn around and stark to speed-walk out of the neighborhood of houses that Sonic and his family lived in while absolutely *refusing* to look back up at the sky. He walked in a straight line past homes, market stalls, and other wooden structures. He kept his eyes straight and forwards as he made his way out from Knothole and to the edge of the city.

And to the edge of the city he made it, with all the wooden structures behind him and grassy fields and trees ahead of him. Freedom away from all the craziness behind him, and a threshold that Sorun was more than happy to cross.

"Nice night for a stroll, huh?"

Unfortunately he only got two steps in before that voice stopped him cold.

The human teen had froze mid-step when he heard that voice, and then hissed through his teeth as he turned his head towards the sound of the voice. His fears were confirmed when he saw the familiar blue form of Sonic a few feet away from him, leaning on a tree with his arms crossed. The hedgehog was smiling, but something about the way he large, green eyes were slightly narrowed told Sorun that he wasn't exactly happy at the moment.

"... Yeah man, totally," Sorun said as he fully turned to the hedgehog. "I couldn't get any sleep, so I just stepped out for a bit and..." He trailed off when Sonic's eyes narrowed further, causing him to sigh and slump his shoulders. "Okay, I was running away," he finally admitted.

"Sorun..." Sonic sighed as he pushed off the tree. "I heard you leave the house. You're not as sneaky as you think."

The human teen felt his eyes twitch on the insult. "How'd you even get ahead of me?"

"Don't sweat it. What I want to know is what your plan was. What were you gonna do once you left Knothole City?"

The teen shrugged. "I don't know. You... you said that those gems that brought me here, the Chaos Emeralds, got scattered all over the world, right?" He limply gestured to the field in front of them. "I figured, I dunno, I'd go and find them. So I can go back." He sighed and looked down at his feet. "Sonic I really wanna leave. I can't- I can't deal with this. It's too much."

"You're still...? After all this time, you still don't want to help us out?" Disappointment- actual disappointment to Sorun's growing frustration- flashed in his eyes, and Sonic took a step closer to Sorun. "Why don't you want to help the Freedom Fighters?" he questioned.

"I don't know, Sonic!" Sorun shouted as he spread his arms out. "What would you do if a bunch of furry aliens kidnapped you and told

you that you can't go home until you help out with the robot war, huh!?"

"I would help them," Sonic began as he continued to stomp towards Sorun, "because I'm not one to sit around and let good people get pushed around when there's something I can do to help!"

"Well *greeaat* for you, Sonic! I'm not you, though! I'm not that good a person!"

"You're not even trying!" The hedgehog stopped right in front of the human, and a slight amount of anger began to mar his features as he pointed a whole hand at Sorun. "You haven't once stopped and even thought about helping ever since you came here!"

He couldn't even find the words the retort. He grew so upset by Sonic's word that he scoffed harshly and turned his back to the hedgehog. This only served to make the blue Mobian more frustrated.

"You know, almost nobody in the Freedom Fighters, in any group of Freedom Fighters anywhere on Mobius, actually wants to fight," he said. "Nobody wants to go to war with Dr. Robotnik. But nobody wants to see their friends and family hurt by him, either. So they fight anyways." He stepped to Sorun's side and tugged roughly on his arm. "And you know what, Sorun? I know people just like you who can't do much but still chose to become a Freedom Fighter just so they could protect the people they love. Why can't you do the same?"

"Because this isn't my home, Sonic," Sorun shot back as he pulled his arm back. "I don't have anything I want to protect here because I don't love anything here! Everything I do love is a whole universe away! Or, what, you want me to go and risk my life to defend a bunch of animal people that would rather glare at me and throw rocks at me than say 'hi'?"

There was something in Sorun's words that caused Sonic to violently flinch, and he had to take a look down and take a deep breath before looking back up at Sorun. "Okay, fine. So you leave to go find the Emeralds. Let's humor your plan," Sonic offered. "We're talking about you walking around and searching the planet. The *whole planet* , Sorun. That's just not reasonable, and chances are Eggman is looking for the Emeralds and would find them before you ever could." Sorun remained silent, and Sonic took that as a sign to continue talking. "And even if you somehow managed to gather up all seven Emeralds, Tails is the only one that knows how to use them to bring you back to your zone."

"Well, that's just super, now, ain't it?" Wasn't that painfully ironic? The only person that could send him back home was the same person that brought him here in the first place. This world really was trying to kill him through sheer stress alone. "But why do I have to fight?" he asked Sonic. "I can't just hang around until you all manage to find the Emeralds and send me back?"

"I told you, we need help," Sonic answered. "We traded all seven Chaos Emeralds for that help. You're the help."

"It's not my fault you made a god-awful trade," Sorun retorted.

"Hrng..." The blue hedgehog held both the sides of his head in exasperation at Sorun's words, but then suddenly stood straight up and opened his eyes wide. He froze for two seconds, and then a grin game to his face as he walked to the side a bit. "You know what your problem is, Sorun?" he asked as he dug the tip of his left shoe into the ground. "You don't have any self-confidence."

Instead of responding, Sorun chose to watch as Sonic began to drag a line in the dirt with his foot as he continued talking to the human. "How about we have a little bet?" he offered. "A race."

"... A race?" Sorun repeated as he warily eyed the hedgehog. "Like... a foot race?"

"Yeah, that." He finished drawing the line and stood at one end while pointing to a tree in the distance. "How far would you say that tree is? Twenty, twenty-five meters? We'll race to it. If you win, I'll let you crash at my family's house until me and the Freedom Fighters happen upon all seven Emeralds while fighting Eggman, and once we get them I'll have Tails send ya back home." He winked and Sorun and pointed a finger at him. "But if I win, you gotta join the Freedom Fighters and at least try to put in an effort to help. How about it?"

Certainly an intriguing offer, that one, and one that actually made Sorun think. It was tempting- and also dangerous, but that was considering the possibility he would lose. He did like the idea of being free of any obligations to helping the Freedom Fighters. On the other hand, being forced in because he made a bad bet would practically be a death sentence. And who knows what Sonic would do if he kept dodging the Freedom Fighters, or anybody else? But if he won, he could pin all the blame on him not doing anything on Sonic.

But could he win in a foot race against Sonic the Hedgehog?

"Based on what I've seen, all Mobians have these really noodle-y limbs. I mean, look at those things." Those limbs were thin. Really thin. But unfortunately so were his, because he wasn't exactly in great shape and was underweight. But that aside, he was fairly decent at running. At the very least he got leg training in from riding a bike. That was something. *"I mean, there's gotta be some strength in those deceptively-skinny limbs. Tails is apparently only eleven but he managed to drag my whole body. But are Mobians fast?"* Sorun's blue eyes squinted as he continued to look at Sonic's legs. *"... Nah, no way he's that fast. I got this."*

He'd win the race and earn the right to do absolutely nothing until they sent him home. That'd solve all his problems, and he was just fine with it.

"Alright, Sonic. I'm game." Sorun stepped up to the other side of the line, and Sonic sent him a competitive smirk as he got into a running position behind the line. "If it'll get you to drop the idea of me joining the Freedom Fighters, I'll beat you in a foot race."

"Ooh, someone's confident." Hopping from one foot to the other, Sonic backed up and took a similar running position to Sorun as he glanced at the human from the corner of his eye. "I'll tell you what. I'll even let you do the countdown."

"Okay..." Sorun took a deep breath, and then tensed his muscles up and he intensely focused on the target tree. "Three... two... one... GO-!"

Sonic was already at the tree.

He didn't even know what happened. Sorun had said "go", and he'd blinked. In that blink his vision had cut out for a single millisecond, and when the eyes opened back up Sonic was standing next to the target tree with a victorious smirk on his mouth. It was such a shocking display that Sorun had frozen one step in, and hung still like a statue as he stared dumbstruck at the Mobian who was cheekily waving at him.

And after he was done waving, Sonic went back to the starting line Sorun was frozen at, and this time he did see what happened due to his eyes being open. Sonic simply *moved* . He ran at a speed that was so high that he went from standing at the tree to standing next to him in less than a tenth of a second, having turned into a blurry, blue shape as he moved.

"Ah, well, you know how it is, Sorun. Rules are rules." Sonic gave the human a hapless shrug, and the smug smirk he was sending him had Sorun's cheeks burning in embarrassment. "Welcome to the Freedom Fighters! You're gonna have a great time, trust me."

"... Guy's literally the friggin' Flash," Sorun mumbled to himself as he straightened his body out and turned to Sonic. "Super speed. You

seriously have super speed?"

"They don't call me the fastest thing alive for nothing," Sonic said.

"Of course." The human teen face-palmed his own face. "So is that a Mobian thing, or a hedgehog thing, or- or what am I missing here?"

The hedgehog shook his head. "No, that's a me thing. I've always been that fast. Don't know why, never bothered to ask." He shrugged again. "How else do you think I've been fighting Egghead this long? My plucky attitude sure didn't carry me this far."

"Yeah, guess not," Sorun numbly replied. "So, uh, does everybody in the Freedom Fighters have super powers?"

"Eh. Some," Sonic answered, and Sorun visibly withered. "But everybody is special in their own way, super powers or not. They just need to find out what they're good at to help out. Like you."

"... You know, you try to come off as this ultimate pillar of altruism, but you're really coming off as a huge hypocrite to me, man," Sorun told him. "You hustled me. You literally hustled me to join the resistance."

"Hey, don't make a risky bet you know you can't win."

The oh-so-innocent grin supplied with that statement was equally as infuriating as it was mocking. He was so right, too, and it frustrated Sorun to no end. Even worse was that he lost the bet and had to join the Freedom Fighters.

"But do I have to join them?" he thought. *"No, I do. Integrity aside, they'll probably do something like drag their feet getting the Emeralds or something if I go back on my word. My hands're tied here. Dammit."*

He didn't want to. But now he didn't have a choice because of that stupid bet.

"You know I still don't have anything going for me," Sorun weakly told the hedgehog. "And I think this is a big mistake you're making here, but... ugh, bet's a bet. I'll..." He had to swallow a lump in his throat. "I'll go back to the HQ tomorrow and tell them I'm in."

The wide smile that was beamed at him from the blue hedgehog was so intense that Sorun actually was forced to look away from him. He didn't think he'd ever seen Sonic so happy since he'd met him, and the raw happiness radiating off of him was almost stifling to the teen. "You don't know how relieved I am to hear that, Sorun. Now come on!" He waved him forwards and then turned around to walk back into Knothole. "It's really late and we have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow!"

Sorun stared after the blue Mobian with wide eyes, but eventually he hung his head and began dragging his feet across the ground as he slowly trailed behind Sonic. "Man, I just wanted orange juice..."

Chapter 4

Recursion Error

Episode 4- The world's most useless Freedom Fighter

"Goddammit, it wasn't a dream."

A large part of him- about ninety-nine percent if he were to portion his soul off- had hoped that it had all been a bad dream. That he'd went and ignored a wet floor sign in the supermarket or something and that he had just hit his head and imagined all this. That he was in a hospital room or his own room or wherever and that all of these terrible things happening to him were nothing but a figment of his imagination. That he would be able to wake up and go back to his normal, ordinary life without a care in the world.

Those hopes were dashed when he awoke to Sonic's ceiling.

After the depression came and went, Sorun dragged himself out of the bed, stomped out of Sonic's room, and hunted around the house for a solid five minutes before he finally found the bathroom. And the first thing he did when he locked the door behind him was head right to the sink, splash his face with cold water, and stare at his own wild face in the mirror.

"Alright, keep it together man. You're probably gonna not make it through this, but there's still a chance. It's abysmal, but it's there. It exists." A young, gaunt, pale face stared back at Sorun from the mirror he was staring at, and he had to brush back long locks of black hair to be able to see the blue eyes that were staring at him in terror. For a brief moment he eyed the bandage stuck above his left eye, and his grip on the sink tightened. "All you gotta do is fight robots with furry people and not die. Easy-peasy." His eyes dipped

towards the sink as he heaved out a deep sigh. "God, I'm so screwed."

He was starting to forget was optimism felt like. He'd been in such down spirits that such things like that were becoming too difficult to even try and attempt to think on. Probably not a good sign, but there wasn't anything he could do about it, so that left him with little else to do than power through it. Even if he was rapidly losing willpower.

"I wonder if there's a clothes shop or something I can get some spare clothes at," Sorun muttered to himself as he examined his clothes. "I only got the one set on me, and that's not gonna last me very long. What do I got, anyways?

"Let's see..." He began to pat down parts of his body as he listed off his clothing. "Okay, so... black sneakers, check. Socks, check. Black sweats, check. Blue t-shirt, check. Underwear?" He pulled his pants back and stared down at his crotch. "Thank goodness, I remembered to wear underwear," he sighed out as he released his pants, and then dug into his pockets. "How about my phone? How's that doing?"

His hands rooted around in his pockets. Rather alarmingly, he couldn't find his phone.

"What the? Where's my... oh, I swear if it fell out of my pocket when Tails grabbed me in that store," he angrily muttered under his breath. He didn't want to believe it, but the more he searched the more realized his phone wasn't on him, as the only things that were in his pockets were pieces of pocket lint and a gum wrapper. "Damn, that's rough," he sighed out. "My poor phone's either in a lost-and-found bin back on Earth or it got lost to the friggin' multiverse ether when Tails pulled me in that portal. Either way, it's gone. And I think I lost my wallet, too." He hung his head backwards. "Those things were expensive."

Well, that was his last lifeline to his home universe gone forever. It also meant he literally had nothing but the clothes on his back. And a

gum wrapper.

After taking care of everything he needed in the bathroom, Sorun found himself wandering around the house some more until he'd found his way into the kitchen. A high-speed blue object chose to bump into his side at that exact moment.

"Hey, Sorun!" He didn't even get a chance to think of a response before he felt Sonic pulling at his arm and dragging him to the kitchen table. "You know what today is, right?"

He quite simply didn't have the energy or drive for banter, but he didn't have the energy to be antagonistic towards the hedgehog, either. "No clue," he replied with a subdued yawn as he was seated at the kitchen table, with Sonic sitting right next to him. He could see the hedgehog's mother cooking something at the stove at the other end of the kitchen, and he could catch the scent of something sweet being cooked.

And, of course, right at the other end of the table was Sonic's robotic father. He had a newspaper in his metallic lap, but Sorun could swear the red sensors that were his eyes kept flashing briefly and moving in their black, eye-like screens from the newspaper to Sorun and back again. Like he was trying and failing to surreptitiously sneak glances at him.

The robot hedgehog must have realized he was doing a poor job, too, as he'd shifted in his seat, made a synthesized coughing noise, and rose up a mug filled with a black liquid that he poured down his mouth-grill.

"What the hell is he drinking? Oil?" Sorun thought as he stared at the mug. *"The weirdness just keeps getting deeper every second. I swear, this Looney Tunes shit is gonna drive me insane..."*

"I know somebody's hungry!" The teen was startled from his thoughts when plate stacked absurdly high with pancakes was set right in front of him. Sorun's surprised eyes slowly turned from the

pancakes to the female hedgehog who was setting another plate in front of Sonic. "Something the matter?" she asked upon noticing Sorun's staring.

"... You made me breakfast?" Sorun asked, voice laced in confusion as he picked up a nearby fork to poke at the pancakes.

"Of course." She turned towards her robotic husband. "Jules, there's more oil in the fridge if you need it, dear."

Jules nodded. "Thank you kindly, Bernie."

While continuing to poke at the pancakes, Sorun glance at Sonic. "Bernie?" he questioned.

He nodded. "Yeah, short for Bernadette."

"Oh. That makes sense." The teen was still poking at the pancakes. "She made me breakfast?" he mumbled.

Concern began to creep into Bernadette's features as she noticed Sorun's continued assault on his food. "Oh, no. Don't tell me they're not to your liking? I can always-"

"No, it's fine." A tore a chunk of pancake out and brought it to his mouth. "I just didn't really expect you to... huh."

There were two things he realized the second that he at that first bit of pancake: one was that Sonic's mother was an excellent cook. The second was that he hadn't eaten a single thing since coming to Mobius, and was just now feeling the fact that he was starving.

Eating was a blur for him, literally and metaphorically. His hands were moving too fast for him to keep track of and his mind was so focused on eating the pancakes that he could even remember moving to eat them. He wasn't even able to keep track of the time, so by the time he finished he was looking down at an empty plate that, from his perspective, had been full just a few seconds prior.

To say Sorun was stunned by the fact he'd so voraciously eaten the pancakes was an understatement, to say nothing of the reactions all the hedgehogs around him were giving him. Even Jules looked surprise, which was really impressive to Sorun considering most of his face couldn't move.

"Uh... wow, Sorun," Sonic chuckled, "you really like pancakes, huh?"

"Your mom makes really great pancakes." He felt embarrassment begin to burn at him as he placed his utensils on the plate before carrying the plate to the sink in an attempt to wash it. He couldn't even get that far before he felt somebody gently pull the plate out of his hands.

"Oh no, dearie, I'll take care of the dishes." Even as Bernadette pulled the plate away from him, the embarrassment Sorun felt was still too great, so he was forced to turn his eyes away from her. "I appreciate the sentiment, though," he heard.

"O-of course. Thank you, ma'am."

He heard a pleased trill next to him. "Honestly, my own husband and son could learn a thing or two from your behavior."

The sound of distorted coughing rang out as Jules crumpled his newspaper and sat up straighter in his chair. "Sonic, didn't you and Sorun have something to do today?"

"You know it!" From the corner of his eye, Sorun was reminded of Sonic's speed when he wolfed down his own pancakes even faster than he had before dashing next to Sorun and handing his mother his empty plate. "Don't you remember? We gotta go talk to everybody at Freedom HQ."

"Yeah-I-know-cool-let's-go." They could barely be counted as words, but Sorun wanted to badly to go away right now to even bother to care. It was no sooner did he say that string of barely-passable words did he begin to speed-walk out of the kitchen, and right behind

him he could hear Sonic bid his parents farewell before he heard rapid footfalls and felt the hedgehog's presence right besides him.

He didn't even need to look at him to know he had a smug grin on his face.

"Lookin' kinda red there, Sorun," he teased. "You doin' okay?"

Sorun didn't speak and resisted looking at him.

"But wow, you must REALLY like my mom's cooking. I actually had to try to keep up with how fast you ate, and that's saying a lot!" Sorun continued being silent, and Sonic's voice lowered as he stepped closer. "Hey, seriously, is something the matter?"

"No, I just... didn't really expect your mom to be so nice is all," he told him. "You and your family are being a lot more hospitable than I thought you would be. There's nothing wrong. I'm just surprised."

Sonic sent him a puzzled glance. "Why wouldn't we be nice?" he asked him. "Everybody here will be nice to you. They're all great people. I'm telling ya, you just gotta chill out and give them all a chance."

The pale teen's response was to point to the bandage on his forehead and mumble out, "Rock."

"The rock was a fluke." Sonic waved a hand. "I'm gonna talk to those kids later to make sure that doesn't happen again, alright? I know that you might still be a bit shaken by everything, but just give life here a try while you're here. You'll be surprised if my mom's cooking is what's stopping you in your tracks."

Sorun groaned, and then held his face in his hands. "Can we please stop talking about the pancakes?"

"Sorun, I'm never going to stop talking about the pancakes now."

The whole journey to the HQ had been spent with Sorun suffering in silence as Sonic unleashed jab after jab at him. By the time they had finally arrived he wasn't sure he had an ego anymore.

"I'm starting to regret a lot of my life choices right about now."

It was strange being back down there in Freedom HQ, the place where his life took a turn for the absolute worse. He felt all sorts of emotions the first time around when he was learning just what happened to him: disbelief. Doubt. Sadness along with crushing despair. Fear. Anger, *lots* of anger.

Admittedly he was still holding onto that anger, but over time it was slowly beginning to simmer into frustration.

The fear was still there, too, though when he reflected on it he figured that it was more nervousness and embarrassment than actual fear. He didn't have anything to fear- except for the killer robots, but that would come later. No, this was just him being nervous about talking in front of a group of people whose first impression of him had been seeing him at his lowest. Who were, by Sonic's account, these amazing people that put their lives on the line for other people with all sorts of powers and fighting skills. And then there was him, the human who tried his hardest to weasel out of fighting, who cost them seven infinite power gems, and who almost had a mental breakdown in front of them and screamed at a child.

It legitimately scared him thinking about how little they must have thought of him. And here he was about to tell them all he was going to join them despite having absolutely nothing positive to add to the team.

He felt like a bad joke.

Now that his eyes weren't killing him and he'd finally adjusted to whatever was up with the colors in this world, he was able to get a good look at all the Mobians that had gathered in front of him as he

leaned on the kitchen table in the HQ's kitchen. Seventeen of them in total with Sonic and Tails among them, the former near the head of the group giving him an encouraging smile while the latter was hiding near the back.

Everybody else was as colorful as he remembered and were all watching him with mixed looks of curiosity. Try as Sorun might, he couldn't bother to try and classify what kinds of animals they were. A very select few were obvious: he was fairly certain the tall, green one that looked like a crocodile was a crocodile. Or an alligator. Something along those lines. The small, floating one that literally looked like an anthropomorphic bee was most likely a bee, and if Sorun learned he wasn't he'd jump off a cliff at the absurdity of it. The white one with the bat wings could have been a bat, but Sorun didn't want to make assumptions with her. Everybody else with the exception of two could have been anything else, and for all he knew they were all alternate-universe animal breeds that didn't even exist on Earth.

The two exceptions seemed to be other hedgehogs, like Sonic. One was a pink one with much flatter and shorter spines than Sonic's that looked female, who looked about as curious as everybody else who had divided their attention to him. Her, Sorun was curious about due to the fact she had significantly more clothing than Sonic or the other hedgehog, as she had a dress that fully covered her torso. And now that he looked closer, it seemed all the female members he saw had more clothing than the males.

The clothing thing still confused him as much as everything else in this world did.

It was the third hedgehog in the group that was really making him worried, because the way he was looking at Sorun was legitimately making him scared. A male, black-furred hedgehog with the same tan-furred mouth that Sonic possessed, with a white patch of fur on his chest. Interestingly, the spines on the back of his head were pointed upwards unlike Sonic's or the pink one's, and even more interestingly he had a red stripe on each of the spines, his limbs, and

around his eyes. Red eyes that were constantly affixed at Sorun in a perpetual angry scowl.

"He just keeps glaring at me. Why does he keep glaring at me?" Sorun wondered. *"Nobody else looks angry. It's just him. It's making me really nervous."*

Sorun decided to just not look at the angry, black hedgehog, but even then he could almost feel him burning a hole into the side of his head with his stare.

But angry hedgehog or no, he had to get this started so he could get over with it as soon as possible. So he cleared his throat, lightly sighed as he thought over the words he planned on saying for the millionth time, and faced the crowd as he opened his mouth to speak.

"So... uh... yesterday kind of got heated, and I apologize for that," Sorun began. "I wasn't used to going to a whole new universe 'zone' place, so I was pretty shocked. I'm admittedly still trying to adapt to... well, literally everything, but Sonic's been helping me with that.

"I'm... aware you needed to use all seven of the Chaos Emeralds in order to bring me here. I'm sorry that you got somebody as useless as me instead of the super-cool, mega-awesome guy you were all hoping for, but here I am. And while I'd like nothing more than to just go home, I've also been made aware that you all can't afford to look for the Emeralds I'd need while fighting Eggman, and I completely understand. And after some *considerable convincing* from Sonic, I've decided to go ahead and join your group of Freedom Fighters.

"I will warn you right now. I have absolutely no combat experience whatsoever. I'm not particularly strong or smart. I don't have any special powers like Sonic or any of you might have. I have absolutely no tactical know-how or any knowledge of how war works."

Some of the Mobians began to look at one another with unsure, confused looks while others were grimacing in pity at Sorun's sake.

Sonic was glancing around with a nervous smile while it looked like he was beginning to sweat. The black hedgehog was glaring at Sorun even harsher.

"I don't have any technical or mechanical knowledge. My medical knowledge is slim to none, especially considering I have no idea what Mobian biology is like. I can't track or survive in the wilderness to save my life. My cooking skills are nil. I have absolutely no practical skills that are of use to anybody. I don't even have a high school degree. What I'm trying to say is that I'm more of a liability than an asset to you all, and I seriously doubt that I can be of any help to any of you." He sighed deeply, looked down at the floor, and rubbed at the back of his neck. "But I'm already here and everything, so I guess I'll do what I can to help out," he finished.

It was possibly the worst speech he'd ever given in his entire life, but he honestly had nothing better to say in his defense. And at the very least, it was honest. Whatever good that did him.

Unfortunately, any confidence he had was quickly beginning to vanish when he looked back up at the group of Mobians in front of him. It almost physically hurt to see them all wincing at him and giving him pitying looks, and even Sonic looked downcast at Sorun's words. Even then he was trying to support him with a smile, but even Sorun could see how fake and forced it was.

The black hedgehog looked ready to bite his head off.

"Yep. This is even worse than I thought it would be." He desperately wanted any excuse just to leave right now just so he could escape this embarrassing hell he was in. *"Should never have made that stupid bet with Sonic."*

A full, solid minute of awkward silence was spent as they all stared at each other in equal parts embarrassment and pity, and Sorun was beginning to wonder when the pressure of the situation would actually knock him out before anything else happened when one of the Mobians stepped forwards in front of him. The red-haired one

Sonic had pointed out from yesterday, who looked like a brown chipmunk now that Sorun got a better look at her.

"Um... Sonic said your name was Sally, right?" Sorun asked as he leaned harder into the table behind him. "Something about royalty or something? Does that make you the leader here?"

She shook her head. "Not officially, no. The Freedom Fighters don't really have so much a leader as people who coordinate it. I would be one of those."

"That's... the literal definition of a leader, Sally."

He saw one of her blue eyes twitch, and Sorun idly wondered if antagonizing the royal chipmunk was perhaps not the best move to make right now. Fortunately, she seemed to brush it off and stared him square in the eyes with a serious expression on her face. "Sorun, I understand your plight, and I appreciate you understanding that we can't divert any resources towards sending you back home at the moment. But do you seriously want to join the Freedom Fighters, even after everything you said? I don't think I need to tell you the dangers involved."

"Want? Want is, uh, want's a strong word. Strong word," Sorun mumbled. "It was more Sonic's idea than anything."

The long-drawn out sigh that came out of Sally followed by the look of sympathy she shot him made Sorun feel that maybe he wasn't alone at holding some contempt for Sonic. "I'm not going to lie to you," she started. "The Freedom Fighters are hurting right now and are accepting any help we can get."

"You're so desperate you'd take a loser like me?"

"... Unfortunately, yes," she said with a resigned nod. "So if you want to join, I'll let you join. And I promise that, regardless of what you say, if and when we ever come across all seven of the Chaos Emeralds again I will personally ensure that sending you straight to your home

zone is a top priority. But Dr. Eggman and the safety of Mobius comes first above all else." She extended her right hand to Sorun. "We'd be happy to have you."

So much for scaring them off with how useless he was. That was his last strategy in the bag for getting out of this. Looking down at the hand being offered to him, Sorun wanted to go back on his word right there and tell her that he couldn't do it. That he wasn't cut out for being a Freedom Fighter and should just stay away. He wouldn't even be lying, because he knew for a fact he wasn't cut out for this.

Thoughts of his home were the only thing that kept him from doing such a thing. As it stood, they were his best bet going back. He had to.

"Mm. I feel like you won't be thinking that for long." He meant that with genuine sincerity. "Well, regardless, I'm in. For better or worse." He held his left hand up and grasped it with hers, trying his best to ignore the perplexing, alien feeling that he felt when grasping her hand. She was one of the few he saw that didn't wear gloves. "Until I find a way home," he added. "Then I'm out of here and we never see each other again."

"Of course." They shook on it, and Sorun felt like he just signed his life away. But it was a step forwards for getting him home. A small, minuscule step. Barely something that could be registered, really. But it was more progress than he'd made since coming to this world, and that alone was enough to make him feel *some* positivity.

Home was still so far away to him. But maybe he'd make it back now.

"Now, I'm sure you'd like to meet the people you'll be working with now that you're one of us," Sally said as the two of them pulled their arms back, "but before all that, there's something we need to take care of first."

"Hm? What's that?"

"I need to take you to Castle Acorn to meet my brother. The king," she clarified upon seeing Sorun's questioning face, to which the pale teen blanched. "My brother, Elias, is usually busy with his royal affairs, but he likes to take time to meet anybody new who chooses to settle in Knothole City. That goes double for any new Freedom Fighters, and that goes triple for you in particular since he was the one that green-lit the use of the tablet's coordinates as our request. He specifically told me he wanted to meet you, actually, so we should go see him sooner rather than later."

"Ah. I see." Sorun nodded in understanding. "Your brother is gonna be a very disappointed man, Sally. Sorry in advance."

The Mobian laughed a little, and it took Sorun a moment to realize that she must have thought he'd told a joke. He didn't have in it him to correct her. "You're not as bad as you say you are, you know," she told him. "Now come on. We're burning daylight."

"Yeah, sure, let's-" Sorun stopped himself when he saw Sonic hopping on his feet to gain his attention, and then looked back towards Sally. "Actually, gimme a sec. I'll catch up."

She'd followed his gaze to Sonic, and then nodded in understanding before turning to leave. Most of everybody else had dispersed to deal with their own business, while Sonic had dashed up in front of Sorun with a big grin on his face.

"Great job, Sorun!" He gave the human a thumbs-up. "I knew you had it in you! How d'ya feel?"

"Like the biggest idiot on the planet," Sorun answered. "I literally just told everybody I'm dead weight, and they all probably think I'm worthless now. And they'd be wrong. Because I'm way worse than worthless."

"Aw, don't be like that. What'd I say about self-confidence?" He stepped to Sorun's side and shook his shoulder in a playful manner.

"We'll fix that in no time, buddy. We just gotta figure out what you're good at and work on that."

He made it sound so easy. And if Sorun didn't know any better, he would have believed him and felt relieved about the whole situation. But unfortunately he did know better. "I... thanks, Sonic." He gently pulled away and nodded his head to the stairs leading to the exit. "I gotta go meet the king. Oh, wait, quick, before I go, you got any advice for me? What's the king like?"

"Elias? He's a nice guy. Not that much older than us, actually." Sonic shrugged. "I wouldn't be too worried about it. Just be yourself."

"'Be yourself' he says. Most generic advice ever," Sorun muttered under his breath, but gave Sonic a nod of thanks regardless and turned to the exit. "Sure, I'll go for it. I might be gone a while, so I guess I'll see you back at the house." He waved a goodbye behind his back. "Later."

"I'll have mom save some pancakes just for you!"

A deep breath was needed to steady Sorun after he heard the jab, but to his own surprise, a breathy chuckle left him when he exhaled it. "You better," he called behind him as he ascended the stair. "Those pancakes are great."

A/N- Yeah, there's not really a set length for how long these chapters are gonna be. I've tried doing hard word limits in the past, and they really kill the flow for me. Some chapters could be 2k words long, they could be 20k words long, I dunno. They end when they end.

Chapter 5

A/N- So I goofed up and named named Jules Charles for some reason, which was pointed out to me. My brain had a critical error or something; I dunno how I screwed up that badly. Don't even know where I got the name "Charles" from. Anyways, I went back and stealth-patched it, so it's all good now.

Recursion Error

Episode 5- The post-apocalyptic furry wasteland is brutal

"As you might have imagined, my brother lives in Castle Acorn being the king and all. You might have seen it?"

"Yeah, giant castle in the middle of the city. Hard to miss."

"I thought so." Sally adjusted the short, blue jacket she wore, and then began walking towards the direction of Knothole City with Sorun closely in tow. "So how have you been finding everything so far?" she asked him. "I know it can't be easy, what with you being stranded here and all, but otherwise have you been getting by okay?"

Oh, how there were so many ways he wanted to say no. So many ways he wanted to display his bitter resentment towards this entire situation through a harsh choice of words so Sally could stop asking him about his feelings and they could spend the rest of the trip in silence. He wouldn't yell, but the remarks would be scathing enough to cut just deeply enough to get the message across.

"I'm telling ya, you just gotta chill out and give them all a chance."

But Sonic's words ringing in his head stayed his tongue. For as many negative thoughts as he had about the hedgehog- and quite a few at that- even Sorun would admit that the hedgehog was *trying* to help him through this, and at the very least everybody seemed to regret bringing him into the circumstances he found himself in. At the very least, Sorun appreciated that. And even he would admit that something about the blue Mobian's boundless optimism spoke to him in a good way, though he'd never admit it.

Was he still upset at them all for opening that portal and dragging him here against his will? Yes, he was. Did he blame them? Not anymore, no. Did he forgive them? That remained to be seen.

A lot of things remained to be seen.

"I'm getting by, yeah," Sorun answered. "Some kids chucked a rock at my face, but Sonic's mom took care of the cut. Otherwise things have been manageable."

Sally visibly winced as she peeked up at his forehead. "I was wondering about that," she said. "What happened with the kids?"

"Sonic said he'd deal with them."

She looked relieved at that answer. "That's probably for the best."

Sorun raised an eyebrow at the response, and then leaned forwards to nudge her in the shoulder. "What, don't trust me to handle a bunch of kids?" he asked. "I know we just met and I didn't give off a good impression when it comes to kids, but sheesh."

"You *did* scream at Tails." That shut Sorun right up. "And that's not what I meant. Sonic's a hero to those kids, to kids all over the world. I was just saying that they'd listen to him a lot easier than to, well, somebody like you. No offense."

"... Ah-huh." He actually did take some offense to that, but didn't say anything and chose to keep walking next to Sally.

Unfortunately, the chipmunk seemed to notice his silence, and then began to nervously rub at her arm as her eyes darted around awkwardly. "Are you still upset at us?" she asked him. "For bringing you here. It's just that, well, with the way you acted with Tails-"

"Geez, I get it, I shouldn't have yelled at him," Sorun interrupted with a harsh wave of his hand. "Gimme a break here. I already told Sonic I was going to apologize to him. I'm just looking for a good time is all." He swiveled his head away to avoid Sally's eyes. "I didn't even know he was a kid," he mumbled. "Didn't even know what a Mobian was until Sonic told me."

"... That's good," she said after a few moments of silence. "But please don't forget to talk to him. It's hitting him really hard."

"I doubt it's hitting him any harder than it is me," Sorun thought. The pair continued to walk in silence afterwards, with the human teen sneaking glances at Sally every so often as the wooden buildings of Knothole began to grow closer and closer. *"I guess I should ask her something? Try to get to know her? Ask what, though? What it's like being in a royal family? Nah, she probably gets questions like that all the time. Hobbies? No, she'll probably say something like she's too busy with the Freedom Fighters and get pissed at me."* He scratched the back of his head. *"Dang, I don't know how to talk to people."*

It was really hard to come up with anything to say, too, especially considering he didn't know what kind of person Sally was having just met her. The thought about asking her something Sorun was interested to know crossed his mind, but choosing a single question out of the millions floating around in his head proved to be a rather difficult task. *"Maybe... I dunno, there's so many things I wanna ask. Maybe what the deal with humans here is? Better than nothing, I guess."*

"So I noticed that there aren't any other humans that live in Knothole," Sorun voiced. "Also it looks like Mobians don't particularly like humans. Is there a reason?"

"There's a... general stigma towards them, yes," Sally admitted after a terse moment. "A large part is Eggman, but even before him our kinds never really mixed all that well. We've had wars and a lot of bloodshed between each other." She turned away to avoid Sorun's inquisitive stare. "And I don't mean to be rude, but... any confrontation between our kinds were more often than not initiated by the Overlanders. Mobians just wanted peace between everybody. We only ever fought to defend what was ours." She looked back to him. "So you'll have to forgive everybody for being a bit tense around you. Even if you are from another zone, you still look like one of them."

Well, that didn't paint a really big picture. Sorun felt like she was glossing over a lot of details, but when he thought about how much history she was trying to condense into a few sentences, he didn't blame her. But knowing that there were a sizable enough amount of humans on Mobius to be able to wage wars was an interesting tidbit. The fact they actually did wage wars wasn't as surprising, but it did give him some context for the general animosity he felt from any passing Mobians.

"That so? I'm not really surprised," Sorun said.

"Huh? Why not?"

"Dude, Sally, there's whole historical textbooks filled with human wars back from where I'm from," he told her. "Humans fight for a lot of reasons. It just happens."

She stuck her tongue out at that explanation. "That's barbaric," she said. "Why? Why does your kind think it's so okay to wage war?"

"Well, it's not like every single human goes 'aw yeah, war! Awesome!' all the time. I can't speak for the ones here, but most, and I mean, like, a large majority, back home on Earth don't. And why?" He hummed in thought, and then sighed as he rubbed the back of his head. "I dunno. I'm not really a big historical philosophy

buff. Things happen. And I sure couldn't tell you why the people here fought your kind when I got no other information than 'they just did'."

He certainly had a few assumptions, land dominance and a general dislike for anything nonhuman being the greatest suspects in his mind. They sounded too stereotypical to be true, but on the other hand he didn't nearly have enough faith to not believe in the possibility. And he had to remind himself that this wasn't Earth; it was Mobius, with a different set of humans. And apparently one of them was an evil tyrant using robots to take over the world. For all he knew humans in this world were just walking evil stereotypes. It would fit in with all the other weird logic he'd been exposed to so far here.

Sorun really hoped that wasn't the case, because he really didn't know what he was supposed to do with that information if it was.

"Something you said's bothering me," Sorun continued. "Overlander. You called humans Overlanders. Is that, like, the Mobian nickname for humans or something?"

Sally shook her head. "No, there's a clear distinction between the two of them. Overlanders are humans that evolved from the gene bombs that formed Mobius as we know it today. Humans are simply descended from normal humans who were never mutated by the bombs."

"..." There was a lot of information in that statement that Sorun was drawing a blank on, and now he was just confused. "Uh... gene bombs?" he mumbled out. "Wh- what are you talking about?"

The chipmunk stopped in her tracks and whirled towards Sorun with surprise in her eyes. "Did Sonic not explain this to you?" she questioned.

Sorun shook his head. "Explain what?"

"Oh, for the love of..." She slapped a hand to her forehead, and Sorun could have sworn he heard faint murmurs spill out from her mouth as she tiredly shook her head. "Shouldn't have trusted Sonic with him. Should have left him with somebody more responsible. How could he not explain this to him?" Sorun had rose a hand to try to get her attention, but stopped himself when Sally slid her hand off her face, took in a deep breath, and looked Sorun straight up at the eyes.

He felt a bit wary at how serious she looked all of a sudden.

"Sorun, there's something important about Mobius you should know since you're, well, stuck here for now," she stated. "It'll help clear up your confusion and may answer a lot of your questions. I was hoping Sonic would have the common sense to tell you beforehand, but it looks like he didn't." She grumbled under her breath again and glanced the the side while crossing her arms. "How come I can trust him to save the day but nothing else?"

"Sally?"

"Oh, right." She cleared her throat and turned back to Sorun. "You said your home zone is called Earth, right? Is that the name of your planet?"

Quirking an eyebrow in confusion, Sorun slowly nodded at the Mobian. "Yeah...?"

"Well... this planet wasn't always called Mobius. Once upon a time, it was called Earth, too."

"Buh." There were so many implications with that sentence that he didn't even know where to begin. "Explain," he demanded. "Explain now."

"I will, I will," she assured him while raising her hands to calm him down, as the human teen began to breath heavier. He nodded and slowly slowed his breathing. "You said back when you first came

here that there weren't any Mobians on your planet Earth. That it was dominated solely by humans and nothing else but what I assume were normal, non-sapient animals. Am I right so far?"

Sorun confirmed her question with a shaky nod of his head. "Mh-hm, mh-hm, yeah."

"Well," she began, "This planet was the same way once. It was called Earth, and the only sapient species that lived on it were humans, the same as yours. This all changed when an alien race named the Xorda visited the planet."

"Ah. Aliens. Of course." Why not? Sonic already told him about aliens. Everything else about this world was so crazy that it seemed normal by comparison. Why would this be any different? "What do aliens have to do with this?"

"You have to understand that a lot of what I'm about to tell you is relatively new information to us," she quickly explained to him. "It was a bit over a year ago when the Xorda came back and explained a lot of details to us before we had to repel their invasion. We cross-referenced a lot of historical data from the royal archives after and managed to piece together as consistent a timeline of the planet's history as well as we could."

Sorun rose a hand to stop her. "Sally, I don't want to know about the alien invasion that happened last year. I'm still trying to understand the whole 'Mobius is Earth bit', okay?" His head actually felt like it was going to explode, and much to his alarm he could hear his heartbeat thumping in his ears. "It's... you're dumping a lot on me right now. Can you please, *please* just stick to the important bits?"

"Okay, Sorun. Okay. I understand. Just calm down." She stepped forwards and but a reassuring hand on his shoulder. She needed to stay there for a few seconds, after which Sorun's breathing began to even out. He gave her a shaky nod, which she reciprocated with her own nod before stepping back. "As I was saying, the Xorda came and sent an ambassador to have peaceful talks with the humans,"

she continued. "The humans' response was to dissect the ambassador."

The pale teen's only response to this was to roll his eyes while muttering curses under his breath too quiet for Sally to hear.

"The Xorda saw this as a sign of war, and bombarded planet Earth with weapons called gene bombs," she explained. "There were a precious few amount of human settlements that managed to survive underground, but for the most part all life on the planet was completely annihilated by the gene bombs. The Xorda, thinking the planet had been completely destroyed, left afterwards." She paused, and looked out at the distance past all the trees and towards the plains past the castle they were walking towards, right at the horizon. "What happened afterwards is what history calls the Days of Fury," she said. "Practically all life that didn't escape the bombs were reduced to primordial sludge. The tectonic disturbances caused by the bombs' explosions were so great that they caused natural catastrophes on the planet's surface. Storms that tore the land up, volcanoes that scorched the skies and the earth, and earthquakes that reshaped the entire surface. Eventually the planet calmed down, but all that was left was a lifeless planet above ground." She stopped to take a breath and turned back to Sorun, who remained completely silent while paying rapt attention to Sally's story. "Thousands of years would pass before life would begin to evolve out from the primordial sludge left by the gene bombs," she continued. "Details on this point in time are... scarce, but from what little data we were able to gather along with... 'statements' from certain questionable people and sources, there were extinctions on the first species to evolve from the sludge, and it was during this time that the Chaos Emeralds came to exist on the planet, though back then they took on a different form. How they got to be in the state they're in today is another story entirely, and we can talk about it later if you want.

"Getting back on track, eventually species arose out of the sludge that didn't go extinct, and they evolved into what walks on the planet today. Mobians, and Overlanders. Technically speaking Overlanders

are Mobians, too, but they would never admit to it since they're so attached to their human ancestry." She turned sideways and pointed towards Castle Acorn. "One of my ancestors was responsible for uniting the various Mobian tribes to make a single kingdom that stood for unification regardless of what subspecies of Mobian you were. He believed in strength of unity and friendship above all else, and everybody agreed with him. So the Kingdom of Acorn was born, and the line of royal succession has been handed down through a monarchy every since." She looked back to Sorun, and sympathy was cast over her face when she saw the lost look on his face. "Sorun, I know that's a lot to take in all at once on top of everything else you're going through, and I know you must have a lot of questions. If you want to know any finer details, feel free to ask me or anybody else. Otherwise, that's a basic, and I cannot stress the word 'basic' enough here, crash-course on the history of the planet."

"... Ah-huh." He was honestly surprised his brain hadn't melted and poured out of his ears yet. It certainly felt like that's what it should be doing right now, because he couldn't think properly right now. He had to keep rethinking the words of Sally's story over and over again in his head to make sense of it all, and though he gained a little bit more clarity each time, he also felt his sanity slip away in equal amounts.

Sally's face was marred with concern as she saw the conflict on Sorun's own face, and held up a hand to try and calm him. "Sorun?" she softly asked. "Are you alright?"

Very slowly, he nodded, though he had to maintain a hand on his forehead to try and soothe the pounding in his head. "Sure, probably," he moaned out as he tried to order his thoughts out. "So-so this... this zone. It's Earth? Earth, but in a... what, some kind of post-post-post alien apocalypse? That's why everything is so weird? That's why there's walking, talking animals everywhere and why the logic in this place is all screwy? It was aliens?" He moaned again as a headache assaulted him, and he had to begin to use two hands to try and rub the pain out of his head. "And you're sure that this is an

alternate universe?" he clarified. "This is an alternate universe and not the future? This isn't my home, right? Oh my god, please tell me you're not mixing the two up, Sally, *please* ..."

There was only so much he could handle, and Sorun had already crossed that threshold yesterday. This? This was too much, because if they were wrong and this was actually just the future, *his* future...

"It's another universe, right? It can't be the future. It's-it's-it's all just some screwed up alternate plane of existence. It's not my home. Everybody isn't dead. They're... nobody's dead, right? Everybody I know didn't die, r-right?"

Did she make a mistake?

She didn't want to think she did, and in her heart of hearts she believed she hadn't made a mistake. Sorun had asked her, and she'd told him the history of Mobius. It was supposed to be a harmless little history lesson used so they could get to know each other, something to do a little bonding over so Sorun would be a little easier around her and other Mobians so he wouldn't be so jumpy. She had just wanted to help her.

What she didn't want was for her explanation to turn Sorun into the shaking mess she was looking at, and for the life of her Sally didn't know what to do. Had she said something wrong? She didn't think so; everything she had told him was accurate. So why was-

"Oh my god, please tell me you're not mixing the two up, Sally, *please* ..."

And then it dawned on her just why Sorun was freaking out, and she instantly became mortified behind the implication of his question.

"S-S-Sally, say somethin'," he mumbled. "Everybody I know isn't dead, right? Th- they're fine? I- I don't, this isn't, I-I-I..."

"Sorun? Sorun, look at me." The desperate urge to correct this misunderstanding was rapidly beginning to well up inside of her, and she ran right up to Sorun and began to gently shake his shoulders to try and gain his attention, but it just wasn't working. He was shaking so intensely that if, anything, merely touching him was shaking her more than him, and his eyes were so wide with terror that it unsettled her to a great degree.

So she tried to do the first thing that came to mind in order to give him *any* kind of comfort to snap him out of his episode and tried to give him a hug. Just a gentle, reassuring thing to let him know that everything was okay. But she didn't even get close before his entire body jerked and he pushed her away. She stumbled backwards and looked at him with a hurt expression, but it was wiped away when she saw his terror-stricken eyes and the raw contempt that was buried underneath all that fear that was being directed right at her.

"Right," she thought, and a pang of guilt began to tear through her. *"He... still blames us for putting him here. He still doesn't trust us. He isn't ready for something like that."* Her hands tightened at her sides. *"I still need to snap him out of this, though. I can't just leave him like this."*

"Sorun? Please calm down." She slowly moved her arms in a lowering gesture, and hope began to well up in her when the quiet, wheezing breaths Sorun was breathing began to die down at her words. "It's not a mix-up, okay? We know what we're talking about when it comes to zones. We're not in your world's future. This is a completely separate world. Your world and everybody you know are fine. They're just a bit similar, alright? Everything is fine."

"Separate? Separate. Yeah." She exhaled the breath she'd been holding when the shaking began to subside and Sorun's hands began to lower off his head. "Okay, yeah... just a different universe. Nobody I know died. They're all still alive. Everything back home is okay."

The guilt from earlier began to come back, and it was those words that made her realize just how much they had taken away from Sorun when they had dragged him through the portal to this world. *"Just how much did he leave behind when we... why are you even asking that?"* she berated herself. *"He had a whole life. Friends, and family, and a whole lot of other things, probably. And we took it all from him when we brought him here. It wasn't supposed to be like this at all. We didn't think... we rushed into it too fast. Eggman made us too desperate, and we rushed right into that tablet and- it's too late for regrets."* She shook her head roughly. *"It's bad now, but we can fix it. Sorun's here, but we can send him back eventually. It'll all be fine."*

There would never be a point she didn't regret pulling Sorun into their mess. She knew the rest of the Freedom Fighters felt the same, Tails especially, but she didn't know if they fully understood the weight of what they had done like she did right now. And they *would* make it right and send him back to his home zone when the opportunity was right. But she had to wonder if letting him into the Freedom Fighters was the right decision after all, because at the end of the day, he was right. He was a normal teenager who made it sound like the things they dealt with in this zone didn't even exist in his zone. And she was worried that if merely explaining Mobius's history shook him up so bad, that he would freeze up entirely the first time he saw a Badnik. And she didn't want to think about what would happen if he froze in front of a robot trying to kill him.

"Sorun... you know, if you're having any regrets about joining the Freedom Fighters..." She looked away from his disheveled face a scratched at the back of her head. "Nobody would blame you for quitting. We'd understand. It's not your fight, and-"

"I already said I would, didn't I? Drop the subject already." On the upside, his sentences weren't fragmented anymore and he sounded composed once more. But he also sounded extremely bitter, and his tone had a cold edge to it that made Sally do a double-take on Sorun. "Can we just go to the castle already?" he asked.

"U-um, sure." She watched as Sorun stomped past her towards the castle, and had to stifle the sigh that threatened to leave her as she followed him. *"I wish I'd brought Nicole with me,"* she found herself thinking. *"I could really use her advice right now, because I just don't know how to talk to him."*

They'd finally arrived at the castle gates. Sorun noticed that were were a rather large amount of Mobians stationed around the castle perimeter- ones in green uniforms who were wielding swords and spears. He also noted the way they were eyeing him from his position, but a quick nod from Sally always put them at ease. He felt mildly ticked off at the treatment, and wanted to tell somebody, but he just couldn't find it in himself to do so. So he remained silent for the most part, even as they entered the castle.

He'd calmed down from Sally's story about Mobius, but a part of him was still shaken from the thoughts that had been running through him. Sally had assured him that, no, this wasn't his world's future, and he was relieved beyond words. Relived, but still shaken, because the scare had been bad. So bad he'd almost lost it.

"Hell, I practically did lose it back there," he thought as he lagged behind Sally, who had elected to lead him through the castle. *"Shoved her and everything. Even after I told Sonic I'd try and get along, but it's... it's hard. It's all still too new."*

Sorun really hoped that he hadn't offended her by pushing her away when she'd just been trying to comfort him, or at least apologize to her, but he wanted so desperately to forget the whole ordeal that he was too scared to bring it up again. So that left them at this awkward impasse where they would just pretend that didn't happen and they would just forget it.

That was what he was doing, at least. He didn't know how Sally was dealing with it, and he was too scared to ask.

Eventually these thoughts became too uncomfortable for him to think on, so he chose to distract himself by looking around the castle they were walking in. For all intents and purposes, it was about as large as it looked like and about as spacious as one would expect a castle. Big rooms, lots of stairs and hallways, and a layout so convoluted that he would be doubtlessly lost if it weren't for a fact he had a guide. A lot of guards, too. So many guards that Sorun had to wonder if it wasn't overkill.

"There sure are a lot of guards here," Sorun noted. "Don't you think it's a bit much?"

Sally spun her head around to look at Sorun, and he saw her blink her blue eyes in surprise, almost like she hadn't expected for him to talk to her again. "It was my father's idea," she said. "He was the previous king, before my brother. There aren't usually this many, but, well..." She stopped to take a deep breath. "Remember when Sonic said we had one of the Chaos Emeralds here?" she asked.

"... Vaguely?" It certainly sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite remember. He certainly didn't blame himself for forgetting such a small detail. Things had been so hectic that he was sure he'd forgotten all sorts of details. "Remind me," he requested.

She nodded. "The seven Chaos Emeralds were all locked away into a zone called the Special Zone, which was presided over by a being called Feist. Sonic at one point had ventured into the Special Zone to retrieve one of the Emeralds, the gray Emerald, to help my father who was deathly ill at the time."

"And he got the Emerald?"

"Yes, he did. Afterwards, we kept the gray Chaos Emerald safe in the castle, but... but then it was taken." She stopped, and her body shuddered as she squeezed her eyes closed. "We're not entirely sure what happened. Just that something came in here and stole the Emerald. Out of nowhere. Hershey, one of the agents to the kingdom's Secret Service, just happened to be on duty and nearby

and was... we think she saw whatever was stealing the Emerald, because we found her dead." She opened her eyes and looked down at her feet with a forlorn expression. "It wasn't just her," she continued. "Over twenty guardsmen were found cut to pieces. There were cuts and slashes all along the walls and floors, like something was swinging around a giant sword or something."

"Oh... geez," Sorun mumbled, and he shot her a sympathetic look. "That sounds really bad."

"It was," she agreed. "We think that it was one of Dr. Eggman's robots, but we honestly don't know, because nobody who saw it lived. And right after Eggman somehow managed to acquire the other six Emeralds."

"But they were locked away in the Special Zone, right?"

Sally shook her head. "That's the thing, Sorun. We tried going to the Special Zone to ask Feist who had taken the Emeralds, but we couldn't find it. The Special Zone is just *gone* ."

Those were certainly disturbing implications. He wanted to ask more, but he saw the pained expression her face was making, so he decided to hold his tongue and tried changing the subject. "So Elias?"

The chipmunk straightened up upon hearing her brother's name, and then pointed down the hall. "Right. This way."

Walking with silence between them once again, the pair continued to make their way through the castle's winding corridors until they stopped in front of a large set of double doors. Sally motioned for Sorun to stay where he was before she went to the doors, knocked on them, and then entered after waiting a few moments.

Sorun chose to obey and wait, and then idly began to rock back and forth on his feet. He heard and tried and discern the muffled voices from the other side of the door, but failed to make anything out. After

some more waiting, the doors opened back up and Sally's head poked in through the opening.

"He said he's fine to talk to you right now," she said. "And try not to look so nervous. My brother really isn't scary at all."

"Nervous? Who's nervous? I ain't nervous." It was a complete lie, but she didn't know that. He hoped she didn't, at least, but the knowing look in her eyes didn't give him much hope in that regard. "Anyways, he's in here?" he asked as he pulled the door open further and slipped in past Sally.

It was, quite unsurprisingly, a throne room. A rather modest one compared to what he had expected, but still a rather large room considering. Wide open space, large pillars, giant, rectangular windows on the walls, and a big throne right at the end. Though, to Sorun's surprise, the sole other person in the room wasn't in it, and was in fact standing near the entrance to the room and looking at him in an expectant manner.

"Wow, this guy has more clothes on him than anybody else I've seen around," Sorun observed. Elias certainly looked the part of a king, too, with the blue and gold vestments he wore on his whole body. It was readily apparent that he was Sally's brother, too, as he had the same hair, hair, and fur color as her as well as even some of her facial structure. *"Except his tail's way longer. What is he, a squirrel?"* the teen wondered when he looked at the long, curled tail behind the king. *"Huh, that's kinda... wait. Waaaaiit... squirrel, chipmunk, Kingdom of Acorn, oh my god it's called Acorn because they're a royal family of squirrels it's a damn pun oh my god that's so STUPID-!"*

"Yo, what's up? I'm Sorun." The flippant greeting was the only one that Sorun could manage, as the rest of his focus was being diverted towards trying to not tear his hair out. He held up a 'v' with his fingers and tried to smile, but due to his inner turmoil it looked less like a smile and more like a rictus grin one might find on a corpse.

Overall, not his worst greeting.

The young king actually seemed a bit flustered by his greeting, so much so that the small, gold, acorn-shaped (Sorun had to resist gagging when he saw it) crown on his forehead slipped down, and he had to fumble to right it. "Oh! Greetings! Hi." He cleared his throat, clasped his hands behind his back, and then looked to his sister. "This is Sorun, then, sister?"

"Yes, brother. That's Sorun." She gave her brother an affirmative nod before turning to Sorun. "I'll be waiting outside. Just come find me when you're done, okay?"

"Uh, sure. I'll do-" The door was closed behind her before he even finished. "... That," he finished with a slump of his shoulders. "Hm. So!" he cried out while whirling to the king, and his sudden change in demeanor caused Elias to jump slightly. "Kingy. What'd you wanna see me for?"

"Well, everybody was making such a large buzz about that wooden slab and the... individual the Freedom Fighters planned on bringing on behalf of it." Elias's eyes flicked nervously towards the door Sally had closed, and then went back to Sorun. "I understand you've volunteered to help them after being guided here by-"

"Abducted. I- I was abducted," Sorun interrupted. "You can use the word abducted, Elias."

He gave the teen a stiff nod. "Nevertheless, I am glad to hear you've volunteered your services-"

"Coerced, really."

A large breath was quickly inhaled by the king when he was interrupted, but then he hung his head and slowly released the breath. "You really don't want to be here, do you?"

"What part of abducted didn't you understand?" Sorun asked him. "Abducted; verb: to take someone away illegally by force or deception. Example: I was minding my own business buying orange juice from a store when your Freedom Fighters dragged me through a magical portal. Chaos portal. Whatever portal."

He would have went further, but his words began to grow quieter when he saw Elias shrink back further and further away from Sorun the more he spoke while looking increasingly uncomfortable. And then he thought that, just maybe, he was being a bit overbearing again. So he paused to take a deep breath and calm his thoughts before speaking again.

"Maybe a I went a little far. Don't worry about it," he told Elias. "I mean, yeah, I don't want to be here. Like, I *really* don't want to be here. But I am, so, you know, I'm trying to make it work. I don't think I'm doing a very good job, but I'm trying."

He must have said something right, because Elias's body relaxed at his words and he stopped slowly backing away. He even nervously laughed a little as he shuffled closer to him while looking to the side. "You're not giving yourself enough credit. I... think I would be rather terrified if I were in your shoes. I'm honestly shocked you haven't tried running away."

"Oh, I did. I came back 'cause I realized the Freedom Fighters are the only realistic bet I have on getting home."

"... I see." He sighed out loud and turned his back to Sorun as he walked towards one of the large window panes that overlooked the city below. "Suppose I can't blame you," he admitted after stopping in front of the window. "I somewhat know what it feels like to be thrust into a world you're unfamiliar with, though I speak more of a metaphorical sense."

There was a strong, sarcastic rebuttal Sorun thought of, but he held in it for fear of making his first impression worse than what it already was. Instead he stepped besides Elias and stared out at all the

wooden buildings below them. "Wild guess here, but it's the king thing?" he guessed. "How old are you, anyways?"

"Twenty-one," he answered. "And, yes, that is indeed what I refer to. My father, Maximillian, was the previous king, but while he's okay now he's not... physically fit for the position anymore. He's bound to a wheelchair these days, you see."

"Yeah, Sally said something about him being sick. So, what, you ran away?"

A pained expression flickered across Elias's face. "I thought I could handle the pressure that came with all the responsibility. I was woefully wrong," he admitted. "So yes. I ran. Tried to settle in a village, even took on a wife and her daughter after her husband disappeared due to one of Eggman's machinations. But to make a long story short, things here became dire, so I returned to take back the crown. But now... now I'm just not so sure, Sorun." He ran a hand over the glass. "Even after the Freedom Fighters took the Emeralds back from the Doctor, his hold on the world hasn't diminished in the slightest. I worry that I'm performing inadequately in service of the people I've sworn to lead, and the fact that we haven't so much as made a dent in his forces despite all the fighting only strengthens that notion within me."

"This is a lot of heavy stuff he's unloading on a guy he just met," Sorun thought as he listened to Elias. *"Is it just because he sympathizes with me so much? Even then, we're still strangers. I get that these Mobians guys are a lot nicer than pretty much anybody else I've ever met, rock aside, but... seriously?"*

It was niceties and trustfulness to an absurd degree, really. He's seen it in Sonic and his folks and in Sally. Tails had *seemed* sincere when he tried to tell Sorun he was sorry, and by all rights he was. People had been glaring at him, sure, but the only ones who had actually assaulted him were children which he chalked up to idiot kids being idiot kids stressed by the war. He sure couldn't judge.

"You're being really forthcoming considering I'm a total stranger," Sorun noted. "It's kind of weird."

"Is it?" The Mobian actually looked confused by Sorun's statement. "I was just trying to open up and get to know you. Did I do something wrong?"

"Nah, it's just a... culture thing," Sorun explained. "People are a lot more socially closed off where I'm from. By that I mean nobody likes telling each other their problems. That's why we have therapists nobody can afford or wants to go to."

That just seemed to make Elias even more confused. "I don't understand," he admitted. "Wouldn't it be easier talking to people?"

"Dude, nobody wants to because it's super embarrassing. I don't know how you're telling me all this stuff with a straight face." Shaking his head, Sorun ran a hand over his face as he turned from Elias to the window. "You people are the weird ones, being so open with your feelings," he added, and the urge to quickly divert the conversation to a different subject overtook him. "But if it makes you feel better, I don't think you're doing a bad job. Pretty sure a lot of kings where I'm from would've folded already, so hey, you got that goin' for ya."

"Oh, really?" Elias shot him an inquisitive look as he turned his head to the side. "How do the kings of your world fare?"

"Er, yeah, monarchies aren't really a thing anymore where I'm from," Sorun corrected. "There used to be kings and queens and all that, but they kind of got phased out for democracies and republics 'cause of, you know, all the wars. And revolutions. And the famines. And the fires. And the mass decapitations of the upper class." The squirrel standing next to him grew appalled. "I'm only talking about one country here. France had it rough. I'm not even gonna try to get into any of the other countries, because they all have really sordid origin stories, mine especially. But I mean it worked out for them all in the end. Mostly. Sort of." The human teen exhaled sharply. "Okay, fine, my world's a mess, but it's a mess that we make work for the most

part." He cleared his throat. "But, uh, y- you look like you're making it work. I've only been here for a couple days, not even twenty-four hours really, but it, uh, it all looks like it's going pretty good. So yeah. Good job. You're doing a good job."

"I suppose?" Blinking at the teen in confusion, the king cleared his throat as he looked towards the afternoon sun. "Well, I think I've heard all I need to," he said to Sorun. "It's already midday, and I've yet to even begin any of today's work. But our conversation was very enlightening. If it's not too much to ask, I'd like to continue these discussions further. At a later date, when we both have free time."

Sorun wanted to say no, but he couldn't think of a good reason to. He still could have said no, but the cautious side of him warned that saying no to a king may not pay off in the long run, and that maybe he could use this later. Or at the very least kill off an afternoon if he ever grew bored. So he squashed down his reservations and gave Elias a curt nod. "If I can." Short, noncommittal response. Perfect.

Elias looked very pleased by his answer, and he gave the teen a wide smile. "I very much enjoyed talking to you, Sorun. Thank you."

"Alright, man, alright. Geez." He almost regretted agreeing now that he had to see that. *"All this positivity. It's suffocating,"* he thought as he backed up towards the door leading out of the throne room. "Seeya around, kingy."

He couldn't get out of there fast enough, and it was all he could do to not make it apparent as he had to fight to not slam the door behind him he'd closed it so quickly. He breathed out a heavy breath as he steadied himself, and composed himself as he turned away from the doors.

The fact that Sally was leaning on a wall nearby and saw all that shattered his self-confidence once again, but he tried not to let it show.

"Sorun? Did everything go okay with my brother?" she asked.

"Hm? What? Elias? Uh, yeah. Cool, uh, cool guy, your brother. He's kind of weird, but decent dude."

"Good. That's, good." Sally cleared her throat and turned down the hall. "Well, we should get going, then."

Sorun nodded, and trailed a few paces behind Sally. But the incident of her cutting him off by closing the door so quickly hung in his mind, and the black-haired teen just couldn't get his mind off it.

'"Wouldn't it be easier just talking to people?' No, Elias, it isn't. Maybe for you people it is, but for me it isn't. But man, that shove move I did really isn't gonna do me any favors... gah, man, I gotta at least say sorry."

It was uncomfortable just thinking about it, but it made him even more uncomfortable thinking about what Sally would assume about him if he just let what happened be without talking about it. He had to work with her now, what with him being a Freedom Fighter and all.

"So, uh..." He took a breath, and then braced himself for the coming apology. Sally slowed to a stop and turned to him as he began to speak. "About that... thing that happened..." He breathed out again, shoved his hands into his pocket, and avoided her gaze. "You said this is a different zone, but there are things like time zones, you know, and they sounded so similar 'cause of the 'zone' word and I don't know if the terminology here isn't different or not, so I just- I made some stupid assumptions."

She gave him an astonished look, and Sorun had to wonder if he was really that bad that him apologizing was so surprising. "Are you trying to say you're sorry?"

"Y-yeah. For the, you know. Shoving and... anyways!" He reached his limit on awkward conversation and briskly walked past her. "S-s-so, uh, you said something about me getting to know all the other Freedom Fighters. Which I guess is important, since we're all a team now."

He didn't hear an immediate answer, and slowed down just a tad so that the Mobian could catch up with him. He heard the sound of footsteps walking alongside his, and glanced to the side to see that the chipmunk was keeping up with his pace.

He also saw the appreciative smile on her face, and mumbled under his breath while turning his head away again so he didn't have to look at her.

"Well, first of all, only half of the people you saw at Freedom HQ were part of the Freedom Fighters here. The other half are part of Knuckles' team, and two of them are a separate team of their own called Team Dark."

Sorun nodded along to her explanation. "Okay. What's the deal with Knuckles and his team?"

"The Chaotix- oh come on, the name isn't that bad," she said in an admonishing tone when she saw Sorun raise his eyebrows. "They share our ideals, but always had their hands full with their own problems up on Angel Island to ever help out much with Dr. Eggman. But circumstances changed, and now they're down here helping us since things are so bad with him."

"Angel Island?" Sorun questioned.

"It's a floating island that moves around the planet."

An exasperated breath left the human teen. "Sure, why not? Not even the weirdest things I've heard all day," he muttered with a shake of his head. "And Team Dark?"

"That would be Rouge and Shadow. They're here due to extenuating circumstances as well regarding Eggman's forces."

"Shadow," Sorun repeated. "He wouldn't happen to be that black hedgehog with the red stripes that was staring at me the whole time I was making that speech, was he?"

Sally blinked in surprise when Sorun looked to her for confirmation. "He was staring at you?"

"It felt like the dude was trying to set me of fire with his eyeballs."

"Oh." She winced, but at the same time she didn't look at all that surprised at what Sorun said. "Shadow's a... complicated case. Try not to let it get to you, okay? I can't speak for him on what he's thinking, but if he says anything can you please be patient with him?"

There were a lot of questions that explanation raised, and while Sorun wanted to ask them, he couldn't help but notice the pleading look in the chipmunk's eyes, and he relented by giving her a small nod. The black hedgehog didn't like him for some reason. Considering he didn't like any of them, that was fair. All he had to do was avoid him and he'd never have to think about it again.

"With that all said," Sally continued, "I think it would be more beneficial if you just talked to them all and got to know them. To better improve team cohesiveness and to make you feel better at ease. Maybe you could even get Shadow off your back."

Dammit.

"Yeah, sure, sure," he mumbled. "I'll get right on that. And Sally?"

"Yes?"

"You said if I had any more questions about that planet that you'd help me out. You wouldn't happen to have a map of the world or something I can look at, would you?"

He could complain all he wanted that Freedom HQ was basically in an underground burrow, but at least the lighting down here was decent, the space was equally decent, and the way they got the kitchen section to look like an actual kitchen was nothing short of

miraculous. He didn't even know how they managed to power the fridge or anything else down here, but he wasn't one to question it.

What he was questioning was if there was anything good in the fridge to drink, because he hadn't drank anything since coming to Mobius.

Sorun opened the HQ fridge, and then slung his arm over the door as he leaned in to look at the contents. "Cheese, fruits, vegetables, random-ass food brands I don't recognize... hell even is this?" he muttered as he grabbed a small, spiked purple thing that may or may not have been a fruit. "Weird," he mumbled as he set the thing back.

Something near the back caught his attention, and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head when he saw a glass bottle with a familiar shape filled with an even more familiar, brown liquid. His hand shot towards the back of the fridge as he grabbed the bottle, and he immediately brought it to his face so he could read the label.

"'Chao-Cola'..." he read. "Nice to know some things never change no matter where in the multiverse you go. It's even got the same funky font as Coca-Cola. Actually, wait, that's way too coincidental. What are the odds somebody just found a bombed-out soda factory from the old world and just stole the logo?" He stared down at the bottle for a few more moments, and then shrugged as he shut the fridge. "Ah, well. Not my problem and I don't care as long as it tastes about the same."

The teen walked over to the kitchen's circular table, sat down at the nearest chair, and leaned back as he twisted the cap off of the bottle and took a sip of the soda. He was mildly surprised to find that the taste was virtually identical to the Earth-brand of cola, and this was immediately followed by a wave of nostalgia as the flavor drudged up all sorts of memories at the back of his mind.

"Yeah, this was probably a mistake," he muttered to himself before taking another sip. He was sad now, but he was also too thirsty to stop.

He knew it was only minutes, but it felt like he'd been there for hours as he leaned in that chair, taking periodical drinks of his soda as he relived the memories playing through his head. He was so engrossed that he didn't even notice when somebody walked into the kitchen, and even when they froze halfway to stare at Sorun staring blankly at the ceiling he still didn't notice.

"Uhhh, hey, new guy. You doin' okay?"

The voice was so startling that Sorun had nearly fallen out of his chair, and he spluttered out in surprise when he had to balance himself and save the soda he was holding. Bottle clutched tightly in his hand, Sorun slowly turned his head towards the person that addressed him.

A pair of violet eyes attached to a red body was staring back at him. For the life of him, Sorun couldn't discern exactly what he was. He thought the dreadlock-like appendage... things he had for hair may have given him some hint, but they only made Sorun even more confused the more he thought on it. The white crescent on his chest gave him no clues, either. So he gave up, shook his head, and waved the Mobian a greeting.

"Yeah, just thinkin'," he answered. "Nice to meet you, red... man."

The red Mobian gave him a deadpan stare. "My name is Knuckles."

Sorun nodded, and found his eyes traveling down to the Mobian's hands. He almost scoffed when he saw that each of his fists had two large, spike-like protrusions under his white gloves. "Probably could have guessed that," he quietly muttered before looking back up at his face. "Knuckles, right. And you're a, uh..."

"Echidna."

"IN WHAT UNIVERSE- nope, in this universe. Logic doesn't exist here. Guy says he's an echidna, I'll believe it." A shaky breath left Sorun's mouth, and he needed another drink of cola to steady

himself. "Well, nice to meet you, Knuckles. I'm Sorun." He pointed his bottle at the Mobian. "You're the, uh, Chaotix guy, right? Sally told me."

"She did, huh?" He gave a shrug. "It's honestly more Vector's team than anything. I think he's just too lazy to lead it himself, so he lets me do it. I don't really care all that much as long as we get things done."

Sorun blinked. "Vector's...?"

"He's the crocodile you might have seen."

His mouth opened in an "ah" of understanding. "Big green guy, right." He nodded. "So Sally said you live up on a floating island? That sounds wild."

"Wild. Right." Knuckles turned his pointed, tan muzzle away from Sorun. "You could say it's something like that."

"Okay? This guy doesn't seem like much of a talker. Maybe he doesn't like me, either. Or it could be the whole, I dunno, war thing. " He shook his head and turned back to his soda. *"Well, I'm not opening that can of worms. I've had enough emotional distress for one day."*

"What are you doing here, anyways?" Knuckles asked him.

Sorun glanced to the side, and set the bottle down on the table before leaning further back in his chair. "I asked Sally for a map of the world, and she said she'd get one for me. I figured, y'know, since I'm stuck here and all I might as well get a lay of the land. Or at the very least know what the planet looks like."

"Ohh, I gotcha." He pointed one of his hands forwards. "That her right there?"

Sorun turned his head to see Sally walking towards him with a large roll of paper in her hands. He stopped leaning back on the chair and sat up straight as she came to a stop to the table while setting the map down, and then gave Sorun a tired smile.

"Well, it took some doing, but I managed to get you a map," she said.

"Some doing?" Sorun repeated. "It really that hard to get a map?"

"Well, you wanted a global one, and I figured you'd want something as accurate as possible, so we, um..." She coughed into her hand. "We may-or-may-not have hacked into a Overlander satellite and stolen topography data. A while ago. We actually already had the map on file; I just needed to print it off."

Sorun's eyes widened in surprise, and a bemused chuckle left him as he grabbed at the map. "Ooookay, I'm just gonna go with it. Let's see what we got."

He rolled the map out on the table, and idly he could feel Knuckles lean over his shoulder in interest. Sorun chose to ignore this and looked down at the map. And then he stopped cold when he recognized *very familiar* geography.

"Well, that's... yeah." It was a 2-D map of all the worlds continents and oceans spread out before him, as well as labels for the continents, and the fact that it looked extremely similar to Earth's topography was the first thing that jumped up at him. Similar, but not the same. He'd even felt his heart rate spike, but he quickly calmed himself down. *"Relax man, relax. Different world different world different world... Sally said so."*

"So?" Sally asked, and to Sorun her voice sounded distant. "What do you think?"

"It's... yeah, if I squint it's pretty much the same as my zone," Sorun said. "Yup, that's Earth, but... shaped wrong."

He heard an interested hum from the echidna behind him. "So our world is shaped the same as yours?"

"Well, according to Sally they're exactly the same, except aliens never came and bombed my world," Sorun explained. "There might be a difference of thousands of years between them, too, but I dunno." He leaned closer to the map. "So, guess I'll go through this all one at a time here...

"So, the North and South Poles look about the same," he started. "Are they still frozen wastelands, or do Mobians live there?"

"The Tundra is home to some villages, yes," Sally supplied. "I think Rotor's family lives there, actually."

He didn't know who that was, but at least his question was answered. "Okay. Northamer- which sounds an awful lot like North America, which is what it was called in my zone. Actually it is just North America with missing spaces and letters," he commented. "Canada looks the same... except for the fact that the upper-right portion there is connect to the eastern continent. How'd that happen? They were completely separated by ocean in my zone."

"You must be talking about the Great Continental Bridge," Sally mumbled as she looked at the spot Sorun stared at. "The landscape being changed by the destruction of the gene bombs? Thousands of years of continental drift? Take your pick. Any number of things could have moved them closer together."

"I guess," Sorun agreed. "Moving down to America. Looks like some bits came off into islands on the sides there, but otherwise it's the same."

"This is where the Kingdom of Acorn is." Sally pointed at the area that was once America, and tapped at where a large river was cutting down the landmass and dividing it in half. "The eastern portion is completely forest and plains," she added, "and Knothole is right about here."

Sorun hummed as he followed her finger. "We're right above Florida, so... somewhere around Georgia or Alabama, I think. Could have fooled me with all the trees. It isn't even that hot. Guess thousands of years would change the climate." He pointed to the western portion of once-America. "How 'bout that half?"

Knuckles chose this moment to speak up. "The west half? Ain't that part just mostly desert?"

Sally nodded. "Yes, it is. There are some patches of green here and there, but for the most part the western portion of lower Northamer. It's where Sandblast City lies, too, a settlement of-"

"No-good jerks and bandits?" Knuckles angrily muttered.

"I was going to say vagabonds, but yes, Knuckles, that works too," the chipmunk sighed out.

The human teen hummed in understanding. "Yeah, that place was pretty desert-y in my zone, too, but it wasn't the whole western half. Mostly just around Nevada, where Vegas was. Man, I wonder if Vegas is still around?" he wondered, and then moved up. "Actually, let me see if I can find my home. I lived in a place called Detroit, and it should be pretty easy to find. The state it was in was this weird mitten-shaped landmass surrounded by lakes, so- where is it?"

He blinked, and then looked closer. Michigan wasn't on the map. Both the upper and lower Peninsula were completely gone, and the five Great Lakes that once surrounded the state had melded together in what looked like one large super lake that fed into the stream dividing America in two.

Detroit was completely gone.

"... Oh, it just doesn't exist anymore here," he mumbled. "Yeah, that figures."

Sally gave him a sympathetic look, and he could feel Knuckles shift uncomfortably behind him as he coughed nervously to the side. "You doing alright?" Sally asked.

Sorun nodded. "Yeah. It wasn't my Detroit, anyways. That one's still around. Just somewhere else." His eyes moved down the map. "Somehow the Caribbean got bigger. Dunno how that happened. Central America and Mexico are just *gone* , so North and South America are completely separated now. And South America got renamed to Soumerca. Jesus, that's even less effort than Northamer.

"And Soumerca is... wow, it's even more fragmented than Northamer is." The southernmost part of what was once South America looked to be broken, and pieces of landmass-turned-islands were spread out all around the tail-end of the continent.

Noting nothing else of interest, Sorun moved to the eastern portion. "Oh, Greenland and Iceland are completely gone, too," he noticed.

"Greenland and Iceland, huh?" Knuckles commented. "I bet Iceland was a pretty cold place and Greenland a pretty green place, right?"

Sorun shook his head. "No, it's backwards. Greenland was the frozen one. Iceland was the nice place everyone lived in."

Knuckles grinned and barked out a laugh. "Hah! Good one."

"I'm serious."

The grin slowly drained away, and the echidna shook his head in disbelief when he saw Sorun's blank expression. Sally stifled a giggle at the display. "Wait, for real? That doesn't make any sense! Why would they name it all backwards like that!?"

"Hey, I didn't name 'em," Sorun said with a shrug. "Okay, Eurish, formerly Europe. Looks like it's the United Kingdom, France, London, Italy, Spain, Greece, Finland, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Germany, and the rest of Europe all rolled into one. And it looks like Italy and

big chunks of Europe split off and formed a island right next to it, too."

"There were really that many countries before the Xorda came?" Sally asked, and there was a hint of amazement to her voice. "I... never even considered how diverse humanity was before the gene bombs came, and how close they were to one another, either. It's almost too much to believe."

"Oh, yeah. It was really neat," Sorun said. "It's hard to see now since it's all a single color without any borders, but there used to be so many countries here. All with their own cultures, languages, architecture, man, they all had different *everything* that they shared with the world... but, uh, I guess they don't anymore." He paused, and then tapped his finger on Eurish. "So what's up with this place?" he asked.

"The middle part here is a forested mainly home to the Kingdom of Mercia. They're a lesser-known Mobian body that mostly keep to themselves," Sally explained. "There's also a couple of cities that fall under the United Federation's jurisdiction." Sorun sent her an questioning look, and she nodded to let him know she'd explain. "They're, for lack of a better term, the Overlander government. The surviving human cities I told you about earlier were converted into Overlander settlements, and they are all part of it, though the cities maintain their own independence of one-another. That said, the United Federation is the main governing body over all of the Overlander settlements." She pointed at the large island next to Eurish. "This island here, for example, is all United Federation territory. And I think the name of one of the Overlander cities here was... Spagonia, was it?"

Sorun snorted at the name. "Never heard of it, but is sure sounds Italian. Weirdly enough." He rubbed a hand behind his head. "So United Federation is all Overlander stuff. Anything else?"

"Sadly, the United Federation doesn't really interact with Mobians all that much, especially after the Great War between our species. We

don't really know that much at all," she told him. "Shadow and Rouge would, though. They're part of G.U.N."

"... G.U.N.?" Sorun repeated.

"The Guardian Units of the Nation," she clarified. "It's basically the United Federation's military. They were sacked completely pretty early on after Eggman got the seven Emeralds, and all United Federation cities were occupied by him afterwards. The only reason Team Dark is even here helping us is because G.U.N. isn't in a position to do anything in an official capacity anymore due to the occupation."

"Pfft. 'Course they would name their military G.U.N." Sorun shook his head. "And you don't know much outside of that?"

Sally hummed, and then moved her hand back to the western portion of the map. "Our only connection is through this place, here," she said as she tapped at Soumerca. "There's a human city called Station Square. It's unique in that, unlike all the other cities that were made to survive the Xorda, this one was made completely by accident and was never affected by the gene bombs. From what they told us, a plane had crashed into a mountain, and the humans inside decided to build an entire city-state in a massive hollow that was under the mountain. It was actually discovered by us during a mission some time ago, and the mountain itself was lost later on. Our understanding is that they joined up with the United Federation." She rubbed at her shoulder. "Actually, the only reason we even know about the United Federation is because of Station Square. They're the only UF-affiliated settlement that will talk to us since we helped them and maintained friendly contact."

"They seriously just decided to build a whole city under a mountain and live there for thousands of years?" Sorun sat back in his chair, and then began to tiredly rub at his eyes. "Okay, sure. Lines up with all the other wacky stuff." He looked back at the map. "So Station Square, huh? Looks like it's around where Brazil used to be. And the

rest of the United Federation is mostly on the eastern side of the world?"

The chipmunk nodded. "Yes, but mostly in small pockets of city-countries."

"Gotcha." The human looked back to Eurish. "What about this?" he asked when he pointed to a smaller island near the top of Eurish, near Mercia's coast. "Actually, I might be wrong about Iceland. I think that's Iceland? Or it could be another piece of Europe that broke off. Can't tell. That UF, too?"

There was a grunt from behind him. "That's Albion," he stated. "And no, it isn't."

"Okay?" He'd turned back to look at the echidna, but all he was doing was glaring at the island on the map. Sorun shrugged it off and looked down below Eurish. "So Africa is Efrika now. It looks way smaller than I remember. Looks like Madagascar's gone, too. Or it might be one of those broken-off bits on the eastern side of the continent. I don't know.

"And, oh boy, Asia. Now Yurashia. I think that's the first one that had its name extended," he idly commented. "So this is all of Russia, China, the whole Middle East, and India, looks like. Any details?"

Sally looked closer at the map. "Mostly more wild lands and pockets of Mobian settlements and villages. If I remember correctly, they refer to it as the Dragon Kingdom."

Sorun threw his hands up. "What happened to the Kingdom of Acorn being the only official Mobian kingdom?"

"It is," she defended. "The only recognized one that can be officially called a government, at least. Places like the Dragon Kingdom and Mercia aren't nearly as organized as we are, and in matters concerning Mobians as a whole judgement is usually deferred to us. And like Mercia, the Dragon Kingdom mostly keeps to itself."

"Alright, fair enough. Moving on." Sorun moved the map further to the left as his eyes traveled east. "Well, the Philippines, Indonesia, New Guinea and any of the other island countries don't exist anymore. Geez, the whole archipelago got wiped out. And Australia-" His voice abruptly stopped, and his eyes widened when he saw Australia and the new name on the map. "Oh, come on. You're kidding me." He grew so weak that he slumped forwards and hit his face against the table. "Ugh, whyyyy..."

The two Mobians next to him looked at each other in confusion, and Knuckles reached over to shake Sorun's shoulder. "Er, Sorun? You okay?" he asked.

The human's response was to shoot straight up in his seat, a motion that was so sudden that Knuckles flinched away. "Downunda. They seriously called it Downunda?" His tone grew clipped and disbelieving as he looked to Sally. "Do the people there talk in this really weird and distinct accent?"

"Um... yes, they do," she confirmed, and Sorun's mind began screaming. "Did that accent exist in your zone?"

"Yes. It did. And somehow space aliens blew away all human culture and it still survived." A long, drawn-out sigh left his mouth along with a defeated chuckle. "Alright, cool, cool. Anyways, last but not least: Japan. It looks like it went from being the most eastern country to being at the dead-end of the west, but compared to everything else it looks the same for the most part."

Sally's eyes followed to where Sorun was pointing at the map, and a sound of understanding left her. "Oh, that's the Flicky Islands," she said.

"Ahh. I don't know what that is."

"It's a island completely unique in that it's entirely comprised of precious gems and other rare geodes," she explained, causing Sorun's eyes to widened. "It's inhabited by a species of bird Mobini-

er, normal animals you could say- that eat and survive off of the gems."

Some seconds passed as the pale teen stared at her in complete silence, and then she shook his head with a bemused chuckle. "You know, considering this is Japan we're talking about, that's actually the least weirdest thing you've told me yet," he said.

"Huh?" Knuckles tilted his head to the side in confusion. "Why's that?"

Sorun affixed him with a deadpan stare. "Japan was weird, dude," he said. "They made some great stuff, but man, they were weird. Shame they got obliterated like everything else." He sighed, and then rested his head again his closed hand. "The Australian accent gets to survive, but Japan gets turned into a rock? That just ain't fair."

More sanity had been shaved off of him than he would have liked, but at the very least he got an overall idea of how good a shape the world was currently in. And overall, it was pretty bad. Yes, he could recognize it as Earth, but at the same time it looked so different that it was practically a different planet.

Well, it *was* a different planet, but the similarities were still there.

It was boggling how the borders in all the continents had been completely erased and all the countries he'd known were gone, too. Hell, there were even whole landmasses that just didn't exist anymore. But what did interest him were those precious few surviving human cities, the places the Overlanders lived, and just how much human culture had survived along with them. They seemed completely xenophobic towards anything that wasn't a human or Overlander, but fortunately he was a human. Could he go there?

"... Probably not. It's a whole continent away. Yeah, they're connected now, but I'd have to trek all the way up America and

Canada just to get to get to the Continental Bridge, and after that'd I'd have to cut through Mercia and the rest of Europe. Eurish. Whatever. I'd have to get through all that just to get to a UF city. That'd take me months on foot, and that's assuming something doesn't kill me on the way. It ain't happenin'."

So much for satisfying his curiosity. Maybe they'd at least take him to Station Square someday, since they seemed friendly. It seemed better than nothing.

"Sorun, what's your problem with the accent people in Downunda have?" Sally asked him. "I've talked to people from there. Sure, it's a bit off-putting, but it's not something unpleasant."

"Eh, that accent was kind of a joke back where I'm from. Me and everybody would always make fun of it," Sorun answered as grabbed his bottle of cola. "I mean, that was kind of our thing, you know? Making fun of things that are different."

The reactions he got from both Mobians were not positive in the least. Sally looked taken back by the answer, and even Knuckles looked uncomfortable with what he said. It took Sorun a second of thought to realize why he'd gotten that reaction, and he grimaced once he realized the gravity of what he'd just said.

"Okay, yeah, maybe saying me and my friends made fun of things for being different to a species of animal people who had a race war with aggressive humans wasn't the greatest thing to say in hindsight. Think next time, dumbass." He took a nervous sip of his soda and cleared his throat. "But I mean, you know, Australians were- they were cool. Nothing wrong with having an accent." He tapped his fingernails against the glass. "I personally never had a problem with it. Not like I did with a French accent."

Sally froze. "F-French accent, huh?" She started to rapidly blink and nervously tap at the table. "What's wrong with that?"

"I don't know. I always thought it just sounded weird," Sorun said. "The weird pronunciations, the heavy emphasis on the letter z, you know, those things." He took another drink, and for some reason Sally was becoming more tense the more he talked. "But I mean, hey, Australian accent may have survived, but it looks like France got annihilated, so there's no way I'll ever hear-"

"Bonjour, mes amis! How is it zat we are doing today?"

The glass bottle held in Sorun's hand cracked when his grip tightened.

He could hear muffled laughter behind him from Knuckles covering his mouth with his gloves. Sally, who had chosen to wear a highly-forced smile, turned towards the source of the new voice in greeting. Sorun sat completely still in place, the cracked bottle thankfully still holding the liquid inside, but he paid it no mind as his face became completely blank and stared aimlessly forwards.

"I didn't hear that. Auditory hallucination or something. They put something in the soda that's making me sick. It's my immune system freaking out because I'm drinking alien liquids. That's all it is."

"Eh? Knuckles, what is ze matter? Did I miss the funny joke or something?"

The laughter behind him increased. "N-no, Antoine, you didn't miss anything. We were just talking with Sorun."

"He's talking to the hallucination, isn't he? Goddammit, it's real." The deepest breath Sorun had ever taken in his life entered and exited his lungs, and he gingerly set down the damaged bottle as he turned his head so slowly that he could feel the bones in his neck grinding against each other. And he could have sworn he heard it, too.

There was a third Mobian who had entered the kitchen and was standing on the other side of the table. And just like Knuckles, he couldn't tell what he was. Definitely-possibly-maybe a canine of

some sort if the light shades of brown and the dog-like muzzle said anything. But for all he knew that didn't mean anything and it would turn out that he was a badger or something.

"He's more clothed than the rest," Sorun noted as he looked at the blue, military-esque jacket the newcomer worse. *"A sword, too,"* he thought as he looked to the sheathed saber that hung off his side.

But absolutely none of that compared to the small mop of blonde hair that rested on top of his head, and for whatever reason Sorun had the urge to rip it off. He theorized that it was the stress of the situation giving him that urge.

"Sorun?" The new Mobian turned his head towards Sorun, who was currently chewing aggressively at his lips. "Ah, yes, ze newcomer to the Freedom Fighters! How is it that you are doing? It is very nice to be meeting you!"

"Somebody help," Sorun's thoughts cried out as he addressed swallowed the lump in his throat and gave a very stiff nod. "Yes. Hello. I am Sorun," he droned out. "Antoine, was it? You have an interesting accent." His head snapped to Sally. "His accent's *really interesting* , Sally," he said through grit teeth.

"His, uh... his family is from Mercia," she explained while looking away from Sorun. "Didn't you say that the part of Mercia your family is from mainly spoke French, Antoine?"

Sorun's eyes widened. *"No , Sally, don't give him a reason to talk more-!"*

"Ah, yes. My parents had been having the argument over which language for me to learn, so I ended up learning both from them. But apparently such a thing proved to not be easily as done as said, and the war made things difficult, and the two languages ended mixing together and being tossed around much like the salads that Bunnie keeps trying to force on me." So lost was he in his own thoughts that he didn't even notice Antoine slide over next to him and wrap an arm

around his shoulder. "But such things are minutescule and not at all very important, non?"

His whole body was screaming at him to throw the French thing invading his personal space off, and as much as he wanted to, he wanted to build a good reputation with these people even more. So Sorun exerted as much control as he could muster and patted the Mobian on his back. "Yeah, man, what are language barrier between friends?" he mumbled, and then added, "Minuscule."

"Pardon?"

"It's minuscule, not minutescule," Sorun corrected. "Minuscule is the word you use when describing something small. Minutescule isn't a real word."

The Mobian standing right next to him blinked in surprise, and stood still at his words. For a moment, Sorun feared that he had said something wrong, but then light laughter began to leave to Mobian as he gave Sorun a friendly shake. "Look at zis one, already giving me grammar advice. And you all were so nervous over him. He isn't seeming like so bad a guy after all, especially for a human!"

Sorun slowly peeled himself out of the other's grasp and pushed his feet on the ground so that his chair would move away from him. "Yeah, you don't seem so bad either, for a... I wanna say wolf...?"

Antoine gave him a questioning glare, but then his eyes lit up with understanding along with his ears that stood up. "Oh, no, I am a coyote."

At that, Sorun's head impacted the table, and his arms flopped uselessly alongside it. "I give up," he muttered into the table. *"Coyote, man? Seriously? How is that..."* He turned his head so that a single eye could see Antoine. *"... Actually, yeah, I can see it. Huh."*

Maybe the problem was him after all in that he couldn't recognize what some of these people were species-wise. But then he was

reminded about the echidna in the room, and thought to himself that, no, he wasn't at fault for not being able to tell who was what. It only made him feel marginally better.

"... Wait, what did he mean when he said you guys were nervous over me?" Sorun asked. He picked his head up and looked towards Sally. "What'd he mean?"

"Oh, you know, it's just you weren't the most, er, enthusiastic person when Sonic asked you to join us..." Her voice trailed off and she looked to the side. "By the way, I wanted to ask. What did Sonic say to you that changed your mind, anyways?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh, come on!" He felt Knuckles pat him on the back, and he almost angrily hissed at him in response. "What could he have done that was so bad?"

They weren't going to drop it. He could glean that much from the looks they all had in their eyes, and Sorun knew that if he didn't say anything, Sonic would eventually tell them. What he had to wonder was which was worse? They would probably laugh if he told them. But if they heard it from Sonic they'd know he was too embarrassed to tell them, and that could be even worse.

But they wouldn't actually laugh at him, right? They seemed too nice to do something like that. To do something like bruise his already rapidly-disintegrating ego. What was the worse that could happen?

So, taking a deep breath, Sorun decided to tell them. "I made a bet with Sonic. He said I'd have to join if I lost. The bet..." He finished the sentence, but his voice had tapered off so much that the others weren't able to hear it.

"Huh?" Knuckles leaned in closer. "Could you say that again?"

Sorun crossed his arms. "... Foot... speed..." His mumbling was still too quiet to hear.

The other two Mobians leaned in closer, too, with Sally requesting, "Could you please speak a little louder?"

The pale teen sighed, and then hung his head. "Sonic challenged me to a foot race."

A beat passed. All three of them had stunned looks of disbelief on their faces. The hope was that any minute now they would be giving him pitying looks and words of encouragement to help him not feel so bad.

What actually happened was that they all burst out into uproarious laughter. To Sorun, it felt like his very spirit left him, and he visibly deflated into his chair while his head continued to hang down.

"S-S-Sorun, don't feel too bad about it," Sally laughed as she wiped a tear out of her eye. "We're laughing with you, not at you."

"You know, it really doesn't feel like it."

"Ah, but who can blame us? Pfft-hah-ha!" Antoine was so amused that he was doubled over on the table and holding his head in his hand. "Challenging Sonic to ze foot race! It's the most hilarious thing I have heard all month! Just wait until I get home to tell Bunnie about it!"

Knuckles couldn't even speak he was laughing so hard, and it seemed to spur the other two into another laughing fit.

Sorun, who was having none of it, rose up off his chair. "Okay, I'm done for the day," he announced as he began to step around the table. "I'm gone, I'm out, I'm going to Sonic's house. If anybody needs me I'll be there."

"Sorun, wait!" He stopped, and then looked back towards Sally who was still barely containing her laughter. "C-come back here tomorrow, alright? We- we got something for you to do."

"Yeah, sure. I'll be here." He waved them all off, turned around, and walked as fast as he could towards the stair leading out of the HQ. It wasn't until he left entirely and shut the door behind him did he finally stop hearing the laughter. Even then he heard it being played in his head, and he couldn't help it when he leaned against the HQ's door for support as he tried to compose himself.

It took him a whole half an hour to finally recover from the embarrassment, and another fifteen minutes to find the willpower necessary to push himself off the door and walk back to Sonic's home.

A/N- Thank goodness that Sonic encyclopedia on the comic exists, because I've been checking that thing over like a crazy person so I don't get details wrong.

So yeah, these first few chapters have been really slow, I get it. But I got a lot of things planned for the future, and I need to build up a lot of momentum up so I can have a big impact later on in the story. But it'll pick up relatively soon.

Anyways, I didn't say it before, and I'm never gonna say it again, but if you somehow actually like this story then I always take reviews. Not that I'm trying to pressure anybody into reviewing so I can feel self-gratification or anything shallow like that, it's purely out of interest for people's thoughts on the story as well as critique.

Heh.

That all said, hope you enjoyed and see you whenever I decide to upload next.

Chapter 6

Recursion Error

Episode 6- The first day on the job

Sorun didn't really know what "Freedom Fighting" entailed when it came to being a member of the Freedom Fighters. He had enough context clues from all the conversations he had to make a rough gist of it: the big bad of this world, Dr. Eggman, would do something. This something would involve robots usually. The Freedom Fighters would fight those robots and/or help those affected by the maniacal schemes of Eggman.

He assumed at least, but it was a pretty good assumption. And he imagined there was other stuff involved, too, but he didn't know.

But he wasn't doing any of that right now, which suited Sorun just fine as it meant he didn't have to put his life on the line right now at the moment. No, he got the most glamorous job in all the universe today: guard duty. To "better help acclimate him to his life as a Freedom Fighter" and to "get some experience under his belt in a nice, easy manner to start with" and all other sorts of reasons they gave him to avoid saying "we don't really have anything for you to do since you're so useless".

He wouldn't even mind so much if he didn't know for a fact the kingdom had guardsmen that could do this job, and probably even do it better than him. But it was a relatively safe job for him, so he couldn't complain.

And the one chosen to escort him to this most prestigious of positions today? A walrus.

There wasn't much to say about Rotor, mostly because he'd been leading Sorun through town in relative silence. He was tall. Purple. More focused on carrying the... technological-whatever he was holding in his hand-claw fingers than on Sorun himself. He had a cool flight jacket, though, so there was that.

"Rotor, I've known you all of however many minutes we've been walking, and I've realized that I don't know a single thing about you," Sorun said, hands tucked loosely into his pockets as he walked next to the large Mobian. "These long, silent and awkward walks I've been having with everybody's been getting old, you know."

"I didn't know you wanted to talk," Rotor answered without even looking down at the human. "You don't really seem like the most sociable guy."

"I mean... I'm not," Sorun admitted, "but I'm still a person, you know? With feelings."

"Oh, trust me. Everybody saw your feelings when you screamed at Tails."

Sorun inhaled sharply, and then pursed his lips as a low hum rumbled in the back of his throat. "You know, Rotor, I don't know if you've ever been abducted before-"

"One time by a alien robot, yeah."

"I'm sorry I asked," Sorun spluttered. "Look, it was a really shocking experience for me, okay? They don't have things like going to other zones or aliens or killer robots or flipping Infinity Stones where I'm from."

"Ah. Sounds nice. Good for you. I hope you make it back to your peaceful life."

The human teen narrowed his eyes at the Mobian's bland tone. "You don't like me very much, do you, Rotor?"

"I don't dislike you, either. But what you did with Tails didn't set a good precedent."

That was fair, Sorun supposed, even if he didn't want to admit it. He'd made a lot of mistakes since coming here, but the "screaming at an eleven-year-old" blunder seemed to be the one hurting him the most. Some people seemed to understand him at least somewhat. Knuckles and Antoine hadn't brought it up. Sally and Sonic at least tried talking to him about it. Rotor was the first one to give him a cold shoulder over it, but again, he couldn't blame him for the passive-aggressiveness. Even if it did hurt his feelings the smallest amount.

It made him wonder what everybody else thought about it, and brought up the idea that maybe, just maybe, he should hurry up and talk to Tails so he didn't have to find out. And also to ease the mind of a child who was probably mentally eating himself alive because he thought he was directly responsible for ruining Sorun's life.

Well, he wasn't entirely wrong, but as long as he got back to Earth eventually it wouldn't be ruined. Greatly inconvenienced, perhaps, but not ruined.

"Here we are," Rotor announced as the two of them came to a stop. "This is a guard tower at the edge of Knothole City primarily used to monitor the distance for threats. You're gonna spend the whole day up there."

"Oh boy, Rotor," Sorun drawled as he looked up at the tower. "You don't even know how excited I am for this."

There wasn't much to say about it. It was a large guard tower held up by wooden supports with the only entrance being a wooden ladder underneath it. And in front of it? Green plains and trees for as far as the eye could see, which was pretty far considering it was the afternoon.

Looked fun.

"I'm glad you're excited. Here," Rotor said as he handed the large device he was carrying to Sorun. "This is yours for the day."

The device was dropped into his hands, and Sorun immediately went to work examining it. His first assumption was that it was some kind of rifle, but he honestly wasn't too sure. It had a grip and trigger that looked like it was made of piping. The main body and barrel looked like a metal tube, and there were a couple of panels missing that revealed a mess of wires and electronics on the inside. There was also a scope on top of it, but it was so large that it was practically a telescope.

It looked less like a rifle and more like a failed science project.

"Is this a gun?" Sorun questioned with raised eyebrows as he looked the weapon over. "I... Rotor, seriously, what is this?"

"That's a prototype personal infantry anti-Badnik weapon I designed a few years ago. It never really made it past the prototype stage," the walrus explained. "I had it lying around and thought, why not, you can get more use out of it than me."

"Ah-huh..." Sorun turned the gun over in his hand while squinting. "So is there a place to insert ammunition, or is it like a laser gun you have to charge or somethin'?"

"Oh, it doesn't fire," Rotor said, and Sorun nearly dropped the gun right there. "Freedom Fighters don't use guns. Sets a bad image of violence we try not to endorse. And these days the titanium plating on Eggman's robots are so tough that conventional ammunition doesn't really damage them anyways."

"So why am I holding this, then?"

"You're holding it because I modified the lenses on a old telescope I had and bolted it onto the frame of the weapon to use as a scope when I was making it. Just use it to keep an eye on the horizon."

Sorun slowly nodded, and then looked up at Rotor. "You couldn't have just given me binoculars?" he weakly asked. "I gotta haul this thing up that ladder."

Rotor shrugged. "Scope on that thing's way stronger than any pair of binoculars."

"Mm." He found that there was a strap on the weapon, and managed to sling the defunct gun over his shoulder before turning to grab the first rung on the ladder. "Welp. Guess I'll just go do that, then. You want this back when I'm done, or-?"

He turned his head to the walrus, but he had already turned around and began walking away.

"... I guess I'll just give it back when I'm done," Sorun decided, and then began climbing up the ladder towards the top of the guard post. "'Freedom Fighters don't use guns'... hell do they expect me to do then, punch the bulletproof robots?"

In hindsight, it was probably a good thing that Rotor had given him a gun that couldn't fire. Because he was at the point that he would have considered shooting himself to get out of the tedium that was doing this job.

There was absolutely nothing to do up in the guard tower but guard. It was quite literally just an empty wood box suspended in the air with chest-high walls and nothing else. Not even a chair for him to sit in. So what had he been doing for over an hour? He did his job and guarded by using the scope on the experimental gun to look out at the horizon.

But there was absolutely nothing. Nothing but wide open space, grass, and trees. He tried to pass time by looking at clouds but there were barely even any of those today. There was nothing. Nothing at all to draw his attention.

He wasn't bored to straight tears quite yet, but he was getting there.

"You know what would go a long way in making this place safe? Some damn walls," Sorun mumbled to himself. He had the gun propped up on the lookout box's wall, but he was so bored that at this point he wasn't even looking through the scope. "Seriously, Knothole doesn't have any walls. That's, like, fundamental defensive strategy number one or something in a kingdom. Make a wall that goes around the whole place. But nah, they don't got walls. Just a bunch of guard towers circling the place with poor fools like me to keep an eye out. And what am I even supposed to do if I see something? Climb down the tower and run all the way to the guards to tell them I saw something?"

A heavy sigh left him. "Maybe I'm overthinking the wall. We're fighting robots, right? And the only material out here they have in bulk is wood. Doubt a wall would do anything." He focused the scope on a nearby patch of grass. "It'd still be better than nothing, though. Just saying."

It probably said a lot that he was so bored he was having a full conversation with himself, but he was too bored to be at all concerned over it.

But something happened that fortunately dragged him out of his doldrums and made him straighten up in surprise. He heard the trapdoor to the guard box behind him open. So, while silently thanking the universe for a brief reprieve, Sorun turned around to the trap door to see who was coming up.

He went right back to cursing the universe when he saw it was a familiar fox Mobian sticking halfway through the door, staring right at Sorun.

"Oh holy hell I thought I was mentally prepared for this and I'm super not," Sorun thought, his breathing increasing to control his growing panic as he slowly set the prototype weapon against the short wall behind him.

This was long time coming. Even he could see that much considering how much everybody had been bugging him about it. And he agreed with them that, yes, he had to talk to Tails. But he hadn't seen it coming so sudden like this. He hadn't even taken to time to mentally rehearse what he was going to say to him!

"Well, he's here. Can't just ignore him now. Screw it, I'll wing it."

"Um... hi," Tails shyly greeted as he pulled himself up from the trapdoor, shutting it behind him. "Are you busy right now?"

Sorun glanced behind him at the nothingness stretching all the way to the horizon, and then glanced back at the fox. "Nah, not really," he answered.

"O-oh. Okay." He fidgeted with something he held in his hands. "I brought you this."

The human blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected anything, least of all a gift. His surprise only increased when he looked closer and saw that it was a glass of orange juice that he was offering him.

"... Orange juice?" He walked to Tails and slowly grabbed the glass from his hands. "You brought me orange juice?"

"It... the tablet said to." Tails turned his head away from Sorun. "It said you would appreciate it. Now seemed like a good time."

"That's... incredibly convenient and coincidental," Sorun noted, but nonetheless drank the orange juice. Speaking in a literal sense, it tasted fine. More than fine, really. Speaking from a metaphorical sense he didn't know if he'd ever drank anything more bitter in his life.

And the more he thought on it, the more Sorun realized that what Tails just said didn't make a lick of sense.

"Wait, the wood tablet? The thing that brought me here? It told you that I would like orange juice?" he asked. "You know, I've heard so much about this tablet, but I have yet to actually see the thing. What was actually on it that led you all to me?"

The ears on the fox's head perked up. "Oh, it was really weird. It had a really long string of numbers that took me a while to decipher, and when I did it became pretty clear what they were: coordinates. Specifically, coordinates that pointed directly to where your zone was in the multiverse, down to the exact spot where you found the portal. It was kinda scary, actually, how accurate and precise those numbers were, but everything about that tablet and how weirdly specific it was was weird."

"Ah-huh." Sorun took another drink of the orange juice. "Can I see it?"

"Uh... you can't. Sorry." Tails rubbed the back of his head. "It said we had to burn it after we deciphered the coordinates. It said it three times, actually. There's nothing left of it."

"Um. Okay then. Forget I asked." That sounded like the most suspicious thing in the universe, and left him with nothing but more questions. But he supposed that nothing could be done for it if it was already burned. "Do you at least know why it opened up in the middle of a random grocery store I just happened to be in at the time?"

Tails shook his head. "It just said to trust in the coordinates, and that the person on the other side would help us. That they would be a hero with a pure heart that would have the power to help us save the world. And with how bad things have been, we all really hoped that it would be true. That's why I was so desperate and pulled you."

"I see. Everybody's been saying how bad the war with Eggman's been, so I can see where you're coming from."

"Right." The yellow Mobian shifted his bright blue eyes down to his feet. "You know I'm really sorry for what I did, right?" he asked Sorun. "I... I didn't mean to pull you away from your life. I didn't want to drag you into our war. I just..." Sorun heard him quietly sniffle. "I just want all the fighting to finally be over."

Sighing deeply, Sorun pressed his backside to the short wall and slowly slid down to a sitting position. *"I'm not good at this,"* he thought, *"but I gotta say something."*

"You know, it always bugged me," Sorun began, his voice causing Tails to look up. "People saying sorry all the time," he explained. "I never got it."

Tails looked up and tilted his head in confusion. "Huh?"

"Everybody always says it all the time for the littlest things. So much that saying sorry to somebody just feels cheap now. Sorry used to mean something, you know?" He patted the spot next to him and moved over, and Tails took it as a sign to walk up and sit in the spot next to Sorun. "Sorry's supposed to mean that you recognize you made a mistake, and that you'll make sure to correct it and never make the same mistake again," Sorun continued. "That's why it bugs me when people say it for little, inconsequential stuff. The right way to say sorry is this." He turned to Tails and softly flicked him on one of the three bangs of fur hanging off his head. "I'm sorry for snapping at you like that. I was really scared and upset. I'm fine now."

There was as much raw sincerity as he could humanly pack into that apology, and Sorun had even gone as far as to speak as softly as possible. He'd never been one to say sorry all that much in the entirety of his life, but even so, he felt that what he said just had to have the impact he was hoping it would have. Because while he was sincerely sorry for what he'd done, he just didn't know if he was physically capable of conveying that he was sorry.

But his words, much to his relief, seemed to do the trick. There was a cautious joy in behind Tails's eyes, and he had a small smile on his

white muzzle so bright that Sorun could hardly stand it. "You really mean it?" he asked in a wavering voice. "You're not mad at us any more?"

Sorun pursed his lips and sighed through his nose. "Look, I... I'm still upset at this whole 'stuck in another zone' problem, but I've been here three days now and I'm calming down," he admitted, and Tails's smile lowered a little. "I'm never not going to be upset at it. Don't get me wrong, everybody here in Knothole seems like they're really great people and this whole war thing is really terrible, but if I had a choice between coming here and staying home I would have stayed home. That said... I don't blame you for pulling me in. Because things here seem really rough and I understand why you did what you did. So I can't blame you." He clicked his tongue. "I know this is a really bad apology, but it's the best I got."

"No, it's fine." Tails rubbed at one of the tufts of fur on his cheek. "This is actually a lot more than what I was expecting."

"Geez, I know I'm bad, but you don't gotta lay it on that thick."

A light chuckle from Tails. "I was just kidding. But really. Thanks."

Sorun mumbled incoherently, but managed to give the short Mobian a small nod. His head froze halfway in the nod though when he saw Tails leaning in dangerously close in what looked like a hug, and he held up a hand to stop him while scooting away a bit at the same time. "Let's, let's not," Sorun said. "Nothing against you. I'm just not, y'know, that touchy-feely."

"Oh. Sure." He looked slightly confused by what the black-haired teen said, but he nodded all the same, and the two of them stood back up. "Maybe we should just restart," he suggested. "My name is Miles Prower, but all my friends call me Tails."

"I'm Sorun," he greeted. "Tails, huh? Why do they call you that?"

He looked even more confused by that statement. "Uh... the tails?" he quietly answered as he gestured to his backside.

Sorun's eyes traveled down, and then widened when he saw not one, but two fox tails slowly swishing behind his backside. And then he had to mentally kick himself for not having noticed them earlier and putting together why he was named Tails.

"Dude, I'm not gonna lie. I didn't even notice those until you pointed them out," Sorun admitted, and Tails's mouth dropped open in disbelief. "But they're neat, I guess."

"Heh. Thanks." One of his tails moved in front of him, and he began to stroke it. "I've always been a bit self-conscious about them since nobody else has anything like 'em, but everybody's always been supportive over them, and they've helped me more times than I could count." He paused. "Well, technically I could count them since I remember all those time, but that'd take way too long."

Sorun rolled his eyes and snorted. "Real brainiac, huh?" he commented. "Actually, wait, you're the one that deciphered the coordinates that brought me here, right? And... I think Sonic even said that you developed the machine that made the portal?"

"Well, Chuck and Rotor helped out, but yeah, it was mainly me," Tails confirmed with a nod. "It wasn't so hard once you figure out the quasi-dimensional configuration of the-"

"Dude, how smart are you!?" Sorun gasped out. "I thought you were eleven!?"

Tails shrugged. "I've always been pretty smart." His eyes widened when he saw the way Sorun's shoulders slumped. "But don't feel so bad! Not everybody can be... you know, everybody's good at something! Just because I'm smarter than most people doesn't make me better! I can't run like Sonic, or lead like Sally, and a whole lot of other things, but-"

"Tails, it's too late. My self confidence is already gone." The pale teen leaned on the guard tower's wall and stared forlornly up at the ceiling. Tails reached out to him with a concerned expression, but he stopped when a small grin spread across Sorun's face as his body shook with light laughter. "I'm kiddin', man, don't worry about it," he said, and Tails chuckled along with him. "Seriously, though, I can't believe you're a genius and you're only eleven. Smartest thing I ever did was get an A in English class, which in of itself isn't really that great an accomplishment."

He turned around and rested his elbows on the wall as he stared out into the distance. He idly noted Tails step next to him, but didn't acknowledge him and kept staring forwards.

"Did you not do well in school?" he asked.

"Hey, no, I did decent," Sorun defended. "Straight B's and the occasional C isn't bad. And that one A averaged out the C's."

Tails hummed beside him. "I get it," he said. "Say, Sorun? What was your life like back in your zone?"

Sorun shrugged. "I mean, my life was pretty great until I got shanghaied into the global furry resistance from another universe," he admitted. "It was... average, I guess. I went to school, I had hobbies, I had friends. I only lived with my mom and didn't really have any other relatives, but it was still technically a family. It was a life. It wasn't a particularly exciting life, but it was mine. I was happy with it."

"Oh. I see." The suddenly nervous Mobian began to idly rub at one of his tails. "Did you have a lot of friends?"

The older teen's eyes squinted in thought. "To be honest, they were all less friends and more a lot of people at school I made jokes with and talked with. Nice folks, sure, but nobody I'd ever go out of my way to hang out with. Except David. He was cool. Kind of a know-it-all. I played video games with him." He looked down at Tails. "Sonic

said that you all have been fighting Eggman for over a decade, right?"

"Right."

"So... you've been fighting him pretty much your whole life, huh, Tails?" It was a fact he only realized right there talking to Tails. And he'd just went on and practically bragged about having a quiet life to somebody who'd been in a war all their life. He felt embarrassed and uneasy. "That, uh... that sucks real bad, man."

Tails blinked, and his expression became unreadable as he began fiddling with his hands. "It hasn't been so bad," he said. "It's not like we ever fought Eggman *all* the time. There were quiet days. Quiet weeks, even. Sometimes even longer than that. And we've always had each other, so we were never alone. We helped each other through it all." He suddenly grew uncomfortable. "But it stopped being manageable when he got all the Chaos Emeralds," he said. "Everybody always says I shouldn't be anxious, but that's hard to do when I go out on missions and see the world outside getting worse and worse each time."

Humming in understanding, Sorun drummed his fingers along the top of the wall. "I don't really have anything to say to make you feel better," he mumbled. "Sorry."

"I thought you said not to use sorry so carelessly?" He felt a light punch on his side, and looked down to see Tails shooting him a teasing smile. "Just so you know, I think you're wrong about that," he said. "Just because people say sorry all the time doesn't make it any less meaningful. You don't have to act all awkward about apologizing all the time. You're really nice; I think everyone would like you more if you just opened up." He stepped forwards and pulled himself up to the top of the wall. "And Sorun? Don't worry too much. It looks bad now, but the Freedom Fighters will take care of everything. We always do. And we'll get you back home in no time." The fox gave Sorun a two-fingered salute, and- much to Sorun's confusion- his tails began to rotate. "I gotta go. Keep up the good work!"

It was around when Tails' tails began to rotate like a helicopter's rotor did Sorun begin to mentally check out. And when the fox jumped off the guard tower and began to fly away by using his tails like a helicopter, he needed to down the rest of his orange juice just so that he could set his mind straight.

"Oh, he can use his tails to fly. That's cool." Sorun gently set the empty glass on the ground next to him, but froze when a horrifying revelation hit him. *"Christ, I'm starting to get desensitized to all this crazy shit."*

Hours passed. Boredom mounted. Sorun prayed for death. Or at the very least a way out of this horrible guarding position.

Uneventful. That was the only way to describe how his day was going. Aside from the brief reprieve provided by Tails, absolutely nothing had happened his he was staring out of the watchtower. It was such a mindnumbing experience that Sorun was honestly shocked he hadn't fallen asleep at some point, and searched for any distraction in lieu of sleeping away the hours.

His desperation led him to staring at ants out in the distance through his telescope-scope.

"And we're off boys and girls, we're off," he quietly announced as he watched a sole ant carry a leaf three times its size up a tree. "Antony races up the tree carrying the largest payload in his whole life. He's looking to make his whole family happy tonight, but OH, big upset from Antony as he steps into the tree sap leaking out from that one spot on the tree!" Sorun hissed when he saw the ant and the leaf it was carrying become completely buried in the golden sap oozing out from the tree. "And he's down, folks, Antony is down and out. You hate to see it, but that amber gets the best of us at the worst of times." He sighed. *"God, I'm bored."*

"Enjoying yourself?"

Sorun yelped and fumbled with the prototype weapon in his hands. It nearly dropped out of his grasp, but he managed to lean forwards just in time to pull the gun close to him and cradle it safely to his chest. He breathed out a sigh of relief, and then set it down on the floor next to him as he angrily turned to the new voice that addressed him.

His anger quickly began to fade away into worry when he saw a black hedgehog with red stripes leaning on one of the tower's corners, arms crossed and crimson eyes affixed right on Sorun. He still had that scowl on his face.

"Guess this is happening now," Sorun mumbled to himself before clearing his throat. "Hey, how's it going? Shadow, right? I'm-"

"Completely worthless."

Sorun paused, and then let a slow breath out as he leaned back and rested his elbows on the wall behind him. "We seriously *are* doing this, huh? Okay." He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them up to the dark hedgehog. "I've gotten some pretty cold greetings, but you're the first guy that went out of his way to straight-up say what's on everyone's mind."

"I'm not surprised everybody has been dancing around the issue," Shadow stated. "Nobody wants to admit they wasted all of the Chaos Emeralds we gathered on a useless waste of space like you."

"You're preachin' to the choir, pal," Sorun remarked with a roll of his eyes. "You seriously come all this way to insult me?"

"Of course not. I have better things to do than waste my time berating you."

"And yet here you are. Being an asshole and berating me."

The dark Mobian flinched, and then turned his head away. "You always use that kind of language around people?" he asked.

"Oh, dude, I've been holding myself back really hard in front of people to keep up with appearances and because it sounds like nobody talks like that here." The human crossed one leg over the over. "And boy, lemme tell ya. It's been a struggle. 'Cause I'm pissed, Shadow. I've been pissed out of my mind at everybody since day one here." He held his index finger up. "But here's the thing. Most everybody has been super supportive of me and I'm getting used to things here, so I've been getting better. But then this dick with stupid stripes comes up and starts telling me I'm worthless, something I'm already fully aware of, and it doesn't help that he was one of the people who decided to bring me here, so I don't really feel like censoring myself around-"

"I didn't decide anything," Shadow snapped at him. "For your information, I was the only one who knew that wasting all of the Emeralds on you was a foolish mistake. But they decided to make the decision a democracy, so any complaint I raised was ignored."

The single finger Sorun held up went limp. "I see." His hand flopped to the side, and his blue eyes slowly rolled away from Shadow. "You must be feeling pretty good about yourself, then, huh?"

All this statement seemed to do was make Shadow angrier based on how his face wrinkled. "No. As a matter of fact, I'm not. I'm not happy that I was right about that tablet being a waste of time. I'm not happy we threw the one advantage we've had over Dr. Robotnik in months away." He shot the human teen a pointed glare. "I'm certainly not happy we have to deal with you on top of everything else."

While a heated argument carried on below, an individual lying flat on his back on the roof of the guard tower was forced to listen to every word being spat back and forth. This figure was covered completely in a red cloak save for their human hands, which currently held a long sword with a broad blade.

The cloaked man's main focus was using the reflection on the sword to examine his teeth on a face that was otherwise shrouded by his

red hood.

"Damn, this is boring," he thought as he used one of his fingers to pick at a tooth.

"Yeah, Shadow, I get it. I'm useless. I'm the last person in the whole world you need to remind. What the hell is your deal, anyways?"

"My 'deal' is that you infuriate me, human."

"Oh, wouldn't have guessed!" Sorun's voice grew intensely scathing. "Here I was thinking you trying to murder me by staring at me was a gesture of friendship. You know how uncomfortable it was making that speech when you kept looking at me like that the whole time?"

"You being a liability as you so eloquently put it is only part of the reason I find your existence irritating," Shadow coldly stated. "My frustration in you stems from the fact that you're aware you're useless and refuse to do anything about it. You've spent your entire time here complaining about your situation instead of actually trying to become useful."

"What the- dude, it's been three days! And what the hell do you think I'm doing right now!?" There was the sound of something metal being shaken. "And what, what do you expect me to do, huh? What, I'm supposed to find somebody to train me to fight? That it?"

"It would certainly be a step in the right direction. I believe there's somebody in the Freedom Fighters with extensive training in martial arts."

"Oh, so I'm supposed to learn how to kung-fu the *bulletproof robots* with my bare hands?" There wasn't a response from Shadow, causing an exasperated breath to leave Sorun. "I don't even know how you people do it. You don't use guns, so how do the people without powers like Sonic even fight robots?"

"... Mobians have superior physical capabilities to humans," Shadow reluctantly admitted. "Even Mobian children are vastly stronger than adult humans. The only reason humans even manage to compete with them is because they primarily use guns. Unfortunately, they're ineffective on Eggman's Badniks."

"Okay, newsflash Shadow: maybe a Mobian can punch a robot to death, but if I try it I'm just gonna break my hand off!"

There was an inaudible sigh from the figure cloaked in red, and he silently turned onto his side in a resting position as he tried to fight off sleep from the boredom.

"Look, what do you want from me?" Sorun threw his hands up in frustration. "I'm doing my best here."

"Are you?" Shadow questioned him. "Have you really been exploring every possible way you could provide even an iota of assistance to the Freedom Fighters instead of complaining? You don't think you're at least slightly obligated-"

"Obligated? Obligated!?" The human teen felt outrage at that statement. "You know what? You're right. Problem's me. I'm sorry I'm up here doing a job that, let's be honest, anybody else could do but at least it's *something* for me to do instead of nothing. I'm sorry I chose to join the Freedom Fighters when, let's face it, I don't belong with them! I'm sorry I'm a normal human and can't fight like a Mobian! I'm sorry I was minding my own business before I got dragged into some other universe's war!"

He really thought he'd buried these issues finally, but Shadow's words dug them right back up and now they were all he could think of. And along with that came all the anger he'd thought he'd finally worked through to some degree, all brought back through this argument. It was enough to make him want to throw the useless weapon he held at Shadow, but he grit his teeth and kept a firm hold on the gun.

But at the very least, something he said got to Shadow. He still looked as angry as when he'd arrived, but his eyes widened the slightest amount and his mouth clamped shut. They stood across from each other in silence, Sorun breathing noticeably heavier while Shadow was still enough that Sorun would have confused him for a statue if he didn't know any better.

And then the dark hedgehog simply pushed himself off the corner he was leaning on and crouched down to open the floor's trapdoor. "Just so you know," he said, "I actually did have a reason for coming here. You're relieved of your duties for today. And Rotor said he wanted you to deliver his prototype weapon back to him."

There was a loud scoff from Sorun. "You couldn't have lead with that?" he asked while shaking his head. "Sure. I'll go back to the HQ and drop it off."

Shadow simply grunted and swung his legs over the open trapdoor, and then stopped. "... Sorun."

"What?" he tersely replied.

"Nobody ever said you had to fight with your bare hands." He dropped out of the guard tower right after saying this without even bothering to take the ladder.

Sorun felt a bit alarmed when he saw the Mobian simply drop down, but when he looked over the edge, he saw that Shadow was walking away from the tower without even so much as a limp. *"What was that all about? I don't have to use... actually, didn't Antoine have a sword? Guns aren't fine, but I guess weapons are fine if he gets to use a sword. So I should... use a weapon?"* Sorun blinked in surprise. *"There's an idea... Wait, was- was that him giving me advice?"*

He looked again, but Shadow had already disappeared from sight. Sorun rolled his eyes, slung the defective gun over his torso, grabbed his empty glass, and began descending the ladder. *"Okay, maybe he ain't as bad as I thought. Still a bit of a dick, though."*

The teen's feet touched the ground, and every step he took away from the guard tower felt more and more liberating. There was a moment where, after walking a large distance away, he felt a strange sensation like somebody watching him, but when he looked back all he saw was the empty guard tower.

Sorun shrugged and turned back around, his mind stuck between the idea of the weapon suggestion and thinking about how bad he wanted to crash into his bed and sleep.

Chapter 7

Recursion Error

Episode 7- Glove culture sucks

"You want a stun baton?"

"Stun baton. Electric truncheon. Zap rod. Something along those lines." Sorun shrugged his shoulders. "Tails, there's only so many different ways I can say I want a stick that shocks things. I'm runnin' outta nouns here."

It wasn't like it was the most selfish request in the world. Maybe him rushing into Freedom HQ and ambushing Tails while he was in the kitchen eating a sandwich wasn't the most tactful way he could have gone about this, but on the other hand there weren't many better ways of going about and asking something like this.

He wanted that weapon, though. He really wanted it.

Tails blinked at his request in surprise, and then slowly set the half-eaten sandwich down on a plate in front of him as he gave the human his full attention. "Why do you want something like that?"

Leaning back in the chair he'd pulled up next to Tails' chair, Sorun pointed a finger at the young fox. "Lemme ask you something, Tails. You fight Eggman's robots, right?"

"That's... correct...?"

"And you're actually out there personally destroying them?"

The yellow Mobian slowly nodded. "When the situation calls for it, yes," he said. "I usually bash them to pieces with my tails or spin into them to destroy them."

"Okay, see, this is where my point lies." Sorun propped both his elbows on the table and leaned in closer. "You're eleven. Still growing. But you can destroy robots just by hitting them since you're a Mobian." He stuck his thumbs out at himself. "I'm sixteen. Technically not fully mature, but speaking in practical terms I'm pretty close, so the difference is negligible. But I'm a human, Tails, so if I try hitting a robot I'm gonna break something. You see where I'm going with this?"

Tails hummed in understanding. "I'd heard humans and Overlanders weren't as physically apt as Mobians, but I didn't know it was this bad. You really can't-?"

"Tails, it's hard enough admitting an eleven-year-old is however many times stronger than me. Don't make me go into further detail with this."

The younger between the two raised his gloved hands in defense. "Okay, okay, I get it." He drummed his fingers along the table in thought. "Why a stun baton?"

"'Cause they're robots, right? So I figured, y'know, robots are weak to electricity, so I could go with that."

"Where did you get the idea that robots are weak to electricity?"

Sorun opened his mouth to answer, closed it, then turned to avoid Tails' gaze. "... Video games," he admitted.

The answer elicited a sigh from the fox, followed by him rubbing at his forehead. "I hate to tell you this, but Eggman uses EMP shielding on all of his creations. That's electro-"

"Electromagnetic pulse, yeah, I know what EMP stands for." Sorun looked back to Tails. "So electrical-anything won't work on Badniks?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Sorry."

"Dang." Certainly not the answer he would have wanted to hear. He'd had great plans for that stun baton. "Well, you gotta give me something, man. I'm gonna get creamed if I go out there with nothing. I'd personally just like a gun, but Rotor's running his weird anti-gun policy and apparently they're useless against robots, so I need something I can swing."

"Normal ballistics, yeah, but energy-based projectiles and heavy munitions work fine against them." Sorun would have words with Rotor if he got the chance. "Where did you even get the idea for using a weapon?" Tails asked him.

"Uh... someone pointed out using a weapon, and I noticed that Antoine had a sword," Sorun answered, "so I thought, 'why not just get a weapon?'"

"So get a sword like Antoine's," Tails suggested. "He cuts apart Badniks like nothing with it."

Sorun's eyes widened when he heard that. He'd seen the sword, sure, but he hadn't pegged him as the kind of person that would be going around cutting robots in half with a sword. That alone made his respect for the coyote raise a little, even if he did speak butchered French. He didn't even think it was possible to cut titanium-plated robots apart with a normal sword, but apparently in Mobian hands it was possible.

Unfortunately, his hands were human and rather frail in comparison.

"I'd love a sword, Tails, but I'm not Antoine. Any blade I swing is just gonna bounce off a robot's chassis because of my weak human muscles."

"Oh, yeah." The fox rubbed inquisitively at his chin. "A hammer? One of the Freedom Fighters, Amy, uses a hammer. You could have her help you."

With a frown, Sorun's eyes traveled down to his arms. His rather unimpressive arms that were thin even by human standards. His arms that looked like they didn't even have any muscles. And try as he might, he couldn't see these arms holding a hammer of any kind.

"... Tails, I'm not even that strong compared to other humans," he admitted, "so I think we can cross off anything that needs more than one hand to hold. Anything bladed won't work, either, so it needs to be blunt. Hey, you know what fits in that criteria? A stun baton!"

"Electricity still won't do anything to Badniks," Tails reminded him.

"Okay, fine, normal baton then." He clasped his hands together in a pleading gesture. "I know asking you to make me something after all the terrible things I did makes me look really low, but I wouldn't be asking if I didn't need it. And I really need it."

Tails sent him a look of understanding and smiled. "It's okay, Sorun. I understand. I'll see what I can do."

Relief flooded the human. "Great, man. Thanks." He gave the Mobian a thumbs-up as the other returned to his sandwich. Sorun chose that time to get out of the chair he was in and exit the HQ's kitchen.

He felt a little disappointed that he wasn't able to get the stun baton, but the normal baton was better than nothing. His main worry was that he would still amount to nothing even with the baton, because there were large doubts in his mind that hitting titanium-plated robots with a stick was much better than hitting them with his hands.

At the very least, it was better than nothing. He just didn't know how far above nothing it was. But maybe Tails would pull through for him and give him something he could actually use. He wasn't completely sure on entrusting his survival to an eleven-year-old, either, but at the same time that eleven-year-old could do things Sorun couldn't even dream of doing himself along with everybody else around him, so he wasn't one to nitpick.

"But man, would my life be easier if they would just let me use a gun," Sorun thought. *"'Freedom Fighters don't use-' I'm so tilted at that statement. I'm technically not even a real Freedom Fighter. I'm a temp if anything. And I'm putting my life on the line here, so the least they could do is give me a decent advantage so I don't have to ask a kid to make me a stick!"*

It genuinely angered him, and Tails telling him there were ranged weapons that worked against Badniks only made him madder. And he doubted he could ever convince Rotor to change his mind, considering he wasn't on the best standing with him. Even if he apologized to Tails, at best that made him neutral in his book.

On the other hand, Sally, who Sorun saw walking past him as he made his way through the HQ's main room, should have been rather high in that book. And all of a sudden the possibility of getting a gun didn't seem to be an impossibility.

"Hey, yo, Sally Sally Sally." Sorun bolted right in front of the Mobian, and his sudden appearance had startled her enough to make her jump in surprise. "Look, could you talk to Rotor? We were talking yesterday and he brought up this whole 'guns are bad' argument. Is that a real thing? No guns in the Freedom Fighters?"

The other teen calmed down quickly from her surprise and affixed him with a questioning look in response to Sorun's question. "Why do you want a gun?" she asked.

"... You've seen me, right?" He looked down at himself and gestured to his body. "I'm a human. I'm squishy and fragile."

"You know Mobians are flesh and blood just like humans, right?" She gave him a wry grin. "We're squishy, too."

"Yeah, but do you know what you all have that I don't? The ability to destroy a robot without your body exploding because it evolved to handle that kind of stress." He flipped a hand up before it flopped down to his side. "Not all of us evolved from gene bomb soup, you

know, which I'm pretty sure is the only reason you're all able to do this stuff."

Her eyes squinted in confusion, and then slowly opened wide as realization dawned on her. "Oh, I think I seem the problem," she mumbled as she grasped at her chin in thought. "Right. Humans aren't very strong."

"I'm right here, you know."

Sally shushed him and held up her free hand. A few seconds passed as she thought, and then she slowly sighed as she lowered her hands. "So what's your plan?"

"My plan is that I asked Tails to make me a baton, but these are titanium robots we're talking about, Sally. They could be made of aluminum foil and I'd still be too weak to take them on."

She gave him a skeptical look. "Really?"

"... Okay, fine, even I could take on aluminum foil robots, but they're not, Sally. They're titanium."

"Yeah, and those are just the weaker ones," she informed him. "But Rotor's right. The Freedom Fighters don't use guns. I realize you're a bit nervous-"

"I'm scared to death, Sally."

" *I get it* , but we can't make an exception." She gave him a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry, really. But we can't."

Sorun groaned, and then ran his hands over his eyes. "But why? You're seriously not going to let me use a gun because of some arbitrary no-gun rule?" His voice grew an octave deeper. "'Oh, the Freedom Fighters can't be seen using guns. No sirree.' It's stupid," he complained with his normal voice.

"That's not- it's complicated, okay?" Sally closed her eyes and held a hand up to her forehead. "There's a general dislike of guns and similar ranged weaponry among the Mobian populace," she explained to him. "It's mostly from the Great War with the Overlanders. You wouldn't believe how much heavy artillery they used. They had all their soldiers use guns. I only heard stories, but it sounded awful."

"Uh... yeah." She must have been expected some reaction from him, because when Sally opened her eyes she looked surprised at Sorun's nonplussed face. "War was fought the same way where I'm from," he said. "Armies fought by shooting each other and blowing each other up. Not necessarily in that order."

She blinked in shock at him. "Why are your people so drawn to fighting with guns?"

"'Cause it's easy. And they do a lotta damage." After saying this, Sorun spluttered and waved his hands above his head.. "What do you want from me? You point and shoot, enemy goes down. It's a million times more efficient than fighting hand-to-hand, and I'm not surprised the Overlanders took the gun route considering they were fighting a whole race of animal people that could evidently bend them into pretzels!" He coughed and turned his head to the side after Sally crossed her arms and gave him a perturbed look. "But, uh... I guess lotta Mobians got gunned down in that war, huh?"

She stiffly nodded. "Yes. A lot."

Maybe bragging about how great is whole race thought guns were wasn't the wisest argument for him to make in his defense, and it was only now that Sorun realized it. And now an unsettled feeling was beginning to grow in his gut as he saw that downcast expression Sally held.

He cleared his throat and turned back to her. "You know I'm not condoning the wholesale slaughter of Mobians or anything like that, right? I'm, uh... I'm just saying. Guns. They're really effective."

"I know, Sorun. I'm not upset at you or anything." She didn't sound too convincing from the shaky breath she took. "Mobians don't like guns because of the Overlanders," she said with a flat expression. "That isn't to say they're banned outright. In fact, there were a few select Mobians during the war that stole Overlander weapons to use against them, and even some to this day that use guns based on their designs, but Mobians like that are few and far between. Guns generally invoke negative responses among Mobians, partly due to the trauma they inflicted in that war, and mainly because they're seen as weapons that are, well... dishonest to use. Cheap. Cheating, you could say."

Sorun shook his head in disbelief. "What the- Sally, you can't *cheat* in *war* -"

"I know, but that's not how the people see it," she interrupted, and then sighed. "Look, bottom line is that the Freedom Fighters are more than a ragtag group of rebels, despite appearances," she added when she saw Sorun raise an eyebrow. "We're a symbol of hope and freedom for the people. What does it look like when we start using weapons everybody is afraid of? That we have to *resort* to those things? The people start losing hope and trust in us, and what are we supposed to do if it grows to the point they don't want us to save them? What then?"

The human teen blew air out of his nose and rubbed the back of his head. "I mean... I guess you're right," he conceded, "and I get that normal guns don't really do much to robots anyways, but wouldn't it be a bit easier on you all if at least a few people used energy weapons or something?"

She shot down his idea with a shake of her head. "They're too similar to guns, and weapons like those aren't easily manufactured," Sally explained. "I know it might be frustrating from your perspective, Sorun, but please try to understand our position."

He wanted to argue the point more, but he couldn't find it in himself to do so. Because he actually understood the argument she was

making, and while he still thought it was *extremely* foolish to not use guns, he did understand where they were coming from. That and the pleading look she was sending him made him hesitate in even trying to think of a way to counter her argument, and in the end he ended up making a long, drawn-out groan while throwing his head back.

"Fine. Fine, I'll drop the whole gun thing," Sorun said.

A relieved smile spread across Sally's face, and she gave him a thankful nod. "Thank you, Sorun. And don't worry too much; I'm sure the baton idea will turn out to be great."

"Guess we'll see. Here's hoping."

"Hah, yeah... Hey, Sorun?" Her eyes had wandered down to his torso, and Sorun saw that her nose briefly wrinkled. "How long have you been wearing those clothes?"

He felt his body tense up. "I didn't exactly have a spare set of clothes on me when I got dragged here," he said, "so I haven't been able to wash my clothes because I wouldn't have anything else to wear in the meantime. I tried showering with my clothes on, but it- it just didn't work, Sally. You ever try walking around with wet socks? It's the worst feeling in the world."

There'd been an unbearable amount of disappointment, too, when his "wash his clothes with him in it" idea didn't pan out. Because his clothes were starting to become rank, and it was a problem he was rapidly running out of solutions to. And now somebody had noticed, the one thing he had been most afraid of. And the worst part, which he just now realized, was that everybody probably had a stronger sense of smell than he did due to being evolved animal people.

He really hoped he was wrong in that theory, but Sally taking a step back away from him wasn't a good sign.

"Oh man, this is super embarrassing..." Sorun thought, and then unconsciously brushed some of his hair in front of his face to try and

hide his expression from Sally.

"Well, um... oh!" Sally's eyes lit up. "That could work. Hang on a second."

Her hand reached into the inside of her blue vest as she began to search for something. Curiosity briefly crossed Sorun's mind, but grew too skittish to look closer when he remembered that she worse nothing but that open vest on her torso. So he made a light cough and looked away.

"Around a month ago Eggman burned down a fairly populated village near Knothole. We managed to evacuate everybody, thankfully, but the kingdom had to take them all in since they had nowhere else to go," Sally explained as she continued to dig around in her vest. "One of the Mobians that moved into the city was a cat named Honey. She's a tailor. A, uh... bit eccentric, but she's honestly talented in her trade."

"Okay...?" Sorun slowly turned to look at Sally, but his head snapped back away when he saw her still looking inside her vest.

"I don't think you're going to find a lot of places that will sell clothing that can fit you, even if you are around our size. But she does custom work for clients, so maybe she could help you out. Oh, here it is." She pulled out a small drawstring bag as Sorun looked back, and she lightly tossed it to him. Sorun's hand shot up to catch it, and experimentally shook it to get a feel what was inside. He felt the sensation of many small, circular objects rattling around inside the bag.

"Is this... this is money?" he asked.

Sally nodded. "Mobiums," she clarified. "We get donations from the royal dowry, so I'll just write it off as an expense for the Freedom Fighters. Don't worry too much about it and just get yourself some clothes, alright?"

Sorun blinked at the bag, and then tilted his head up to Sally. "Are you sure? 'Cause this seems like a lot and-"

"Freedom Fighters expenditure," she reiterated. "You're one of us now. You need more than a single set of clothes. It's completely fine." She stepped past him. "I've got something important to do, so you'll have to find her shop yourself. Just ask around the city and you'll find it in no time."

He didn't even get a chance to say anything in return before she disappeared out of sight through a door, which left Sorun standing alone in the middle of Freedom HQ dumbly staring at the wall with a bag of money held in his hand.

"Getting pity money from a princess for clothes. Not even a week into this world and I've already hit rock bottom." His eyes didn't stop staring ahead as he pocketed the bag of money. *"Tch. 'Mobiums'. I really am in hell."*

It took some doing, but he finally had found that tailor shop. It had taken a half hour of asking anybody who didn't give him odd looks and wandering around aimlessly after he reached Knothole City, but he finally found the place.

There wasn't much to say about the outside. It was a large, wooden structure like most other buildings and houses in the kingdom. What was different was the large display window out front with wooden mannequins displaying articles of clothing. The large sign above the door that said "Honey's" in large, stylized golden letters was also a big hint for him.

"Eccentric, huh?" Sorun muttered under his breath. "Oh, what have you gotten me into, Sally?"

He had a lot of reservations about the place on first glance, but he did need those clothes, and Sally had made it sound like this was his

best bet. So the pale teen had taken a deep breath and walked through the front door before he could have second thoughts.

The first thing he noticed was the small chime he heard from the bell above the door he walked through. The second thing he noticed as the door swung behind was how distinctly vibrant the inside of the shop was: pink carpeting, yellow wallpaper with orange stripes, bright lighting, and a wide plethora of clothes packed on shelves all around the shop. Shoes, shirt, dresses and other clothing items of various styles and colors practically littered the place, and all of that was just what he saw upon entering the place.

It was all so colorful that he almost felt as ill as when he first entered Mobius, and had to rub at his eyes to sooth them.

"I-is someone there?" he heard a female voice call out. "Just a minute, please!"

Sorun's ears perked up, and he looked towards the sound of the voice to find a counter at the rightmost side of the shop, next to the door he just entered through. He could vaguely see a figure hunched over and a long tail waving in the air above it as the figure rummaged around on the ground for something. Sorun chose to remain quiet and patiently waited.

"Now where did I put... oh, forget it," the figure huffed before standing upright. A yellow-furred cat with black hair smiled widely at him before spreading he arms out to her side. "Welcome dear and valued customer to my humble-!"

She stopped dead when she saw that it was a human standing in front of her. All Sorun could manage was a small wave.

"... Oh, I know you!" The cat's golden eyes widened in realization. "You're that human that everybody in town has been talking about! The one that joined the Freedom Fighters!"

"Yep, that's me," Sorun confirmed with a nod. "Yo. I'm Sorun."

"Sorun. Sorun, Sorun, Sorun..." She tested the name a few times before smiling brightly and hopping over the counter and landing right in front of him. "Well, Sorun, welcome to my humble boutique! What brings you here?"

So far it seemed to be going good. A bit more energetic than he expected, but otherwise Honey just seemed like a normal person. It was enough to give the human a bit more confidence in what he was doing, and the smallest of smiles began to form as he explained himself. "Well, I only have a single set of clothes on me, and Sally, er, the princess said that you were a tailor that could-"

"Tailor...?"

The teen stopped right there when she hissed that word out. It was a word uttered with such contempt that Sorun was nearly floored by the hostility in her voice, and her face changed to match her tone.

"So that's what I am now, huh? Just a humble little tailor?" The yellow cat in a red dress turned around and gripped the counter behind her. "I've really gone so low as to be called a tailor, huh?"

The air around Sorun began to grow heavy, and he reached a nervous hand out at Honey. "Uh-"

But then her grip on the counter increased so much that the wood splintered, and in the same instance she turned back around to face him with fiery eyes and a snarling face.

"I'm a fashionista, you hear me!? A bona fide fashionista!" she screeched at him, causing Sorun to take several steps back in fear. "People from all around the whole continent used to come to me for my high-quality product! But then that vile, evil, reprehensible, horrid, no-good Dr. Eggman had to go and ruin everything and burn down all those poor people's homes and ruin my business!"

"She's nuts! This lady's nuts!"

"You understand, right!?" She zoomed right in front of Sorun, hands clasped together with comically sized tears pouring down her face. "To be torn away from the only world you ever knew? To have the life you made with sweat and tears be ruined and to be reduced to nothing more than a glorified tailor? You understand me, don't you, Sorun?"

"... A little bit?" He honestly just wanted to leave, but he was too afraid of what she would do if he tried. "Dude, I-I just wanted some extra clothes."

Honey's whole body perked right up, and her face snapped right back into the happy visage it had been prior. There wasn't even any evidence that she had been crying, which left Sorun absolutely stupefied. "Some clothes, huh?" She started to scratch at her chin, and a devious smirk began to grow on her face as her tail slowly swished behind her. "... Yeah. Yeah, that can work." She stepped closer to Sorun, much to his silent protest. "You're a Freedom Fighter, Sorun. You're out there fighting for the planet and representing the people, right?"

"I, uh, haven't done anything like that *yet* technically, but I, um, plan to?" he answered in an unsure voice. "Where're you goin' with this?"

"'Honey' was a well-known name in the fashion industry before my business was burned to the ground, Sorun. But now with the war and everybody being so anxious over Eggman every single day nobody could ever possibly care about branding. But you!" Her tragic tone turned near-manic in its excitement as she pointed to Sorun. "You're out there fighting and making a name for yourself."

"I'm really not-"

"Details!" She waved his denials right off. "What matters is that you're a Freedom Fighter. More than that, you're a *human* Freedom Fighter. That's never existed before, which means in time people will be talking. Paying attention. Freedom Fighters like Sonic are already known heroes around the world for what they do in the fight against

Eggman, but you? You're unique. A bit bland, maybe. Not very strong-looking if I'm being brutally honest. But unique."

A spike of irritation shot through Sorun. "Hey-"

"No other Freedom Fighters wear my brand. You'd be the first," she interrupted, and then affixed him with a serious look. "So here's what I'm offering: not only do you wear my clothes, but you wear nothing *but* any clothes I make for you."

Understanding soon began to dawn on the black-haired teen. "You want me to advertise for you?" he asked in a flat tone. "Really?"

"Really," she echoed with a nod. "I mean, are you kidding? A Freedom Fighter going around the world, fighting in front of the people's eyes? You couldn't pay for better advertising. And the fact that you're a human? Even better. It gives me a chance to develop my technique past Mobian clothing, but more importantly it gets other humans to take notice. Could you imagine how lucrative it would be for me if I got into the human side of the fashion industry? They're usually so closed off to Mobians, but at the very least if I could gain a foothold in Station Square my reputation would *soar* ."

At this point Sorun was completely lost. "Isn't the world being dominated by Eggman, though?" he weakly asked. "I really don't think anybody is gonna care... t-the whole world is under siege, you crazy cat lady."

She didn't even looked fazed by the insult. "You're all fighting for the world's freedom, aren't you? The current status quo isn't permanent." She waved her hand from side-to-side. "Admittedly this is all long-term talk, for sure, but when it pays off, and it *will* pay off, it'll be more than worth it." She pointed at Sorun with a smirk. "And it's not like you wouldn't get anything out of this," she added. "After all, I wouldn't dream of asking all this from you for absolutely nothing! I can easily offer you an extensive discount on all my apparel, and I would even go as far as to put any orders by you on the top of my priority list!" The cat fluttered her eyes and pressed a finger against her cheek.

"But let's be honest, here. The fact you're getting such quality clothing alone should be enough; the rest is just icing on the cake. So what do you say?"

Crazy, conceited cat lady aside, the offer was tempting. Becoming what he would personally consider a sellout didn't sound appealing at all, if he was being completely honest. But going back to Sally or anybody else and asking for money if he ever needed more clothes was even less appealing with that, Freedom Fighter expenses be damned. His dignity may have been beaten and battered the whole time he'd been on Mobius, but he'd at least try to save as many shreds as he could.

Above that, making a deal with Honey could have benefits in the long run. She had to be talented; the clothes scattered all around the store actually did seem high-quality to Sorun's eyes, and in such variety, too. By all accounts, she was the real deal. Certainly had the attitude to back it up. And it wasn't like he lost anything but a bit of self respect for saying yes. And cheap clothes did sound rather appealing.

"Alright, Honey. Sure. I'll take that deal." He stuck his index finger out at her. "But no modeling. I draw the line at modeling."

"Aw." She pouted at him in response, but it was quickly wiped away into a smile when Sorun's expression didn't change. "No problem. A deal it is, then!"

They shook hands on it. Sorun couldn't help but feel like he was shaking hands with a devil. The smirk she wore the whole time they were shaking didn't alleviate him of these thoughts in the slightest.

No sooner did he do the equivalent of sign his soul away than was Sorun dragged further into the boutique by Honey, and all the while Sorun could genuinely say that he feared for his life.

"First things first: We're burning those clothes," Honey said as she continued leading him. "Starting right now you wear nothing that wasn't made by me."

"Hold on, hold on!" Sorun dug his feet into the ground and pulled his hand away from the cat. "Look, I don't got a lot on me from back home but these clothes. I don't mind if you make me wear anything else, but do we really gotta burn them? And, uh... think we could, you know, keep the color scheme? Maybe?"

The red-dressed Mobian turned around and gave his clothes a scrutinizing glare. "Do what you want with them as long as you don't wear them. As for the color..." Her eyes went up to Sorun's face. "Eh... I don't normally do black and blue combinations- they blend too easy in my opinion. But it matches your hair and eyes, so we can make it work."

Sorun silently cheered on the inside. It was the small victories that really mattered.

"Now," she continued as she began dragging him again, "believe it or not there actually are a few prototype pieces I worked on that are about your size. I made them during a... we'll call it an experimental phase I had. I want your opinion on them moving forwards."

"That's... fine, I think?"

Whether it actually was fine or not he didn't know, because she didn't answer him. Instead she pulled him into what looked like a well-lit storage room full or more wooden mannequins stuffed in glass cases, each with various pieces of clothes on them. "This," Honey announced with a wave of her hand, "is where dreams come to die. Unless I change my mind and come back, in which case they come to life. But otherwise this is where I put my experimental pieces. So let's get lookin'!"

"What do you think of this piece?"

"You serious? I'm not wearing this!" The clothing piece on the mannequin he was staring at quite literally looked like three jackets sewn together into a single jacket, with a fourth one hanging off the display's shoulders. "I'm gonna get heat stroke or something if I wear that!"

"Oh, come on, it's got that stalwart hero vibe all the ladies drop dead over." When Sorun refused to uncross his arms at the sight of the display, Honey sighed out loudly. "Fine. How about this?"

It was possibly the most egregious pair of pants he had ever seen. There were so many pockets and zippers that he could scarcely even tell it was pants. There were more pockets than pants.

"You're kidding."

"Hey, just think about it for a second." Honey tapped the side of her head. "You could fit all sorts of things in those pockets for your missions with the Freedom Fighters. Eh? Eh?" She nudged his side with her elbow.

Sorun shook his head. "I never was a big item user whenever I played video games. I'm not about to start now in real life." And he wouldn't be caught dead wearing that abominable thing. "What else ya got?"

"A skirt?" He gave the black piece of clothing in front of him a questioning look. "A *skirt* ? I ain't a girl, man."

The Mobian gave him an affronted look. "Hey, the notion that skirts are a solely female-oriented clothing item is completely wrong. Besides, we pair this with a skintight shirt or something similar to contrast between your upper and lower body? You'll be gorgeous."

Sorun shook his head. "I don't wanna be- hey, you know, that thing actually does look kinda comfortable, and the freedom of movement

it'd give me-" He shook his head harder. "No!"

"I don't even know with this one, Honey."

Belts. That's all it was- pants made of belts. It had to be belts and nothing but belts, because he couldn't see the actual pants beneath them. It was nothing but belts on belts on belts.

"Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking with this one, either," Honey admitted. "Still wanna try it?"

"Not happening."

"Okay, enough. Stop." He felt like they'd been looking at clothes for hours. For all he knew it had been hours, and that fact alone scared him more than anything else. He couldn't physically go on without passing out.

"Eh?" Honey shot him an inquisitive look. "What's the matter?"

With a groan, Sorun sat down on a nearby wooden crate. "The matter is that I just wanted some normal clothes, man. That's the whole reason I came here. Clothes." He tiredly gestured to the display cases next to them. "But now you got me back here and you're trying to doll me up like a Final Fantasy character. I know you don't know what that means, but it's what you're doing. I don't want these weird, impractical clothing pieces. I get enough looks from people already."

And it was more than they looked weird. That played a large part, but it was much more than that. They frankly looked uncomfortable. Some were so bulky with added... *things* on them that he wouldn't know how to move in them if he tried. And other pieces were accessorized to hell and back to the point they were more accessories than clothes.

All he had wanted was spare sets of clothes. He wouldn't have taken this deal if he knew this is what it entailed.

"'Impractical' you say..." Surprisingly, none of Sorun's complaints seemed to upset Honey in any way. In fact, she looked deep in thought as she slowly stroked her chin. "Something that isn't plain, but practical," she murmured. "Something that doesn't sacrifice uniqueness for functionality. That'd... be a really special style!" She leapt to her feet and dove towards the back of the room, behind stacks of wooden boxes. "Stay right there! I have just the thing!"

He wasn't even sure he could go anywhere if he wanted to. For all he knew Honey would hunt him down and drag him back. So he responded by giving a half-hearted wave while his attention slowly drifted towards the display cases next to him. He found himself looking at the pants made of belts in particular.

"I know she said it was experimental, but geez, all that leather... might as well have made chaps or something," he thought. *"... Wait, where the hell do they get leather from in this world?"* His eyes widened. *"No, really, where? Normal dogs and Mobini are a thing, sure, but... but what do they make the leather fro-"*

"I found them!" Sorun was roused from his concerned thoughts and turned back to Honey, who was walking towards him with a pair of black pants. "Look at these! They're leagues better than that travesty you're wearing right now," she claimed as he tossed him the pants.

Catching the pants, Sorun gave the yellow cat a pointed glare. "What's wrong with my sweatpants?" he asked.

"Ugh, they're atrocious. Baggy and loose, and not in a stylish way. You look like a bum with those pants." She pointed to the new pair of pants in his hands. "But what you said finally made me realize the style you're going for. A simplistic look that offers you practical movement on the battlefield without sacrificing style. It's the perfect choice for a Freedom Fighter!" She clasped her hands together. "It's

also something I've never tried before. It'll be a real challenge to meet that kind of standard, but I'm all for it!"

"Simple but stylish, huh? That's... hey, that actually sounds kinda cool," he admitted. He didn't know the first thing about style, but she the way she described it just *fit* with him somehow. He didn't even know how to describe it. It just felt right. And now that he thought about it, he never was one for flashy, complicated clothes. Granted he'd always been on a tight budget when buying clothes, but still.

But he had to question the pants. "Why these, though?"

"It's made from a polyester-cotton blend and fitted in a way that makes the pants secure but non-constrictive on the wearer," she explained. "They're the kind of thing that can take a lot of punishment and provide you all the mobility you could ever need without restriction, and comfortable to boot. You don't even need to worry about stains since they're black. Perfect for fighting."

Sorun turned the pants over in his hands, and then gave Honey a deadpan look. "These are just cargo pants," he claimed.

Honey's shoulders drooped. "I don't get a lot of customers asking for pants, okay? At least try them on before you say anything, Mr. Judgey McJudge."

The human teen raised his hands in a sign of surrender, and after looking around found a large crate nearby. He hopped off the one he was sitting on and stepped behind the crate and out of Honey's view, who was patiently waiting for Sorun with her hands clasped behind her back. There were various rustling sounds from behind the crate, and soon after Sorun walked out with his old pants in his hands and his new pants on.

And it killed him to admit it, but they felt *good* .

Honey hadn't been kidding when she said they were non-restrictive. He felt them being secured onto his body, but at the same time they

felt so loose that he could easily forget he was wearing them. It was almost like they molded to his legs naturally, and they even looked great on him on top of everything. They didn't look too baggy nor too tight. They were just right.

And Honey knew he liked them, too, because she was sending him one of the smuggest grins Sorun had ever seen. All the teen could do was sigh and hang his head.

"Yeah, okay, I want them," he whispered.

"What was that?" Honey held a hand up to one of her triangular ears. "Didn't catch that."

His head snapped up with a flustered look on his face. "They're great!" he shouted.

"Hah. Told you." The cat hummed and looked down at his legs. "I'm surprised they even fit you, to be honest, but I was trying out a lot of sizes. I got some socks in the back somewhere that should fit you, too, and some black boots to go along with the pants."

"Boots?" Sorun asked while tilting his head back. "What, you're a cobbler, too?"

"Oh, Sorun. If it goes on the body, I make it." He opened his mouth to ask something else, but Honey waved the question away. "They're combat boots, but they have short shafts if you're worried about that. So about everything above the belt-"

"Hey, come on, not the shirt." Sorun defensively hugged at his own chest. "Shirt's non-negotiable."

Honey sighed out in frustration while she tapped her foot on the ground. "I'm not having my investment walk around nothing but plain t-shirts, even if they're made by me."

"Yeah, well, I'm not going outside wearing what looks like a coat you stitched a carpet onto." He nodded his head at one of the display cases. "You got my style in mind, right? You can go ham with it later, but for now I just want some blue t-shirts." Plus it would give him time to think of a weak excuse not to wear anything crazy she made, or at the very least give him time to ease into it.

Fortunately, it seemed to be enough for Honey to accept. She sighed and slowly nodded her head. "Fine, we'll go with plain t-shirts for now. But you're not getting out of wearing anything I make from here on out." She didn't even acknowledge Sorun nodding at her as she began walking towards him with a tape measure in hand. "Now come over here so I can measure you," she ordered. "You're lucky I have some things lying around that fit you now, but going forwards anything I make for you is going to be custom-fitted."

Sorun rolled his eyes. "Yes, ma'am," he grumbled out. He rose his arms to his side as the Mobian began murmuring under her breath while wrapping the tape around parts of his body. This went on for a few minutes before she paused and looked up at Sorun.

"Oh, hey, before I forget," she said, "what size underwear you have?"

A small blush made its way to his face. "Why do you gotta know that?" he mumbled out.

"What part of 'I'm making everything you wear' wasn't clear?" She gave him a serious glare. "I'll freely admit that not a lot of Mobians bother with them, but if I'm ever going into the human market I'll need the practice making them. So give 'em up."

"Oh, come on..."

The fear that he would never make it to checkout had been at the front of his mind, but after what had to be the most awkward measuring experience he'd ever had, the two were finally back at the store's front counter. Honey was behind the counter counting out the

mobiums- a name for currency he still detested- out while Sorun did his best to avoid eye contact with her by examining his new clothes.

She'd been true to her word and refitted him head-to-toe in new clothes. The pants were still amazing. The new boots were equally amazing, doubly so as she happened to have something close to his size. The blue t-shirt was still a blue t-shirt. A paper bag containing his old clothes and the spares he bought from Honey laid at his feet.

Once again he was actually thankful for being so short, because otherwise he didn't think she would have had all these clothes in his size on hand already. And he had to admit- Honey was a master at what she did, even if she was loopy.

"Hey, I've been wondering something," Sorun suddenly said as he rested his hands on the counter, careful to avoid the spots Honey had destroyed with her hands. "What's with the glove thing? Almost everybody around here wears gloves."

Honey's ears stood up. "Oh, do you want some? I got a pair right here, actually." She reached under the counter and dropped a pair of large, white gloves on the counter. Sorun immediately backed up away from them.

"Oh, no way. I don't want the Mickey Mouse gloves. Uh-uh." He shook his head. "You don't have something, I dunno, slimmer? And darker?"

"Darker?" A sly grin stretched across Honey's face. "Why, Sorun... I didn't know you swung that way."

His pale face went even paler. "Huh?"

"Well, it's common knowledge that Mobians who wear dark gloves gravitate towards a certain... orientation not commonly seen among couples." With a shrug, she placed the white gloves back where she found them. "It's a surprise, but I'm not one to judge a client on who he chooses to-"

"I take it back!" Sorun quickly rose a hand to stop her before she could continue. "I'm not- look, how 'bout fingerless?" he asked. "Could you do fingerless gloves?"

Honey rose her eye ridges in surprise. "... You didn't strike me as someone who would do something like that in public, Sorun."

"What does that even-!?" He felt about ready to pass out from embarrassment, but he stopped cold when he saw Honey trying and failing to muffle stifled laughter behind her hand. "... You're screwin' with me," he accused. "You made all that up!"

"Complete lies. I would never... pft, yeah, I did," she admitted, causing Sorun breath out and collapse on the counter. "You're right, none of that is real. I just wanted to see how you would react."

Sorun let out a breathy groan on the counter. "Oh... oh, that ain't funny, dude..." He shakily picked himself up off the counter, equal parts relief and irritation in his eyes, and looked to Honey. "Seriously, though. What's up with the gloves?"

"Honestly? There isn't much to say." She gave Sorun a shrug. "Mobians don't wear much clothing on principal, but it mostly comes down to personal preference at the end of the day. The gloves are a staple in people's wardrobe mostly because everybody wears them with a few exceptions here and there."

"So it's just, what, a trend everyone follows?"

"Pretty much."

"Oh." Well that was a relatively underwhelming explanation. He'd expected something over the top, and half of him expected aliens to be involved with it somehow. But all things considered that was a surprisingly reason. Who knew something as innocent as that could exist on Mobius?

There was a small *ding!* as Honey finished closed the small register on the counter next to her. "Well, you're all set," she told him. "I'll get to work on the rest of your ensemble as soon as I can. You just keep being you."

"Ah-huh, sure." He bent down to pick up the bag of clothes, and made his way towards the shop's door. "Thanks."

"And Sorun?" The teen stopped right as he put his hand on the door and looked back at Honey, who was smiling at him. "It's a pleasure doing business with you."

He couldn't get out of that store fast enough.

"Oh, I just wanna sleep forever..." Sorun sighed as he plopped his body on the living room's couch. He'd walked straight to Sonic's home right after leaving the store, and he hadn't even been able to make it to Sonic's room where their beds were. He'd only made it as far as the living room before he'd finally collapsed.

"Eccentric she said. Eccentric. If that's this world's standard of eccentric than I'd hate to see what full-on crazy is," he thought as he closed his eyes. *"Ugh, at least it's all over now. I just wanna go to sleep and make it to the next day-"*

"Hey, Sorun!"

On the inside, he was screaming. On the outside, Sorun slowly opened his eyes so that he could see the blue hedgehog that was standing next to the couch and staring at him.

"What do you want, man...?" Sorun yawned out as he stretched his arms over his head. "It's been a long day."

Sonic looked at something across his room. "It's only two in the afternoon," he informed the human.

"What!?" His eyes snapped fully open as he followed Sonic's gaze to a wall clock. It was, indeed, just past two. "Oh, for the love of- ugh." He went slack on the couch. "What is it, Sonic?"

"Just wanted to compliment the snazzy new threads." He snapped his gloved hands and pointed his fingers at Sorun. "You get new clothes?"

"Yeah. I went to Honey." Sorun ran a tired hand over his face. "It was an experience and a half, lemme tell ya."

Sonic blinked at him. "You don't sound very happy about the new clothes."

"I am, but an insane cat woman knows my underwear size now because of it. I'm not gonna be able to sleep at night knowing that."

And now Sonic just looked confused. "And that's bad because...?"

Sorun's looked down to Sonic's bare crotch, scoffed, and turned his head away. "You don't wear underwear. You don't know the struggles." A strange scent hit his nose and caused him to look back at Sonic. "What's that smell?"

"Oh, I'll tell you what that smell is." He zipped onto the spot next to Sorun on the couch and held out his hand to the human. "I thought to myself, 'hey, I think Sorun's still a bit stressed over his situation,' and bam! It hit me. You need the greatest food ever conceived by Mobian minds."

The teen's blue eyes focused in on Sonic and the object he held in his hand. From what he could see it was a normal hot dog he was offering to him, but he couldn't place the topping that was put on it.

"... That's just a hot dog, man," Sorun said.

Sonic vehemently shook his head. "No. It's a hot dog with chili on it."

"That sounds like the most disgusting thing in the universe," Sorun thought as his eyes flicked to the hedgehog and back to the hot dog. "What ever happened to just using ketchup?"

"Ketchup ain't got nothing on chili." The chili dog was forced into Sorun's hands, with a second one being held in Sonic's other hand. He gave Sorun an encouraging look. "C'mon, Sorun. Don't knock it 'til you try it."

He most certainly didn't want to try it. The die-hard fan of ketchup inside of him absolutely refused to even partake in any condiment other than ketchup. His very spirit considered it self-betrayal, even if chili was fairly close to ketchup. He didn't even like hot dogs that much.

That look Sonic was sending stayed his hand from outright throwing it away. That wide-eyed expectant look in combination with that small smile he wore. And Sorun just didn't want to be plain rude to his host by throwing away offered food.

"This thing still looks gross," he thought. *"Screw it. I'll eat it."*

It was with much resignation that he took a bite.

The taste was fine enough, he supposed. Certainly better than what he had expected. The spiciness of the chili complemented the meat flavor of the actual hot dog well, but it was still a flavor that he found lacking. Passable, but not something he'd go out of his way to get. An overall six-out-of-ten for him.

"Eh. It's okay," he said with a shrug. When he looked to Sonic to gauge his reaction, he saw a wide-eyed look of surprise plastered on the Hedgehog's face. "What?"

"I... had Chuck load that chili dog with extra spicy peppers, you know, as a joke. You didn't even react to them," he said in a voice that was almost in awe. "What's your secret?"

The fact that he'd almost been pranked went completely over Sorun's head as he took another bite of the chili dog. "I dunno. I've always had a weirdly high pain tolerance. It's one of my only redeeming qualities." His chewing slowed down as he looked at the chili dog. "Hey, Sonic?"

"Mm, yeah?"

"Where, uh... where... where did the meat used to make this thing come from?" He glanced to the side at Sonic, who was busy consuming his own chili dog. "'Cause, like, animals here are people, so... is there, like, a Mobini meat industry or something? Because this is... it's kinda weird..."

Sonic gave him no answer whatsoever. On the contrary, all he did was passively stare into Sorun's eyes as his still head continued to eat his own chili dog. It was an unusually creepy gesture from the hedgehog that sent a chill through Sorun's spin.

"... What the fuck is that look supposed to mean!?" Sorun tried his best to not let his immense confusion show on his face, and decided that perhaps the subject was better off dropped entirely. "So," he said as he finished off the chili dog, "haven't seen you in a while. Where ya been?"

"Ah, you know, the usual. Eggman does a bad, I do a good, and the universe balances itself for about two seconds before he pulls something else we have to solve." He took the last bite from his own chili dog. "The others are trying to ignore it, but we're losing ground fast out there, Sorun. I don't know how much longer we can keep going like this."

An unusually somber look crossed Sonic's face, and Sorun grew uncomfortable from just sitting there next to him. Even more sobering was being reminded that things in this world weren't so peaceful despite how Knothole appeared. Fighting a war against a tyrant trying to take over the world would make things rather dower, Sorun supposed, but now that he thought on it he realized there

wasn't actually much he knew about Eggman. Now seemed like the right time to ask.

"So, this Eggman guy," Sorun began. "Dr. Robotnik. Crazy robot guy. What's his actual deal? Everybody's been talking about him, but nobody ever actually explained him to me."

"Eggman, huh?" The expression Sonic wore on his face was one Sorun had rarely seen on him. His face was scrunched up in a way that suggested even thinking about the madman was unpleasant to the hedgehog, and Sorun could hear his gloves strain when he tightened his hands. "What do you want me to say? He's an evil genius who makes robots to take over the world."

"Sure, but why?"

"Because that's just how he is," Sonic answered. "There isn't any reason to what he does. He wants to take over the world just because he wants to. Because he thinks he's better than everybody else, so it gives him the right to do whatever he wants with other people's lives." He looked down to the floor. "I'll never admit he's right, but he's trying really hard to prove his point by successfully taking over the world."

Sorun blinked. "That seems... really shallow, even by evil tyrant standards."

Sonic dry chuckled. "Yeah, well, he's a real shallow guy. Always was." He looked up at Sorun. "You know that he used to be the kingdom's warlord? He's practically the only reason Mobians won the Great War against the Overlanders- that's how my dad puts it, anyways."

"That guy was actually part of the kingdom?" Sorun rose his eyes in surprise. "How'd that happen?"

"Dad said that he was running from Overlanders. He and my uncle were actually the ones that found him, and the kingdom offered him

asylum. And then he went and stabbed everybody in the back after he helped win the war. Using the roboticizer to turn people into robots, enslaving people, using his own robots to try and take over the world..." Sonic sighed. "We fought him for ten years, and we finally thought it was all over when his final grand master plan blew up in his face. Literally. But then he got replaced by an even worse one."

A beat passed, and Sorun slowly sunk back into the sofa as he gave Sonic a perplexed look. "Come again?"

"Yeah, an Eggman from an alternate zone came to this one." The hedgehog waved the answer off like such a thing was normal, and Sorun could only stare at him in silent disbelief. "The way he put it, his zone was a mirror version of our zone where he actually won and took over the world after turning himself into a robot, but he got bored. So he came over here to take ours over. We've been fighting that one ever since."

"So... it's a weird alternate-universe version that's pretty much the same but worse," Sorun summarized. "And he's a robot, too?"

Sonic shrugged. "Well, he was. But while me and Tails were fighting him and his nephew- he has a nephew helping him, by the way- some aliens abducted us and turned him back into a... well, I dunno what to call that weird body of his. He turned back into a living person."

A long, drawn-out breath slowly escaped Sorun. "Sonic, how come every time I ask somebody something, half of the time the answer I get back is 'it was aliens'?"

"Eh-heh-heh. Come on, Sorun, it isn't that bad."

"No, Sonic, this has been consistent in the four days I've been here." Sorun pinched his thumb and index finger together. "Every single day here I've had at least one conversation that involved aliens. Why is it always aliens?"

He gave the human a wry smile. "No idea! We're just so popular nobody can leave us alone, I guess."

"I guess," Sorun said with a roll of his eyes. "So why'd aliens de-robot him?"

"It was these aliens called the Bem. They, uh... have this weird thing with turning people into robots and turning robots into people, but the one that visited Mobius and turned Eggman back to normal was one that wanted to help us." Sonic rubbed at the spines at the back of his head. "She went and turned all the roboticized Mobians into regular people again, and made it so that the roboticizer would never work again. That's why Eggman has to resort to building his own robots now; his little slavery trick doesn't work anymore."

Sorun nodded in understanding, but stopped halfway. "But... your dad...?"

The hedgehog's face lowered even more. "He couldn't turn back because of his wounds from the war. It'd... he'd die. Being a robot is the only thing saving him." He tapped at his knees. "That's why the roboticizer was even made, you know? To turn people into robots so they could be fixed if they got hurt really bad. It was my uncle's dream project, but Eggman twisted it into... well, you know. He ruins everything he touches."

"Oh." And now it all made sense why nobody liked this Eggman person, aside from the obvious "he's trying to rule the world" bit: he sounded like a legitimate psychopath to Sorun's ears. A megalomaniac bent on ruling the world no matter what. A sociopath that didn't care about hurting and enslaving literally every single person in the world if it meant he got to take it over. There were so many negative psychological terms he could fit from the description given to him alone that Sorun could barely sort them out from one another.

"I know comic book villains from back home that aren't as bad as this guy," Sorun thought to himself. *"At least some of those guys had*

reasons for doing what they did. Awful reasons, sure, but still. But this guy... he's wrecking the whole planet just because he wants to? Because he can, and that's it? It's just hearsay from Sonic, but... but he's been fighting Eggman practically his whole life along with everybody else in the Freedom Fighters. If anything, he's the most reliable source of info on the guy, and if Sonic *of all people is saying he's absolute evil..."*

He said it before, and he would say it again: Mobians, the ones he'd talked with at least, were all unusually nice. Some were a bit more *unique* than others, crazy cats aside, but overall they were nice to the point of off-putting to Sorun. They were kind to a fault, really, and Sonic embodied this more than anybody else he met so far. That's why he found it so hard to believe they would all paint Robotnik as an unredeemable tyrant. That just didn't seem like something they would do.

But after hearing all of that, Sorun could understand. The robo-slavery, the conquering, the ruining of lives? And for years at that? The fact he was doing it all *just because* according to Sonic? It was no wonder they all hated him.

"I wasn't too far off when I called this world nightmare-bizarro," he realized. *"Man. Hard to believe that a single guy could cause so much trouble. Just who is Robotnik?"*

"Do you guys at least know where he is?" Sorun suddenly asked Sonic. "Does he have a base of operations or something like that? Or does he move around?"

Sonic shook his head. "No, his round butt's firmly planted in New Megaopolis. It's..." Sorun stopped himself and made a slight hum. "Hey, you still have that map Sally gave you?"

"Yeah, it's in your-" Sonic was gone and back in less than a second, holding the rolled up map in his hands. "- Room, yeah. Showoff."

Grinning, Sonic unrolled the map and pointed at an extremely familiar spot to Sorun. "This is where New Megaopolis is," he explained. "From what I heard, it was a Overlander city a long time ago, but they lost it in the war."

Sorun leaned in closer to the map. "That's... New York," he whispered under his breath. "He actually went and took over New York? I mean it's not New York anymore, but... but seriously? I can't believe the place is even still around, but now he's in charge of the city?"

Now it was just insult upon injury at this point. He really liked New York. And not only that, but it was so close to the Kingdom of Acorn with it being on the east coast. He was way closer than Sorun would have thought.

"I don't know about what it used to be, but nowadays it's robot central," Sonic said as he rolled the map back up. "Nothing but metal, metal, and wouldn't you know it, more metal there. We can't get close without his defenses pinging us, and even if we could he's got so many robots there a head-on attack would be pointless. That whole city is a fortress for him and a factory for his Badniks."

"So attacking him's no good," Sorun summed up. "So what have you guys been doing?"

Sonic sighed at the question. "Try to disrupt his supply lines. Steal what we can for ourselves. Destroy his refineries that keep poisoning the planet. Dismantle his factories. But usually we're so busy saving people from his Badniks that we can barely ever make a dent in his operations, and when we can, we do so little that it feels like we aren't making a difference. For all I know we aren't."

"Which is why you banked on what that wood tablet said."

Sonic started at what Sorun said, but then gave him a slow nod. "Yeah, that's why we did what we did," he confirmed. "You see why we were so desperate now? We *need* a win here, Sorun. No, more

than a win- we need hope. Because at the speed we're going? Hope's runnin' out real fast, and once it goes away completely? I don't know." He shook his head. "The Freedom Fighters'll keep fighting to the end, no matter what. But everybody else? I just don't know."

He did understand. It didn't make him feel better for being here in the first place, but he at least understood. And more than that, to his surprise... he honestly felt bad for them. "Sorry you got somebody as bad as me," Sorun mumbled out while pulling a knee up to his chest. "You... deserved someone better. Someone that could have helped."

That statement earned him a shocked look from Sonic, who looked so stunned that he nearly dropped the map he held out of his hand. He shook it off quickly though, and a small smile, sad but appreciative, found its way on his face. "Hey, come on. I already said no negativity," he said. "We're putting together a big mission, you know. We're gonna need all hands on deck for this one, too, so chances are that you'll finally be pulled into the field." He stepped forwards and put a hand on Sorun's shoulder. "But really man, thanks. For helping us, even if you can't really do that much. And for talking with Tails- he told me you two are cool now. I really appreciate it."

Sorun said nothing at first, and simply just looked down at the hand. He then shrugged the hand off while getting up off the couch at the same time. "We made a bet," Sorun airily replied as he walked away. "That's all."

"Yeah, but you didn't have to honor it."

The human teen didn't so much as look back at Sonic, but he could feel the smile being beamed into his back from the hedgehog. And as it was, he was too tired to care, much less respond. He just wanted to sleep, to the point that he'd passed out the moment he crashed on Sonic's spare bed.

A/N- For his neutral special, Sorun does NOT wield a gun. He'd really like one, though.

So I'm taking a few liberties on this story and adding characters that didn't exist in the OG pre-plot wrecker wave universe. I still think it was the most egregious story choice in anything I've ever read, but I'll freely admit that the reset universe at the very least had some cool stuff in it. And I can use that.

Chapter 8

Recursion Error

Episode 8- When I tried my best and didn't succeed

Today was the big day.

For a full week now he'd been on Mobius, and while the experience wasn't exactly miserable, per se, Sorun's mood was up there. One whole week away from his home zone, and he wasn't a single step closer to getting back. The Freedom Fighters had yet to even collect a single Chaos Emerald.

But in that week he'd been acclimated to his new surroundings and had formed... bonds with those around him. What those bonds were, he didn't rightly know. He wouldn't go as far as to say they were bonds of friendship. Even calling them the bonds of comrades felt like going too far. He wasn't too surprised; he was a newcomer. Someone who people had only been around a week when they'd been fighting together for years. And unless he had to Sorun usually went out of his way to avoid people, as the "they're the ones responsible for my misfortune" thought still plagued his mind. There were those few exceptions, Sonic chief among them, but otherwise he'd yet to even have a single conversation with over half of the Freedom Fighters.

In the meantime, he'd kept busy. Done more useless busywork to make it at least look like he was doing something with his time. Slept unusually long hours to pass as much time as possible, because there wasn't exactly anything to do that was fun when he avoided most people. It was a nice little routine that kept his mind off himself and kept people from paying attention to him.

That all came crumbling down on day seven, when all the Freedom Fighters had been summoned to Freedom HQ for what was apparently a very, very big mission. A mission Sorun recalled Sonic mentioning at one point, but had chosen to ignore in the hope that it would go away on its own as he didn't want to deal with it.

In hindsight, that probably hadn't been his best move.

So now, once again, everybody was gathered around in the main room of the underground Freedom HQ, with Sorun hanging back far enough so that he wasn't next to anyone but close enough to hear everything. But while he could hear everything, his focus was more on the small, silver cylinder he was grasping in his right hand. Tails had come through with his request and made him a collapsible baton. Whether it would actually do him any good or not remained to be seen, though Sorun still had his doubts over its effectiveness. Many doubts.

"It'll be a three-pronged attack, with each team heading an attack..." A small table had been set up in the main living room of the HQ, with a large map spread out across it with various circles drawn on it in red marker. Sally was at that table with Sonic and Rotor standing next to her as she explained their plan of attack and organized the mission in front of everybody. And out of everybody in the room, Sorun was the only one that wasn't paying rapt attention to every word she said.

A poor choice? Most definitely, but he just couldn't bring himself to listen. Not because he didn't care, but because he was too scared to listen. Because if everybody was here, that meant everybody was going out on the mission. And unfortunately, he was part of everybody. Which meant he had to fight. Which meant his life would almost assuredly be at risk. He'd been fondling his baton as much as possible to try and calm his nerves, but it just wasn't enough. It was a miracle that he was even able to keep a straight and even face as he continued to roll the baton on his hand while he listened out for his name to come up.

"What was that one quote that sergeant guy said a million times in that one movie? The one with the guy that kept dying and reviving?" Sorun wondered. *"Oh, right. 'Battle is the Great Redeemer. The fiery crucible in which the only true heroes are forged. The one place where all men truly share the same rank, regardless of what kind parasitic scum they were going in.' Eat your heart out, Farell."*

An not-so-amusing quote considering who he was compared to all the heroes he was around. Who was he compared to them? A weakling. A nobody. Dead weight. A liability. Somebody that was so useless he'd slow them down and probably get somebody hurt or worse because of it. He wasn't an equal in their eyes, and going on a mission with them where he was almost certain to screw up in some way wasn't going to change that. He didn't even have as good a reason to fight as them. They fought because they chose to; Sorun was fighting because he arguably didn't have a choice, and they all knew he didn't want to.

He couldn't even understand how they could stand to be around him.

"- Last but not least is the Chaotix. As we discussed, you'll be attacking the factory directly. Team A will be running the distraction out front by directly attacking the Badnik forces stationed there while Team B will be taking advantage of the chaos and infiltrating the facility with the explosives." There was a pause from Sally. "Sorun?"

"Yeah?" he called out. His eyes were still down on the baton he was rolling in his hand.

"You'll be going along with Team A on this mission." He looked up from his baton in surprise at that. "Some of the heaviest hitters are going to be on that team," Sally explained, "but that being said, there's still only going to be two of them out there. I'd like you to go along with them to provide support and to... ease you into these types of missions."

"... That so?" And now he was wishing he'd paid more attention, but he had at least heard enough to play off his ignorance. "You're only

sending two guys on the distraction run, not including me? That's kinda low, ain't it?"

There was some movement as a red figure pushed through the small crowd of people. Sorun's eyes lazily tracked Knuckles as he stopped in front of the human while crossing his arms.

"A couple of our guys got wounded in an earlier op. Light injuries, but they're out for this one," he explained. "You're ridin' with me and Mighty for this one, pal."

"Alright." Sorun looked back down at the baton. "Just tell me when and we'll go."

He didn't pay attention to the odd look Knuckles gave him as he shuffled out of sight, and the rest of the meeting was largely tuned out by Sorun's ears. Too many nerves getting the better of him. Too much anxiety creating white noise in his mind. So focused was he on the metal object in his hand he couldn't even correctly perceive time slipping past him.

"Why the hell did I let everybody talk me into this...?"

"I'm really worried about him."

By now most of everybody had made their way out of the HQ in preparation for their part in the upcoming mission. There were some exceptions, though, mainly the human who had yet to move from the spot he'd practically glued his back to as he stared at a metal tube in his hand and the blue hedgehog who was looking at him from across the room.

The one who had expressed concern over Sorun wasn't him, though. It was the chipmunk standing right next to him who was giving Sorun equally concerned eyes.

"Aw, who? Sorun?" Sonic waved a hand in the face of her concerns. "Yeah, sure he's a bit nervous, but so is everybody their first time around. You remember how Antoine was. It's just first mission jitters."

"I'm not so sure," Sally argued with a shake of her head. "He gets freaked out pretty easily. You didn't see how he was when I was explaining the planet's history to him." She shot Sonic an irritated look. "Something I would have thought you'd think to do considering we decided to leave him with you."

Sonic shrugged. "He had other things to worry about. It didn't seem important."

She did a double-take in disbelief. "Not impor- how could something like that not be important!?" She pointed her hand out to the human. "Sonic, he had a panic attack when I told him! I thought he was gonna pass out it was so bad, and when I tried to calm him down he wouldn't let me!"

He froze at hearing that. This was new information, and now he actually was beginning to get a bit worried. "I didn't know," he said, and then immediately shook his doubts off. "But c'mon, Sal, Sorun's a tough guy. He's gotten this far, and compared to how he was on the first day he's practically a different person! He'll be fine."

"I'm not saying he hasn't gotten better," she said in a cautious tone. "I'm just worried he's not, you know, cut out for this sort of thing, and this is a big leap compared to what he's been doing so far."

"Look, Knux and Mighty are gonna be there too, right? They're two of the strongest guys around, and the factory their team is hitting isn't even that big," Sonic reasoned. "If anything bad happens, they'll be there to make sure Sorun makes it out in one piece. They've fought bigger Badnik hordes than what we're expecting them to find, so it should be easy for them."

After making his point, Sonic stepped around the table with the marked-up map and began making his way towards Sorun. On his

way he'd turned back to Sally, and gave her a reassuring smile while pointing both of his fingers at her.

"Seriously, don't worry about it," he said. "We've made tons more dicier plans than this. It'll all work out."

He turned around too quick to catch the doubtful look on her face.

"There's no hope for this private, nope, dunno what I was thinking..."

The silent panic was still going strong. He was squeezing the baton hard enough that the joints in his hand were going white.

That all ended when he felt somebody shake his arm.

"Hey, Sorun? You doing alright?" Hearing Sonic's voice ripped Sorun away from his mild panic and caused him to look up at the blue hedgehog, who was looking at him with a mildly concerned expression. "Your team for the mission is heading out. Aren't you going?"

"... Lost track'a time," Sorun mumbled out as he pocketed the baton. "Yeah, yeah I'm goin'."

He made the motion to move past the blue Mobian, but the grip on his arm remained firm. When Sorun stopped and turned around, Sonic still had that concerned expression on his face.

"You sure you're good?" he asked.

Not at all. "Mm. Sure I am." Sorun lightly shook his arm free of Sonic's grip. "What brought this up?"

"Oh, ah, nothin', nothin'," Sonic said with a light chuckle. "You're gonna be fine out there. You have two really strong guys backing you up, and hey, you got that cool new weapon, right? There's nothing to be worried about." He gave Sorun a thumbs-up. "And after it's over

I'm sure mom'll have the biggest stack of pancakes you've ever seen back home. We can make it a celebration!"

While that sounded nice, Sorun had nothing but worries. Worries the baton was a waste of his time. Worried about dying some time within the next however many hours this operation was going to last. Worried he'd never see home again. He had so many worries that he felt like the stress of it all was going to kill him before a robot got the chance to.

And of course he wasn't going to tell Sonic or anybody else the innumerable fears and worries he had. Too much embarrassment on his part, too much baggage on their part when they had bigger things to worry about concerning the war. They didn't have to worry about him. He didn't want the attention. So he'd fake it for as long as he could.

"Mm. So where am I actually going?" Sorun asked Sonic. "Is there a- a car or something, or what?"

A devious smirk slowly spread across Sonic's face. He didn't like it one bit. "Oh, something way cooler than that. You'll love it. Trust me."

Sorun didn't trust him.

Sorun was right not to trust him when he saw what it was Sonic had been referring to.

"Plane? Y-you guys got a plan? Plane?"

Knothole City had a little clearing that had been converted into an airstrip near the kingdom's outskirts where the Freedom Fighters kept their aircraft. It was surprising to Sorun because he hadn't realized they had aircraft, let alone an airstrip. And not even a particularly good one at that- it was just a long dirt road with a large wooden hanger next to it. A hanger that was way too large for just

the one little plane he was standing in front of, which made him question what else was in there.

The plane he was looking at, though? He wasn't sure what to make of it. A blue airplane with an extra seat behind the pilot's seat. What drew his eyes though was the fact that there was a logo on the top of each wing. A logo of a pair of yellow and white tails.

The same pair of tails attached to the fox that was sitting on one of the plane's wings and grinning down at Sorun.

"Of course we have a plane," Tails said in a tone that implied it was the most obvious thing in the world. "How else do you think we get around? I sure didn't build it just to look at it."

The teen's mind ran blank at that. "You built an airplane."

"Sure did!"

"Of course he did," Sorun mumbled under his breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I already knew he was a kid genius. You didn't need to show me evidence and emasculate me further, universe."

As if he needed more hits to his confidence. Again. Now of all times when this may have been the last day of his life.

"You're not afraid of flying, are you?" Tails asked him with a tilt of his head. "Are you?"

"What? Pfft, no, I'm not- no way, man." Sorun scratched the back of his head and turned away. "I've never flown in a plane before but I'm totally cool with heights so yeah, hah hah, I'm all set." A low whine sounded in the back of his throat. "Oh man, I gotta get in that...?" he hoarsely whispered to himself.

It had to be sturdy. Everybody seemingly trusted Tails to fly them. Tails, the same person that helped make a portal to another

dimension. What was a plane compared to that? Practically nothing, really. There was no way it wasn't good even if it was a homemade plane. It even arguably looked better than planes he'd seen on Earth. There was no way it wasn't stable.

He so dearly hoped his logic was sound.

"You're not getting cold feet now, are you?" There was a pat on Sorun's back with so much force behind it that it had almost knocked him right off his feet. The startled teen stumbled, caught his balance, and then whirled around to see Knuckles standing behind him. "Not too late to turn back."

"That's arguably untrue," Sorun argued as another Mobian approached them. "You're Mighty, then?"

He definitely saw him around, but otherwise Sorun hadn't paid attention to him. A Mobian with black fur and the same kind of peach stomach and mouth that Sonic had. But what he had instead of spines was a shiny, red shell of some sorts on his back. Most surprising of all was the unusually friendly aura he had hanging around him, more so than most other Mobians Sorun had met thus far. He found it strange.

"Yeah, that's me. It's nice to meet you." Even his voice sounded friendlier than friendly. "You're coming with us on the mission, right?"

"For however much worth I am, yeah," Sorun answered. "So, Mighty. You're..." He clicked his tongue as his eyes briefly roamed to the shell and then back to Mighty's face. He was guessing at this point, but considering the shell, he felt solid about this guess. "... An armadillo. Right?"

It was a baseless guess on his part. He was fairly confident Armadillos didn't have fur, and he really did just look like a hedgehog but with a shell in place of quills. But thinking with that kind of logic hadn't gotten Sorun anywhere in trying to guess people's species

with only a few exceptions, and he didn't have anything to lose. So he took a shot in the dark.

He looked unsure at the question. "Uh, yeah? Why?"

The shot in the dark paid off.

"Yes!" Sorun silently hissed as he turned his back to Mighty and held up a fist in victory. "I got one. I'm gettin' better at this." And here he'd thought he was hopeless at identifying Mobians, but he'd finally gotten one right. Maybe there was hope after all.

"Uh, Sorun?"

"O-oh, right." Sorun spun back around and cleared his throat. "So you're, like... a big defense guy?" he asked. "'Cause of the shell?"

"Hm? The shell?" He looked back at the red shell on his back. "It helps, I guess, but my main strength is, well... my strength." He lifted up his right bicep and flexed it. "I'm stronger than most Mobians. Like... really extra strong. Scary strong."

Sorun's face fell flat. "You mean super strength?"

"Yeah, that!"

"I see. The guy with super strength is named Mighty. The guy with super speed is named Sonic. Feels like the world is trying to tell me something." On that note, Sorun turned around and made his way towards the plane. "Welp, we got a mission to do, right? Better get to it."

Maybe it was a culture thing he was ignorant of, or maybe Mobians just weren't that creative with naming things. Or some other third thing he wasn't thinking of. They couldn't all be this blunt with names; Tails at the very least had a normal-sounding name with a nickname. Sally and Antoine had normal names.

"Mm, but wait, they ain't got powers from what I've seen. At least Antoine doesn't if he has to resort to a sword," Sorun thought as he climbed up the side of the plane and into the seat behind the pilot's seat where Tails was sitting. *"Did Sonic's parents seriously name him Sonic out the womb? Or is Sonic just a nickname like Tails' name? Oh, what if he has a really embarrassing real name or something funny like that?"*

"So my job is to deliver some of the teams to their respective positions. I'll drop you all off and swing by to pick you up later," Tails informed Sorun before turning to the plane's controls.

Sorun said nothing in response, instead choosing to hug his arms against himself as he sat back further into his seat. A thought occurred to him suddenly and he pressed back forwards to get Tails' attention. "Hey," he called out over the plane's spinning propeller, "where're the other two gonna sit!?"

He got his answer when Knuckles and Mighty casually walked up to the plane and jumped right up on the wings, with each Mobian standing on either side of the plane's wings. Sorun's jaw dropped the slightest amount when he realized they intended to just stand on the wings while in flight, but he quickly managed to shake off his disbelief and went back to shrinking into his seat.

"Why am I not even surprised?" the teen wondered to himself as the plane began to move down the dirt runway. *"That's actually one of the less surprising things I've seen here. Says a lot."*

Any further thoughts were muted by the sheer anxiety Sorun felt as the plane finally took off. It was an experience that lasted the entire flight.

Tails had dropped the three of them off in a forested area and had flown off soon after. After a small trek through some forest they came to the edge of a small hill under the cover of trees. Anything beyond that hill was practically a different world: unlike the forested area they

had just come out of, there were absolutely no trees for as far as the eye could see below them. Nothing but flat land comprised of dried, hardened soil. The sky was orange and the clouds ominously dark. Even the smell was different, and somewhat reminded Sorun of his home city, but somehow even worse. More metallic.

And at the center of what was practically a wasteland? The factory they were sent here to destroy. A compound with a large building at its center that had two tower-like cones protruding out of the top billowing black smoke into the air, reminding Sorun of the nuclear power plants he'd seen pictures of on Earth. There were smaller buildings around the main one scattered throughout the compound, and even paved, concrete roads connecting them all together. Further out there were construction cranes and signs of half-finished buildings.

On the upside, there wasn't any type of fence or wall they had to bypass. On the downside, there were dozens of robots walking around the whole compound.

Now, Sorun had never seen a real-life robot before. Not surprising; the technological curve on Earth had made it so the closest thing he'd ever seen to an actual robot was a mindless vacuum that skirted around on the floor before it got caught on a chair or something. But he'd been an avid consumer of entertainment, and had seen his fair share of fictional robots across a wide variety of video games, movies, and anime. So he had a general idea of what to expect when he was told the force they were fighting was robots.

At least he thought he did until he actually saw the things.

If he remembered correctly, he'd heard the term "Egg Pawn" be thrown around at some point, and looking at them now, he could see where that name would come from. Robots painted various colors with round, almost spherical torsos. Thin limbs with large hands and feet. Squat, round heads with pointed, needle-like noses, blue, circular lights for eyes and a blue, eerie smile built beneath those eyes. They honestly looked like something out of a cartoon to

Sorun's eyes, but there was nothing cartoonish about the lances, hammers, and what looked like hands that were laser canons if his fictional trivia-savvy mind was to be trusted.

"So those are the robots, huh?" Sorun mused. He was leaning against a tree behind his two Mobian comrades, who were crouching near the edge of the hill. "They look weirder than I woulda thought."

"Eggman modeled them after himself," Knuckles grunted under his breath. "Honestly, it's so... what's a word that work? Self-indulgent? No, wait, that's two..."

"Obsessive?" Mighty tried, but looked unsure of his answer.

"Narcissistic," Sorun supplied, and the two Mobians let out a small "oh" at the word. "So we're going down there to be the big distraction?"

Knuckles nodded. "Yeah, we draw their attention out here while Espio and Charmy sneak in with the bomb to detonate the factory. We fall back right after. They got their own ride back home." He looked up at the sky with a slight pained expression. "It won't help much with the pollution, but it's better than nothing."

Wordlessly, Sorun pushed off the tree and stepped besides the two Mobians while trying to ignore the fact he didn't know who Charmy and Espio were. "So we, uh-" he pointed to the factory, "- we're just gonna rush right in, huh?"

"That's the plan," Mighty said.

"Ah." He didn't like that plan. The plan sounded hazardous to his health. "You guys mind if I just, y'know, hang back a bit?" They both looked up at him with questioning looks. "You know, just... have me pick off the stragglers. Or something. They're all gonna be focused on you two anyways, so I don't really have much to do otherwise."

The two looked at each other, and the breath Sorun had been holding was slowly exhaled when they shrugged their shoulders and gave the human a nod.

"So we going in right now?" Mighty asked.

Sorun did a double-take. "Wait, *now* now? 'Cause I-"

"Yup." Knuckles already began shuffling his body over the hill's edge. "Let's hit it."

"This seems sudden-"

They were already sliding down the hill. Halfway through him trying to think of what to do next, he already could hear explosions and an alarm going off.

"Well Sorun, guess, uh... yeah, just go in there," he whispered to himself. His hands, clammy with nervous sweat, shakily reached into his pocket to pull out the baton which he promptly flicked so that it extended to its full length. "How hard can it be? They're just killer robots." He began to slowly slide down the hill. "Man, I'm so screwed..."

Every single footstep he took towards the factory felt like his shoes were full of lead, and when ground gave way to concrete his anxiety only increased. Littered all around him were the remains of destroyed robots that looked like they had been literally ripped apart by either Mighty or Knuckles, and Sorun had to wonder if he was even needed here. Only minutes in and those two were tearing their way through Badniks like it was nothing. Meanwhile he was slowly walking around with a clueless look on his face, glancing from his baton to anywhere around him.

"Why am I e-even so upset? It's good th-that they get all the robots, isn't it?" he wondered to himself. "I-I can't fight, so it's... it's fine? What am I even doing here? I can't- oh."

In his aimless wanderings, he'd come to the part of the larger factory area that was under construction. There was an open area right in front of him, near a half-finished building with a construction crane overhead and with steel beams littered around. And right in the middle, in a space that was relatively clear, was a robot. A red Egg Pawn with its back turned to Sorun, a metal shield in its left hand and a long lance in its right.

Sorun gulped. *"Fuck. It's one of them."* He struggled to get his breathing under control as he lowered into a crouch. *"Okay. Okay, you got this. Just... do what they do in every movie and video game ever. Sneak up to the thing in a crouch-walk, then whack it with the baton. That's all you gotta do. You can do it."*

His heart was hammering so hard in his chest he felt like it was going to explode any second now, and he was sure his heavy breathing wasn't doing it any favors, but he pressed on. He was actually thankful for the loud alarm blaring from the factory and the distant explosions, because otherwise the Egg Pawn would have for sure heard him slowly approach.

And what a slow approach it was. Sorun made sure to crouch-walk as slow as possible, half because he wanted to remain unseen, and half because he wanted to delay him actually hitting the robot at much as possible. But the paranoia of the robot suddenly spotting him and turning around spurred him forwards, and if not for that alone he probably would have remained rooted to the spot in fear.

Finally, however, he managed to get behind the robot. Even when he rose to his full height, the Egg Pawn towered over him by an inch or two, but despite its height it had yet to even notice him or turn around. A miracle, really, seeing as he was breathing so hard he was practically blowing on it.

"Damn, how the hell did Snake crouch-walk for so long? That's rough on the knees," Sorun internally complained as he held his baton up. Any soreness in his knees was overridden by the anxiousness of what he was about to do. *"Alright. Alright, just... just*

hit it." He reared the baton backwards. *"Give it everything you got and hit it!"*

He grit his teeth, and with a grunt of exertion slammed the baton down on top of the Egg Pawn's head. There was a loud *ting!* sound as well as a few sparks when the baton landed before bouncing right off. A heavy vibration began rumbling in Sorun's arm from the impact, and he had to step back and hold his arm to nurse the shakes going through him.

Unfortunately, much to his dread, when he looked up he saw that his strike had done absolutely nothing. The robot's head was completely pristine and dent-free. The paint wasn't even scratched in the slightest.

Worse still, it turned around.

Sorun was so afraid in that one moment that he was completely frozen as the Egg Pawn stared at him with those large, blank lights for eyes. Its head tilted down slightly, and then it dropped the shield and lance it was holding on the ground. The Badnik reached its empty hands out and, almost gingery, took the baton from Sorun's shaking hands.

The creepy, perpetual grin it wore was almost mocking as it held the baton up to Sorun's eyes before it grabbed both ends with a hand and snapped it in half with about as much effort as it would take to snap a chopstick.

"... Uh..." So stunned was he from the act that he just saw that Sorun couldn't even think of words. All he could do was stare dumbly down at the fragments of the baton as the robot dropped them with wide eyes and a still, rigid body. "Um..."

The Badnik wasn't nearly as stunned as Sorun and casually reached down to pick up the dropped lance in a single motion. But when it bent back up straight to face the human, he was already gone.

"Oh no oh no oh-no-no-no..."

Run for cover. It'd been the one thing Sorun's fear-addled mind had managed to convey to his consciousness, so that was what he did. In the moment the Egg Pawn reached down to grab its lance, he'd bolted towards the first thing he saw that could place something between it and him. In this case, a sheet-metal wall that was nearby next to a small metal shack. Sorun was currently cowering behind that wall.

"The baton was a stupid idea what was I thinking oh god I'm gonna die..." In hindsight, no, banging a metal stick on a titanium-plated robot wasn't going to do anything to it. But it was something, and something was better than nothing. And Sorun had hoped that something would be enough, even if it was practically nothing.

But oh, was it not enough. It was not enough at all. And now there was a killer robot aware of his existence and currently trying to kill him.

"Okay. Alright, maybe if I run REALLY HARD I can find Knuckles or Mighty and they can take care of it. I'm gonna look like the lamest person ever and they'll lose all respect for me, but fuck it, I'd rather live with that than not live at all." They couldn't be that far, after all. The sound of robots exploding in the distance was fairly close, and Egg Pawns didn't look that fast. He could do something like that. *"Good plan? Good plan. Just gotta-"*

A red lance punched its way through the sheet metal inches from Sorun's face, and he screamed at the top of his lungs.

The lance pulled back through the hole as Sorun fell backwards onto his back. Right as he landed the lance tore through the metal again, right above him where'd he'd been standing before he fell. The teen immediately scrambled to his feet and began running away as the lance punched through the metal wall over and over while chasing him. Eventually Sorun had run past the entire wall, and turned his head briefly to see the red Egg Pawn on the other side of the wall

with its lance. It turned its head towards him and began walking towards the human at an alarming rate.

He ran to the metal shack that was near the wall, but when Sorun tried for the door he found that it was locked. In his panic, he looked left and right, and then found a small wooden table nearby with an open toolbox sitting on top of it. Sorun, desperate for anything to help him at this point, reached for the toolbox, grabbed it, and then spun around to face the advancing robot.

And what did he choose to do with the box of tools he picked up? He reached inside to throw the contents at the robot. Hammers of various sizes and shapes, screwdrivers, metal rulers, if it was even remotely heavy he picked it up out of the box and chucked it as hard as he could at the robot. The effect was about to be expected: every single item he threw bounced harmlessly off of the robot's shell, and it was to the point that it wasn't even slowing down.

Eventually it came down to the last item in the box, which Sorun thoughtlessly grabbed and held behind him in preparation to throw. Right before he swung, he noticed that the shape he felt was familiar, and quickly looked back to confirm that, yes, he was holding a regular tape measure. *"Goddammit, gimme a break,"* his exhausted mind thought as he yelled out and threw the tape at the robot.

The Egg Pawn actually took the effort to deflect the tape with its lance before thrusting the tip forwards towards Sorun.

He yelped in fear, and then instinctively held up the empty toolbox to his face to defend himself. By some miracle the lance pierced through the box with the tip stopping millimetres from Sorun's eye, but to his alarm the Egg Pawn began to use the lance to lift the box and Sorun upwards. Sorun, too afraid to let go of the toolbox, held on fast. But then the Egg Pawn swung the lance in an arc over its head, swinging the box and Sorun overhead with it. The momentum caused the toolbox to come loose from the lance, and at the same

time Sorun lost his grip, causing the teen to fly backwards away from the Egg Pawn.

Landing on the ground, Sorun grunted out loudly as the momentum caused him to roll a brief distance before coming to a stop on his back. He only managed to get one terror-stricken breath out before a shadow fell over him, and a scream escaped him as a shape shot down towards him. He rolled away just as the tip of the Robot's lance went through the ground where his head was, though it was while he was mid-roll did the robot's free hand reach out and grab him by the throat.

Genuine fear along with obscene amounts of adrenaline flooded Sorun's systems when he felt cool, metallic fingers wrap around his windpipe. His terror-filled breathing became short as he felt his airway become constricted, and then felt a tight pain in his whole throat as he was lifted up in the air off his feet by the robot. He desperately kicked at the robot and tried to pry the fingers off of him, but the robot proved to be too strong, and he was rapidly losing strength due to the fact he couldn't breath.

It was quickly becoming hard to see, as the edges of his vision was becoming dark. He had enough sight left in him to see the Egg Pawn's fixed, glowing smile, and even more alarmingly he saw the lance in its other hand reared back and aimed right at Sorun's head.

"No. Stop it..." Sorun's movements were becoming more and more feeble, and between the adrenaline and oxygen deprivation he was beginning to lose all feeling. It wasn't enough to stop the cold dread seeping though him when he saw the lance and thought that, yes, he was about to die. *"No no no please stop it I don't wanna die please-"*

The lance never came. It would have, but a large, heavy object falling on top of the Egg Pawn and crushing it stopped any attempt by it.

Sorun was slammed right into the ground from the force of the fallen object dragging the robot's arm down along with the teen. He

crashed right into the ground and immediately pried the lifeless fingers away from his throat, and then crawled a few inches backwards in fright. He held a hand up to his raw throat as wheezing gasps escaped him, and looked in confusion at what had befallen the Egg Pawn. It laid completely crushed under a mess of metal cross beams, buried to the point that the only parts visible was the arm that had held Sorun and half of its round, grinning head. The lights on its eyes and mouth were thankfully dimmed to a muted gray.

Panting heavily, Sorun tilted his head up just to see what had fallen to crush the robot. To his shock, he saw the culprit immediately in the form of a construction crane's arm suspended high in the air above him. It appeared that the tip of the crane's arm had somehow been cleanly cut off, the remains of which he assumed had been what fell down and crushed the Badnik.

"The hell...?" The confused teen thought as he looked at the destroyed Badnik and then back up to the crane. *"It... that piece of the crane just... came off? What the- huh?"*

He saw something, near the base of the crane's arm. What that something was, he didn't know. It was red in color, but he couldn't discern any visible shape as it moved too fast, and in the blink of an eye the red something was gone completely.

"Am I seeing things?" Sorun whispered. "The hell was-?"

The sound of loud, creaking metal made the teen cut himself off, and he looked up in fright at the crane arm. Fright turned into alarm when he saw that the rest of the crane's arm had been segmented, and was all falling towards him.

"Oh shit!" he shrieked, and looked around for the nearest *anything* that could shield him from the crushing debris quickly falling towards him. But there was nothing- nothing but wide open space and pieces of open construction around him. The shack may have worked, but even if the door was unlocked, it was too far for him to reach.

Panic racing through his mind made him think faster than he thought possible, and in a split second he noticed that there was a noticeable gap in the crushed, metal debris that was the piece of crane that had crushed the Egg Pawn. Debris that had a relatively covered top with all that metal. Without thinking, Sorun dived right towards the debris and squeezed his body inside as far as possible. Not a second was left to lose as he fitted his entire body inside before the next piece of debris crashed down on him. His ears rang with the sound of crashing metal and the shock sent vibrations throughout his whole body, but thankfully he didn't feel any part of him become seriously hurt.

But then the next piece fell after than, and he could feel the steel prison he'd wedged himself into begin to constrict all around him. The effect only increased further when the next piece dropped, and Sorun began to worry if he'd made the right choice after all.

One after another the pieces of the crane's arm crashed into that one spot. By the time the final piece touched down a large dust cloud had been kicked up from the large, concussive impacts, and whole minutes had to pass before the dust finally settled to reveal the massive, house-sized pile of red metal in the construction yard that Sorun was trapped in.

"So this is what that raider in Fallout felt when he tried to beat my player character in power armor to death with a wooden cue stick. Shame and humiliation," Sorun thought as he released a low, shallow breath. *'"Nobody said you had to fight with your bare hands,' he said. Yeah, that went real well for me, Shadow. Real fuckin' well."*

On the bright side, he'd survive a whole crane's arm falling on him. On the downside, his dumbass decision of diving headfirst into the debris instead of running away, while possibly having managed to save his life, also trapped him. The rest of the crane falling on him had crushed the metal he was hiding inside in to the point it was all pressing against his body. He couldn't move, and therefore was trapped.

At least he didn't feel injured, which, all things considered, may as well have been a miracle. The metal beams pressing against his chest made breathing a challenge, but he was alive. That had to count for something.

"How long has it been? Five, ten minutes? I can't even see in here. I wonder where the others are?" As if on cue from his thoughts, he felt the ground beneath him rumble as a loud, deafening explosion was heard in the distance, followed by a shock wave making the metal all around him rattle worryingly. *"I guess that was the factory blowing up,"* he reasoned. *"Knuckles said we were gonna fall back after it went off, but they wouldn't leave without me. Would they? Probably not. I don't know."*

He honestly didn't, but he really hoped they would come looking for him. He'd be stuck here otherwise, and didn't want to think about what would happen if he were just left here. Dying of dehydration after being pinned in place for days came to mind. Being excavated by robots and being taken prisoner or worse scared him even more.

"Sorun? Hey, Sorun!"

That was Mighty's voice he heard, much to his relief. The armadillo was shouting his name and, based on the volume, was relatively close. Unfortunately Sorun couldn't get enough breath in him to shout back, but he did have a hand with enough freedom of movement for him to bang on something. So he made a fist and rotated his wrist so that his fist hit a piece of metal to make a loud *clang!* sound.

"Sorun!? That you!?" Mighty called out. Sorun hit the metal a few more times in an attempt to give an affirmative sound, and was thankful to hear rapid footfalls approach his position. Soon enough he heard the sound of heavy pieces of metal being lifted off of him, and breathed in a large breath when the constriction on his chest was relieved. Minutes passed with more and more sunlight hitting Sorun's body as more metal was cleared away until a particularly large piece was lifted off him, exposing him entirely.

Blinking at the harsh sunlight in his eyes, Sorun slowly turned his head to his savior. Mighty was standing right above him, holding up a piece of crane high above his head with a single hand in what was a ridiculous display of strength. His face was marred with worry as he looked down at Sorun, who coughed and blinked blearily at the armadillo.

"Hey," Sorun croaked out. "One of my legs is pinned. Help me out?"

"Y-yeah!" The metal debris Mighty was holding was tossed over his shoulder and crashed into the ground far behind him. "Just hold on, okay? I'll get you out of there in a second."

The human teen remained silent and let Mighty dig him out. To his credit, he seemed to be genuinely careful in his work, and even went as far as to look to Sorun whenever he lifted something to make sure he wasn't causing him any pain. But Sorun remained silent for the most part, due to both the shame he was feeling and the heavy exhaustion settling through him. Eventually the last piece of debris was lifted off him, and Mighty wasted no time in offering Sorun a hand to help him stand up. He accepted the hand, and then softly groaned as he was slowly picked up to his feet with Mighty pressing his second hand against Sorun's back to steady him.

"Sorun, man, what happened?" Mighty asked him. "We went looking for you after the factory blew, but we couldn't find you."

"What happened? What do you think happened? Crane fell on me," Sorun mumbled as he brushed Mighty off of him. "Which one of you flatfoots decided it be such a great idea to drop a crane on me?"

"Huh?" Mighty blinked and flicked one of his ears. "W-we didn't drop this on you!"

In response, Sorun gestured wildly to the bits of crane scattered around them. "Well, it didn't fall on its own! And I saw something red up there before it fell, so it was either you or Knuckles!"

"Sorun, really, we didn't!" There was still concern in Mighty's eyes as he looked up and down Sorun's body. "Are you sure you're ok-?"

"Yeah, fine, I'm fine," Sorun grunted as he rubbed at his head. "Agh, forget it. Let's- let's just go. I don't wanna be here anymore."

He stumbled past Mighty who held a hand out to try and help him, but Sorun refused and pulled his arm away before the Mobian could grab it. He heard Mighty let out a consigned sigh in response, but heard him follow closely behind Sorun. He didn't care too much, and he cared even less about what the deal with the crane was. He just wanted to leave.

There was a slight pain in Sorun's left ankle that caused him to limp, but otherwise he felt fine enough to keep going. As they made their way out of the construction area, Sorun had turned his head around to see the large, central building that had once been the factory. Half of it was rubble now, with the other half on fire and slowly crumbling away. Even some of the nearby buildings had been hit by the blast and had been heavily damaged if not outright flattened completely.

But more than that? There were destroyed robots everywhere. For as far as he could see past the cracked streets and wrecked buildings were dozens upon dozens of Badnik corpses ripped to pieces and completely dismantled. There were so many destroyed robots that Sorun didn't think there were even any left. Mighty and Knuckles had destroyed them all.

The fact alone sent Sorun's blue eyes shaking as a feeling of complete self-loathing overtook him. His body threatened to shudder, too, but he kept it in check for fear of Mighty noticing.

"They... managed to do all this..." He felt like a walking disgrace at what he saw. He'd called himself useless so many times, but now he genuinely felt like he was completely useless when he saw the devastation that just two Mobians were able to do, compared to him. Him, who wasn't even able to destroy just one robot. Who was still

so shaken over the fact he almost died it was taking all his focus not to break down right there.

"I'm absolutely useless after all..."

He didn't speak a single time after the fact, as he was too worried his voice would crack from how bad he felt and that Mighty would notice. Even when Knuckles found them halfway back and joined the group he remained silent and even took steps not to meet any of their eyes so they couldn't see the devastation in them. It wasn't even when Tails met them at the rendezvous point with his plane did he choose to say anything. He merely climbed into the seat behind Tails while absolutely refusing to meet anybody's eyes or answer any questions.

Sorun couldn't even enjoy the view of the plane ride back. His head had been hung down in shame the entire time.

The plane's propeller hadn't even finished rotating before Sorun had jumped out of the plane and began skulking away. He thought he'd heard his name being called out to him, but this was largely ignored by Sorun who couldn't even hear anything outside of his own negative thoughts.

His limp was getting better, at least. Halfway back to Freedom HQ he was able to walk fully on his two feet. He sighed out when he finally saw the small, red flag on the pole mounted on the HQ's hill, and slipped through the door before gently shutting it behind him. A short trek through halls and stairs later, and he'd somehow found his way into the HQ's kitchen. He immediately went for the fridge and opened it, but to his dismay the only drink it was currently stocked with was water.

A listless sigh left him as he closed the door, and he endeavored to drag himself all the way to Sonic's home to just end the day already. He only made it as far as the kitchen table before he collapsed into the nearest chair and went limp.

"What did I actually think was gonna happen? I never had a chance. I knew that, everybody else knew that... why'd I even try? Just to say I did? Is that what I almost died out there for?" He still felt on edge from that fact. Even after getting on the plane and flying far away from that factory he still felt nervous. Still felt afraid for his life. Still felt terrible at his own weakness. *"Damn it all. What am I doing?"*

He would have went further, but he felt a sudden tap on his shoulder that caused him to jump up in his seat in surprise. He wildly looked around, but settled down when he saw it was just Tails standing in front of him. The young Mobian wasn't alone, either: Knuckles and Mighty were hanging back near the kitchen's entrance. Sonic and Sally were there, too, with each one giving Sorun looks of concern. Even Antoine was there, much to Sorun's exasperation.

"Sorry. Didn't see you there. Did you guys just come back from your mission?" Sorun asked, tone completely dull as he looked towards Sonic.

Sonic gave a slow nod. "Yeah, everybody's mission was a success. A couple of us were just chilling in the HQ when you just... kind of stumbled in the kitchen."

"Yeah, we chased you all the way from the airstrip, but you wouldn't listen to us," Tails added. "Sorun, what's wrong?"

"... You did?" Sorun mumbled. "I didn't notice. I was..." He sighed out, rubbed at his eyes, and sunk lower in his chair. "Alright, guys, look. I'mma be real here." His eyes gazed up at the Mobians watching him. "I tried, okay? I tried really hard. But I'm- I'm not cut out for this. For any of this."

There was an awkward pause, and everybody glanced at each other with questioning eyes before a majority looked to Knuckles and Mighty for clarification. Knuckles gave a half-shrug, and looked to Mighty for help. Mighty was biting at his lower lip before he let out a small sigh and stepped forwards.

"Look, Sorun, I know it didn't go so well for you-" he began, but stopped cold when Sorun gave him a wide-eyed stare.

"It went terribly, Mighty," he interrupted. "I couldn't do anything! You two were out there killing robots by the literal *dozens* while I couldn't even beat a single one! I lasted barely a minute against the thing when I tried!" Sorun, feeling heated from the discussion, kicked up out of his chair and began pacing back and forth in a little line. "I-I almost died! I was this close to getting a spear jammed through my face and out the back of my head before *divine intervention* or whatever that was decided to drop a crane on the Badnik- amazing I didn't get crushed to death!- and I woulda been stuck there if you didn't dig me out!" His hands flew up to his hand and rubbed at his hair in a frenzy. "I just- I don't- there isn't anything- I just can't- augh, I don't know..."

Any energy had had been building up suddenly felt like it was being drained out of him, and Sorun found himself collapsing back into the chair he'd shot out of. "Look, at the end of the day... I'm just not you guys," he said, voice and face both tired. "I'm not a Mobian. I can't handle the things you guys can do. I wasn't born with special powers. I don't have super strength, I can't run fast, I'm not some genius and I can't fly..." He lifted a hand to Antoine and sighed in defeat. "I don't know what he has, but whatever it is I ain't got it," he mumbled as the hand dropped. "I... I just can't do this. I would if I could, but I really can't. I tried."

After he finished talking, Sorun sluggishly rose up out of the chair and kept his head held down so he didn't have to see anybody's faces. He passed by Tails, and then stopped before digging into his pocket to bring out the two pieces of the broken baton. "It has some design flaws. Mainly that the guy operating it is physically incompetent." He handed the pieces to the fox, who accepted them with shaking hands. "I'm sorry for wasting your time with this, Tails."

He left right after without another word, thankful for the fact that nobody chased after him. His plan after this? Go back to his pseudo-home and wallow in self pity before falling asleep. And after that? He

genuinely didn't have a clue what came after this, and right now he couldn't bother to care.

"... Did a crane seriously fall on him?"

The overall mood that hanging over the kitchen soon after Sorun left was dour. Frowns were seen on faces all around, though none more than Tails as he looked down at the broken baton in his hands in dismay. The one who had asked the question, however, was Sonic, who was looking towards Mighty hoping for an explanation.

"I don't know how it happened!" The armadillo raised his hands up in defense. "I just found him like that! Maybe a Badnik dropped it on him or something, I dunno!"

"But you guys were supposed to be keeping an eye on him," Sonic bemoaned as he rubbed a hand over his face. "We all promised him everything would be fine and a crane ended up dropping on him." He turned towards Knuckles. "What happened to keeping an eye on him?"

Knuckles turned his head away from Sonic and gave a half-shrug. "He... said he's hang back to deal with the stragglers," he explained. "It seemed like a safe enough play, but... he seriously couldn't even take out one robot?"

"Humans aren't that strong," Sonic mumbled out with a shake of his head. "I knew it was bad, but I didn't think it was... oh, man..."

Taking strength for granted was something nobody present in the room had ever done. Overestimating someone's strength was a different matter entirely, though, and was evidently a lot easier to do than Sonic would have liked. He'd genuinely believed that Sorun would at the very least be able to fight one measly robot if nothing else, but apparently even something like that was beyond him. He didn't blame him in the slightest- everybody had their limits, and it

wasn't Sorun's fault his were so low compared to theirs. But it did leave him wondering what was left for Sorun at this point.

Even more than that, he was getting worried over the human and how he was handling all of this. He could tell from the faces all around him that everybody was thinking the same.

"Sonic?" His green eyes turned towards Tails, who looked up from the pieces of the baton to the hedgehog. "What's gonna happen with Sorun now?"

"I dunno, buddy. He's..." He grunted in frustration and turned around. "I'm gonna go talk with him and-"

"Wait, Sonic." Right as the hedgehog lifted a foot up, he was stopped by the sound of Sally's voice. "I don't think going to him would be a good idea right now."

He whirled towards the chipmunk in surprise. "Why not?" he asked. "You saw how he is. I can't-"

"Sorun's... volatile under stress. You know that," Sally said. "I don't mean to demean him in any way, but you heard what happened. He's shaken because of how that mission went. He could lash out because his nerves are so high right now."

"He wouldn't... he's been getting better with that, Sal," Sonic argued as his shoulders went slack. "Sorun's a little freaked out, sure, I get that, but he's not like what he was a week ago when he first got here."

Sally nodded her head in understanding, but the saddened expression on her face didn't change. "I'm not saying don't talk to him. I'm just saying give him some time to cool down," she elaborated. "Let him sleep this off so he can get his thoughts in order, alright? It's been a long day for all of us, anyways."

"Easy for you to say. You don't share a room with him." Sonic's foot began to tap aggressively on the ground. "I don't like it, but... yeah. I'll get back with him tomorrow." It wouldn't be his first choice, but he could see the wisdom in it. Even if it did hurt him inside.

"I'm going for a run to clear my head," he announced as he turned away from them all. "Have a good night you guys."

His hope was that running would take his mind off of what he had just witnessed, and just maybe give him a chance to think over what he was going to say to the human tomorrow to make him feel better. But even after he left the HQ, and even after he began sprinting through the forests, he couldn't get it out of his head. Even as the trees he passed began to blur into unrecognizable shapes, all he could think of was that look Sorun had on his face. That utterly defeated face that looked like it was on the verge of breaking down.

Sonic didn't like that face at all, and wanted to do everything he could to fix Sorun's mood and maybe even make the human smile for once. A real smile that would tell Sonic that Sorun was alright so he didn't have to worry about him anymore. But no matter how hard he thought, he just couldn't think of what he was going to say.

"Sorun... what are we going to do with you?"

Chapter 9

Recursion Error

Episode 9- I just wanna play video games

"You know, I've been thinking. Maybe- just maybe- what happened yesterday was a good thing."

Waking up the very next morning (which by Sorun's standards was the afternoon) Sorun had seen that Sonic was absent from the room. So with that and the fact he currently had no standing orders from the Freedom Fighters, combined with the thoughts from yesterday still plaguing his mind, he'd decided to wander around Knothole. To try and get his thoughts straight now that he was calmed down from a good night's sleep.

It was something he'd done often back on Earth whenever a problem arose that he needed to think on. Him aimlessly wandering down streets while deep in thought, though this eventually turned into David or one of his pals from school taking him to a local snack shack near their school. Sorun had found back then that food helped immensely with sorting his thoughts. And, as it happened, Sonic's uncle owned a small diner which the human incidentally walked into.

There wasn't much to say about it. Small and quaint, and as it was Sorun had apparently just missed the afternoon lunch rush, so the place was empty save for Sonic's uncle, Chuck. So what was Sorun to do other than sit down at the diner's counter and order some food? At the very least it was familiar territory, which put him somewhat at ease. Something like that had been sorely missing from his life for the past week.

"I... thought you didn't do too well in the mission?" the mustached hedgehog commented as he set a plate down in front of Sorun on

the counter. "Sonic told us about it last night. You seem rather calm given the description he gave us."

Sorun looked down at the plate that was set in front of him. He felt his face scrunch up when he saw the lone chili dog on it. "You don't serve fries or anything like that?" he asked.

"Huh? No." Chuck shook his head. "These are a delicacy here in Knothole. Why would I serve anything else?"

There was something seriously wrong with the people here if that really was the case. "Eh, forget it," Sorun grunted as he reached for the chili dog and took a bite. "Anyways, yeah, Sonic wasn't wrong. I was pretty messed up. Almost dying for the first time in your life will do that, I guess."

"I see. Want to talk about it?"

"No way." Another bite. "But I slept it off, and then a thought came to me." Sorun pointed a thumb at himself. "I'm a total scrub. Common knowledge at this point, right? And- and Chuck? I tried. Everybody wanted me to give the Freedom Fighters a shot, and boy howdy did I give it the biggest shot I could. But at the end of the day? I'm just a random normal dude who's seriously under-powered compared to literally everybody else around me." He raised his index finger in the air. "But now that I've tried and failed? Given irrefutable proof I can't actually do anything? Nah, they ain't gonna let me on any more missions." He took a final bite out of the chili dog and leaned back in his chair. "I'm home free, baby. All I gotta do now is ride out the rest of this trip and I'm all set."

He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it sooner. It could have had something to do with the raw adrenaline high he'd been on, or the near-death experience shaking him so bad. But with the clarity of sleeping it off? It made Sorun realize that it may have been the best thing to happen yet. No more fighting equaled no more risking his life, which meant all he had to do was sit around and do nothing until

the others gathered the Chaos Emeralds and opened the way home for him.

Unironically the greatest fumble of his life, really.

Chuck didn't look nearly as proud of this plan as Sorun was. In fact, he had a rather disapproving scowl on his face, and even his mustache became furled. "Isn't that a bit selfish of you?" he asked. "They did use all the Chaos Emeralds to bring you here. You don't think you're entitled to help out at least a little?"

Sorun's eyes snapped to Chuck's blue eyes, and he scowled. "Three points," he began before raising his index finger again. "Point one: I didn't ask for this. None of this. Not the 'abducted into the robot war in a different zone' bit, not the 'go fight said robots' bit, none of it." He held up two fingers. "Point dos," he continued, "it's not like I'm faking incompetence or anything to get out of fighting. I really am useless." Three fingers were held up. "The coup-de-grace to all that, though, Chuck? That's point three: I almost died out there. Died in a stupid war I have no right to be in, because I shouldn't even be here." He slowly inhaled as he lowered his hand, and then exhaled. "So no. I don't feel entitled to help them considering it's their fault I'm in this situation to begin with. It sucks they used all the Chaos Emeralds, sure, but that's on them, not me. I just want to go home, Chuck. Can you really blame me for thinking like this?"

Sure, maybe playing the "I'm a victim" card in this scenario was a low blow, but Sorun honestly couldn't care less. Just because it was low didn't mean it wasn't true, and as far as he was concerned that gave him a free pass to be as low as he wanted to be. He'd almost died, after all. Gruesomely at that. So he'd weasel out of everything as hard as he could if it meant getting back home risk-free.

And mentally speaking, he wasn't sure he could handle having another near-death encounter. He wasn't even sure how much more of this world's nonsense he could handle before he had a mental breakdown.

"So you're content to just sit on your haunches while the Freedom Fighters risk life and limb searching for the Chaos Emeralds to send you home?" Chuck questioned.

It sounded bad when he put it that way, but he wasn't wrong. Sorun didn't care. "Pretty much, yeah," he admitted with a shrug. "In my defense they're not even actively searching for the things. They said they'd just pick them up if they happen to run into them on missions."

Chuck sighed, and then reached for the empty plate in front of Sorun. "Are you sure this isn't you being too afraid after nearly losing your life?"

"You know, now that you mentioned it that was actually the most traumatic thing that's ever happened in my entire life." Sorun gave the hedgehog a flat look. "What do you think, man?"

"I think that I knew a lot of people like you back in the war, me included." The older male reached for a cloth and began cleaning the plate. "People who saw terrible things and didn't want to go back to the battlefield. More often than not they did, though, because the terrible things they saw, sonny? They'd rather fight it themselves than have all that awfulness reach their loved ones back home. So they fought, not because they want to, but because they have to."

"Mm. It's a good thing I don't have to, then, huh?"

The scrubbing of the dish became more vigorous. "At the end of the day, the choice is yours, Sorun. And I'll say that, at the very least, choosing not to fight is a choice nobody can blame you for. But you're not going to get very far with this attitude of yours." He gave Sorun a piercing look. "Going it alone just isn't something a person can do. Even my nephew Sonic, with all his power, knows this. Knows it better than anyone. They all do, which is why they stick together. Sometimes all you need is a helping hand, and if you have that, you can get through anything." He looked back down at the plate. "You might realize this and actually make a friend to help you

through this if you stopped treating everybody like monsters that abducted you."

Sorun scoffed, and then hopped out of his chair. "If you ever find yourself in my shoes, old man, then you can talk. 'Til then, though? Stop pretending you know how I feel."

"If you say so, sonny," Chuck rumbled. "It's two mobiums for the chili dog, by the by."

"Oh. Yeah, man, I'm broke." Sorun turned his back to the wide-eyed hedgehog and began walking away. "Thanks for the food and talk, though. Seeya."

He walked off with that, ignoring the hole that the hedgehog's eyes were boring into his back. He couldn't care less about his thoughts, especially after everything that had happened yesterday.

"If he was trying to do his 'wise old man' bit to get through to me, it didn't work. What does he know about my problems? Nothin'," Sorun bitterly thought as he thrust his hands into his pockets. *"I stopped treating everyone so negatively. I said sorry to Tails. That ain't enough? Go to hell. I just want to leave.*

"Agh... but they're trying hard is the thing." He wasn't completely callous or blind. Sonic was completely transparent in his attempts to befriend him. Tails was more shy about it, but was arguably the same way. Sally was trying her best to help him, but Sorun didn't know if that was just courtesy on her part due to the guilt of helping bring him here or if it was a genuine attempt at friendship. Others like Antoine, Knuckles, and Mighty were friendly towards him. Even that king, Elias, had been way nicer than he'd expected. Even went as far as to say he wanted to see him again.

Shadow and Rotor were different stories, but those were outliers Sorun would rather just leave alone.

Honey... Sorun just didn't want to think about her for as long as he could help it.

"Fine, so maybe being this weird, antisocial guy that kind of just hangs around isn't doing me favors. But friends? With the guys that brought me here? That pressured me into endangering my life?" He just plain didn't feel like it. He'd been fine with letting bygones be bygones and leaving it at that. Taking it a step further and extending hands of friendship? A bit too much for him. *"I don't think I could ever be friends with them. But maybe I should at least talk to them like Sally said. Team cohesiveness and all that. At the very least, it's something for me to do to pass the time, 'cause man oh man am I bored. I wonder if anybody's at the HQ?"*

As it turns out, there wasn't. A rare occurrence, really, considering this was the one hangout spot the Freedom Fighters had to gather in. Hence why it was headquarters, Sorun presumed. But even as he wandered into the living room and looked around, there was nobody. The place was completely empty.

"Huh." The sight produced raised eyebrows from Sorun, who was thoroughly surprised enough that he was scratching at the freshly-healed wound on his forehead. It was fine, though. It freed him up to do something else. What that was, he didn't know, because there honestly wasn't that much for him to do in Knothole other than walk around and ponder on what was currently on his thoughts. It beat talking with one of the Freedom Fighters, though.

Unfortunately somebody chose that time to open the doors to one of the rooms near the back of the living room, and Sorun had to suppress a sigh at realizing there actually was somebody there.

When he looked over to the opening door, he saw Mighty stepping out of the room while yawning and stretching his arms over his head. It was after he lowered his arms and opened his eyes from the yawn did he see Sorun standing across the room, looking at him. The armadillo tensed and and briefly looked uncomfortable from the

stare, but then made a small sigh as he made his way towards the human.

"Sorun. Hi. I... didn't see you there," Mighty awkwardly greeted as he stopped in front of Sorun, and then began to rub at his shoulder. "You doing okay?"

"I'm still alive," he answered. "That's always nice."

"H-heh, yeah..." Mighty looked down at his shoes. "About yesterday... I'm, sorry. About the crane thing. We were supposed to be keeping an eye on you, and... yeah. That happened."

Yet another prime example of these people being too nice for their own good. Sorun could barely keep from rolling his eyes. "Well, you're not the one that dropped it on me. So it's fine." He was still unclear on just what it was that dropped it on him, but he didn't care enough to pursue the answer. And he sure wasn't going all the way back there just to investigate it further. He wanted to put that crane as far behind him as possible.

Mighty didn't look too convinced at Sorun's forgiveness. To his credit, he wasn't too far off. "It's just that things like that don't happen... often." He looked really hesitant at saying often, which caused an eye-raise from Sorun. "Okay, when it comes to fighting Eggman nothing is really what you would call 'traditional'," he said with finger-quotes, "so a crane falling on you wasn't the most surprising thing in the world, and I get that it was your first time and this is all jarring for you, but I, well, y-you're doing fine, right?"

Sorun blinked. "You sound worse than I am, and I'm the one that had to brush off almost dying." A feat he was still coming to terms with, right alongside what he was seeing unfold right in front of him. "You're really that worried about me?"

"I don't want to see anybody get hurt, and it's messing me up a bit that you got crushed while under our watch," Mighty confessed. "And I really don't wanna see a friend get hurt."

There was a flinch from the black-haired teen when he heard that friend word. "You guys sure like to toss the word 'friend' around real casually," he commented.

"Well, yeah." The armadillo grew a confused expression. "Why wouldn't we be friends?"

"We just met yesterday," Sorun deadpanned.

"So what?"

Sorun had to hold his shaking right hand so it wouldn't slam into his own face. *"I really don't understand these people,"* he thought, and then breathed out a slow breath. "So where is everybody?" he asked in a desperate attempt to change the subject. "Place is kinda empty."

"Oh, they're off doing their own thing," Mighty answered with a shrug. "I didn't have anything to do, so I'm here."

"Yeah. Same."

"Ah, cool." There was an awkward pause between the two as they both looked away briefly, and then once again locked eyes. "Wanna do something?" Mighty asked.

He didn't, but at the same time Sorun didn't have anything better to do. "Why not?" he mumbled. "You got anything in mind?"

Mighty hummed in thought for a few seconds, dipping his head down while rubbing at his cheek. "We could... play a video game?" he suggested.

Somewhere in Sorun's mind, there was a jolt. A spark of excitement so intense he couldn't even remember the last time he felt something similar. "You have video games here?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah." Mighty pointed towards the middle of the living room, where there was a couch with a TV in front of it. "We don't have many, but-"

Sorun raised a hand to stop him. "Yes. Yes I do," he quickly said as he nearly ran to the couch. "Where's the... oh, I see..."

The world practically froze around him when he saw the small, electronic box sitting in front of the TV and connected by cables. The two game controllers sitting in front of it only made it even more recognizable. It was a welcoming enough sight that a short, breathless laugh escaped him as he crouched down next to the device and ran his hands along it.

How long had it been since he'd played a video game? Too long. Most definitely it had been too long since he'd been deprived of his most favorite pastime on Earth. So much had happened that something as simple as video games hadn't even crossed his mind since coming to Mobius, but now that he had the opportunity to play something, he couldn't help the deep, longing feeling growing inside of him. The urge to sit down and take a damn break from it all. To just not think about anything as he played a game.

He needed this. This escape from everything, even if it was just for a bit.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised. World has robots. Why wouldn't it have a game console?" It was a bit silly to assume they wouldn't have something like this, now that he thought of it. The TV looked older than he would have liked, but he easily managed to navigate towards the power button and flip it on. The console was another matter. *"Looks like an old Sega Genesis, but... more streamlined,"* he observed as he looked at the small black and orange game console sitting on the ground. *"There's a single slot on the side here with a cartridge plugged in... is that the game cartridge? This thing must be old even by this zone's standards if that's the case. Or maybe they never focused that hard on game development with everything else going on. Well, whatever. Game's a game. I can deal."*

Questions for later, but they sure as hell could wait until later because he needed this *now* . The power button on the console was a bit harder to find, but he eventually found it on the front and

pressed it. There was a small whir from the console, and the screen on the TV changed as Sorun grabbed one of the controllers- corded, much to his disgust- and hopped on the couch behind him. Mighty sat down on a spot next to him.

"Oh, you're playing this one, huh?" Mighty noted as the game's main menu loaded on the TV. "Good luck. Everybody in the Freedom Fighters has had a shot at this game. It's insanely tough."

A indistinguishable mumble left Sorun as he looked at the main menu. There was a little gameplay segment playing in the background of the menu, and he was able to tell enough from watching the small loops of gameplay. 2-D shooter from the looks of it with bullet hell mechanics. Player character was a small spaceship fighting alien spaceships that varied in size and complexity both in their design and projectile attacks. He'd seen enough of these on Earth to get the gist.

"Mm, just beat all the bosses at the end of the stages to win it, right?" Sorun quietly muttered as he navigated the menu. There weren't many menu's to go into- simple "play", "quit", "options", and "scores". Scores interested Sorun. "How does scoring in this game work?" he asked as he navigated to the score menu.

"I think by how many of the other ships you blow up?" The tone in Mighty's voice made it sound like he was unsure, which mildly irked Sorun. "There might be a time thing, too?"

"I'll figure it out," the human teen grunted as he opened the score menu. His eyes widened when a long list of names with scores next to them slid onto the screen. "Are these the top scores of all the Freedom Fighters?" he wondered.

Mighty nodded. "Yeah, I think so," he said.

Sorun hummed. Predictably, all of the names comprised of three letters. The scores all only had five digits, and were posted next to each three-letter name. He snorted at a majority of them; most were

around ten-thousand in score, with a few above that. One that stood out was "ROT" with a score just above twenty-thousand, likely Rotor Sorun presumed, and another named "TAI" at thirty-five thousand. Tails, most likely.

But at the very top of the scoreboard were three names whose scores were so above the rest Sorun couldn't help but notice them.

SHA: 52800

SON: 52500

Sonic and Shadow, then. Abysmal scores in Sorun's opinion, but practically amazing compared to everybody else, and he almost laughed when he saw how close the numbers were. What really piqued his interest, though, was the name at the very top of the leaderboard.

NIC: 98100

A decent score indeed. Not great by his standards, but decent.

"Who's Nic?" Sorun asked.

"Hm? Oh, that's Nicole," Mighty answered. "You haven't seen her. She's a, uh, computer."

Sorun paused. "Computer" ran through his head some times, but he remained confused at the phrasing. "What do you mean by that?"

"She's, like... a fake person? A program, but really smart like a normal person," Mighty explained.

The pale teen blinked. "So... an AI?" he tried.

It was Mighty's turn to blink. "A-what?"

"Artificial Intelligence." When Mighty continued to stare blankly at him, he sighed. "Robot. She's a robot?"

The armadillo's eyes widened in realization. "Ohhh...! That's what that means!" He shook his head. "I mean, kinda? But not really. Her body's this little pocket computer Sally carries around with her, but sometimes Nicole will transfer herself into the computers in the Freedom HQ's lab." He turned around and pointed to a door near the back of the living room. "It's through there."

He decided to just go ahead and accept that, but the mention of a lab interested him. "There's a lab back there?"

"Yeah, it's where they do, you know, computer stuff. And things."

The teen nodded in understanding. He wouldn't have expected them to have something like that down in an underground place like this, but if they had a fully-functioning kitchen and the electricity to power everything down here, he could see them having something like that. And he could also see why they would need something like that. That map had to come from somewhere, after all.

Turning back to the TV, Sorun pointed to the screen. "So if Nicole's an AI, how'd she play the game to get that score?" he questioned.

"Oh, Nicole's little computer body can project a real body for her to use sometimes," Mighty answered. "I don't really know how it works; you'd have to ask her or Sally. But one time Nicole made herself a body and tried out all the video games when we were having that one slow week that one time." He lightly chuckled and rubbed the top of his head. "She's really good at video games. Nobody's ever been able to beat her scores. Perks of being a computer, huh?"

"Looks like it," Sorun agreed. "She smoked all of you and got an almost perfect score. Almost." He scoffed and exited out the score menu. "Pfft. I can beat that, easy."

As he navigated towards the play button, Mighty gave the teen a slightly startled look. "Huh? I dunno, man. This game's really hard." The first stage began to load. "I haven't even come close to beating Rotor's score. I don't even dream of beating Sonic's or Shadow's.

But Nicole's score?" He shook his head. "I'm tellin' ya, she's too good."

"All I gotta do is get a perfect score," Sorun reasoned. "Simple."

"That's not simple at all!" Mighty began waving at the screen as the game loaded. "Sorun, you're not listening! Nicole's unbeatable at this game!"

Sorun's fingers instinctively pushed at the thumbsticks on the controller to move the spaceship on the screen, and a feeling of pure content flooded him as he sat back into the couch. This. This is what he needed. For the first time since landing on this planet, he felt completely content. Like he was in his element as his hands naturally conformed to his controller's shape and began to almost automatically press buttons.

And slowly, a small smile spread across his face, and he slightly turned his head towards Mighty to respond to his previous claim of Nicole's ability.

"Let's just see."

"Maybe he could... no, that wouldn't work..."

There wasn't many things in life that could so easily stump Sonic. Unfortunately, Sorun was one of those very few precious things. And try as me might, he couldn't find any answers to Sorun's problems. It was an issue that put an unending amount of duress on Sonic.

For once in his life, running to clear his mind hadn't helped him think of an answer. Pacing in circles, counsel from his parents and uncle, even the other Freedom Fighters... nobody had any idea what to do with Sorun. A large part of why he was choosing to walk down to the Freedom HQ. He hoped that he would be able to find something, anything, that could give him some idea on how to solve the Sorun

problem. Or at the very least an idea had come to somebody else they could use. He was desperate for anything.

"But what can he do? He can't fight- he really can't, and we should've listened to him more when he said he couldn't." Human fragility was something that had slipped his mind entirely, much to his shame. It wasn't a mistake he was ever going to make again, he'd already promised himself that, but that still left him wondering what Sorun could do if not fight? *"It'd be so easier if he just talked to us more, but it almost feels like he avoids us all the time. It'd be easier to put him somewhere he'd actually be helpful if we just knew more about him. It's not even that he's shy. He's just... so cold sometimes."*

It was another problem, but this one was more easily fixed. Sorun just didn't socialize, and Sonic feared he actually went out of his way not to talk to people. On the bright side, it was better than what he was. He didn't *seem* angry anymore and didn't lash out. He was just distant. A great improvement, but Sonic knew he could do better.

"Would bringing people to him work? Get him to open up that way?" Sonic thought as he descended the stairs into Freedom HQ. *"Feels kinda mean just ambushing him like that, but he can't keep going on like this. We can't help him if he won't let us."*

Those were the thoughts running through the blue hedgehog's head as he entered the HQ's living room, at least. But then his ears perked up when he heard the telltale boops and beeps of a video game, and he turned his head towards the sound. He almost couldn't believe his eyes at what he saw: Sorun playing video games with Mighty sitting next to him. Almost like they were hanging out. Almost like... Sorun was voluntarily socializing with somebody.

A large smile grew on Sonic's face. This was exactly what he had been hoping for- a chance for Sorun to finally interact with somebody like a normal person. It came out of nowhere and was honestly shocking, but he'd take it. Because as far as Sonic was concerned, something as little as this was progress for Sorun.

"Hey, guys!" He zoomed right behind the couch in a blur and leaned over it so his head was between the two. "Sorun, Mighty, how's it going? Mighty?"

There was a certain look on Mighty's face that he couldn't place. The armadillo's eyes were glued to the TV screen where a video game was playing, and he had an expression of amazement on his face. He was so amazed, in fact, that he was completely shocked still and wasn't moving a single facial muscle. It was honestly a little creepy to Sonic.

When he looked to the other side at Sorun, though, Sonic became even more freaked out. Sorun's face looked more calm and at ease than he'd ever seen him. Serene, almost, with the exception of his eyes which were entirely focused on the TV screen he was facing. And his fingers- those fingers were flying over the controller he was holding at a speed that even had Sonic impressed.

"Neh, Sonic, hi there," Sorun mumbled. Even his voice sounded softer and more calm than what it usually was. "Mighty showed me this game, so I decided to give it a try."

"Which one is- oh, *that* one." He felt his own face wrinkle when he saw that particular video game Sorun was playing. One of the more difficult ones in their collection, and more importantly the one where Shadow had just a slightly higher score than him. He never lorded it over Sonic but there had been that one smirk and he just *knew* it was inflating the dark hedgehog's ego. "So how are you doing on it?"

"Well, we're about to see. Final boss is in his dying animation." True to Sorun's words, a large, alien ship was in the middle of falling apart and exploding into clouds of fiery pixels. With one last digital explosion the ship disappeared entirely and the text "FINISHED" began to flash on the screen. After some seconds of flashing, the text disappeared and Sorun's final score appeared on the screen.

Sonic's jaw almost dropped right onto the couch when he saw it. Mighty's practically did. Sorun looked completely impassive.

SOR: 99999

"Aaaand to the top of the leaderboard you go," Sorun whispered as his name settled neatly above Nicole's score and name in the score menu.

"Huh!?" Sonic's head began to rapidly turn from the TV to Sorun's face. "That's- how!? How did you get a score that high on your first try!?"

"Eh, wasn't that hard." The sheer flippancy in Sorun's voice was baffling to Sonic, and only served to make him even more surprised. "All the enemies and bosses have set bullet patterns, so you just anticipate what's gonna come at you when you see the models appear on screen and dodge between the projectiles. The tracking attacks were a bit tricky, but nothin' special. The final boss has this really cheaty pattern, but if you eat a hit at the very beginning you can use the i-frames you get to move into a sweet spot and dodge everything else. It's not the most viable strategy in the world, but I saved up a bunch of the laser special shots and since those things hit for frame-by-frame damage they just *melt* the boss's health bar since he stays in place. I still had some spare hit points left which gives you a score multiplier at the end." He tossed the controller on the couch. "Ya'll are trash at this game, by the way. Nicole's decent, but the rest of you are just awful."

The explanation had gone completely over Sonic's head, and based on the blank, unthinking expression on Mighty's face he assumed it had gone over his head, as well. Or maybe he was still paralyzed from the shock that Sorun had done so well at the video game.

Wait. He'd done well. He was good at something.

Sorun was good at something.

"Sorun, you're really good at video games," Sonic marveled. "Like, really, *really* good. Nicole got close, but even she couldn't get a perfect score, and she's a computer!" An idea began to race in his

mind as he hopped over the couch to sit in the gap between him and Mighty. "Hey, maybe this is it!"

"What's it?" the human asked

"Your skill! Your special something!" Sonic claimed as he wildly gestured to the TV. "You got a perfect score on your first try! Literally nobody else in the Freedom Fighters could do something like that! You don't think a skill like that would be helpful when nobody else can do it?"

Sorun blinked, and then frowned at Sonic's words while shaking his head in denial. "Yeah, amazing. Video games. The one thing in the world I'm actually good at and it's completely useless when it comes to fighting robots. You're reaching, Sonic."

"Well... yeah..." He honestly had a good point there, and once more Sonic found himself struggling with finding something good to say. But after some thinking he could practically feel a light bulb go over his head, and he grinned widely. "You could be a pilot!"

There would have been complete silence between them all if the TV wasn't still silently playing beeping sounds from the video game and if Mighty wasn't still in his stupefied state. Sonic was trying to appear encouraging while the pale teen was apparently struggling to process what the hedgehog had just suggested.

"... Pilot," Sorun slowly repeated. "You think that, because I beat a video game, I could be a pilot."

Sonic nodded vigorously. Maybe a little too vigorously, as it rapid motion caused Sorun to lean away from him. "Totally! I know that playing as a little ship in a video game isn't the same thing as flying a real ship, but the fact you did so good there has to mean something! And yeah, almost everybody in the Freedom Fighters has *some* flying skills, sure, but the only real pilot we have is Tails. And Antoine, too, on certain occasions. But if we had another pilot that would free up positions and they could be doing something else! It'd be great!"

He thought it was great, at least. Beyond great, even. Not only would it finally give Sorun something to contribute, it would free up more people to help out in the actual fighting. Maybe even Tails would have more time for his inventions and projects if Sorun took over some of the piloting work. It was a plan that worked out for everyone!

But unfortunately, Sorun didn't seem all that enthusiastic about the plan. If anything, he looked extremely hesitant at the idea. "I don't know... I've never flown anything in my entire life, Sonic. And I really don't think video game experience equates to real-life piloting experience."

"So you can learn!" Sonic suggested. "Tails could show you. He'd be more than happy to!"

"But isn't he busy?"

"Well... okay, yeah, we're all busy most of the time with Eggman, but we could make time!" A thought popped into his head. "In fact, I think Tails was free tomorrow! I'll just go ahead and ask him later and we can find him tomorrow morning."

Now Sorun was starting to look distressed, but for the life of Sonic he couldn't figure out why. "Sonic, I didn't really do too well the last time I did a... fight thing," he said. "You really wanna put me behind a plane and try again? I don't want to crash into the ground and explode or something."

"It's fine! You wouldn't be doing any fighting at all- that's all on us. And it wouldn't be right away. We'll have Tails square you away first and then we can ease you into the whole thing." He hopped off the couch while flashing Sorun a smile. "I'm gonna go find him right now. Don't worry, Sorun. We're gonna figure this out. I got a great feeling about this one!"

This was the answer he'd been searching for. He wasn't completely sure of it, but he was confident enough in it that Sonic may as well have been sure. Sorun wasn't raising any complaints, either, electing

to just sit back in the couch and give Sonic a reluctant nod. It was all he needed, and like that Sonic bolted right out of Freedom HQ in search of Tails.

"Yeah. Yeah, this is the one." Sonic felt lighter to the point that he could have sworn he was running faster than normal, which only caused the smile he was wearing to widen. *"It's all gonna work out now."*

Well. That happened.

A withering sigh left Sorun as his back sunk further into the couch. All he'd wanted to do was play video games. To engage in his favorite pastime and take a break from it all for just a little bit. Maybe show off a bit by getting the high score just so he could feel a little better about himself, because at this point he needed it.

And now Sonic wanted him to be a pilot. All because of a video game.

He just couldn't catch a break anymore.

"Ugh, I thought I finally got out of fighting and then he goes and dumps this on me," Sorun thought as he rubbed at his forehead. *"I guess it's technically not fighting, but... maybe he's got a point? Flying way above the ground, away from everything... Could this actually work?"*

It had merits, now that he thought about it. An Egg Pawn certainly couldn't stab him if he was hundreds of feet above it in an airplane. It'd get everybody off his back if he started doing something useful like that, even if nobody had said anything about his uselessness barring Shadow. He most definitely wouldn't be bored, either, for better or worse.

But above all that? If he made enough of a difference and actually helped by letting more people fight instead of fly? It would mean the

process of collecting the Chaos Emeralds so he could go home would speed up.

Maybe Sonic was on to something after all.

"So what do you think?" Sorun nearly jumped out of the couch when he heard the voice next to him, and turned towards Mighty who was looking at him in an expectant manner. After all the piloting talk he'd nearly forgotten he'd been sitting there the whole time. "About learning to fly? Think you'd be up to it?"

"... I guess?" Sorun gave the armadillo a shrug. "It's something to do. I can't fight, so this would be the next best thing, right?" A startling thought suddenly occurred to him. "Wait, Eggman doesn't have flying robots or anything like that, right?"

To his dismay, Mighty nodded. "Oh, yeah, he's got lots of flying types. He has a whole armada of ships he made, actually."

And there was the clincher. He wouldn't be completely safe if he became a pilot, not if there were flying robots. Or worse yet, weapons designed to take flying vehicles out. Sorun wouldn't be surprised in the least if something like that was a reality given the armada revelation, and even if it wasn't, which he highly doubted, there was still the flying robots and armada problem.

Mighty must have seen the second thoughts going through Sorun's face, because he immediately leaned forwards and waved his hands to get Sorun's attention. "But I think Sonic has a really good point!" he said. "If you were a pilot it would make things a lot easier on Tails and Antoine, and everybody else! And it's not like you'd ever be alone, either. Somebody would have your back." He gave Sorun a small smile. "After all, it's not like we'd ever let you get shot out of the sky or something horrible like that. We all look out for each other, and I really think you should consider this piloting idea."

He really didn't want to now that Sorun knew there was an air of danger involved with this piloting idea. Saying that they'd watch his

back didn't mean much to him after the crane incident, but he was willing to write that off as a fluke if he needed to. And as it was, he was helping wage a guerrilla war against an army of robots. Pretty much anything he did would be dangerous.

And, of course, the merits of it still existed. He'd be helping, which would speed things up, which would get him the Chaos Emeralds faster. Then he could finally go home and forget all of this.

"I'll... think about it." He was still torn between his personal safety over getting home faster, but as things stood now he wasn't in any condition to make a decision, especially right away. He needed time to mull it over.

It seemed to be a good enough answer for Mighty, who nodded happily in response to Sorun's answer. "That's great, Sorun. Seriously." He turned back to the TV and pointed at the game console. "So, uh, there's a racing game we could both play. You wanna take a go?"

If Sorun was being honest with himself? Yes. He could easily go for something like that, if only to take his mind off the piloting idea. "Sure. Load it up."

And that was how the rest of that day had gone, with Sorun wasting the hours away playing video games with Mighty. A few short conversations passed between the two, and Sorun decided that Mighty was a pretty decent guy. He was in no way a good video game partner, especially compared to his friend David, but he was a solid person regardless. Solid to the point that Sorun was almost upset when they had to say their goodbyes at the end of the day and go home, Sorun back to Sonic's home and Mighty to his room at the Freedom HQ.

Out of all the days he'd spent on Mobius, this one so far was Sorun's favorite.

A/N- Sorun would have crushed it if I made this one of those Gamer fics. Guy's a min-maxer.

Chapter 10

Recursion Error

Episode 10- Ace Combat didn't prepare me for this

So he decided to go ahead with the piloting in the end.

There were many reservations Sorun had with the idea, sure. The chance of great bodily harm and dying chiefly among them. But the benefit- namely, getting home as soon as possible- outweighed that in his opinion. So yeah. He'd be a pilot. What's was the worst that could happen?

He'd die. The worst that could happen is that he would die. But it was a relatively low risk, so he'd take it.

Unfortunately, learning how to fly a plane under Tails' tutelage, in addition to bruising his ego from learning from an eleven-year-old, was a bit more involved than he expected. Actually, everything about learning to fly a plane was a bit more than he expected. His main hope had been it would be just like it was in video games and he'd get the hang of it immediately, but it was nothing like the flying simulators he played.

"Okay, so the yoke stick controls the pitch and the, uh, the..."

"Yaw," Tails helpfully supplied.

"Yaw, yeah, that." With a hum, Sorun tapped at one of the gauges on the plane's dashboard. "This is the fuel gauge, right?"

Tails shook his head. "No, that's the altimeter."

"... Where's the on button, again?"

Two hours of this. Two hours of the both of them sitting in the blue airplane's cockpit with Tails trying his best to teach him the controls and basics of flying. But none of it was sticking to Sorun. The basics of basics, sure, but everything beyond that? Practically in one ear and out the other. He'd mix one control instrument up for another or forget something important entirely, and then it would only turn into a confusing mess from there.

Worse yet, he could see it was getting to Tails. He wasn't exactly irritated with Sorun's ineptitude, but the human teen could tell that the fox was beginning to grow exhausted over this. His fault for being a terrible student, he supposed. So he decided to be merciful and just end it here.

"Tails, let's be real. I'm not getting any of this." Sorun moved over to the edge of the cockpit and sat down on the edge, with his legs hanging over the side of the plane.

He heard something shuffle next to him, and looked to his right to see that Tails had sat down next to him. "What aren't you getting?" the fox asked. "Is it the-"

"The whole thing," Sorun finished for him. "I don't know, it's- it's really complicated. The whole constant adjustment due to altitude and wind speed, calculating fuel consumption based on what feels like a million factors, I still don't understand what a knot is-"

"It's a unit of measurement concerning wind speed."

Sorun sighed. "Yes, that, thank you, Tails." His feet began to kick outwards. "I don't even really wanna learn to fly if I'm being completely honest with you. It was all Sonic's idea and I kind of just went along with it, and I thought it'd be easy to learn but now that I'm actually going through with it... man, I just don't wanna."

Tails frowned at Sorun. Deeply. "It kind of sounds to me like you're just too lazy to learn, Sorun."

"Nooo... that's not it at all, man, come on." Actually, that was what it sounded like, wasn't it? Sorun could see how Tails would make that assumption based on what Sorun said. And now that he thought of it, it was kind of how he felt. "Fine, maybe a little bit. Like, the littlest of little."

The frown the fox was wearing turned into one of disappointment.

"Hey, c'mon, don't give me that look," Sorun pleaded. "It's not like I'm not trying at all, but this-" he waved to the plane's controls, "- this is all beyond me, and with the whole war thing going on in the background I don't think you guys are gonna have a reasonable enough amount of time to train me. Especially at the rate we're going."

"It'd go faster if you could just remember the basic maneuvers the control yoke makes," Tails told him.

"Yeah, yeah, pitch and yee-haw, I remember." He missed the small twitch Tails' eyelid made at his remark. "The only reason I even went along with Sonic's idea was because it was *something* I could do, you know? Something I could contribute to the team so I could get home faster. But I don't think this is gonna cut it."

There was an understanding hum from Tails, who began to kick his feet in the same way Sorun was. "Was that really the only reason?" he asked him in a quiet voice.

Sorun took a second to think. "Well, that and I'm, well... a bit self-conscious about the fact that I'm not really helping out all that much. And it kind of makes standing around people awkward 'cause I feel like I just don't belong."

Tails perked up slightly at that explanation. "I think I understand," he said. "You feel guilty about not contributing all that much and just want to help out, right?"

"You're giving me too much credit here, Tails. I just don't want to feel awkward around people since I'm practically mooching off of you all at this point." He couldn't actually say that, of course, because he was already a shallow enough person in everybody's eyes. The last thing he wanted to do was commit social suicide when his reputation was already on shaky legs to begin with. "Sure, something like that."

"I didn't think you cared so much about what other people thought about you," Tails commented.

"Well, I don't- huh. Wait." Why should he care? Reasonably speaking, what everybody thought of him shouldn't matter in the long run. As long as he got home in the end, everybody's feelings towards him should be completely irrelevant. Sure he'd look like the scummiest person in the world if he just lazed around and did nothing until all the Chaos Emeralds were gathered, but who cared what they all thought once he left? It wouldn't matter.

Except, wait, they might take exception to him if he did that. He kept forgetting. He didn't *think* him doing nothing and drawing everybody's ire would negatively impact the gathering of the Chaos Emeralds, but it sure wouldn't help. And even more, he just didn't want to be *that guy* . Nobody liked that guy, and he sure wasn't going to become him.

Or he would try not to, at least. And he didn't think he was doing too good a job.

"Are you good at anything?" The only reason Sorun didn't glare at Tails was because he'd asked the question in such an innocent tone. As it was, Sorun just sighed and shook his head.

"Video games. I'm good at video games. That's about it," he answered. "You wouldn't happen to have a big mech or something I could pilot with a gamepad, do you? 'Cause I could do that."

Tails chuckled, and then shook his head. "Sorry, but no. We don't have anything like that."

Damn. Of all the crazy things they had in Knothole, mechs wasn't one of them. That was something he could have actually made work.

"Ah, well. It's fine." Sorun scooted off of the plane and landed on the ground below. "I'll figure something out. Don't know what exactly, but-"

The sound of a speeding object approached Sorun's ears, and he turned around right as a high-speed, blue object blurred into his view and stopped right in front of him. The sudden stop caused a cloud of dirt to be kicked up, making Sorun cough and wave in front of his face to clear the air of dust.

"Sorun! Yo." Sorun's vision cleared just in time to see Sonic standing right in front of him. "How are the flying lessons going?"

With a quick glance back at the plane, Sorun shook his head after turning back to Sonic. "Not too well," he admitted. "Piloting isn't really clicking with me."

"Aw, really?" Sonic's shoulders slumped in disappointment, but then almost immediately picked right back up as a grin grew on his face. "Well, I know what's gonna cheer you right up! You and Tails need to get back to the HQ ASAP!"

Something to cheer him up? He doubted it, but he decided to humor the hedgehog regardless out of curiosity. "What's going on at HQ?"

"Oh, I don't wanna spoil the whole thing. You'll have to follow me back to the HQ to find out." He turned around, but then swiveled his head back far enough to glance at Sorun with a single eye. "But I will say there's a good chance at us finally nabbing a Chaos Emerald today."

Sonic was right. That did cheer him right up.

There was a clear memory in Sorun's mind about an offhand comment Mighty had made about there being a lab in Freedom HQ. He'd expressed interest at the time, but in the face of playing a video game it had quickly worn off. But today he had good reason to finally enter the coveted room to see what it was all about.

And boy, did it not look anything like how the rest of Freedom HQ looked.

It was almost like stepping into another world (again) when Sorun walked through the door leading to the lab. It looked... modern. Beyond modern, even. Sleek metal plating covering all the walls, smooth flooring, lights everywhere to make the room bright. There were computers and other machines Sorun couldn't identify lining practically the whole perimeter of the room, and at the very back there were large screens bolted to the wall with an extremely large computer under it.

Place was even air conditioned. It made him wonder why this room got air conditioning and not the rest of the HQ.

Sorun decided to wander to a nearby machine that caught his eyes. Sonic and Tails, who he'd followed into the lab, walked forwards towards the large computers and screens in the back of the lab. Sally and Rotor were there waiting for them.

"What's this thing?" Sorun wondered as he stopped next to a... thing. A small, metal pole with wires running out the top and going all the way to outlets in the wall. *"Some weird metal... yeah, I don't know."*

"- So the sensors we had in that sector went off?" His attention was drawn from the pole to the four Mobians at the computers in the back. He cursed silently at missing the beginning of the conversation and made his way over to them.

"What's this about Chaos Emeralds and sensors?" Sorun asked as he joined up with the group of four.

He saw Rotor glance back at Sorun before facing back forwards to point at the computer screens. "Back when we were trying to get the Chaos Emeralds back from Eggman, we managed to cobble together these long-range sensors that could detect Chaos Emeralds. They give off a unique energy signature, so it was easy enough to calibrate them to pick up Chaos energy. We set them up in a bunch of sectors all around the eastern portion of Northamer just in case." He tapped a few buttons and one of the computer screens flipped to an image. "Well, we got a ping on one of the sensors, and the camera we installed in it picked this up."

Sorun squinted at the screen. It looked like plain enough grove at first glance, but what caught his eyes was what was up in the sky, just barely inside the camera's field of view. A ship, from the looks of it. A ship painted black and red that almost looked like the kind of air carrier he'd seen in pictures on Earth, except this one was floating in the air from large thrusters on its sides and back.

"That's one of Eggman's ships from his armada..." Sally grimly mumbled. "Don't tell me..."

"Yep. Signal from the Emerald is coming right from it," Rotor confirmed. "My best guess is that he sent out detachments of Badniks to go find the Emeralds, and this one found one. And then it just happened to fly over the sensor for us to pick up."

"That doesn't sound good. I need those Emeralds to get home." Frowning, Sorun began rubbing at his chin. *"Everybody makes it sound like they had a really hard time getting them the first time around. They'd probably have an even harder time getting them a second time if Eggman gets them all back."*

And that just wouldn't do. He'd rather not directly confront the evil genius with the robot army on top of everything else in the effort of getting all the Emeralds back, but if he was gunning for them as hard as Sorun was, that may not have been possible. The prospect alone made Sorun uneasy.

"Well, we know where it is, right? Then it's simple." Sonic balled one of his fists up and slammed it into his open palm. "It's not even one his bigger ships. Just one of his scouting cruisers from the looks of it. Tails flies me over, I go down and bust heads, grab the Emerald, and get out." He turned his grinning head towards the human. "Oh. Sorun's coming, too."

Sorun's heart rate suddenly spiked. "Uh... no?" He backed up a step away from Sonic. "Fighting robots didn't really work out so well for me last time."

"No, don't worry about that. You won't be fighting." Sonic zoomed next to Tails. "You said flying lessons weren't going so hot, right? So why not just watch Tails fly the plane for real?"

A beat of silence passed between everybody, and as Sorun stared at Sonic owlishly he nodded at the hedgehog for him to continue.

"Look, it's simple. Tails flies the plane, you sit there and watch, and while you're all doing that I'll go and take the Chaos Emeralds back." Sonic locked his fingers back behind his head as he leaned back with a pleased smile on his face. "Perfect plan all around."

He didn't think so. Sorun thought it wasn't, at least. He wasn't wild about flying in the same cockpit as Tails since that seat was so small, but he could see them making it work. And actually, as long as he didn't have to fight as long as Sonic handled everything... and he did say it was a small cruiser. "Yyyyeah, alright," Sorun agreed after a moment of thought. "If Tails is up for it, sure."

The fox shrugged. "I'm good if he's good."

Sally blinked in confusion at the three of them. "You're trying to teach Sorun how to fly the Tornado?" she asked. "How's that been working out?"

"Well-" Sonic began, but was cut short when Sorun lightly shoved him.

"What're we waiting for? Ship's getting further away the longer we wait c'mon let's go."

Not even waiting for any reply, Sorun left the lab. Everybody else silently stared after the human, with the silence being broken by a bemused chuckle from Sally. "So flying's not going well?" she guessed.

Sonic gave her a small shrug. "He trying." He turned to Tails. "Come on. We gotta go get that Emerald."

"Yep. Still not getting it."

It wasn't like he wasn't making an effort of learning an airplane's controls. The thing was, learning an airplane's controls was about a hundred times more convoluted than Sorun would have ever imagined. At this point he felt like he'd have better luck trying to learn to fly a UFO from watching an alien. And upon thinking harder, he realized that this was technically already happening.

There wasn't much to say about what happened after they left the lab. Tails had hopped in the plane, Sorun had squeezed in the seat right behind him, and Sonic didn't even bother to sit in the seat behind them and instead chose to stand on the wing. Taking off into the air had been an event without flair, though Sorun was more focused on Tails and his hands working the Tornado's controls over the actual scenery.

He didn't even realize they were already hundreds of feet up in the air until he looked away after a half hour later, eyes half-lidded and exhausted. He rubbed at his eyes, and then moved his head over to the edge of the plane so he could look at the land they were flying over.

"It really is just all trees, huh?" It really did feel like the whole eastern portion of what was once America was nothing but forest. Forests, plains, groves, and every once in a while a small mountain or large

hill. A grand vista of green that carried on all the way to the horizon, and even further Sorun imagined. It still boggled his mind how different Mobius looked compared to Earth. *"'Least it looks pretty, I guess. For a post-apocalyptic world at least."*

But what boggled his mind even more than that was seeing Sonic stand on the plane's wing with his arms crossed without even showing a hint that he was having trouble keeping his balance. How Mobians managed to accomplish such a feat, Sorun didn't know, because he'd seen Mighty and Knuckles do it, too. He knew that Tails sometimes made rough turns and dives- he'd seen it watching the controls. But Sonic was making it look as easy as standing on still ground.

"Maybe their kind is just really good at balance. Chalk up something else Mobians can do that humans can't," Sorun morosely thought as he looked ahead. He saw something that caused his eyes to widen. *"Hey, ain't that...? Yeah, it is."*

The small cruiser they were pursuing was finally coming into view, and from Sorun's perspective it was anything but small. And it was only now he realized he wasn't exaggerating when he compared it to a air carrier; it really was that big, maybe a bit bigger.

It was a bit of a sobering sight, really. A flying air carrier, something that Sorun never once in his life ever thought he'd see. So distracted by the sight was he that when Tails dove the plane towards it he'd almost lost his own balance and had to grab onto the sides of the cockpit for support.

"Egg Carrier spotted!" Tails called out as he dipped the plane downwards. "It looks like they spotted us, too! They're aiming their anti-air cannons at us!"

"Anti-what now?" Sorun's irises snapped down to the ship they were flying towards, and they constricted in fear when he saw the weapons Tails was referring to. Six double-barreled cannons were lined on both sides of the ship's main deck, with all twelve cannons

slowly swiveling up towards the plane. "Isn't that a bad thing!?" Sorun yelled out as the plane began flying overhead.

He would have thought it was a problem. Getting blown out of the sky seemed like a huge problem that had Sorun extremely concerned, and it was written on his face. But unlike the human teen, the two Mobians he was riding with looked the opposite of concerned. Tails, wearing a smile, was shooting Sonic a knowing look, and Sonic, for his part, had the most confident smirk on his face Sorun could see.

"A problem? Hah, as if!" The hedgehog crouched down into a running stance on the plane's wing as the Tornado began to swoop near the guns. "Watch this Sorun!"

And then he jumped off. Just like that, he jumped off right as the plane passed over one of the guns. With his eyes locked onto the hedgehog's body, all Sorun could do was stare as Sonic's body fell towards the gun. Much to his confusion, right before impacting with the anti-air cannon Sonic had curled his body into a ball. An oddly spherical ball, he had noted, with the quills on the back of his head sticking out from the sphere.

And then, even more oddly, he began spinning.

Sorun didn't know how. His knowledge on physics was extremely limited, but even he knew that there must have been *some* law of Newton's that said something couldn't build up that much momentum in such a short amount of time while falling, even with the kind of super speed Sonic had. But apparently that hedgehog defied the impossible, because his curled-up body began spinning to such a degree that any features disappeared as his body blurred, making him indistinguishable from a perfect, blue sphere. And Sorun could have sworn he even started to slightly glow, though that could have been a trick of the light from the bright sun overhead.

After all that, Sonic's spinning, curled-up body slammed into the barrels of the anti-air gun. The barrels proceeded to fall onto the

deck of the ship. Just like that. Sonic had used his body to cut right through the barrels. There hadn't even been any resistance; his body went through those large, steel tubes like it was nothing.

But he didn't stop there. After cutting through the barrels of the first anti-air cannon, he uncurled and landed on his feet on the deck of the ship before sprinting at super speeds towards the next anti-air cannon. And just like the first, he'd curled up into a ball, span, and launched himself up to the cannon before cutting through a barrels all in a time frame that Sorun would have blinked if he missed. By the time the severed barrels fell onto the deck of the ship Sonic was already sprinting towards his next target.

"Oh, he can- he can just do that," Sorun marveled as he watched what should have been an intensive battle be rendered practically trivial by Sonic's efforts. He actually found himself at awe at the sight. The sheer power of it. "He can seriously just buzzsaw his way through those things like that?"

"It's pretty cool, huh?" Tails commented with a light chuckle. "Yeah, that's our Sonic. He isn't called the Hero of Mobius for nothing, after all. People all over the world look up to him."

"Hero, huh?" By the time Sorun got that thought out, the last anti-air cannon had been completely disabled by Sonic, who was waiting in the middle of the ship's deck and waving up to the airplane. Right after, Tails began to slow the plane down and lower it towards the deck where Sonic was. *"I can see it,"* Sorun thought with a frown as he looked at his right hand. *"I just don't know what he sees in me. How am I supposed to help with anything with guys like THAT in the Freedom Fighters? How are the Freedom Fighters slowly losing if people like that exist? "*

It didn't even surprise him anymore, but seeing somebody as laid back and as nice as Sonic become something short of a weapon of mass destruction and lay waste to air carrier's entire anti-air defense system was beyond humbling for Sorun. If it wasn't already shattered to dust, his confidence would have taken a big hit at seeing that. As it

was, he barely felt anything at all at this point. Just a bad feeling in his stomach he couldn't quite describe.

Was it fear? Sorun honestly didn't know, but he couldn't help but wonder how it was that Eggman was successfully taking over the world despite the fact people like Sonic were fighting him. It didn't imply anything good, that was for sure.

The Tornado's wheels touched down on the steel deck of the ship and slowly came to a halt next to Sonic, who stood in wait with his arms crossed and a big grin on his face. Sorun still had an awestruck look on his face mixed with downcast eyes, but he managed to tear his gaze away from the sheer destruction around him down to the hedgehog standing below the plane.

"How was that for a way past cool display, Sorun?" Sonic asked, an accomplished gleam shining in his eye. "Impressive or what?"

"Way past c- what?" Sorun blinked in confusion, than shook it away. "Yeah, man, sure. You took 'spin to win' to a new level." He slumped against the edge of the cockpit and let his arms hang limply down. "You're amazing. What do you want me to say?"

He'd said that in the most bland tone he could possibly muster, but Sonic didn't seem to notice. He'd adopted a thinking pose as he blinked in surprise at something Sorun said. "Spin to win?" he slowly repeated, and then a large smile broke on his face. "Hey, that sounds really cool! Why haven't I thought of that before!? I'm gonna use that from now on! Thanks, Sorun!"

"..." Sorun opened his mouth, and then closed. *"Ah, what have I done?"*

"Anyways, Tails! Get down here!" Sonic spun on his feet and pointed down the deck of the ship, where the command structure that Sorun assumed led to the ship's interior was. "Let's go get that Chaos Emerald and jet out real quick!"

"Wait, Tails is going too?" Sorun asked as Tails spun his tails up and flew out from the cockpit. "You guys are leaving me here alone?"

While hovering in the air, Tails spun around so he could address Sorun. "I'm technical support," he explained. "Sonic can usually navigate through Eggman's traps fine and locked doors usually aren't a problem for him, but knowing the Doctor that Emerald will be locked away somewhere real secure. He might need my help getting to it or solving any other problems that come up."

"Yeah, but don't worry!" Sonic gave Sorun a thumbs-up. "Pretty much all of the heat's gonna be on us, so you can just chill out on the Tornado 'til we get back!"

That sounded reasonable enough. As long as it kept all the danger away from Sorun, he was fine with it. "Okay. Stay safe," Sorun said as he waved the two goodbye.

The two Mobians gave him a nod, and then left to do whatever it was they did. Blast through a legion of robots and other deadly things, probably. Do other things that would usually express a high chance of massive bodily harm that would likely be blown through like nothing.

As for Sorun? He planned on huddling up in the Tornado's cockpit to wait it all out, completely safe and away from all of that. He might have even been able to sleep, too, but Sonic and Tails were causing so much of a commotion inside of the ship already that it was shaking from all the explosions.

"This works. Right? Yeah." Locking his hands behind his head while kicking his feet up on the plane's controls, Sorun let out a content sigh as he relaxed in the pilot's seat while trying his best to ignore the pandemonium shaking the Egg Carrier. *"The people with super powers can go do the actual dangerous stuff while I just stay behind like this, all carefree-like. No murder bots trying to turn me into a shishkebab, no falling construction equipment, and no tangible threat to my life... yep. I can deal with this no problem."*

If the rest of his tenure here on Mobius turned out like this, than it would be smooth sailing. Hopefully. The whole "Eggman was still technically winning and gaining ground on them" bit of the current situation had him a little nervous, but seeing a blue hedgehog slice through heavy artillery like that had a way of making him forget problems. And it wasn't like there was much he could do to change the situation anyways, so he didn't see the point in worrying about it.

So yeah. Staying back and letting everybody else handle all the fighting? It seemed like a solid plan for getting through this nightmare.

At least it did until a saw a metal lance fly over his head.

"... Nah, that didn't happen," Sorun decided as he closed his eyes. Right as he did, he could see the sunlight bleeding through his eyelids darken for just a second as something else passed over his head. Seeing this, Sorun groaned out loudly before picking himself up to see what the commotion was.

When he popped his head over the plane's windshield to see what was throwing lances, he let out a high-pitched shriek and ducked back into the cockpit.

Egg Pawns. It was dozens and dozens of Egg Pawns slowly marching towards the plane. There were circular hatches all along the deck of the ship that would periodically open, with a metal tube shooting up through the hatch. The tube would open and a Egg Pawn would march out towards the plane.

"Oh shit! Oh man! That ain't good!" Sorun heavily blinked his eyes a few times and peeked his head over the plane's dashboard just to make sure he was correct in what he saw. He screamed and lowered his head when a lance flew just over his head after an Egg Pawn had thrown it. *"Alright-alright-alright! Options! What are my options!?"* He squeezed his eyes shut to try and think of some idea, but much to his dismay nothing even closely resembling a reasonable solution came to mind. *"... Shit!"*

And here he'd been congratulating himself on having found such a perfect solution for surviving this mess of a war he'd been dragged into. It apparently wasn't as foolproof a plan as he'd been hoping it was, but that thought wasn't nearly as terrifying as the sight of a small legion of robots coming to rip him limb-from-limb. Literally, if the fact one had tried to skewer his head said anything.

"Oh, man...! What am I supposed to do!? We're hundreds of feet in the air and the only thing separating me from them is this airplane!" Right as that thought ran through the teen's head, he slowly blanked out as a realization came to him. *"... Wait, you goddamn moron! You're in an airplane! Do something!"*

Just like that, a determined scowl folded over Sorun's features as he sat forwards in the pilot's seat and looked at the controls. The controls that featured a myriad of lever, knobs, and switches that was already making the human teen more befuddled than he would have liked. For the life of him, he just couldn't remember what most of these did even after Tails showed him. Multiple times at that, too.

"Alright, uh... so if I wanna fly the plane, I... on switch is this, right?" Sorun muttered to himself as he flipped a small switch near the center of the control board. To his delight, he felt the plane shudder to life as the propeller in front began to spin. "'Kay 'kay 'kay 'kay... so then what I do is... uh..."

He couldn't even say he wished he'd paid more attention, because he did pay attention. But all those lessons were quickly slipping his mind, and the fact that the Egg Pawns were getting closer by the second was making him panic more and more to the point his vision was becoming shaky, and that was just making him forget faster.

"Damn, why didn't I write any of this stuff down!?" he cursed. "Ergh, maybe... no, that's not the... or maybe it is!? Fuck it. I'm just gonna start hitting random buttons."

A pretty terrible strategy if he was being completely honest with himself, but he was extremely desperate and didn't have any better

ideas. And doing something was better than nothing, even if he didn't know what he was doing. So with that in mind, Sorun began to randomly pick out and press different buttons in the hope that one of them would do *something* to make the plane fly away from the robots.

"Uh, this one?" He flipped a small switch, but nothing happened. "This one!" There was a slight jerk in the plane, but otherwise nothing else happened. "Oh, come on! How 'bout this one!?" He pushed a small, green button, causing a pair of windshield wipers to being wiping across the plane's windshield. "That's... aw, yeah, great," Sorun breathed out, "just what I needed!"

A distressed whine sounded from the back of Sorun's throat as he looked at the wall of controls, switches, and flashing lights in front of him, but it was quickly becoming apparent to the teen that this was all beyond him. He didn't know what any of this did, and the closest Egg Pawn was a good ten seconds away from making it to the plane.

With his eyes flashing around the control board wildly, Sorun's gaze stopped upon the throttle stick right in front of him. There was a small, red button on top of the stick, and in his desperate attempt to make the plane do anything helpful he'd thoughtlessly pressed the button.

Boom!

Something peculiar had happened. One of the approaching Egg Pawns that had been right in front of the airplane exploded, right after Sorun had pressed the button on the throttle stick. Sorun blinked owlishly at the small, black burnt spot the robot had been standing previously, and even all the other Egg Pawns seemed to stop and stare in surprise at their missing comrade. After a single, heavy blink, Sorun slowly moved his eyes back to the throttle stick and hit the button again.

There was a high-pitched, electronic thrum from the plane, and in the next instant two short beams of yellow light flew out of the front of the plane and impacted the Egg Pawn that had been standing behind the one that had exploded. Just like the first, the second Egg Pawn exploded in a bright flash. When the dust settled, there weren't even any parts leftover. It had been completely destroyed.

"... This thing has laser cannons...?" Sorun's mouth dropped open in surprise at his discovery, and then just as suddenly clamped shut into a thin frown. "Oh, *fuck you* , Rotor. 'Freedom Fighters don't use guns' my ass. You'll trust the eleven-year-old with a weaponized plane but won't even give me a gun!?"

The sheer gratitude towards the world for this new discovery was easily overshadowed by the simmering rage he was beginning to feel bubble up within him, but the heavy footfalls Sorun heard distracted him from those thoughts. He looked up from the button at the Egg Pawns, and almost laughed out loud when he saw they had all turned around and were running away from the airplane as fast as their robot legs could carry them. He even heard distorted, electronic screaming coming from them.

Well, he wasn't going to have that. Sonic and Tails had enough trouble on their end as it was; they didn't need all these robots to pile up on them as they searched for the Chaos Emeralds. But even more importantly, Sorun was still incredibly sore over nearly being killed by that one Egg Pawn. And now here he was, manning a plane with a laser gun. Pointed right in front of them all.

A savage grin slowly formed on Sorun's face, and he hissed out "Therapy...!" as his hands roughly gripped the throttle stick with his thumbs over the button.

He'd thought it was impossible ever since he failed to kill a single Badnik, but he'd done it: he'd gotten destroying robots down to a science. He couldn't move the plane, but with the propeller running he could at least turn it with the stick, and that was all he needed to aim. From there it was a trivial matter of merely aiming the plane at

groups of robots and hitting the button to fire the laser cannons and destroy them. Sometimes he didn't even need to hit them; the blast made from the laser impacting the ground near them projected enough force to destroy robots sometimes.

"And here I was, always complaining about turret sections in video games." He didn't even know levels of catharsis this intense was possible, but to Sorun it felt that every Egg Pawn destroyed sent a burst of ecstasy through his entire system. Seeing something he'd feared so much and had traumatized him running in fear and being blown up in droves- by his hand, no less. He was ecstatic. *"Never again. I'll never say bad things about turret sections again."*

The sound of hysterical laughter coming from the teen was drowned out by the sound of laser fire and the dying wails of Egg Pawns.

"Do you think Sorun's okay?"

"Why wouldn't he be okay? All the trouble was inside the ship." A brightly-glowing, diamond-shaped object was tossed up in air, and then fell down on it's tip on top of Sonic's finger as he balanced the spinning gem on top of his appendage. "Does it feel like Egghead was slacking with this one? Felt like he was slacking."

Because really, stealing as something as valuable as a Chaos Emerald of all things from the mad Doctor shouldn't have been a complete cakewalk. But that what it was: a complete cakewalk. A lackluster amount of robots guarding the interior of the ship, some of the most simplest traps the pair of ever encountered in their careers with dealing with the man, not so much as one giant, super robot to fight...

There wasn't even so much as a single spike trap. It was almost insulting.

"Well, this *was* presumably a scouting vessel made to look for an Emerald and bring it straight back to Eggman," Tails reminded him.

The pair were making their way through the darkened corridors of the Egg Carrier, with the blue light being given off by the Chaos Emerald Sonic held being their only source of illumination. Surprisingly, they'd yet to encounter any resistance after destroying the storage crate holding the Emerald and taking it away. Sonic would have assumed that meant they were walking into a trap, but they'd yet to encounter anything. And it didn't *feel* like a trap.

"Yeah," Sonic agreed, "but-"

"It probably isn't gonna be as easy the next time around," Tails continued. "He manned the place with some basic Badniks, but nothing overwhelming for people like you or me. I doubt somebody like him is gonna make the same mistake twice."

"Mm, yeah, you'd think. But it's Eggman we're talking about here."

The fox smirked at the jab. "Heh, yeah." He pointed to a door they were approaching. "That's the door we came in from. Let's get out of here and back to Sorun so we can leave."

"I hear that." Sonic began tossing the blue Emerald up and down in his hands as Tails fiddled with the controls to the door. "Hope Sorun didn't get too bored out there while we had all the fun."

"Are you kidding? Sorun probably slept through that whole thing. Besides, I don't really think he considers this type of thing fun." There was a small spark from the door control Tails was fiddling with. "Actually, I think that's just you, Sonic."

He couldn't disagree with that, and shrugged in response. His thoughts were still mainly on the human stuck in the airplane, however. He should have been fine- he'd cleared out all those cannons on top of the ship and everything, after all.

"Ah, you're worrying yourself too much," Sonic thought to himself as the doors leading outside slowly slid open. *"Sorun's probably enjoying sleeping through all the action. Guess I can't really blame*

him after what happened the last time he tried fighting, but the fact he even came out here with us is a good sign, right?" He pursed his lips and nodded. *"Yeah. I hope this piloting thing pans out for him, 'cause- wait, huh?"*

Of all the things he expected when the two of them walked back out to the deck of the ship, a scorched deck littered with bits and pieces of Badniks scattered everywhere wasn't one of them. Sonic's walk slowed to a halt as he gazed out at the destruction around him, and Tails did the same as he stared wide-eyed at all the robot bits around them.

"Where did all... is this where all the Badniks went?" Sonic wondered as he looked around. "Huh. No wonder the resistance on the inside was so lackluster, 'cause... wait." A thought came to him, and he gasped out. "Oh, no! Sorun!"

Tails looked up to Sonic in confusion after hearing his panicked cry, but then grew horrified as he realized the same thing Sonic realized. Most of the Egg Pawns on the ship had been sent to the upper deck after the plane. That's why there was so little resistance on the inside; they'd all been up here.

"Argh, we were so stupid!" Sonic thought as the pair of Mobians whirled towards where they had left the plane. *"We thought it was going so easy when of course they were all up here! Did they attack Sorun!? Is he...!? Wait. Sorun?"*

Both Sonic and Tails had sprinted and flown respectively towards the plane in panic when they'd seen all the destroyed Egg Pawns, but as they grew closer their frantic approach slowed down when they saw that the plane was perfectly fine. Even better, Sorun was there and looked no worse for wear. He was sitting on the deck of the ship and leaning against one of the plane's wheels, with one knee propped up and an arm slung over it.

A relieved sigh escaped both of them, though Sonic had still blinked in surprise as he approached the human and called out his name.

"Sorun? Hey, what happened out here?"

The black-haired teen turned his head towards Sonic, and the hedgehog could have sworn that something was a bit off with him. He wasn't smiling, but his lips were curved up in a way that suggested that he *had* been smiling and he'd simply grown too exhausted to keep it up. His eyes seemed drowsy, too, and his breathing seemed a bit heavier than usual.

"Oh, Sonic. Tails. You're both back." Even Sorun's voice seemed tired. "Hey, what happened to no guns?" He looked up towards the front of the Tornado. "'Cause that felt like a gun. What's up with that?"

That certainly hadn't been something Sonic was expecting him to ask. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Oh, after you guys left a bunch- like, a BUNCH- of robots popped up outta the ground." Sorun waved his hand at the field of robot parts and scorch marks. "I fumbled around with the plane's buttons and found the laser cannon button. So I shot all the robots with the laser cannon. Why is there a laser cannon?"

Both of the Mobians blinked, glanced at each other, and then looked back to Sorun. "You destroyed all of those Badniks on your own?" Tails questioned him with a surprised tone of voice.

Sorun shrugged. "Technically the plane's the one that blew 'em up, but yeah."

"You... seriously?" A large smile began to grow on Sonic's face. "That's amazing, Sorun! You managed to blow up all those robots on your own!"

The human teen thumbed the plane. "Plane."

"Same difference!" Compared to his performance so far, this was the hugest leap Sorun could have made! Sure he needed the plane to

beat all those Badniks, but even that alone was more than most people could have managed. Sonic almost couldn't help the feeling of swelling pride that was welling up inside of him. "It couldn't have been easy shooting all those bots, huh, Sorun?"

"I mean... it kind of was," Sorun admitted with a shrug. "You just aim the plane and shoot. And they all started running when I blew the first one up." His face scrunched up in confusion. "Also apparently robots... feel fear, I guess?"

"Yeah, Eggman has some real weird priorities when it comes to programming robots, but don't worry about that!" The hedgehog zipped to Sorun's side and gave his shoulder a teasing shake. "You must be feeling great after all that."

The pale teen slowly shrugged the hand off his shoulder, but Sonic had caught that small smile that formed on his face. The brief sight alone was enough to make him happy. "Yeah, felt real good," he agreed. "But seriously, how come you got laser cannons on a plane when you all don't use guns?"

"Uh... what does the Tornado's weapons systems have to do with guns?" Tails asked as he walked up to the two.

Sorun shot the fox a questioning glance. "Are you trying to tell me that guns aren't okay, but laser planes are?"

"The Tornado needed a defense system," Tails answered. "I couldn't just build her with nothing. She would have gotten shot out of the sky otherwise."

The human look bewildered at the explanation, but he quickly shook the confusion off. "That's a really weird distinction for you guys to make, but whatever." He pointed to the glowing gem in Sonic's hands. "That the Chaos Emerald? Baller. Let's go."

After stretching his arms over his head, Sorun climbed up to his feat and turned to the airplane before he began climbing up towards the

cockpit. Tails looked at Sonic, and then gave a shrug before spinning his tails up to fly to the same seat Sorun was settling into.

Before going to the plane himself, Sonic looked down at the blue Emerald in his hand, hummed, and looked up at the plane. "Hey, Tails," he called up, "you think Sorun could fly us back instead of you?"

Tails blinked in surprise. "What?"

All the exhaustion in Sorun's eyes shifted into panic. "What!?"

"He's been watching you fly the thing, right? And he just took out all those Badnik's with it!" He jumped up to the Tornado's wing and gave the two a reassuring smile. "It'll give him a chance to show us how much he's learned."

"I dunno..." Tails looked back at Sorun, who was completely still as his eyes darted between Tails and Sonic. "You think he's really ready, Sonic?"

"Aw, sure, and if he messes up you'll be right there to correct him. What's the worse that could happen?"

The walk back to Freedom HQ had been an uncomfortably quiet one, with Sorun doing his best to not look at Tails while Sonic walked besides them tossing the Chaos Emerald up and down in his hands. Sorun felt he couldn't have opened the door to the HQ fast enough. The three soon found themselves navigating the short halls and stepping down the steps towards the living room, though Sorun could still feel the disgruntlement roiling off of Tails.

"Never again," the fox told him as the three stepped down into the living room. "You're never touching my airplane again until you learn to fly."

"I said I'm sorry," Sorun muttered in a defeated tone.

"Sorry!? You almost crashed us three times! Three! You lost one of the landing wheels when you clipped that mountain!"

Sorun rounded on Tails and pointed an index finger at him. "That mountain came out of nowhere, Tails. Anybody could have made that mistake."

Tails blinked at him in disbelief. "We all saw that mountain coming from miles away! Literally! And when I told you to pull up you pulled down!"

"I'm not used to inverted controls!" Sorun argued as he lifted his hands up in frustration.

"Alright, alright." Sorun gave Sonic a silent thanks when the hedgehog stepped in between the two. "Sorun screwed up a little bit with the plane, but it was his first time, so cut him some slack. Besides, you can just fix it later."

Tails looked ready to argue the point, but he stopped himself right before he said something and closed his mouth. His expression softened, and he gave Sonic a small nod before passing one final glance at Sorun and then turning around to walk away. Sorun for his part, let out the breath he'd been holding as he gave Sonic a thankful look.

"In my defense, that mountain really did come out of nowhere."

"It... it really didn't, Sorun," Sonic said with a shake of his head.

Sorun hummed, and then looked to the side at the living room's couch. "Tails isn't mad at me, is he?" he asked Sonic as the two walked towards the couch. Sorun felt it was a little deserved after the yelling incident, but he hadn't intended to make the fox Mobian upset with his flying. He'd tried really hard, too.

"Who, Tails? Nah, he's fine," Sonic assured him as the two sat down on the couch. "He's just a bit annoyed over having to fix the plane,

but he spends so much time performing maintenance on that thing anyways that I feel like he isn't even losing any time over it. But you really didn't do yourself any favors scraping Tails' logo off on that rock."

He was relieved that Tails wouldn't stay mad over the plane, but Sorun couldn't help the withering look he sent Sonic over the rock jab. "Man, I tried pulling away."

"I know. You're doing really good! But, eh, I think you might need some more practice behind the wheel. Er, stick. You know what I mean."

Sorun's response was to grumble under his breath and cross his arms, which caused Sonic to chuckle at the sight and lean further into the couch.

So he hadn't done so well flying the plane. Seeing as it was the first time he'd ever flown anything, Sorun thought he'd done pretty well. The plane may not have been in one piece anymore, but he'd managed to get it back to the airstrip. Even if Tails had to take over on the latter half of the trip back. And then absolutely refused to let Sorun touch anything despite his and Sonic's protests.

Well, he'd tried at least. It was more than even Sorun expected out of himself. And the fact he'd flown a plane semi-successfully? He was rather happy over that fact, even if he'd already almost forgotten everything about flying.

"Hm..." In his thinking, Sorun's blue eyes had wandered to to the gem in Sonic's hand with an equally dark blue shade that the hedgehog was holding. "So... that's a Chaos Emerald," he observed.

Sonic nodded. "Yep," he confirmed as he tossed the blue gem to Sorun, who caught it with his right hand. "One gem of infinite power out of a set of seven. Six more and we can get you home."

"Cool." Sorun held the gem closer to his face to get a better look at it. It was a gem cut into a diamond shape, and was so large it barely fit in his hand. It continually shined with a dark blue light with the gem itself colored the same shade of blue.

He found himself frowning. Other than the fact it glowed and was rather shiny like any highly-lustrous gem ought to be, he couldn't really feel anything special about the gem he was holding. It definitely didn't give him the impression that he was holding a source of infinite power.

"Not gonna lie. This thing is kind of underwhelming," Sorun admitted, his eyes still affixed to the gem. "Also, shouldn't this be green? You said they were Chaos *Emeralds* . Aren't emeralds green?"

He looked to Sonic for clarification, and then raised an eyebrow when he saw Sonic wince slightly. "Yeah, that's... kind of complicated," he said in response to Sorun's question.

"Hah... of course it is." Sorun tilted his head back and let an tired sigh out. "Why's everything gotta be so complicated with you people?" He held the blue Emerald up. "Alright, Sonic. Gimme the lore. What's the story this time?"

"The story is that there used to be more than seven of those. A whole lot more." Sonic paused, and then mumbled something as he scratched his chin in thought. "Actually, wait, I gotta back up a bit further. So, uh, way back when there used to be hundreds of thousands of the things scattered all over the universe, but they were all way smaller. Still infinitely powerful, but small," he elaborated. "All the green Chaos Emeralds were here on Mobius an in some small, localized parallel zones, across the universe all the red ones were on a different planet, the blue ones on another, you get the idea."

Sorun nodded in understanding. "So what happened?"

Something strange happened with Sonic's face. For just a moment he made a grimace, as if the subject was uncomfortable, but it

disappeared just as soon as it arrived as the hedgehog continued explaining. "Some, uh... things happened. There was this incident with a tower, and all the Chaos Emeralds were brought together here on Mobius. Tails and Shadow dumped them all in the Special Zone, and the guy that was in charge of that place, Feist, fused them all together into the seven Chaos Emeralds." The hedgehog coughed and looked away. "So that's why they're all colored differently. There is a green one if it makes you feel better."

"It doesn't." The human teen found it a bit odd how Sonic had grown a little quiet during the explanation, but he waved it off over examining the gem in his hand further with furrowed brows. "So these thousands of gems of infinite power got gathered together and fused into gems of infinite- *er* power?"

Sonic nodded. "Yeah, that's right."

"... I'm drawing the line there." He sent Sonic a flat expression. "That's stupid. That sounds really stupid."

"It's... pft, yeah, a little," Sonic admitted with a small laugh. "Makes it a lot easier to keep track of them since there's just seven, though."

Sorun rolled his eyes, but otherwise said nothing. He was too distracted by his own thoughts to pay much attention to Sonic, as well as the strange sensation going through him as he looked at the Emerald.

This was one of the objects responsible for bringing him to this world, and he was holding it in the palm of his hand. Such a thing was almost funny to think about, but he just felt... odd, holding it. He should have happy that he was partway done with this horrible journey, and by all rights he was, but he just couldn't ignore that peculiar feeling welling up in him.

Actually, he was beginning to think that feeling wasn't an emotional one. Because his skin was starting to tingle and he could feel the

light amount of hair on the nape of his neck begin to stand up. Suddenly he didn't want to hold the Chaos Emerald anymore.

"Hey, Sonic? Do me a favor a take this back," Sorun requested as he tossed the blue gem into the awaiting hedgehog's hands.

Only the Chaos Emerald never made it to Sonic. It had seemingly frozen in midair, and as Sorun watched it he saw that there were small bolts of blue electricity arcing out of the gem. When he followed the arcs, the black-haired teen grew shocked to discover the electricity was ending at his five fingertips and palm. And right as he made this discovery, the Chaos Emerald decided to defy gravity and snap right back into his right hand's grasp.

"... Eh?" Sorun began to blink rapidly and waved his hand in an attempt to shake the gem from his hand. It didn't budge. "What the... come on, get off...!"

"Sorun?" Sonic's voice sounded concerned as he scooted over the couch to be closer to the human. "What's going on?"

Still shaking his hand, Sorun turned his head to address the blue hedgehog. "The, uh... the Chaos Emerald's stuck," he said. "It won't come off."

Sonic tilted his head back in surprise. "Huh? Why is...? Here, lemme help." He held a gloved hand out to Sorun, who leaned forwards to place the Emerald in Sonic's grasp. The Mobian's fingers curled around the gem, and then he pulled back away as Sorun did the same.

Unfortunately, despite both of them pulling away, the Chaos Emerald remained fixed to Sorun's hand.

"Sorun, c'mon! Let it go!" Sonic grunted through clenched teeth as he continued pulling.

"I did let it go!" Sorun grunted back. "It's not letting me go!"

This continued for a minute before Sonic's grip slipped, causing him to yell out in surprise and roll backwards on the couch. Sorun merely fell onto his back, though he let out an annoyed whine when he held his hand up to his face and saw the blue Emerald was still stuck to his hand.

"What's going on?" As the two of them sat back up, they turned their heads to see that Sally and Tails had wandered to the front of the couch. They were both casting confused looks on the pair. "You two looked like you were struggling with something," Sally explained, "so we came over to see what was wrong."

"What's wrong is this." Sorun held his right hand up for the both of them to see. "The Chaos Emerald isn't letting me let it go. It's stuck to my hand."

The explanation seemed to only confused the other two even further, and Sally offered her hand out. Sorun obliged and placed the Emerald in her hand, but like Sonic, she wasn't able to pull it off his hand.

"Ergh...! Oh, wow," Sally gasped out as she let the Emerald go. "Yeah, it's... it's really stuck on there, huh? How'd that happen?"

"I don't know!" A light amount of unease was beginning to grow inside Sorun, because that strange feeling he felt was becoming stronger. "I just grabbed it and it stuck itself to me!"

Tails' tails swished behind him in a confused manner while his head tilted in thought. "Really? That doesn't make any... wait here, I'll get help," he said as turned and walked away from the trio.

Sorun watched the fox walk off, and then let out a distressed noise as he attempted and failed yet again to shake the Chaos Emerald off of him. "This is normal, right?" he asked. "This is the part where you tell me some crazy story explaining why they stick to things, right?"

To his dismay, both Sally and Sonic shook their heads. "Chaos Emeralds have always been weird, but they've never done anything like this before." He supposed he should have taken some comfort in the puzzled expression Sally wore since it meant they were as clueless as he was, but the odd feeling welling up in him was growing too distracting. "Did you do anything besides touch it?"

"No, I just grabbed it for a minute," Sorun said with a shake of his head along with his hand. "You think we could pry it off? Just wedge a knife or something between it and my hand and leverage it off?"

Sonic looked very hesitant at that idea. "Why don't we explore other options before sticking sharp things into your hand?" he suggested. His eyes wandered to the side, and he pointed away at something. "Oh, look, maybe they can help."

Sorun followed the green-eyed hedgehog's gaze. Tails had returned to them with Knuckles and Shadow in tow, the former looking at a loss at what he was seeing while the latter just looked annoyed.

"What is this about the Chaos Emerald being stuck to the human's hand?" Shadow asked as the three of them stopped in front of the couch. His gaze snapped down to Sorun's hand and the blue Emerald it was holding, and he held his hand out to the human. "Urgh, of all the... give it here. I'll get it off."

"I dunno, Shadow." Sonic sent the darker hedgehog a teasing smile as Shadow grabbed at the Emerald. "It's on there real tight. I don't think it's coming off."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's a Chaos Emerald, not a... hm?" Shadow began pulling on the Emerald, and Sorun gave the gem a nonplussed look as it remained affixed to his hand. He did make a note on how harder Shadow pulled compared to Sally and Sonic. He was a *lot* stronger than he looked. "It really is stuck on there," the hedgehog realized. "Don't tell me you glued it to your hand or something else as moronic as that, Sorun."

"I look like an idiot to you?" When Shadow didn't answer him, Sorun sighed out loud and hung his head. "No, I didn't. I grabbed it and these weird blue sparks stuck the Emerald to my hand. Now it won't come off."

Shadow blinked in surprise, and then looked down at the gem. "Blue sparks...? How strange. I've never seen such a phenomenon from the Chaos Emeralds." He turned his head over his shoulder to look at Knuckles. "Come over here and help me pull it off, echidna. We might just not be pulling hard enough."

Knuckles nodded and stepped besides Shadow. "Sure. Sorun, c'mere and give us your hand."

He was incredibly nervous over the prospect of two super strong Mobians pulling on his hand, but the alarming feeling growing in him had him even more worried. So, reluctantly, he held his hand out and nodded for the two to grab at the Emerald. They did so, and then immediately dug their feet into the ground as they began to pull.

Both Knuckles' and Shadow's faces were screwed in exertion as they pulled on the Chaos Emerald stuck to Sorun. Sally and Tails stepped back with concerned look, and Sonic, his face a mixture between hopefulness and worry, held on to Sorun's shoulders to try and anchor him in place as the other two Mobians pulled his hand.

It wasn't working, though. Sorun couldn't so much as feel the blue Emerald budge in his hand. What he *could* feel was the muscles in his arm beginning to become strained from being stretched. Eventually he began to hear his shoulder creak, and the pain started to become too great, so he waved his free hand for them to stop.

"Okay, stop, stop! You're gonna pull my arm off!" Thankfully they let him go when he asked, at which point Sorun pulled his arm back and began to roll it to return feeling to the limb. Everybody around looked disappointed in the fact that they hadn't been able remove the Emerald, with the exception of Shadow, who looked perplexed at the issue. "Any more bright ideas?" Sorun asked.

Knuckles scratched the top of his head. "I could go get Mighty. Maybe he could-"

"No, brute strength isn't enough to remove it," Shadow disagreed with a shake of his head. "We could always cut the hand off."

Reflexively, Sorun hugged his arm to his chest. "That ain't funny."

"Hmph." Shadow crossed his arms and seemed to look deep in thought, and Sorun had to wonder if he really had been joking. "The Emerald affixed itself to his hand... why would it do something like that? How do we undo it?"

"I dunno. You're the Chaos Control expert here," Sonic said as he bounced off the couch to stand at Shadow's side. "Couldn't you just, y'know, Chaos Control the Emerald off of Sorun's hand?" he asked as he gestured to Sorun.

Shadow made a "tch" sound. "What would you have me do? Summon a Chaos Spear and blow Sorun's arm off with it? I have an extremely limited skill set with those abilities, Sonic."

Sorun liked that idea even less than cutting his hands off, and then thoughtlessly tried to pull the Emerald off with his left hand. He quickly found that the left became stuck as well the second he made contact, and grew extremely frustrated when he couldn't remove it. "Oh come on!"

"What the- Sorun, why did you grab it with the other hand!?" Sally exclaimed as she held the side of her face.

"I panicked, alright!? I-" The teen stopped, because that feeling was beginning to grow painful, and even more alarmingly dark blue sparks began to arc off of his hands and slowly creep up his arms. "Guys, I'm getting really worried," he whispered as he shrunk back into the couch, his voice laced with fear.

It was starting to hurt, too, especially around his hands where the sparks were. A deep kind of pain that felt like his hands were being continually shocked. The pain he was in must have been evident on his face, because everybody else, even Shadow, started to look worried at his plight.

"Okay, is there anything else we can do?" Knuckles asked. "We can't leave that on him!"

"Maybe Rouge can get it off. She steals gems all the time, so this should be right up her alley."

Shadow shot Sonic a heated glare at that remark. "We're looking for serious solutions here, hedgehog, not *jokes* ."

"I wouldn't be joking if you weren't freaking Sorun out by threatening to cut his hands off!"

"We can get him cybernetic replacements if it comes to it, but I really doubt we're going to have to resort to that if you actually tried thinking for once!"

"Should we get him to the lab?" Tails suggested. "We have a- a bunch of equipment used to read Chaos energy, so maybe-"

"Guys?" Sorun interrupted, causing five sets of eyes to move to him. All of those eyes widened when the blue Chaos Emerald began to intensely glow in Sorun's grasp. "Is it supposed to be glowing like this? 'Cause-"

He wasn't able to say anything else. There was a bright pulse from the Chaos Emerald and Sorun was flung backwards off the couch and onto the ground from a surge of electricity ran into his body. But to his horror, even after being flung onto his back it didn't stop. The Chaos Emerald continued to electrocute him and cause his body to uncontrollably spasm as bolts of blue electricity arced off his entire body.

And it hurt. It was a burning, shocking sensation across all whole body and through all his nerves that hurt worse than anything else he'd ever felt in his whole life. He might have even been screaming from it, but he couldn't tell as all he could hear was a light ringing in his ears. His vision was becoming spotty and dark, too, but he could see that the others were shouting at him and that Sonic and Knuckles were desperately trying to pry the Emerald out of Sorun's hands.

But it just wouldn't come off. Sorun's wasn't even sure he could control his fingers anymore with all this power running through his nervous system.

Right as Sorun felt like he was going to pass out from the electrical assault, the Emerald pulsed brightly again. Sonic and Knuckles were thrown off of Sorun, and the energy surging into him increased to such a degree that he could barely even feel anything anymore. After that there was another flash that turned Sorun's vision white, and then, thankfully, he finally passed out.

Chapter 11

Recursion Error

Episode 11- Weird sky people ruin my life even further

None of this was right. I don't recognize where I am. Everything around me is wrong and I don't know why.

Too scared to even think straight. Too confused to try and piece it all together. I-

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It was raining. I was cold and in pain. Too much was going on at once and I couldn't even think straight where was I why were all those things done to me why did-

"H-hey! Are you okay!?"

Time passes. Months of it.

Everybody here is so friendly even though I look so different. They even-

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There had been an explosion during a fight. One of my new best friends was so badly hurt. Nobody knew if he would wake up. Nobody even knew if he would survive his wounds. It hurt everybody. It hurt me. And there was nobody that could help him.

Nobody but me. Consequences be damned. I'm tired of the fighting. I'm tired of seeing my friends hurt. I'm tired of seeing my friends die.

I look down at the sword in my hand.

"I don't care how many times it takes... I'm going to save everybody..."

Sorun woke up.

"Agh... that really fuckin' hurt..."

He just couldn't get a win, could he? Oh, no. That'd be too much for Sorun, wouldn't it? After everything he'd been through, he couldn't have his one, single victory. After blowing up all those Badniks with Tails' plane and feeling so good about himself, and then getting the Chaos Emerald which made him go from feeling good to feeling great, he couldn't end the day on a high note.

No. Instead he got to end the day with getting electrocuted by the blue rock. And to get... *whatever* that memory was when he came to in a semi-lucid state.

"What even was that dream? Somethin' about... rain or... I forget. Eh, whatever." He quickly lost the memory of that vision and pushed it to the back of his mind as he forced his eyes open. *"Ugh... where...?"*

Sorun's vision was bleary, but it was slowly coming back and he could recognize the HQ's ceiling with what little sight he had so far. He felt sore all over, and there was a dull throbbing in his head, but it was all going away. He blinked a few times and held one of his hands up. Surprisingly, it didn't look like a burnt mess. It looked completely fine, actually. Small miracles.

Groaning softly, he slowly sat up. The first thing he saw was the couch that had been knocked over when he'd been flung, which lead Sorun to believe that not much time had passed since the Emerald shocked him. His theory proved sound when he saw Sonic from the corner of his eye crouch down next to him and gently place a hand on his shoulder.

"Sorun? Buddy? You okay?" He gingerly shook Sorun's shoulder. "You had us worried for a minute there. Are-"

A wave of nausea hit him. "Please don't shake me," Sorun requested, and he felt Sonic take his hand off of him. A quick look around with his eyes confirmed that the others were still there, too, and were looking at him with concern equal to Sonic's. "I... got knocked out, right? How long?"

"Just a few minutes," Sonic answered.

All things considered, that wasn't very bad at all. He would have preferred not being shocked into unconsciousness, but he at least seemed to have pulled through alright. "Cool," he grunted as he looked down at his hands. They were empty. "Huh? Where'd it go?"

He didn't see the Chaos Emerald in his hands. A quick look confirmed that nobody else was holding it, and when he looked around he didn't see the gem on the ground or anywhere else. So where had it gone?

The pale teen turned his head to Sonic, who still had some worry written on his face. "Where'd the Chaos Emerald go?" he asked. "You guys finally manage to pull it out of my hands or something?"

The worry on Sonic's face turned into an uncomfortable expression, and Sorun found himself not liking it very much. "Um, uh... we don't really know," Sonic admitted as he rubbed at one of his arms. "The Chaos Emerald was-was shocking you and you were screaming, so we tried to get it off but there was a flash of light that knocked us off, and, uh... you passed out. And the Chaos Emerald was just gone."

Well, now he was wide awake. That didn't sound good to him at all. "What do you mean it's just gone?"

There had been an angered edge to his voice, and Sonic must have picked up on it as he'd turned his head to the side to avoid Sorun's

glare. "Maybe you just dropped it? It's kind of round, so it probably just rolled under something. Are you sure you don't remember?"

"Do I reme- no!" Sorun shook his head in denial while waving his right hand in front of him. "All I remember is grabbing the Chaos Emerald-" he waved his hand behind him, "- then it goes and sticks to me, and while-" his hand waved in front of him, "- that was happening it-"

Bring! Shck!

Sorun paused, as did everybody else. There'd been a sound- a single, low ring that tickled the back of Sorun's memory for whatever reason, followed by the sound of something stabbing into the ground. The teen looked around in confusion, and he saw that everybody's attention was drawn towards something nearby that was glowing blue. He began to sigh in relief as he turned towards the object.

The sigh became choked in his throat when he saw something that was definitely not the Chaos Emerald.

There was a sword sticking into the ground. A blue, translucent straight sword with a W-shaped guard. A sword that, upon looking closer, seemed to be made of energy from the way its entire surface was constantly shimmering and wavering randomly.

And then, just like that, it shattered much in same way a glass would shatter if one were to throw it on the ground. The sound of breaking glass even accompanied it as the entire sword shattered to pieces, which then dissipated into nothing.

Nobody said anything. Everybody, even Sorun, looked completely bewildered at the sight they just witnessed. Sorun himself had went as far as to rub his eyes to make sure he wasn't hallucinating, and while the sword was indeed gone, the small indent its blade had made in the ground was still there. He wanted to believe he was

hallucinating, but the astonished faces on everybody present told a different story.

"Uh..." The silence was broken by Knuckles, who blinked heavily at the indent at the ground and pointed at it. "You guys saw that too, right?"

Tails slowly nodded. "The weird blue sword? Yeah."

"That was real?" Sorun mumbled.

"We all saw that," Shadow confirmed before looking at Sorun. The dark hedgehog looked just about as lost as everybody else, but there was an inquisitive edge to his eyes as he looked at the teen. Specifically, at his hand. "Sorun. Was that you who did that?"

The human looked up at Shadow only to tilt his head to the side. "Huh? Me? Uh, no. Powerless, remember?" Had he? No. There was no way. It was somebody else in the group that had a weird power. Had to be.

"You... were waving your hand around a lot, and after what happened with the Chaos Emerald..." Sally, who stood near the back, trailed off before turning her gaze to Sorun. "Can you try again?"

"Wha? What are you- guys, come on." Rolling his eyes, Sorun waved his right hand around. Nothing happened. "Look, see? Nothing. It was one of you."

"Nobody here has the ability to create something like that," Shadow informed him. "Are you absolutely sure? You didn't feel anything strange or out of place?"

"Man, I'm not feeling much of anything after that jolt from the Emerald," Sorun grunted as he stood up to his feet. "Look, I don't know what that was, but-"

It was right when he was calling on the memory of the sword and denying it was him that it happened. That sound appeared again, and accompanying it was a small flash of blue light and a small burst of blue particles on his right side. Sorun's head snapped towards the sound, and he could practically feel his pupils shrink when he saw it. That same blue, translucent sword, floating in the air besides him and pointing outwards with small amounts of blue, ethereal smoke wafting off of it.

By now, Sorun was in deep belief that he was still hallucinating, or that this was some kind of fever dream induced by the Chaos Emerald. It had to be. There was no way that sword could exist. He *recognized* that sword, and it shouldn't be something that could be real. Especially in this world.

"That's..." he mumbled, stepping backwards. The sword followed him and stayed in its position at his side. "That can't be... that's... isn't that V-"

There was a throb of pain in his head, and the break in his concentration caused the blue sword to shatter to nothing. His feet wobbled, and right as his vision began to darken he could see Sonic reaching out to try and catch him.

Sorun passed out before he could see if he succeeded or not.

"Uuugh... I'm gonna get a concussion at this rate..."

Had he fallen on his head? It sure felt like he'd fallen on his head. Why did it always have to be his head that was hit?

Mumbling a quick string of curses under his breath, Sorun planted his palms on the ground and slowly picked himself up. "Alright, where-" he began to ask, but stopped cold when he saw his surroundings. "Aw, no."

His surroundings were that there were no surroundings. More accurately, he looked like he was in the middle of nowhere- in the sky. All around him he was surrounded by white and golden clouds, and above him was an endless sky that shined a corona of colors so bright it was practically white.

Gulping, Sorun looked down. There was no floor he was standing on; just more clouds. He did feel solid ground when he tapped his boot on where he was standing, but he sure didn't see it, nor did he actually hear the sound of his boot making contact. In a quick experiment, he clapped his hands together, and sighed out loud when he heard the clap.

So he wasn't deaf. That was good. He didn't know where he was. That was bad.

"What is all this?" Sorun quietly wondered as he began walking in a random direction. "I finally die and escape this nightmare? Is this, like... heaven or something? 'Cause I'll take it if that's the case. I practically deserve it at this point after everything I've been through."

"I'm afraid that isn't the case."

A frightened yelp came out of Sorun as he whirled around. The golden clouds behind him parted, and a feminine figure wearing long, light-blue robes walked through. A human-looking figure, much to Sorun's absolute disbelief. One with a human face.

The woman flashed her light blue eyes at him and smiled. "Greetings. I am-"

Any further words were interrupted when a blue sword sailed through the air towards her. Unfortunately for Sorun, it seemed to phase right through the woman, who rapidly frowned at the teen's actions.

"Please don't do that. As I was saying-" Another sword passed through her. "Sorun, please-" Another sword. "Will you stop it!?"

"Fuck you and this mystical bullshit. What is all this?" Sorun snapped as another blue sword appeared next to his side, only to shoot towards and pass through the woman. "And somebody better explain to me what the deal with these swords are real quick."

Oh, he was so done with everything. He'd slowly built up a tolerance to all the nonsense but this was breaking down all the fragile barriers he'd managed to make. Between her and this weird sky place and the swords? He was done. He wanted straight answers.

The woman glared heatedly at him, but then relented under Sorun's furious gaze. "It was my hope that appearing to you in this form would calm you. Very well. Let us try this."

As soon as she finished her sentence, the golden clouds next to her began to swirl around her body, concealing her form as Sorun blankly watched from his spot. Seconds later, the clouds parted. The blue dress and the womanly figure remained. The species sure didn't: he was looking at a Knuckles lookalike in a dress. An echidna.

"There. My true form," she huffed out as she straightened her dress. "I will try once again to introduce myself so that we may talk." A forced smile found its way onto her face. "Greetings. My name is Aurora, and-"

Sorun decided to continue shooting swords at her at a more rapid pace. They were still just harmlessly phasing right through her, but seeing the grimace form on her face made it worth it in his eyes.

"That's enough now, young one." That was another new voice, this one male and aged. Sorun turned around to see yet another echidna standing behind him. Old and wearing ragged robes, with all sorts of trinkets hanging from his red, faded dreadlocks. "The you before us is nothing but a projection of your mind we have allowed into our zone. You have no physical presence to harm us with."

After a second's consideration of the old echidna's words, Sorun willed a blue sword to appear by his side before it flew forwards

through his face. It phased through him like it did Aurora, and he sighed at the action.

"Did you not hear a word I just said?" he asked.

"Yeah, but it's still making you mad, and that makes me feel better," Sorun said. "So who are you?"

"Will you stop throwing those things if I tell you?"

Yet another sword was hovering at Sorun's side, but at his will it shattered into nothing, and then he shrugged. "Sure. Let's be amicable. That would be the mature thing to do, right? And we're all mature here."

A thankful smile appeared on the echidna's wrinkled lips. "Rightly so. I am Athair, and-"

A blue sword went through him.

"Are you quite done yet?"

"One more." As Sorun said this, one more blue sword flew through Athair. "Okay, now I'm done. Talk."

"As I was saying-" Athair's mouth clamped shut when, of course, another sword went through him.

The human teen flashed him a cheeky grin. "I had to get one more in. I'll stop for real now."

"... As I was saying," the echidna ground out, "The current circumstances surrounding the world has forced our hands. We must speak."

"Oh, we must, huh?" Sorun scathingly remarked as he watched the old echidna walk next to the younger, female one. "All this time I've been here and it's only after I touch that Emerald and get a weird

sword power you wanna talk with me. A very specific sword power. A sword power I have a lot of questions about."

The two echidna cast nervous glances at each other. Sorun couldn't help but wonder why they looked so nervous. "We two are beings intrinsically connected with the Chaos Force," Aurora explained. "The Virtual Zone you are currently standing in is a zone removed from all other zones that-"

"That's cool and all, but I really don't care," Sorun interrupted. He didn't even understand half of what she just said, but he just couldn't stomach all of this nonsense enough to try and comprehend it all. Or care at that. "Just... who are you and what does all this have to do with me?" he asked as he rubbed at his throbbing forehead.

There were little micro twitches on Aurora's face that showed her frustration. The older echidna next to her looked more composed, but the way his eyes were narrowed slightly suggested some level of annoyance. Sorun counted it as a small, petty victory, but one he could call his. Because with how he was feeling right now, he needed it.

"We were tasked with watching the world after the previous Walkers... passed on," Athair explained. "It's only through the powers granted to us through our connection with the Chaos Force that this is possible."

"Walkers. Right," Sorun scoffed, and then looked down at the clouds at his feet. "Well, I'll say this much: you're doin' a pretty awful job." He looked back up at the echidna's with a scowl on his face. "You seen the state of the world? Place is a mess. Some crazy nutjob's using robots to take over the world."

"That which we must watch entails more than just Mobius. It entails the whole universe." The female echidna rubbed her hands together nervously. "That said, we... feel for the plight of Mobius. At one time in our lives, it was both our homes. What is happening is truly unfortunate, and we wish to help."

There was something about her tone that made Sorun skeptical about how saddened she really was over Mobius. Her tone wasn't exactly flat, but the emotional impact was far from somebody who was upset about their world, or previous world, or whatever she considered Mobius to be, under siege by robots. Hell, Athair looked more upset over it, and Sorun couldn't tell if those wrinkles were from frowning or from age.

But, he truly couldn't care less about their feelings. He just wanted answers.

"And I fit into all this how?" the irate teen asked.

"You are somebody who does not belong in this world who was brought here through unnatural means. We did not truly understand the gravity of this until after you came into contact with that Chaos Emerald," Aurora said. "The Chaos Emeralds are linked to the Chaos Force as we are, and act as conduits for Chaos energy. By touching that Emerald, you... absorbed it into your very being and managed to create a link of your own with the Chaos Force. A weak link, unfortunately, but a link nonetheless."

Blinking in surprise, Sorun looked down at his own chest. "What, I ate it?" he muttered before looking back up. "Why me?"

"Tell me," Athair began, "before coming to Mobius, had you ever heard of or experienced Chaos energy?"

Sorun slowly shook his head. "No...?"

"As we thought," Athair said with a nod. "You and your zone are unique, in that you both are completely cut off from the Chaos Force. It's hard to imagine such a world can exist- Chaos energy is the fundamental energy of all life throughout the multiverse- but your zone is so removed from all other zones that Chaos energy just simply doesn't exist there. That extends to all beings from that zone, including you."

"You are completely empty," Aurora continued. "All beings in all zones possess some quantity of Chaos energy in them. It may be so small that it is inconceivable even to beings such as us, but it exists. But you are unique in that you are truly empty, Sorun. From the second you arrived on Mobius we observed you because of this curious phenomenon, but it was only after you absorbed that Chaos Emerald did we understand what it truly meant."

"... Huh...?"

Aurora saw the visible confusion on Sorun's face, and rubbed at the side of her face as she thought of a better way of explaining. "Chaos energy flows to wherever it pleases, such is its nature. Like fluids, it will naturally gravitate towards empty spaces to occupy as much space as possible. Since you are something with no Chaos energy of your own, unlike everything else, you naturally absorbed the Chaos energy to form a weak link with the Chaos Force. Is that understandable enough?"

It barely was, but he thought he got the gist of what they were saying. "Yeah, uh... Chaos energy everywhere in everything. Except me. I get, uh..." There were a lot of concepts being thrown at him all at once, and Sorun found that he was having trouble sorting through it all. He understood the "Chaos energy is a fundamental aspect of the universe" bit, but the rest was slowly escaping him. "... My zone's special, so by extension I'm special *because* I'm nothing..." he muttered, "so... touching magic rocks gives me powers?"

They both winced at what he was sure was a butchered version of their explanation, but he saw Aurora slowly nod. "Yeees, that is... more or less the heart of the matter."

"Ah. Cool. Cool." Food for thought he could chew on later, but he had more important things to address right now. "Okay. So," he said, and then held his index finger up. A blue sword appeared right over it in a horizontal position and began spinning around like a helicopter blade. "Do you wanna explain to me why the power I got was fucking Vergil's Summoned Swords?"

It's what they were: the power that was supposed to belong to a character in a video game. He knew because he recognized the swords. He'd played enough 'Devil May Cry' games to know those swords from anywhere. So Sorun was extremely confused over why, out of all the powers in the world, the Chaos Emerald decided to give him this one. A power from a video game. It made the least sense out of everything.

And he didn't like how they looked so confused at that.

"Chaos energy is infinite, shapeless energy. That energy can shaped by the heart of those with a connection to it," Aurora clarified. "There are many with strong connections to the Chaos Force who can manipulate Chaos energy to make various techniques using it. This appears to be a technique you've created."

Sorun spluttered at that, and the break in concentration made the sword he was spinning shatter. "B-but he's a video game character," he argued. "It's from a video game! Why did I get this out of everything else!?"

"As I said, Chaos is formed by the heart. For some the manipulation of Chaos energy can be... innate. On a subconscious level," Aurora confessed. "Certain mental biases, likes and dislikes, can influence these subconscious manipulations. Strong memories of recent events or actions could also be a contributing factor."

He did really like that game. And he always did like playing as Vergil, if only because his moveset was borderline busted in how powerful it was. His choice in color had definitely helped. And it was with a dawning realization that Sorun remembered that the last video game he'd played before coming to Mobius had been 'Devil May Cry'. The third one, while playing co-op with David. And he'd been playing the fourth one before that. And both times he'd been playing as Vergil.

Suddenly it was starting to make sense, and he almost hated how much it made sense.

"I seriously just got Vergil's Summoned Swords because I liked playing as him a lot...?" Sorun silently bemoaned as he ran his fingers through his hair. *"Oh my... that's such a stupid reason for... You gotta be kidding me..."*

Powers were nice, but Summoned Swords definitely wouldn't have been his first choice. It was far from the worse, but he could already imagine dozens of other powers he rather would have had. And he didn't even get a choice in powers? It was all subconscious? It just wasn't fair.

"Okay. Alright, that's... yeah." Sorun had to rub at the temples of his head to alleviate the headache coming on, but it wasn't working. "What do you two actually want with me?"

Because that's what he cared about above everything else. Meeting the two divine echidna or whatever they were had been interesting, getting Vergil's power from a glowing rock had been a shock he needed to fully digest later when everything calmed down, but he still wanted to know why he was even here.

"The days on the planet Mobius have grown dark," Aurora said. "All because of Dr. Robotnik and his evil ways. This has always been true, but... somethings has changed." Her face minutely scrunched up into some expression. Confusion? It was too subtle for Sorun to tell. "As we are connected to the Chaos Force, we are granted all knowledge from past, present, and future. The Chaos Emeralds used by the evil Doctor were, for the most part, to remain in the Special Zone under its caretaker, Feist."

"But something disrupted the universe's path by destroying Feist and the Special Zone, taking the Emeralds, and giving them to Robotnik," Athair continued. "And we know nothing about this... entity, for reasons we cannot even begin to fathom. It remains out of our sight. Elusive." He sighed deeply. "It is as vexing as it is baffling. Something like it shouldn't exist, yet does. And because of its actions, the future of Mobius has been thrown off kilter. It's fated for

complete destruction at the hands of the Doctor because of this, Sorun."

Oh, so that was the issue. The semi-omnipotent echidna knew the world was doomed because something gave Eggman the Emeralds. What else was he supposed to expect at this point?

And the worst part was that Sorun could see it happening, too. The Freedom Fighters had grown so desperate fighting the man they'd let *him* of all people join the fight. Sonic himself admitted they were losing ground by the day. Eggman taking over the world fully at one point? It wasn't just feasible anymore. Practically everyone and their mother was telling Sorun it was fact.

What did that mean for Sonic and the other Freedom Fighters once they lost? For everybody in Knothole? More importantly, what did that mean for him?

"Well, there's gotta be something," Sorun tried as he thew an arm up in frustration. "You can't tell me there's nothing anybody can do."

Athair, seeing the distress on Sorun's face, walked forwards and placed a hand on his shoulder to calm him down. "If there's anybody that can do anything, it would be *you* ," he said. "You managed to form a link with the Chaos Force by absorbing a Chaos Emerald, granting you an ability. It is doubtless that absorbing more Emeralds would strengthen this bond and endow you with even more abilities- we can both see it. You have that potential."

Staring at the aged echidna, Sorun circled his hand around in a "continue" gesture. "And!?"

"Your future is a... murky one," Aurora admitted. "Perhaps it is because of your kind's disconnection with the Chaos Force, or because you are not a natural inhabitant of the zone Mobius lies in. Even the methods used to bring you here and the very reason for it are a mystery to us. But the Chaos Force shows us a possible future of Mobius free from Robotnik. A future that is only possible because

of you and your potential." She clasped her hands together and hung her head. "We, the Neo-Walkers, are asking you- *begging you* - to go and seek the other Emeralds. To gather strength and join in the fight. We do not want Mobius and all that live there, be it Mobians or humans, to suffer at the hands of that man. Nobody deserves that fate."

"Get rocks, get powers, save the world? That about sum it up?" Sorun gently removed Athair's hand from his shoulder and stepped back so he could address them both. "Okay. Say I do all that. Get the Emeralds, power up, help the Freedom Fighters stop Eggman. All fine and good, sure." He didn't want to, like always, but the prospect of getting actual powers made the load on his shoulders more bearable. Suddenly the impossible seemed doable, albeit barely. "If I do all of that... then can I go home? I can go back to Earth once I help the Freedom Fighters save Mobius, right?"

That uncomfortable, nervous look returned to their faces, and now it was making Sorun nervous with the frequency it was appearing. They looked at each other with resigned looks on their faces, and subconsciously Sorun felt himself tense up. Why did they have those looks on their faces?

"He must know," Athair told the other echidna. "To not tell him would be unconscionable."

Aurora grimaced, but then slowly nodded her head. "I know," she whispered, and then took in a large breath before facing the human. "Sorun. Your kind is unique in that your lack of natural Chaos energy allows you to artificially form a bond with the Chaos Force. While this is true... it is still an artificial means of acquiring power. Your species did not evolve to have natural bonds with the Chaos Force, such as the Mobians did. To put it in terms you would understand, your species' bodies are not built to withstand Chaos energy."

There was a pit of dread forming in Sorun's stomach. He didn't like that at all. "What is that supposed to mean?" he demanded in a low voice.

"We have insight into the effects on your body due to our own abilities," Athair said. "There is no easy way for us to say it, Sorun. Your body simply can't handle these new abilities. It's causing strain that it can't compensate for, and any new abilities will just increase that strain more and more. To put it quite simply...

"For every single Chaos Emerald you absorb, you will lose roughly twelve years of your life."

Utter silence between the three of them. Athair and Aurora were giving expectant looks to Sorun, and both looked incredibly worried at what response he would give. Sorun was gawking at the two of them in stunned silence, his body completely immobile and his face shocked frozen even as a light breeze blew his black hair over his face.

And then he laughed.

The two echidna glanced at each other, dour looks in both of their eyes. The laughter coming from the teen was low and bitter, lacking of any joy at all despite how hysterical it sounded. He was laughing so hard that Sorun had to hold a hand to his face just to steady himself, and this seemed to continue for minutes until he breathed out a long sigh as his hand limply fell to his side.

Powers at the cost of his life? Right. He wasn't dealing with that. No way, no how. He was done.

"Great story, really. You guys should go into show business. You'd be killer," Sorun sarcastically stated before turning his back to them. "I'm gonna go back. Seeya never, hopefully."

Aurora's eyes widened as the teen began to walk away, and she reached out to him. "W-wait! You cannot-!"

"Nope. I'm not dealing with this," the teen called back. "It's not happening. I feel for everybody on Mobius, really, I do, but I'm not giving my life up for them."

He would have kept walking, but the golden clouds in front of him all flowed together and condensed into a wall. He stopped, and then slowly banged a fist on the cloud of wall. He wasn't surprised to see it bounce right off, but it did anger him significantly.

"The hell is this?" Sorun whirled around to face the two echidna again. A deep scowl had settled on Aurora's face as well as Athair's, but Sorun ignored that in lieu of the hot anger that was beginning to course through him. "Let me out."

"Sorun..." Aurora looked away for a brief moment, but then her features hardened and she faced him once again. "No. I cannot. You must-"

"I don't have to do anything!" he yelled at her. "Are you- are you serious!? T-twelve years? Twelve years!? I'm not doing that!"

"You wouldn't physically age-" Athair tried, but was shut down immediately from the glare Sorun sent him.

"You shut the hell up," he hissed before turning back to Aurora. "So, so what, I've already lost twelve years of my life for Summoned Swords? And if I got the rest, I'd..." He did the math quickly in his head, and then balked when he thought the number up. "I'd be a hundred..." he realized in a choked whisper. "How long would I even live after I got all seven?"

Aurora blinked, and then sighed. "Likely not very long," she admitted. "While your body will remain young, the strain put on it from Chaos energy flowing through you would still exist. You would quickly reach the end of your life after absorbing the last Chaos Emerald."

"... You're asking me to sacrifice my life for Mobius." It was a statement of fact that Sorun could see neither was going to deny from the looks in their eyes.

The female echidna slowly breathed out, and then nodded her head in affirmation. "Yes. We are asking that you give your life for the sake

of the world."

"Oh. Then no." It was quietly mumbled out, but there was no hesitation in Sorun's words as he shook his head in denial. "I'm not doing it. Go to hell. I'm not dying for Mobius."

"Sorun, please." The fact that Aurora had the actual gall to sound so pleading made the human absolutely livid, and his eyes shot right up to her when she stepped forwards with a look of anguish on her face. "The entire fate of Mobius depends on it! All the lives of those who live there depends on it! Not just the ones you've already met, but the entire planet! Possibly other planets, maybe even other zones should the Doctor succeed in his ambitions! You must-!"

"I'm a white kid from Detroit!" Sorun screamed at her. "I don't... I can't do this! You can't make me!" He started to actually shake as he backed off from the two echidna. "I'm not, I, I-I-I'm just some guy. Y-you can't make me do this. I don't want to die, I don't wanna be some, some jacked-up hero, I don't want any of this!" He waved his hand behind him. "I just want to go home! Why can't you let me go home?"

A low rumble left Athair, who lowered his head before speaking to Sorun. "There is no way for you to return even if you refuse," he told the human, which caused Sorun to shake even more. "There... is no way to remove the Chaos Emerald you have absorbed from your body," Athair informed him. "As we understand, you need all seven Chaos Emeralds to return using the machine that brought you here. But with that one in your body, all seven will never be gathered together again. We understand your desire to return, but it is impossible now."

"No, it... no..." He started breathing. Hard. The shock of the information given to him had passed rapidly and now in its place was fear and denial rocking his very core. "I... I just wanna go home..." he whispered as he continued to shake his head. "I don't wanna die for them. I don't want powers. Just let me go back. I-I'm not even s-s-supposed to be here."

He wouldn't do it. He absolutely refused. He was too scared to die, and he simply didn't like Mobius or anybody on it. He never asked to be abducted to an alien world only to give his life for it. All Sorun wanted was to go back to Earth. He missed his home. His friends and his mother. The whole life he had made for himself there. He wasn't going to give that up for Mobius.

"We would not be asking if there was any other way," Aurora told him. "This is a... terrible, awful thing to ask of you, I know. But would not such a noble sacrifice for all those on Mobius be more than worth-?"

"Fucking. *Stop* ."

And then there was *them* . The two echidna who were all but demanding he throw his life away. Just who were they to ask such a things from him? A couple of random echidna with deep connections to the Chaos Force pretending to be gods or whatever it was they were? And they thought he was going to throw his life away just because they *asked* ?

He was just so upset. Angered beyond words at them. Thrown into despair over the prospect of him not being able to go home because he'd absorbed the Emerald. His life being cut short, and him possibly dying because of the Emeralds. It was too much. He couldn't handle this.

"Just let me leave," he pleaded them, hot tears beginning to run down his face. "I-I don't- I can't- I don't want- j-just please stop it. Please. I just want to leave."

"It cannot be done, Sorun," Aurora said with a shake of her head. "I'm sorry."

That word. That word caused Sorun's head to fly up as his face twisted into one of rage.

"Sorry?" he venomously hissed out. "Don't use that word! You wouldn't be doing this if you were sorry! Y-you wouldn't be *killing me* if you were sorry! You're just trying to be nice because you *know* the world is fucked unless I help out, but you know what!? I'm not gonna do it! I'm not gonna go around collecting powers if it's gonna kill me!"

And there was the trigger he needed. Aurora's face instantly went from apologetic to strained, and he knew he was right. All it did was make him more mad. "Sorun, you cannot-!"

"I'll tell Sonic," Sorun suddenly threatened, and both Aurora's and Athair's eyes widened. "I'll tell him and all the other Freedom Fighters everything you've told me. They won't let me near any more Chaos Emeralds if they know they'll kill me."

Aurora's lips pursed, and her hands began shaking at her side. "Sorun, I'm warning you..."

"Or what!? What are you gonna do!? I'm not gonna-!"

He didn't expect a lot of things to happen in the next instant. He didn't expect Aurora's body to slide forwards at a frighteningly fast pace, and he really didn't expect her hand to begin sparking with green energy before she reached out to Sorun's throat. She didn't physically touch his neck, but something did happen to it. Because the second she lifted her hand up he felt his throat become alight with something. He dropped down and began scratching at the pain burning in his throat as his blazing eyes glared up at Aurora.

Behind them, Athair was looking at the display in shock, but didn't so much as raise a hand to stop Aurora, who slowly lowered her hand while she looked down at Sorun in pity. The look alone would have made Sorun lash out at her if he didn't already know it would be useless.

"I've used my power to place a restriction on you," she informed him with a tight voice. "You will not be able to tell anybody of our exchange here. You will not be able to tell anybody that the Chaos

Emeralds have a detrimental effect on your body. If ever you try to convey this information to anybody in any form, the restriction I've placed on you will temporarily stop your heart." Sorun's heart practically did stop already when he heard that. "I truly am sorry, Sorun... but the fate of Mobius is too important. As much as it pains me to say it, the life of an interloper such as you is... inconsequential, compared to everything else."

"You crazy bitch, you're insane...!" Sorun gasped out as he scrambled away from Aurora while still grabbing at his throat. "If you care so much about Mobius, then why don't you do anything!?"

"It is our duty as the Neo-Watchers to watch. Directly intervening is... outside of our capabilities. Placing our trust in you *is* us doing something." As she said this, golden filaments began to float off of Sorun's body as he slowly began to disappear piece by piece. "I am sending you back," Aurora said. "I cannot directly force you to do anything, but please... consider what is at stake. I am sending you back with the hope that you will eventually see what must be done. It's for the good of everybody."

He didn't listen to a single word she said, and she must have understood that by the way she was looking down at him so sadly. But he couldn't speak; he felt so terrible between all the thoughts running through his head to his throat still slightly burning, so he tried to give her the most hateful glare he could muster.

Except it didn't even come out as that. Because of all the emotions running through him, his glare wasn't a hateful one, but a frightened, wide-eyed look of despair that Aurora was forced to stare at with pitying eyes. All that proved to do was add yet another layer to the pile of emotions tearing the teen apart on the inside.

And then just like that, he disappeared.

They didn't say anything after Sorun disappeared. There was a long moment of silence between both echidna as they stared at the spot

the teen had been. Aurora wouldn't even raise her head, and Athair had turned his own head away so he didn't have to look at the display. There wasn't any regret in their eyes at all, but all the same they looked deeply disturbed by what just happened.

How sickening.

"Wow. You guys really are sick in the head." The new voice along with an accompanying clap startled the both of them and caused them to spin their heads in his direction so hard that their dreadlocks whipped into their faces. "There are no words. Seriously. There are literally no words in the dictionary that describe how disgusting that was. That's how terrible you two are."

Their gazes turned to the shocking sight of a figure wearing a red cloak, whose entire head was covered by a hood. He was sitting down, with his human hands slung over a single raised knee as his covered face looked at the two echidna.

Athair simply stared. Aurora was less passive, and let green Chaos energy roil up and down her arms as she practically snarled at him.

"You!" she screeched. "You... you are the one that killed Feist and gave that abhorrent fiend the Emeralds! You-!"

"Hey. You saw what I did to Feist, right?" the cloaked man asked. "You really wanna continue that thought?"

She stopped speaking, and the green energy around her arms faded. She still looked incredibly angry at the sitting man, but chose to back away from him.

"How is it that you have entered the Virtual Zone?" Athair asked in a neutral tone, his eyes boring into the hooded man.

He shrugged. "Same way I got into the Special Zone: nunya business," he answered.

"And what do you want?"

"Hm? Want? Lotsa things," he answered as he rose up to his feet. "But from you two? Nothing, really. I just came by to make sure everything here went okay."

The answer caused Aurora's features to wrinkle in anger once more. "You have the nerve to call us ill?" she asked, glowering at the red cloaked man. "After everything you've done? It is because you handed Robotnik those Chaos Emeralds and all but doomed Mobius were we forced to act in such a manner!"

"Hey, I'm not the one that just consigned a kidnapped teenager to death. That was all you," the cloaked man said as he rose his hands in defense. "But I guess I can be a... little sympathetic, all things considered. Not like I enjoy runnin' around doin' all this scary shit. But it's all in accordance with His will, so whatever." He hummed. "Nope, changed my mind. You're both still rotten."

He walked forwards, but stopped when he made it between the two echidna who were giving him cautious glares.

"... I'm gonna give you some advice," he said. "I get you're frustrated over the fact you don't know what's going on. But as it is, you Neo-Walkers are all pretty much just bystanders in this giant mess He created that I'm trying to fix, so don't interfere. It'll go bad for everybody if you do."

"Don't interfere?" Aurora repeated in disbelief. "It is our duty watch after and ensure the safety of Mobius! We cannot simply-"

"Ensure the safety of Mobius? Way too late for that, lady." With that, the red cloaked man continued walking forwards. "I gotta go tell Eggman about Sorun now. You, uh... keep creeping on everybody from your high perch or whatever you two do all day."

There was a shocked gasp from behind him. "You mean to actually inform him of... why!?" Athair asked in a cracked voice. "For what

possible reason could you possibly have!? Haven't you done enough!?"

"I'm doing it because of bullshit, arbitrary reasons I don't feel like explaining. Now if you'll excuse me, I gotta put on my 'cool mystery guy' persona. 'Cause fuck my life." He stopped briefly, and the cloaked man's hooded head turned back to address the two echidna. "Oh, one more thing. Don't tell Sorun about me. Ever. That would be bad. And that goes for Tails' uncle, too. I know he's in on this Neo-Walkers thing even though he's still on Mobius." He turned his head back forwards and kept walking. "This is the first and last time we'll ever see each other. Remember what I said: watch all you want, but don't interfere. You two already got that down pat anyways, so it should be a cinch."

A passing golden cloud briefly passed by him, and it was revealed that he was gone by the time the cloud left the spot he'd been on. The two echidna were left behind, and could only cast worried glances at one another.

With a gasp, Sorun sat right up as his right hand flew to his heart. It was beating uncomfortably fast, and he had to tightly clutch at it just to try to calm himself down.

The deluge of terrible memories flying through his head made it a poor effort.

"I don't, what, I... sky people, swords, twelve years, I don't- powers from Chaos- just- WHAT!?"

There was too much. There was actually too much new information to process all at once, but at the same time he remembered everything that had been explained to him and there were so many mixed feelings swirling in him that he felt like he was going to throw up.

But there was one feeling superior to all the other ones tearing him up inside. Something stronger than the interest he had over the new power, or the anger and disgust he held over those two strange echidna, or the fear of everything else. His main concern was the Chaos Emerald inside of his body that had sapped twelve years off his life in exchange for Summoned Swords.

"Get it out." He didn't want it. He didn't want any kind of power at the expense of his life. And he really didn't want one of the items needed to get him back to Earth gone forever if what Athair said was true. He needed to get the Emerald out of his body. *"Get it out get it out get it out-"*

"Sorun, calm down!"

The teen had stopped scratching violently at his chest when he noticed somebody crouch down next to him out of his peripheral vision. He turned his head just slightly to see that it was Tails that was kneeling down next to him. It was only then did he realize that everybody was still there.

"T-Tails...?" he mumbled out.

The fox nodded at him. "Yeah, Sorun, it's me. What's-?"

"Get it out of me." His hand shot to the startled fox's shoulder and shook it roughly. "You have it get it out of me. I don't want it. Get it out...!"

"O-okay! Just please calm down!" Tails gave him a rapid nod and placed his own hands on Sorun's shoulders in an effort to calm him. "We're... we're gonna go to the lab now, alright? We have some equipment in there we're gonna use to take a look at you. Okay? You're fine."

"Fine? Yeah. Yeah, it's... I'm fine." Shakily, he nodded his head as he slowly stood up. "Yeah. Lab. Let's go do that."

He severely hoped that they could find something out in that lab. Because he didn't know what he was going to do with himself if everything those two echidna said was true.

A bit of time later found a more mellow Sorun sitting on a metal table in the HQ's lab. Multiple sensors were suction cupped to his arms and face, with wires connecting those sensors to a computer Tails was sitting at. Sonic was pacing nervously back and forth next to the table.

He didn't really know what these sensors stuck to him were reading. Tails had tried to explain it, but with everything going through his head all Sorun had only managed to do was pretend to understand. Something about Chaos readings and energy signatures or something like that. He was grateful that there was at least that much he could count on, and that Tails was helping him with this.

"Where the hell do those two get get off? What, I'm supposed to be fine over getting abducted so I can give my life for an alien planet?" He held in the scoff if only because he didn't want to disturb the sensors attached to him. *"Nerve doesn't even begin to describe that insanity. I just... ugh. I'll figure it out later. Just wanna wait to hear what Tails has to say first."*

There was a lot to unpack. A lot to think about. He had the time for it, but he wanted to get as much information as possible so he could think before acting. Because now apparently not only was his life in jeopardy, but his very means of returning to home was in jeopardy as well, now more than ever. This made him incredibly worried over everything else. But he'd wait a bit longer, if only because he didn't want to screw his situation up any more than what it already was.

"So what gave you the idea that you... absorbed the Emerald?" Tails asked as his eyes scanned over the monitor he was staring at.

He wanted to be completely honest with them and tell them everything that had happened in the Virtual Zone, but Aurora's

warning stayed his tongue, both figuratively and literally. Knowing that his heart would temporarily stop if he tried telling them was a fairly powerful motivator in that regard. Sorun honestly hoped that it had been a bluff, but that burning sensation he'd felt while up there had sure felt real. He felt fine now- his whole body felt fine- but he regarded even speaking with trepidation now. He had to be careful.

"Because the Emerald disappeared after the whole shock thing happened. And now I have this." He held his finger up and caused a spinning, blue sword to appear over it. "I dunno. Chaos energy doesn't exist where I'm from, so maybe because I don't have any my body just... absorbed it. For some reason."

It was a bastardized version of the explanation given to him, but it was still technically the truth. But more importantly, it hadn't set that curse off. So far good progress.

Tails momentarily looked away from the computer monitor to stare at the sword spinning over Sorun's finger. Sonic had stopped and did the same. "So... those swords-"

"Summoned Swords," Sorun supplied. If he was really gonna run with this, he was gonna use the proper name at the very least. "My power, so I'm naming it. Summoned Swords."

"Right, those," Tails said. "If that Chaos Emerald really did give you some kind of Chaos Control, why... why the ability to make swords out of all things?"

Sorun shrugged. "I dunno. Just happened." Because powers based on subconscious desire or whatever it was were fickle like that, he supposed. He still wasn't happy that he didn't even get a choice in powers, but at least it was a halfway decent one. And they were cool enough for him.

Tails hummed, and turned back to his monitor. Sonic chose that moment to stop next to Sorun so he could admire the spinning sword. "Well I think it's neat," he commented as his eyes followed

the sword. "I just didn't think Chaos energy could make something that, well, specific. It always seemed a bit, you know. Chaotic."

"Chaotic. Right." The sword shattered, making Sonic flinch. "That's an appropriate word if any." Sorun turned to Tails. "So? What do you think?"

"I don't really know. The study of Chaos energy isn't an exact science currently, but Sonic's right. It is weird how specific it is. Shadow can use Chaos Control to make these things called Chaos Spears, but even they're not as uniform in shape as your... what did you call them? Summoned Swords? They don't look like any Chaos ability I've ever seen." Tails shook his head. "It's just weird. All of this is so weird."

On that, Sorun was in agreement. He'd been in agreement with that sentiment since day one. But the tidbit about Shadow and Chaos Control was an interesting thing to note. What made Shadow so special that he could use something like that?

"Or maybe he just happens to be special. Maybe people like Sonic have abilities because they just happened to be born with a special link to that Chaos Force thing they were talking about. Or maybe I'm completely wrong and it's something else entirely." Sorun silently groaned and hung his head. *"Why's this gotta be so confusing?"*

"So did you get any other powers?" Sonic asked him. "Or was it just the swords?"

Sorun picked his head back up to address Sonic. "Pretty sure it was just the swords," he answered. "I don't... feel anything else, if that makes sense." He barely even felt the Summoned Swords, but he knew the power was there. A strange, innate feeling spread throughout his body. It was weird, but he could at least identify it. And he only felt the one power.

"No, it does. I've always been able to kinda feel out Chaos stuff, so I totally see where you're coming from."

He was glad at least one person could even if he couldn't.

"Well, I think your theory actually has some merit, Sorun," Tails said as he read whatever it was that was being displayed on his computer monitor. "I'm picking up readings that are awfully similar to a Chaos Emerald from your body. It's faint, but it's there, but I'm not detecting anything physical stored away inside of you." He pushed away from the computer on the wheeled chair he sat in and rolled in front of Sorun. "So... yeah. It looks like you absorbed the Chaos Emerald and gained an ability out of it."

That was what he had been afraid of. He supposed he couldn't have expected anything else, but hearing it from Tails for some reason hit deep.

But Sonic didn't look nearly as disturbed as Sorun was or as puzzled at Tails was. If anything, he looked happy, which earned an annoyed glare from Sorun. "What's got you so giddy?" the human gruffly asked.

"Huh? If anybody should be happy, it should be you!" Sonic stated with a wide smile. "You got a power! It's a weird one, yeah, but it's something! You don't have to feel bad anymore since you can actually learn to fight with the rest of us now!"

Sorun had to take in a deep breath. He couldn't be upset at Sonic's words- he didn't know- but boy, if his words weren't irritating him beyond relief. "Tails," Sorun said as he turned away from Sonic and to the fox, "can you remove the Emerald?"

Sonic blinked in surprise, and one of Tails' tails swished behind his back. "Huh? Why would you want to remove it?" Tails asked him. "You'd probably lose your new power."

"Don't care. Can it come out?"

"Whoa, hey, Sorun." Sonic waved his hands in front of Sorun with a questioning look on his face. "What's gotten into you? Why would

you wanna get rid of your new power?"

Sorun sent him a harsh glare. "Because it's-!"

Thump-thump.

A deep pain in his chest forced Sorun to gasp out in pain as he reflexively held his chest. To his horror, he couldn't feel a heartbeat under his hand. He heaved a loud breath out five seconds later when his heart started to beat again, but that pain temporarily lingered in his chest from some time.

"Damn it all. She wasn't bluffing. I really can't tell them these things are killing me." That was going to make things complicated. He really didn't like that. *"Fuck. Could I write...? No, that wouldn't work. She said something about conveying information in any form, so... dammit. Well, fine. Want me to keep my mouth shut? I'll keep my mouth shut and I won't tell them that I could get more powers out of more Emeralds."* It was a short-term solution made out desperation, and his main fear was that somebody in the Freedom Fighters would suggest he eventually touch another Emerald to try and get more powers, but he could think of something better later. For now he had to deal with this.

"Sorry. Aftershock or something. I'm fine now," he gasped out to address the concerned looks both Mobians were flashing him. "I want to get rid of it," he continued, "because I need all seven Emeralds to go back to Earth, and we can't do that if one of them is inside me."

Realization slowly began to dawn on the two, making them both shy away from Sorun. "O-oh. Right." Sonic looked towards Tails. "So can they?"

The look Tails gave them both didn't give Sorun any confidence. "I'm sorry, but frankly, I don't even know how Sorun managed to absorb the Emerald the way he did to begin with. It looks like it's been converted to pure energy and has completely fused with his body. I

wouldn't even know where to begin taking it out of him." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Sorun, but I don't think it's possible to take the Emerald out of you."

"... Oh. I see." He thought that he was prepared for that answer. He really wasn't, because it felt like Mighty just punched him in the gut. "I'm out of here," he mumbled as he ripped the sensors off his body.

The sensors gathered in his hand were thrown roughly on the ground, and Sorun just missed trampling over them as he slid off the table. Sonic watched as the human stomped away, and then reached a hand out to try and stop him. "Sorun-!"

"Not now." Sorun opened the door to the lab and practically slammed it behind him as he left. Sonic looked towards Tails who had the same troubled expression on his face that he had, which caused the hedgehog to groan out loud and follow Sorun.

He wanted to say he'd made it about ten steps from Freedom HQ's door before he heard it open behind him. Sorun didn't even need to turn around to know who it was, though he did stop and take a deep breath to calm himself.

"Go away, Sonic," Sorun ground out. "Seriously. I'm not in the mood."

"I'm not going away until you tell me what's wrong." Sorun sighed at hearing that, and turned around. As expected, Sonic was there with his arms crossed and one foot tapping at the ground as he looked at Sorun's face with an expression mixed in seriousness and worry. "What's wrong with you? Talk to me."

"Why do you always...!?" The pale teen grunted out in frustration and ran a hand over his face. "Why do you even care...?"

Sonic stepped forwards. "Because you're my friend," he said, "and-"

"We. Are not. *Friends* ," Sorun hissed out, causing Sonic to flinch back with widened eyes. "I am *never* going to be friends with any of you. You're all a bunch of anthropomorphic animal aliens that abducted me and forced me to fight in a war, and now this!" he yelled out as a Summoned Sword appeared next to him. "I have yet another layer of nonsense to deal with on top of everything else!"

The hedgehog looked taken back by Sorun's words. "You still feel this way?" he quietly asked, his voice wavering. "Sorun, I thought... I thought you finally moved past this. You were acting so friendly with everyone..." He blinked, and his eyes turned half-lidded when sadness overtook his features. "And it came out of nowhere, but I thought you'd be happy to have a power now. What happened?"

Sorun took a deep breath, and the sword next to him shattered. "I just want to go home, and these powers are in the way of that. Why is that so hard for you to understand?"

"Is that the- Sorun!" Sonic stomped forwards, and while there was still sadness in his features, it was quickly being overwritten with discontent. "I know it looks bad now, but we can figure that out later! After we've finished fighting Eggman! We can find a way to get the Emerald out of you!"

"And what if we can't, huh!?" Sorun argued. "What if I'm stuck here forever because I touched that Chaos Emerald!? What am I supposed to do with that!?"

It wasn't even a fear of him dying, or the fact that his life had been cut short because he'd absorbed that Emerald. Those were factors, but the main fear was that he couldn't go home. And after both Athair and Tails told him extraction of the Emerald was impossible, he felt liable to believe them. And that scared him even more than getting years taken off his life. He could deal with that, eventually. He could avoid dying by just avoiding the other Emeralds. He could *maybe* survive now with Summoned Swords. That was all manageable.

Home, though? The prospect of never going home again? That scared him. It scared him because it seemed like such a certainty now and he just *didn't know* how he was supposed to deal with the fact he might never see Earth again.

"I..." Sonic held out a hand to Sorun, but stopped himself halfway. The hedgehog frowned deeply, and then hand went limp at his side. "I'm sorry, Sorun. I'm sorry I pushed you so hard."

Of all the things Sorun expected, an apology along those lines hadn't been one of them, and now he was genuinely confused. "What?"

"I know you never wanted to join the Freedom Fighters. I know I... kind of pressured you into it, even though I knew you couldn't do much. And yeah, maybe... maybe we should have just called it when you got hurt in that mission, but it's- it's so *bad* out there, Sorun. Eggman, he's... everything is turning so awful," Sonic admitted with a shake of his head. "So I kept pushing you to try different things to be useful somehow because we all need something to help us out, you know? I know it was wrong, and I'm really sorry, but I'm just... we're all so worried over the world, over everyone!

"But you have powers now!" Sonic shouted with a hopeful gleam in his eyes. "You don't have to be scared about being too weak anymore! You can help out! You can be useful! And we all... we all really need your help Sorun, because I..." He choked something back and look down. "I don't think we can do it on our own anymore. Eggman just had too big of a lead when he got those Emeralds."

Sorun could believe. He all but had to when those two sky echidna flat out told him the world was doomed unless he got powers from the Chaos Emeralds and helped defeat Eggman. But none of that changed the fact that he didn't *want to* . "I already told you I don't even want this power, especially when it-!"

Thump-thump.

"GodDAMMIT...!" Sorun internally screamed as he held his chest once more. Even after his heart started to beat again, he wasn't able to look back up at Sonic. Not from the pain, even though there was plenty of that.

Frustrated. He was just so goddamned frustrated with everything. It was the only word he could think of that described how he felt. Over this whole situation. Over those echidna. Over the Freedom Fighters. Sonic.

Sonic. Why did it all lead back to him? Him and the Freedom Fighters?

They'd stolen him from his home. They didn't force him to fight, but they may as well have, especially with all the effort Sonic put it. And now there was this business with the Chaos Emeralds. Emeralds that gave him powers in exchange for years off his life. He'd already lost so much because of that one Emerald, and now he likely was never going to see his home again, and it was all their fault because they were the ones that physically dragged him through a portal.

And what if they found out he could get *more* powers from other Chaos Emeralds!? What if they forced more on him? They'd be actively killing him at that point so he could save *their* world while his remained all the way on the other side of the multiverse, and he didn't want to die, and he couldn't even *tell* them any of this because of *goddamn Aurora* ...!

He was so frustrated. Frustrated at Tails for pulling him through the portal. Frustrated at the Freedom Fighters because they were unintentionally killing him. Frustrated at Sonic because he kept raising good points that even Sorun agreed with, but didn't want to. Frustrated at the world. At Eggman. At himself.

He couldn't do this right now. He just couldn't.

"Just leave me alone," Sorun moaned out as he turned his back to Sonic. "I need to be alone. It's too much. We can do all this later."

"Just wait a second-" Sonic stepped forwards again, but then leapt back when a blue sword embedded itself into the ground in front of him. He snapped up towards Sorun with wide, shocked eyes, but they quickly softened when he saw the anguished look in Sorun's own eyes.

"Please... just... leave me... alone," Sorun begged.

Sonic looked like he wanted to say something more, but held his tongue and gave Sorun a reluctant nod as he watched the Summoned Sword in the ground shatter. "Okay, Sorun. If that's what you want," he agreed in a level tone. "Are you coming back home later?"

"... I don't know. Probably not. Might just crash on the couch in the HQ." The human shook his head and stomped forwards towards the direction of Knothole City. "I just want to think. I don't want to deal with anything else right now."

He was thankful that Sonic chose to respect his wishes and not follow him, because the last thing he needed was to hear more words from him. Or anybody else in the Freedom Fighters for that matter. Anybody period, really. He just wanted to be alone with his own thoughts so he could figure out what he was gonna do.

The problem was he had no idea what he was going to do.

"Home, the Chaos Emeralds, these powers... Eggman..." With a sigh, Sorun held up a finger as he walked and let a blue sword appear so that it could spin above it. He found himself lost in its almost hypnotic spinning. *"I don't know what to do..."*

New Megaopolis. Once it had been called New York, but that was in a forgotten age thousands upon thousands of years. And during that time it had been a home to millions of humans and had been considered one of the biggest metropolitan cities in the whole world.

Now it was inhabited by a legion of robots and two flesh and blood people: a diabolical Doctor set on conquering the entire world and his nephew. Said doctor was in the highest room in one of the tallest towers in his city, admiring the view of his sprawling, metal city through large plate glass windows at the end of the room.

A tired sigh escaped Eggman, and he could see his own mustache droop along with his shoulders.

"It's been too easy," he lamented. "My complete and utter takeover of Mobius is all but assured at this point. The only pocket of resistance left in the whole world with a leg to stand are those furry fools over in Knothole, but even that can be ended at any time. My conquest is almost at an end, and yet..." He frowned, and his hands tightened at his side. "I'm not satisfied. I came into this knowing I'd be the victor at the end, but it wasn't supposed to practically be handed to me! Sure, I could go around and burn the few Mobian villages not occupied by me to the ground. Keep pounding Knothole with robots over and over until the kingdom falls. Send every single one of those pesky Freedom Fighters into utter despair before finally crushing them once for all. Maybe even do it all at the same time in front of Sonic to break him completely just for the fun of it!" He briefly smiled, but his mouth soon settled back into a frown. "Oh, but where's the amusement in that? The *thrill* !? A victory like that is meaningless without effort, and yet my victory thus far has been effortless.

"It's all because of that man," Eggman claimed as his features wrinkled. "That man who gifted me those Chaos Emeralds all those months ago. Had I known that possessing all those gems would make my Eggman Empire's campaign so trivial I would have outright refused most of them. How I loath him for taking my victory away from me. Because this?" He gestured to the windows and city with his hands. "This just doesn't feel like a victory." He sighed, and then ran a hand over his bald head. "Maybe it's time to call it curtains and end it all already. To stop dragging things out and take it all. I've milked this planet for all the fun it's worth, but in the end I got even less enjoyment out of it than my original zone. It appears my own

supreme knowledge has cursed me to forever be confined within the doldrums. Wouldn't you agree, Snively?" There was no response. "Eh? Snively!"

Thwack!

Robotnik jumped at the solid thud, and spun around. The rest of the room, once the penthouse to a high-rise buildings, was littered in cables and fitted with computers at each side, and Snively was supposed to be occupying one of those computers. But behind his tinted glasses Eggman had widened his eyes when he saw his short nephew unconscious and being held up by the same red cloaked man the Doctor had been so bitter over previously.

A long, content sigh left the man. "I really needed that. You seriously have no idea," he muttered as he dropped Snively's sleeping body on the ground before his hooded face turned to Eggman. "Hey. Been a while, huh? Few months or something like that, right?"

"You..." Eggman seethed, and then dramatically pointed his index finger at the red-dressed intruder. "How dare you... you...! What did you say your name was again?"

"Huh?" The hooded man made his way to the center of the room, and then turned his body so that he was directly across from Eggman. "Oh, I never did give you a name, huh?" he realized. "Gimme a second to think of a fake one real quick."

The finger being held out to the man practically deflated at the sheer flippancy the man was exuding, and Eggman couldn't help but sputter as the cloaked man began to mutter to himself.

"Should I... no, that's lame... red was... what was red in... redrum? No, rubrum. Yeah. Rubrum? Eh, sure." He snapped his fingers and looked up to Eggman. "You can call me Rubrum." He paused. "Man, I already hate that name. Sounded way better in my head."

"I don't care what ridiculous name you've chosen for yourself," Eggman growled at him as he held up a clenched fist. "It's because of you my conquering of Mobius is ruined!"

"... Ruined?" Rubrum echoed. "Last I checked it was goin' pretty well."

Eggman waved his clenched fist to the side. "That's the problem! It's going too well!" he shouted. "Claiming Mobius for my own was meant to be a triumphant victory. Something to savor. But then you had to go and break the game for me. You just *had* to give me those Chaos Emeralds and make everything so *easy* for me." His shining head drooped. "Finally defeating the blue rodent and destroying all his friends, family, and that insipid kingdom has no meaning now. I'll still do it just because I hate them, but it's almost too much to bother with at this point. And it's all your fault."

There was a moment where Rubrum's hooded face just stared at Eggman, as if he was struggling to comprehend the words he'd just heard. Eventually he took a deep breath and spoke out in a disbelieving voice. "You're upset because you didn't have *fun* ruining everyone's lives?"

"Of course I am," Eggman replied in a tone that suggested it was so obvious. "What's the point otherwise?"

Slowly, Rubrum shook his head. "I... I got nothing," he mumbled, completely at a loss. "You are actually just the worst. Bar none."

"Well, you're entitled to our own opinions. Even when they're wrong." At that, Eggman snapped his fingers. "Metal Sonic, if you would."

To Rubrum's right was a pair of elevator doors. At Eggman's command, the doors slowly slid open. From the elevator stepped out a Badnik styled after a specific blue hedgehog, right down to the color. The robotic hedgehog flexed its metal claws before its red eyes snapped towards Rubrum, its face expressionless due to a lack of a mouth.

Rubrum hummed at the sight, but otherwise said nothing.

"I've grown tired of you, Rubrum. You've insulted me, ruined my game, trespassed on my territory, physically assaulted my zone-removed nephew... but above all that? You held a sword to my throat." Eggman shook his head. "I'm done with you. Consider this your execution for your crimes against the Eggman Empire."

"Aw, you don't wanna do that," Rubrum said in an indifferent tone.

"Oh, but I do." With that, Eggman turned his tall, round body back towards the window. "Metal. Exterminate."

There was the sound of a roaring turbine as the Badnik flew towards Rubrum to undoubtedly tear him limb from limb. Eggman allowed himself a small smile for that much at least, but he froze when the sound of Metal Sonic moving suddenly cut out into utter silence.

"Finished already, Metal?" Robotnik asked as he began to turn around. "A pity. I would have at least liked to have heard that cretin's death rattle before- huh!?"

The sight that greeted Eggman when he turned around put him at a loss for words. Metal Sonic was destroyed. Completely. His parts were scattered all around the room, seemingly cut to pieces. Rubrum was still standing in the same spot he'd occupied before Eggman had turned his back, holding Metal Sonic's severed head in his hands.

But that didn't make sense to the Doctor. He'd only turned his back for a single second. There was no sight of the sword Rubrum had held when last Eggman saw him to cut Metal apart. There was no possible way a sword could even scratch Metal, let alone sever him to pieces. And by all appearances, Rubrum hadn't even moved. There hadn't even been any *sound* .

That was impossible. There was absolutely no way one of his most powerful robots had been destroyed in under a second. But Eggman

was forced to accept this as fact, because no matter how many times he blinked he kept seeing a room full of bits of blue metal and a man in a red cloak holding Metal Sonic's head.

And now, he was growing nervous. Because Rubrum had just dismantled Metal Sonic with seemingly zero effort, and his hooded face was now facing him. He cursed the bead of sweat that was beginning to roll down his face.

"Anyways," Rubrum said as he nonchalantly tossed the head away, "I just came to talk. No fighting, no more gifts, just talk. That's all."

"... Talk," Eggman repeated as he cleared his throat and regained his composure. "You've made it clear multiple times you have no love for me, so why would you bother coming all this way just to talk?"

Rubrum shrugged. "Because it's all in accordance with His will. You know how it is." He paused. "Er, well, you don't, I guess. Eh. Is what it is."

"And there it is. 'He'. You keep referencing a He," Eggman noted. "Is this oh-so-mysterious He the one that put you up to all this?"

"Who, Him?" Rubrum actually laughed out loud at that. "Hah. Nah. He's dead. He's long, looooong dead. I think? Eh, doesn't really matter. He's gone either way." He placed his hands into the pockets of his cloak. "But despite Him being long gone, I gotta follow His will. To not do so would be... exceptionally bad for everyone."

Eggman huffed. "And just why would that be?"

"Good question." Instead of answering, Rubrum swiveled his head around the room they were in and briefly glanced out the window behind the Doctor before turning back to him. "You've sure been busy since we last talked," he observed. "Built up your Empire and practically took over the whole world. Why, you could have finished it at this point if you weren't dragging your feet to the finish line." He leaned forwards slightly. "Or is that really the case? Can't help but

notice those Chaos Emeralds I so generously gave you are nowhere to be seen. Don't tell me you lost them?"

"Feh. So those obnoxious Freedom Fighters managed to swipe the Emeralds from under my nose. So what?" Eggman turned his large nose up in the air. "Everything was going so dull that I practically let them take the Chaos Emeralds, but what do they do with them afterwards? I haven't a clue, but whatever they did scattered the Emeralds all across Mobius. They can't even utilize stolen resources properly!"

"Yeah, those dastardly Freedom Fighters. Fighting so that their friends, family, and, oh, everyone else isn't enslaved and killed. How dare they?"

"Hmph." Eggman turned back to the window once more. "If all you've got for me is petty insults, than I refuse to listen to you further."

Rubrum let out an "ah" sound. "Sure, yeah, I get how it is. Don't you want to know what they used the Emeralds for, though?"

That gained Eggman's attention, as he whirled around with a look of interest plastered over his devious face. "You know?" he asked him. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't the slightest bit curious over what they used those Emeralds for."

"Oh, then you'll love this. They used them to summon a human here from another zone."

There wasn't any outwards reaction from Eggman at first as he processed Rubrum's words. Soon enough, though, the features on his face began to flatten. "You can't be serious," he replied in an incredulous tone.

"Nope. Completely serious," Rubrum said, and then began to examine his right hand while he rubbed his thumb and index finger together. "The guy's a sixteen-year-old named Sorun. All in all, nothing really special about him. Pretty plain. Bit ornery. Not very

strong, either, 'cause one of your Egg Pawns almost brained him before some dumb luck saved his life."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Eggman claimed. "Sonic and his miscreant friends are no strangers to zone travelling. They wouldn't have blundered so hard as to lose all the Chaos Emeralds bringing somebody from some random zone here. I can't even fathom *why* they would make such a thoughtless decision like that. I half expected them to just give them to Sonic so he could turn Super and bum rush my capital in an ill-fated attempt at stopping me. I made traps and everything."

"Mm, couldn't tell ya why they brought the guy here, but from what I know the zone they brought him from is pretty far from the Prime Zone. I'm talkin', like, ass-end of the multiverse far. Place is so removed from all the other zones that it's not even connected to the Cosmic Interstate, so they needed the power of all seven Chaos Emeralds just to bring him here. They scattered right after."

Stroking his mustache, Eggman gave a half-interested hum. "Fascinating, truly," he drawled, "but yet another useless runt is hardly of any concern to me."

Rubrum gave him an agreeing nod. "Yeah, guy's pretty useless all things considered." He stopped rubbing his fingers together and reached into his hood to scratch at his chin. "Except for the fact he gets powers off of Chaos Emeralds. That's probably important."

Eggman's hand froze mid-stroke. "Say that again?"

"Sorun. He can absorb Chaos Emeralds and get powers off of them," Rubrum clarified. "He just recently got his first one."

"Impossible," Eggman claimed. "I would have known if such a thing were possible. Nobody has ever exhibited an ability to do such a thing."

"Ah, but that's the beauty of it. See, Sorun's special. His zone? There's no Chaos energy in it." That caused Eggman to raise a hairless eyebrow in interest. "Don't really know how it's possible; his whole world's a big, cosmic mistake, I guess. But because he doesn't have any innate Chaos energy of his own, he's an empty vessel for the stuff. A power sponge, basically."

"Huh. Interesting," Eggman hummed. "He's just able to acquire abilities just like that? With absolutely no negative repercussions to his body whatsoever?"

Rubrum hesitated before answering. "... No, of course not. Why would it?" He shook his head. "Point is, as he is now? Sorun's not much. He gets a few more Emeralds and powers up a bit more? Who's to say how much of a problem he'd be for you?" He shrugged. "Those Emeralds get permanently stuck in him, too, so no chance of depowering him."

Crossing his arms, Eggman gave the red cloaked man a slight scoff. "Hmph. It's doubtful he'd ever pose a problem, even with his unique... circumstances. It would be absolutely no issue whatsoever crushing him like all the rest."

"Yeah, sure, crushing him's always an option. Why not recruit him instead?"

As he said this, Rubrum reached into his cloak's pocket as Eggman watched him warily from behind his dark glasses. What he pulled from his pocket was a small tape recorder, which Rubrum looked down to stare at. He quietly sighed, and then hit the play button on its side.

"You know what? You're right," the recorder said. *"Problem's me. I'm sorry I'm up here doing a job that, let's be honest, anybody else could do but at least it's* something *for me to do instead of nothing. I'm sorry I chose to join the Freedom Fighters when, let's face it, I don't belong with them! I'm sorry I'm a normal human and can't fight*

like a Mobian! I'm sorry I was minding my own business before I got dragged into some other universe's war!"

Rubrum stopped the recording and pocketed the tape recorder. "That was Sorun," he explained. "Surprise surprise, he's not all too thrilled over being abducted. To put it lightly, he completely resents the Freedom Fighters for what they did to him. And there aren't any Mobians where he's from, either, so that's a whole 'nother layer of weirdness he's been trying and failing to cope with. So who's to say what a guy like that, who really hates pretty much everybody around him right now, would do if approached a fellow human... Overlander... former robot-turned-flesh... whatever the hell you call yourself."

"And why would I ever want somebody like him with me?" Eggman questioned. "I've all but won at this point. What use have I for any further resources?"

"Have him fight the Freedom Fighters or something," he suggested. "Back your own forces off and let him do everything. Guy could never beat them all on his own, but he can stall them. Let them grow strength so that when they come for you, it turns into a half-decent challenge. You could go as far as to offer him a way home since you're so brilliant. Hell, the fact you're not even a Mobian might be enough to entice him." At that, he spun on his feet and turned his back to Eggman. "But that's all food for thought. Choice is yours at the end of the day. I got things to do. See you when I see you."

There were further questions Robotnik had for Rubrum, but as the red cloaked man was walking away he had blinked. And when he opened his eyes again, Rubrum had completely vanished from sight.

He jumped in surprise, but quickly huffed before crossing the room towards the discarded pieces that once made up Metal Sonic. He bent down and picked up the severed head, brushing some dusk off its face before giving a contemplative hum.

"Don't ever think I'll ever forgive your transgressions, Rubrum. It's completely preposterous, but... what he says does have some merit. I have to wonder..." He turned the head over in his hand, towards the neck where it had been severed from the rest of the body. He frowned deeply when he saw the clean, straight cut that had went through all that metal and wiring. A cut so clean and straight it almost seemed unnatural.

"Well, nothing a trip to the repair shop won't fix," he decided as he dropped the head, and then looked towards the sleeping body of the short Overlander nearby. He sneered at it. "Very well then. I haven't anything to lose at this point, and I could use the diversion. We'll just have to see for ourselves who this Sorun person really is once my good-for-nothing nephew wakes up, won't we?"

A/N- So I know that so far this whole story was gearing towards a "powerless but still significant/ strength without power" kind of vibe, but that's not what I'm going for here. It's a big shift in tone to be sure, but there's gonna be a lot of that, hence why I'm pacing the story out like this. And I know the biggest concern is power creep, but I'm mitigating that with heavy restrictions while organically threading it through the plot. It's all planned out.

Anyways, that's it for this one. Thanks to all for the reviews; you're all awesome. 'Til next time.

Chapter 12

Recursion Error

Episode 12- Gotta bail

"How did my life go from bad to worse to whatever this fresh hell is?"

It was a question Sorun found himself struggling with as he aimlessly wandered around Knothole while absolutely refusing to meet anybody's eyes. He didn't have to think too hard on the question; he knew the how of the issue. He just found himself struggling with the why.

Why him? Why, out of the seven-odd billion people on Earth, had he been the one to be pulled through that portal by Tails? Out of all the places on Earth, why did those coordinates point to a random grocery store in Detroit? And why, oh why, did he just have to be there at that one specific moment?

Because he'd wanted orange juice. It all boiled down to orange juice at the end of the day. The fact that he'd won the most rigged lottery in the world by accident over orange juice served no end to his frustration.

So where did that leave him? Here. Surrounded by weird animal people. Stuck in a world under siege by some weird mad scientist wacko. Getting the very life sucked out of him by magic rocks. Summoned Swords. Gag curse.

What was he gonna do with all of that? He didn't know. Hours upon hours of thinking of all this, over and over, and now it was dusk and the conclusion he'd come up with so far was that he didn't have any conclusions.

Fantastic.

"Huh? Hey, Sorun! Sorun! Slow down!"

The teen's head picked up. He recognized that voice calling after him from behind his back. That feminine voice that carried such a carefree lilt but had just the slightest hint of being just a little unhinged- oh god it was Honey.

"Oh god oh fuck no not right now." He absolutely refused to take on anything else today, because Honey wasn't going to be the straw that broke Sorun's back- she'd be the whole hay bale. And he was shaky enough as it was with everything else that had happened, so he tried walking faster in an effort to get away.

But then he started to panic when he heard rapid footfalls behind him.

"Jesus she's chasing me!" he internally screamed as he picked up the pace. But the footfalls behind him were gaining quickly, and he soon realized he wasn't going to be outrunning the golden cat. So he spat out a curse, dug his heels into the ground, and spun around to meet the cat.

This was a mistake, as Honey hadn't known that Sorun was going to make such a rapid stop and so ran right into him. They both grunted and stumbled on their feet, but fortunately managed to remain upright. Unfortunately, Honey had been carrying a paper bag in her hand that had been sent flying up into the air.

Sorun's eyes traveled upwards to the paper bag, and he heard a large gasp from the Mobian right in front of him. The bag fell towards the ground, and would have touched down entirely if a blue sword hadn't appeared next to it and stabbed forwards so that the blade caught the bag's string-like handles on the top.

"Well, at least I'm getting some mileage out of these things." The sword floated next to Sorun, and then shattered away right as he grabbed the bag. "Here," Sorun said as he handed the bag to a bewildered Honey, who was flicking one of her ears in curiosity.

"Oh! Uh... I didn't know you could do something like that!" Honey commented as she gingerly took the bag from Sorun. "Guess you're not a Freedom Fighter for nothing, huh?"

"... The swords don't freak you out?" Sorun asked in a surprised tone.

Honey tilted her head to the side. "Why would it?"

"... Mobians," Sorun whispered under his breath. He supposed he couldn't be surprised- they all had to live in this world. It was little wonder they treated strangeness as the norm. "Anyways, yeah. I can make swords. It's kind of a new development for me, actually."

"Oh, huh. Oh!" She suddenly held the bag out to Sorun. "I almost forgot! This is for you!"

For him? He couldn't hold in the blink of surprise, and awkwardly took the bag out from Honey's hand before opening it up. There was only a single item in the bag, and he could tell from the way it was crumpled that it was a piece of clothing.

Of course. She's said something about wanting to expand his wardrobe during their talk about his image. He wasn't too thrilled about that, and with everything else going on he hadn't managed to fit in any time to weasel out of it. And he for sure couldn't find any excuse not to take it now.

Giving an inaudible sigh, he reached into the bag and took out the clothing item. It was a deep blue color that matched his eyes, so at the very least he could appreciate the color. The zipper in front and the hood hanging off the neck hole automatically classified it as a hoodie to Sorun's eyes, but oddly the hoodie was missing sleeves. It was plain otherwise. Didn't even have drawstrings for the hood.

"It's very... utilitarian," Sorun commented as he slipped the sleeveless hoodie on, but just couldn't find the energy to zip in closed. "Part of the practical ensemble, I guess?"

Honey nodded. "Yeah, but looking at it now... I don't know." She gave a dissatisfied hum as she rubbed at her chin with her tail slowly swishing behind her. "I dunno if it's really fitting the aesthetic I'm going for now. The hoodie almost makes you too... punkish. It blends too well with your shirt too, and the contrast between your upper and lower half is a bit too harsh. Hm..."

She didn't sound very pleased at all with his look. "You want it back...?" he asked as he tugged at the bottom of his hoodie.

"No, keep it. It's fine." She shook her head. "I'm gonna figure this out, don't worry. Oh, and I finally got to making those spare pants and boots and other things for you. I tried dropping them off at Sonic's place since I heard you were staying there, but he said you weren't there. I left them with him." She pursed her lips. "Sorun, is everything okay? Sonic sounded kind of... well, sad when he mentioned you."

This was probably the first time he'd heard her sound so concerned. She even looked a bit worried, too, which had Sorun a little surprised. "Yeah, some stuff happened," he confirmed with a nod.

"Oh. Are you alright?"

"No."

She blinked, and then coughed into her hand. "Um... do you want to talk about it?"

"No." He would if he could, but he liked it when his heart actually worked. "Look, Honey, I... don't worry about me," Sorun said as he rubbed the back of his neck. "It's... resistance stuff. Yeah. Everybody's kinda stressed. Just go back to worrying about clothes and your business, okay?"

He didn't even sound that convincing to himself, so he almost expected the skeptical look she was sending him. To his relief, she nodded in understanding and took the empty bag back from Sorun. "Well, if you say so. I should get back to my shop. Have a nice

night." She turned to leave, but stopped and looked back at the human. "And Sorun? You look awful, and believe it or not you're more than a walking mannequin to me. So please don't push yourself too hard, because I don't want to see you hurt because of it."

After saying her piece, Honey left Sorun alone in the middle of the street. He watched her disappear around a corner, and then looked down at the sleeveless hoodie he was wearing before sighing.

"Yeah, trust me, Honey," he whispered, "I'm well aware that going too far is gonna kill me."

"Is Sorun not joining us for dinner tonight, dear?"

The fork that was being held in Sonic's hand clattered onto the plate, and his eyes turned upwards. Across the dining table, his mother was giving him a questioning stare, and to the side his mechanical father was doing the same. He shuffled uncomfortably in his chair under their stares, and then sighed before shaking his head.

"No, Sorun's... not coming home tonight," he informed them. "A lot happened today."

"Oh, my." The female hedgehog held a hand to her mouth. "He isn't hurt, is he?"

"Well, no. Er, maybe? I don't... he's not in a good place right now." He shook his head and placed a hand on his forehead. "I don't really know where to start with him."

Because where was he supposed to start when it came to Sorun? There were so many underlying issues that he'd thought were being resolved that he had trouble counting them. Issues that were still there and were getting *worse* , and no matter how hard he tried to help Sorun nothing changed with him.

Why had it gone so wrong after he got that Chaos Emerald? He seemed to be doing so well until that point...

"So what happened?" His father asked him as he leaned forwards on the table. "I assumed-"

Sonic's mother glanced at her robotic husband. "Jules?"

"Yes?"

"Elbows."

Jules started, and then quickly removed his arms off of the table. "Sorry, dear," he quickly apologized before turning back to Sonic. "As I was saying, I assumed that Sorun was acclimating well. What happened?"

"I don't know, dad. I thought he was doing fine, too." Sighing, Sonic leaned back into his chair and slung his left arm over its top. "You've seen him around. He was still kind of quiet, but he didn't look so upset all the time anymore. I even caught him hanging out with Mighty. He was opening up. I thought... I really thought that was progress. Then today, while he was taking flying lessons from Tails, we got word of a Chaos Emerald that was found by one of Eggman's ships. Sorun needs them all to go back to his zone, and Eggman getting an Emerald is never a good thing, so we decided to go get it. So I grab Tails and Sorun and we fly to the Egg Carrier where the Emerald is. Sorun stays behind in the plane while me and Tails go do our thing and get the Emerald.

"But then it turns out Sorun gets attacked while we're gone. He's fine," he assured his parents when he saw them grow worried. "He found the cannons on Tails' plane and took them out. And I felt really... proud, you know? I felt happy for him because he took out all those robots on his own, and sure, he needed the plane to do it, but it was still *him* . He even looked happy! He was... sort of smiling, in a weird, tired way. He's always tired for some reason."

"He does sleep in a lot," Bernadette mentioned.

Sonic nodded. "Yeah. After that happened we go back to the Freedom HQ and the Chaos Emerald... stuck to Sorun for some reason. We all tried to pry it out of his hand but it wouldn't come off, and then it started to shock him. It got really bad, and he started screaming..." He had to take a breath before continuing. "But then it just suddenly stopped. The Chaos Emerald disappeared, and Sorun was asleep for a couple minutes. He woke up and... he started making swords."

His two parents stared at him for a long moment, and his father leaned forwards to gain his son's attention. "He... started making swords?" he repeated.

"Yeah, Sorun can absorb Chaos Emeralds and get powers. We don't really know why he can. It was kind of a shock for everybody." His green eyes suddenly lit up. "They're really cool, too! He makes them out of nothing and he can spin them around and stuff!"

Those swords really were cool in his opinion, but Sonic just didn't know why. It might have been the color- he never thought blue would look good on a sword of all things, but Sorun's strange power made it look good. He just really liked them.

"It came out of nowhere, but I was really glad for Sorun. He finally has a power now and can seriously help out. But Sorun..." Sonic trailed off and looked to the side. "He didn't take it well. He flipped out. I think it's because Tails said there isn't a way to take the Emerald out of him, and now Sorun's all worried that we won't be able to send him home because of that. I tried telling him that we'll find a way, but... but I just don't know."

Because what were they supposed to do if he really couldn't go home? What were they going to say to him? "Sorry for taking you away from your home forever, Sorun?" Sonic didn't even know how that conversation would go, and he didn't know what Sorun was

supposed to do if that really was the case. Or how they were all going to live with themselves for that matter.

He would have never even considered listening to that stupid wooden tablet if he knew it was going to turn out this bad.

"So anyways, yeah. Sorun's worried over his home, and he's still really sore at us for bringing him here," Sonic finished. "I wish he'd just talk to us, to somebody, but I don't think Sorun likes talking about his feelings all that much. What do you think?"

His mother had a contemplative look on her face, but the unsure look she had underneath that expression said enough. His father eye-sensors had lowered in thought, and eventually picked back up towards his son.

"Is he still going to fight Robotnik with the rest of you?" Jules asked.

"Huh? Uh, I'm pretty sure, yeah. Why wouldn't he?" He understood Sorun was mad, but he couldn't see him being so mad that he would leave the Freedom Fighters. Especially now that he had those weird blue swords of his.

"Well... I can understand the difficulties the young man is facing. And his fears of never going home do seem justified, but if he'll still continue to fight with you all, I don't think he'll be upset forever." His robotic arms crossed over his said. "That said, you have torn him away from his life, son. If it really does come down to him being stuck here, you'll all have to deal with it when that comes."

Sonic sighed. "Yeah, I know. I'm still trying to figure out what we're even gonna do if it's true. I don't want us to be responsible taking him from his home."

"So you're just going to give up on finding a way to get him home?"

"No way!" The younger hedgehog shot up in his seat and shot his father a rebellious glare. "I'm not gonna give up on getting him home

even if it looks bad now! We're just... swamped with Eggman right now. You know how it is." He sat back down in his seat, crossed his arms, and began tapping on his shoulders with his fingers. "It's just not something we can focus on right now. After we finally stop Eggman, then yeah. I'm not stopping until we find a way to get Sorun home. But we just can't do it right now."

It was more of a promise towards himself than for Sorun, but it held the same meaning all the same. He wasn't one to give up, especially when it was on something this serious.

"We're gonna find a way to bring him home," Sonic said at last. "I don't know how, but we will."

"And if you can't?" his father asked.

Sonic didn't have an answer for him.

"So... swords?"

Violet eyes flicked to the left to regard the armadillo sitting next to him on the log as Knuckles tied the laces on his shoes. "Yeah, swords. Weird, blue, kind of glowy."

"Like... sword-swords?"

Knuckles' mouth opened slightly. "What do you want me to say? Yes." He turned back to his shoes. "Sorun took a Chaos Emerald inside of himself and attained some form of Chaos Control."

Mighty nodded. "I get that part, but... swords?"

"Yeah, he condensed Chaos energy into a solid state and managed to control that shape somehow. Don't know why he shaped it into swords of all things. Or why they're blue, either, but Chaos energy has always been weird." He finished tying his shoe and sat up to look at Mighty. "Why do you think got that sword power?"

The armadillo pointed at himself. "You're asking me? You have more experience in using that stuff than almost anybody else here, especially when you were walking around all green that one time," he said. "If anybody would know, it'd be you."

"I don't, though."

"Oh." Mighty shrugged. "Eh, than why worry about it? I don't really get it, but as long as Sorun's fine then does it really matter?"

"Who is it we're talking about now?"

Both of their heads swiveled towards the trees in front of them, just behind the hill that Freedom HQ rested under. A purple Mobian with a yellow horn jutting out the center of his forehead walked into their view from behind some trees. A shorter, bumble bee-like Mobian was buzzing around in the air behind him while humming happily to himself.

"Oh, hey, Espio," Knuckles greeted with a wave. "Didn't see you there."

"Naturally," the chameleon grunted as he stopped in front of the other two. "Me and Charmy overhead you. What is this about blue swords?"

"Something weird happened with Sorun," Knuckles answered. "He grabbed a Chaos Emerald and sort of... took it into himself, and now he's got this weird power to summon swords right out of thin air."

Espio hummed in acknowledgment. "What kind of sword?"

"What the- how should I know!? I don't know swords!" Knuckles yelled as he ran a frustrated hand through his dreadlocks. "They were, I dunno, straight. The middle part was kind of weirdly shaped- look, it was a sword, okay?"

"... So a straight sword, then?"

"Sure, that," Knuckles sighed out. "We've pretty much given up on figuring out why that happened to Sorun in the first place, so now we're trying to put together why he got the power to make swords with Chaos energy. You two have any ideas?"

The chameleon shook his head. "I don't think I've shared a single word with him ever since he was brought here. He never approached me, and I never had a reason to speak with him, so we've remained distant," he admitted. "I'm sorry that I'm not much help in the matter."

"Nah, that's not your fault," Knuckles said. "That's just Sorun. He's not really that sociable. Keeps to himself mostly now that I think about it."

Not that there was anything wrong with that. If there was anybody who could understand somebody who wanted their own space and didn't feel like talking all that much, it was Knuckles. Thing was, he didn't get that kind of vibe off of Sorun whenever he saw him. The few times he had actually talked to the human he'd been fairly conversational. Talking to him was one thing, but actually approaching him? Knuckles wasn't so sure.

"Yeah, I haven't talked to him yet, either," Charmy lamented in a high-pitched voice as he floated nearer to the group. "I tried going up to him once, but when I was about to say something to him he just glared at me. Really hard. I got kind of scared and went away after."

Espio's yellow eyes narrowed and flicked towards Charmy. "He didn't do anything, did he?"

Charmy shook his head. "No, he's just... he isn't mean," he said, "but he can really feel mean sometimes, you know? I don't know how to describe it." The corners of his mouth turned downwards. "Saffron's actually too scared to go near him."

"Aw, Sorun's not that bad a guy," Mighty claimed as he waved his hand. "I played some games with him. He's really chill when you get to know him. He can just be a bit... prickly." He paused and began to

lightly tap at his knees. "He's really good at video games too," he muttered. "He beat Nicole's score in that one spaceship game."

That drew everybody's attention and caused everyone's eyes to widened. Nicole's scores in those games were nothing to sneeze at. They represented a level of finesse with games that were considered by everybody to be unattainable to anybody who wasn't an AI named Nicole. Knuckles himself wasn't even that good at them to begin with, and he gave up on them altogether when he saw that Sonic never even came close to beating Nicole's score.

What hope did anybody have if Sonic's reflexes weren't enough to beat Nicole? Apparently Sorun found an answer, but he couldn't imagine what it was.

"I don't believe you," Espio said in a disbelieving tone. "There's no way he managed to surpass Nicole's score."

Knuckles couldn't hold in the small smirk that formed, and neither could Mighty or Charmy. Espio refused to even touch a video game ever again when he failed to even make it to the top five on the leaderboard of that game, and always claimed that he was cheated because his control stick and been sticking or something. They all knew better.

Mighty shrugged at Espio's skepticism. "Check the game's leaderboard if you want, but I was there. Did it on his first try, too. Got a perfect score and everything."

"Perfect, huh? Wow. That's impressive," Knuckles said with genuine shock to his voice. "So-" he turned to Espio and Charmy, "- Vector still doing good?"

"His ankle's fine. He should be out and about tomorrow," Espio informed them.

"Oh. Good." The echidna crossed his arms and tapped his foot on the ground. "So nobody's got any idea what the deal with the swords

is?"

Mighty shook his head. "Nope, nothing."

"I haven't a clue," Espio said.

Charmy shrugged.

"Yeah, that's what I figured." Knuckles sighed. "Man, what a weird guy."

For hours the sound rapid keystrokes were the only sounds that could be heard within the HQ's lab. The source of this tapping was from Tails, who, for the most part, had been sitting at the same computer he'd sat at ever since he'd recorded those Chaos readings from Sorun's body. So engrossed was he in his work that he didn't even notice when somebody stepped up behind him. He did notice when that somebody tapped at his shoulder.

The sudden contact made Tails yelp and jump up in his seat. He calmed down almost instantly when he saw it was a just a familiar walrus behind him, at which point he pouted and turned back to his computer.

"Oh, hi, Rotor," he tiredly mumbled as he continued typing. "You just get in?"

"Uh... yeah, there were some projects I wanted to catch up on," Rotor answered as he blinked down at the fox. "Tails, it's almost nighttime. Why're you still here?"

"Mm. I'm worried about Sorun. Some issues with the Chaos Emerald happened."

Nearby, Rotor pulled a chair away from a different computer and sat down in it before addressing Tails once more. "Yeah, I heard. Blue swords. Sounds crazy. What about it?"

"Well, I've been trying to figure out the mechanism behind how his body managed to convert a Chaos Emerald from a solid state into a pure energy state and integrate it into... wherever it got integrated into his body," Tails explained as he typed away at the computer. "We need to get it out of him eventually so we can power the portal machine and send him back to his zone, so I've been running a lot of simulations to test out some theories I had."

"And?" Rotor pressed.

Sighing, Tails tapped at one more button and then rotated the chair around to face Rotor. "They've all come up as negative," he lamented. "I just don't understand it, and that's frustrating because I always understand things, but then this happened and none of the data is lining up and-"

"Tails, take a breath." The fox's speech had began to grow more rapid, and Rotor had to hold his hands up to stop him. "I get it, you're freaked out."

"I'm not... yeah. Sorry," Tails apologized. "I just can't find a way to separate the Emerald from Sorun's body. For all intents and purposes, these models are basically telling me they're completely fused. So if we can't remove it..."

"Then we can't send him back," Rotor finished. He hummed, and then folded one his his leathery legs over the other. "You really are worried about the guy," he noted. "I would have expected you to be a bit, I dunno, off-put by him. Especially after he yelled at you."

Tails shook his head, and then turned back to the computer as Rotor watched on. "Oh, he said he was sorry for that. I don't really blame him; I think I would have been a little freaked out if something like that happened to me, too. I don't think I would have reacted so violently, though. Eh heh." He paused to type out a string of commands on the computer. "Sorun's not a bad person. At least, I don't think so. I think he's just sad."

"I think you're mixing 'sad' up for 'angry' here, Tails," Rotor commented.

"Mm, well... yeah, maybe," he admitted. "But he's had a lot thrown at him and he's not *us* , you know? And... I think that's why I had some trouble understanding him at first. I've been around Sonic for so long and seen him shrug off so much that it seems normal, but none of this is normal for Sorun. So I tried doing something normal for him and talked to him."

Rotor hummed. "And how'd that go?"

"He's... nice, it not reserved a bit. If you're really patient with him he really opens up."

"Oh, come on." Rotor rolled his eyes. "I've only known him for over a week but he doesn't give the impression of being a conversationalist. He usually just spends the day standing around glaring at people. He's as bad as Shadow."

Tails shook his head. "No, he's just shy. At least that was the feeling he gave off when I was talking with him. He *can* be friendly, but he just... he doesn't approach anybody. And I think it's just because he's always nervous around us." He stopped typing and glanced back at Rotor. "I mean, he's friendly with Sonic, but I think that's mostly just because they're sharing a room." His face fell. "Or, well, they *were* friendly. Sorun kind of... snapped at Sonic, I think, after the thing with the Emerald."

That was how Sonic had put it to him, at least, right after that incident. He had to wonder if more had happened though from the dour expression Sonic had held, and knowing how upset Sorun must have been, he wouldn't have been surprised to learn things grew a bit too heated. But all he could do was hope that things would settle down soon.

"Well, he still kind of creeps me out," Rotor said as he pulled his chair towards a different computer and booted it up. "But I can guess

I can understand his attitude all things considered when you put it like that. Oh yeah, by the way, didn't you say something about wanting to conduct maintenance on the plane? I saw it got dinged up pretty bad."

"Uh... later. Tomorrow, maybe," Tails answered. "I want a few more cracks at this simulation to see if I can't get an idea about what to do about that Emerald."

"Any progress on that front?"

The fox's blue eyes turned up at the computer screen. They slowly closed when he saw the words "critical failure" flashing in red letters across the monitor. "Not really, no."

Boom!

"I somehow knew I'd find you here."

The location was a small training area tucked away in a small clearing past a stream near Freedom HQ used primarily for, unsurprisingly, training purposes. One section of the training area was a small space comprised of wooden boxes and crates stacked on top of each other spread out all over. Currently this area was being occupied by a dark hedgehog standing on the ground and a white bat that was sitting on a pile of crates and looking down at him.

Shadow regarded the bat for a moment, and then looked down at his hand. A crackling bolt of yellow-green energy that was vaguely shaped like a spear formed in his hand, and he turned towards a nearby crate. "And what gave you that impression, Rouge?" he asked before he threw the energy spear at a nearby crate, which exploded upon impact.

"I thought to myself 'where could Shadow possibly be if he's not in his room' and came to the first place that came to mind," Rouge answered him. She slung one of her high boots over the other and

blinked her teal eyes down at him. "What's got you so riled? You normally only chuck those Chaos Spears around so wantonly when you're upset over something."

"I'm not upset," Shadow denied as he threw another Chaos Spear at a crate. "I'm simply... intrigued at something. And intrigue is slowly turning to vexation." Yet another Chaos Spear formed in his hand, and he scowled down at the energy bolt he was holding. "Hmph. It just won't shape the way I want it to," he muttered before throwing it at a crate.

Rouge watched the explosion with an impassive expression, and then looked back to the hedgehog. "Alright, I'll bite. What happened?" she asked.

"Are you aware of the incident that transpired with Sorun and the Chaos Emerald that we recently acquired?"

"Something about him absorbing it? I heard people talking." The bat shook her head. "Waste of a good gem if you ask me. But I heard he got a sword ability or something out of it?"

"He gained some form of Chaos Control," Shadow confirmed. "The mechanism behind how such a thing is possible is unclear, but what's even more unclear is the ability he manifested." His face furrowed into an puzzled expression. "I thought it was a Chaos Spear at first, but it's clearly something different. He made a sword."

"... So a Chaos Sword?" Rouge tried.

Shadow shook his head. "No. You know I have a deep connection with Chaos due to my biology. Sensing Chaos energy is second nature to me, so you can trust me when I say that sword Sorun manifested was nothing like a Chaos Spear," he explained. "Compared to my own Chaos Spear it practically had no power behind it. He could barely even sustain it; it shattered. But... not only did he manage to form it into a completely solid state, but he did so while forming it into an intricate shape. That sword."

The explanation caused a semi-interested hum to come from Rouge. "Alright...? So what's the problem?"

"The problem is that I can't recreate it," Shadow grumbled under his breath. "I have an innate mastery over the manipulation of Chaos energy. I thought shaping my own Chaos energy into something as simple as what I saw Sorun create would be simple, but it appears I was wrong. I can't even grasp how he created such a technique. Or *why* he created it for that matter."

A very, very strange Chaos Control technique at that. Even the blue coloring of the ability had been peculiar, though Shadow was less concerned about its color and more behind the actual intricacies of it. It was unthinkable that *him* of all people couldn't replicate a Chaos technique after having seen it firsthand, but that particular ability continued to elude him, though admittedly his desire to create that technique for himself was more out of academic curiosity than anything else.

He would have to discuss it with Sorun at some point, though he had his doubts that the human was approachable at the moment. Especially after all the shouting he'd overheard earlier today. But then again, reading people wasn't a strong suit of his. For Rouge, though, such a thing was practically an inborn skill. The perks of being a spy, he supposed.

"What's your impression of the human, Rouge?" he asked.

"Impression, huh?" She looked up at the darkening sky in thought. "We've pretty much avoided each other for the most part, so I can't really say much. I never really thought much of him so I pretty much just ignored him."

"That doesn't sound like you at all," Shadow noted.

"Hey, you heard him during his big 'inauguration speech' or whatever you want to call it. He didn't give any reasons to be paid attention to." The bat rested her head against a closed fist. "Speaking of which,

swords or not, that guy's still technically a civilian fighting as a resistance soldier. He's unskilled, and that kind of thing is dangerous for himself and everybody around him."

Shadow nodded in agreement. "I know, but they're desperate. We all are at this point. But maybe we can make something of him now that he has that sword ability of his."

Rouge scoffed. "What, you wanna train him and his power?"

"More like pick his brain about those swords," Shadow admitted, "but if need be... perhaps. Whether he likes it or not, he's an actual asset to us now. It'd be unfortunate waste for him to suffer a fatal injury because we didn't properly prepare him."

Anybody dying at this juncture would be detrimental to their operations. But Sorun was inexperienced, and if anybody in the Freedom Fighters was in danger of falling due to a stupid mistake, it was him. At the very least he could maybe give him a few pointers on those swords of his so he didn't end up poking his own eye out with them. Or somebody else's for that matter.

He would *really* need to talk with that human at some point.

"Ah, well, you have fun with that." The two black, leathery wings on Rouge's lower back began to flap, and her body picked up into the air and off the crate. "You gonna be here much longer?"

"Just a few more minutes," he answered.

She didn't say anything in response, choosing to just give a shrug before her body turned around and flew off. Shadow didn't even bother to see her off, as he was too focused on the crackling weapon forming in his hand as he concentrated on an image of a sword.

To his disappointment, the weapon still came up as a Chaos Spear. It was promptly thrown at a crate.

"Huh? What do ah think about Sorun?"

"Well, yeah." Sally sat up in her seat and gestured to the yellow-furred rabbit Mobian sitting across from her. "Likes, general concerns, any, er, issues you may have had with him," she elaborated. "I'm worried he's not fitting in here, and in the long run that could be problematic. I want Sorun to trust us, but he socializes so little with everybody it's hard to gauge him in any regard."

It wasn't exactly a problem, but it wasn't something she was comfortable with letting lie, either. The problem was that Sally just didn't know *how* to approach Sorun to solve these issues since his attitude was so... different. Alien even by human standards, and she didn't know if it was because Sorun was still acclimating to everything this zone was throwing at him or if he was just this strange naturally.

So she decided a practical solution was in order by way of discussing the issue with somebody else. Specifically, to go to her friend and fellow Freedom Fighter's house to talk to her about the odd human that had joined them.

"Well... the feller sure is different. And ah don't mean just his looks," Bunnie admitted in a southern drawl. She placed her left arm, a robotic limb, on the table. "Ah haven't spoken to him once, but there've been times ah've caught him starin' at my robot bits."

"Huh!?" There was the sound of a fridge door closing as a coyote Mobian's head poked in from the kitchen door and into the dining room. "Say it is not so! Sorun has been what!?" Antoine yelled as he looked towards Sally.

The chipmunk winced and made a lowering gesture with her hand to calm Antoine down. "It's not his fault. I've heard him mention some things here and there about where he's from. I don't think his zone has anything like cybernetics over there," she explained. "I'm sure he's just curious about them."

"Oh. Right. Of course." Antoine- for reasons that were unclear to Sally- sighed in relief and stepped into the dining room. "Eet's understandable then that Sorun would be curious."

"And what about you, Antoine?" Sally asked. "Do you have any thoughts on Sorun?"

"He iz... very difficult to talk about," he admitted. "We have talked very little, but to me he seems like the nice kind of person. Perhaps he iz just nervous?" He stopped himself and rethought his words. "But... he did go on zat mission for us, so he cannot be the fraidy-cat, unless... I don't know." His shoulder hung and he gave Sally an apologetic look.

"Ah just thought that he never looked to be in the mood to talk if you know what ah mean," Bunnie added. "What brought all this up anyhow?"

Right, they hadn't been there during the incident earlier today, Sally had to remind herself. Well, now was as good as time as any to fill them in, and it would give her a chance to air her own concerns. "Sorun apparently has a condition where he can absorb Chaos Emeralds. Earlier today Sonic took him on a mission to get one, and when he touched it the Emerald disappeared. He's fine," she assured them when they grew concerned looks, "better than fine, really. He got a, well, an ability out of the ordeal. But mentally I think he's about as upset as he was the day he came here."

Bunnie blinked her green eyes in confusion. "The feller gets a new power out of a Chaos Emerald, an' he's upset?"

"Sonic filled me in. Sorun's worried that, since the Emerald is stuck in him, that he won't be able to return home since he needs all seven. Whether that's actually true or not remains to be seen." She lowered her gaze towards the table. "Add that to the fact that he's still upset at us since we were the ones that brought him here and, well, you get the picture. I'm worried that Sorun is holding us

responsible for possibly stranding him here in this zone forever because of everything that's happened."

Her words hung in the air for a few moments before both Bunnie's and Antoine's faces fell in realization. "Ah. Oh," Bunnie voiced as her large ears fell. "Ah guess, uh... he would be really sore, huh...?"

"Zat is... not the ideal sort of problem," Antoine agreed. "It is no wonder he looks so angry all of the time."

"But that's the thing. He isn't," Sally sighed out in exasperation. "Or, most of the time he isn't. Today and day one notwithstanding. I've talked to him and if anything he just sounded, I don't know... scared. But at the same he's been patient with everything going on around him. It's confusing. On one hand he's upset at all of us, but on the other hand he's been understanding towards us at his own inconvenience. It's as impressive as it is frustrating."

"If I may interject?"

The new voice sounded from the inside of Sally's vest, and drew the attention of everybody present. She immediately reached into her pocket to pull out an object and place it on the table: a small, square keyboard with a green flip-screen attached to it.

"Have you considered that perhaps it would be wisest to just talk to him?" The small computer talked in a feminine voice, and the words she said were displayed on the screen. "Would that not be the simplest course of action?"

"I'm... not really following you, Nicole," Sally admitted.

"There is little to follow. Talk to him. In my experience talking with others in concern to issues causing mental duress can be an effective treatment. It is obvious that Sorun is experiencing stress due to recent events, so if he will not approach anybody on his own, then why would you not approach him yourselves?"

Everybody blinked at the simple solution. So simple that Sally felt like kicking herself for not thinking of it earlier, and she forcibly reminded of why she confided so much to the little computer.

"That... sounds really practical actually," she agreed, and then looked up to Bunnie. "Maybe tomorrow we could try something?"

The rabbit looked uncomfortable at the idea. "Ah dunno," she muttered, "ah wouldn't really know what to lead with when it comes to him."

"Open up with the cybernetics," she suggested. "Or if you're uncomfortable with that we could just open up with something else. Anything is fine as long as it gets him to talk." She leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms. "Just... please try talking with him? About anything?"

The other two Mobians gave each other unsure looks, but eventually they turned towards Sally and gave her a nod. It offered some relief to her that maybe this issue could be fixed yet.

"Maybe you could talk to him, too, Nicole?" Sally suggested. "I feel that the more people on this the better the results would be."

There was a pause from the computer. "I'm not entirely against it," Nicole said, though the chipmunk had noticed that her volume sounded slightly lower. "That being said, from what you have told me Sorun's experience with mechanical beings has been extremely poor. I fear that this has caused a negative bias within him against anybody who can be seen as an artificial construct. Such as me."

Sally's eyes widened in realization, and she immediately shook her head. "No-no-no! Sorun's isn't... well, I don't think he... no, he wouldn't have any reason to dislike you. You're not a Badnik," she reasoned. "It'll be fine. I can even get a Power Ring and you could make your body to talk to him with! You two could, I dunno... play a video game? You like video games. I think I heard Sorun mention a

couple of times he likes video games. That's already something you two have in common!"

An ellipses symbol appeared on the small computer's screen as Nicole mulled over Sally's words. "... Is he any good?" she finally asked.

"I think?" Sally shrugged. "I'm pretty sure Sonic mentioned something about him being good. But you could find out."

"That is acceptable."

And just like that, Sally saw her plan of getting Sorun to finally open up to someone actually have a decent chance of success. There'd be a bit of planning to put in, but it would be all the worth it in the end if this actually worked.

She really hoped it would work.

By now it was the middle of the night. Midnight, more accurately, as the broken moon was high in the center of the sky and was the one source of illumination for the sole human walking through the woods just outside of Knothole City's edge. With his hands firmly tucked into his pockets, the teen was mainly spending this time walking in random directions with hunched shoulder while thinking quietly to himself.

"Freakin' Emeralds and the echidna and Sonic and... egh. Everything's all screwed up," he thought as he kicked a rock away. *"Maybe I should just jump off a cliff or something and cripple myself so that I'm too disabled to save the world. I'll do it just to spite Aurora."* He sighed. *"No, that's a stupid idea. And I like my legs."*

So far he'd come up with no solutions to his current predicament, nor even a plan on moving forwards. Sorun wasn't even so sure he'd come to terms with everything yet. And despite walking for practically half a day at this point, he was still coming up blank on everything.

This lead him to this point: exhausted both physically and mentally while wandering the woods.

What to do, what to do...

"Do nothing? Take the 'wait and see' approach? Probably wouldn't end too well. Fight? If I wanna wind down into the grave, maybe. But fighting's the only way I'm getting those Emeralds. But those Emeralds will... man. What am- agh!"

He'd walked into something. Something small and metallic from the peculiar *ding* he'd heard upon collision. Sorun backed up a step and rubbed the spot on his forehead he'd been hit as he looked up to see what had impacted him.

Sorun didn't quite know what he was looking at.

He almost thought it was a floating golf ball at first, but the way its smooth, white surface shined implied it was made of metal, and there was red eye-like lens right on its front looking right at Sorun. Looking closer he saw that it was more oblong in shape than spherical, and there were four small ports on its underside with jets of air firing out of it.

It looked harmless enough, but Sorun had to wonder why something like this was just floating in the middle of the woods.

"Hell are you? Some kind of drone?" He wondered as he leaned his head forwards. In response, the small, white drone zipped enthusiastically around in the air and floated a fair distance away from Sorun. It stopped and turned around so the red lens was facing Sorun once again, and then shook up and down in what he assumed was an attempt at getting his attention.

Sorun rose an eyebrow at the drone's antics. "What, you want me to follow you?" he asked, though it was more to himself than the robot.

The drone shook up and down again.

"Alright, let's think this over. There's a mad scientist named Eggman trying to take over the world with robots. There's a vaguely egg-shaped robot trying to lead me somewhere. Coincidence? Who the fuck knows when it comes to this world." He sighed while deliberating with himself on what to do. *"... Agh, why not? Day can't get any worse. Sure, let's follow the strange white egg drone from outta nowhere."*

Was it the wisest decision for him to make? Probably not, but he was too tired to even care at this point. So he gave the drone a stiff nod and began following it as it lead him pasts trees and brush away from Knothole.

Was it Eggman? He truly, honestly didn't know. He didn't know the man outside of what Sonic had told him. Maybe it really was just somebody else trying to get his attention. But he didn't know anybody else besides the crazy robot guy terrorizing the world who would be even remotely interested in him. And yet he didn't know why Eggman would take interest in him.

He supposed he would find out when he made it to wherever the drone was leading him.

Eventually, Sorun and the drone emerged from the trees into a large, circular clearing of grass and a few large rocks. The broken moon was still shining brightly above them with few clouds in the sky, and with that lighting Sorun was able to see that there was somebody in the clearing sitting on a rock fiddling with a controller of some type in his hand.

When he walked closer to get a better look, Sorun was shocked to find it was a human. An admittedly odd-looking human, but a human. Or maybe an Overlander, now that he thought on it, but he didn't know how different they looked from normal humans. Based on his stature he looked to be shorter than even Sorun, which made him laugh once under his breath, was bald save for six individual hairs vertically aligned on his head, and had probably the longest nose he'd ever seen. His clothes were even stranger: he was wearing a

short, green jacket with pointed tails and a black pair of pants that, to Sorun's bewilderment, looked to be fused with his boots.

In a word? Odd. Everything about this strange, little man was odd. But he didn't look like a maniacal tyrant at first glance, so there was that.

"Eh, hm? Oh! There you are." The little man looked up at Sorun as the white drone floated over to him and hovered in place. He waved to Sorun with an unreadable, easy smile as the teen walked closer to him. "My apologies for taking so long with the navigation. The camera on that things was a last-minute slap job. Resolution's quite poor."

As he said this, he hit a small button on the controller before setting it down. A small, pin-sized hole next to the drone's lens lit up red, which Sorun took a brief note of before focusing back on the shorter man.

"Uh... yeah," Sorun commented. "You, um, you were looking for me?"

"Well, we were using the drone to scout around Knothole so we could catch sight of you. We weren't planning on making contact this early, but you just so happened to be alone so we chose now to talk," he explained.

So far he seemed nice-ish. There was a devious undertone to his otherwise neutral voice, but Sorun didn't have any problem with him. Yet. "What happened to your face, man?" he asked. It was only know he'd noticed a rather glaring black eye over the man's right eye.

The man frowned. "I was hit," he plainly stated. "I'd prefer not to discuss it further."

"Okay. So are you Eggman or what?" Might as well get that question out of the way and go from there.

The short man chuckled and shook his head. "Oh, no. The honor of being at the head of the illustrious belongs to the brilliant Dr. Ivo Robotnik. I would be his assistant and nephew, Snively."

He blinked. The teen looked to Snively, looked around the clearing to confirm that they were alone, and then blinked again as he looked back to the other man. "... Ohhh!" Sorun pointed towards Snively and smiled in light amusement as he threw his head back in realization. "Yeah, I heard he had a nephew helping him out, hah hah."

A small stream of laughter escaped from the teen, and Snively looked at him oddly before he began chuckling along with him, though his head was tilted in confusion. This carried on for thirty seconds before they both stopped to take a breath.

"Hah... hey, Snively?"

"Yes?"

"What's stopping me from literally fucking murdering you right now?"

The shorter man's eyes widened in shock, and then his entire expression changed to abject horror after a small flash of blue light and particles appeared on Sorun's sides. Four blue swords, two at each end of the teen's body with one over the other, were floating next to him with their points aimed directly at Snively, who became rooted to the spot.

"I'm gonna be honest with you. The day I've had today? Worst day of my whole life. The week I've had? Hoo boy." The teen's expression had gone completely cold as he regarded the shorter man with utter contempt in his eyes, his hands still casually tucked in his pockets despite the swords next to him. "So here's what's gonna happen. You either give me a real solid reason why I shouldn't kill the man partly responsible for the current shitty state of the world, or I ram these things through your body and turn you into a carcass."

Because after everything that had happened today? He wasn't having it. He wasn't having any more nonsense. The fact he was considering actual murder at the moment wasn't even crossing his mind as he affixed Snively with a deadly glare. He just wanted all of these problems to be over with.

"Y-you're bluffing," Snively stuttered as he back up a step. "You wouldn't dare. Freedom Fighters don't kill!" A sword flew away from Sorun and into the ground right in front of Snively, causing him to fall onto his backside. A fifth sword appeared to replace the one Sorun had fired.

"I'm a pretty terrible Freedom Fighter." The points of the swords had moved in a way that tracked Snively's movement, who was frozen on the ground chattering in fear at the pair of cold, blue eyes locked onto him. "You know what? Forget it. You're not worth the effort-"

"Whoa-whoa-whoa! Hold your horses there!"

A new voice. older, and coming from the white drone of all all things. It slowly floated between Sorun and Snively, and the teen watched in mild interest as the top of the round drone opened up to reveal a small projector on its inside. Light spilled out from the projector and quickly warped in the air until a stunningly clear, holographic image of a man was being shown.

If Snively looked strange, than this new man was straight out of a cartoon.

He wore the same outfit as Snively, though it was red in color. A body that was impossibly round but with limbs that were so long and thin by comparison it was grotesque. A round, shining head that was bald save for a wild ginger mustache, eyes hidden behind blue-tinted glasses, goggles on his round forehead, and a smile that was almost manic to Sorun's eyes.

He'd shoot himself with a Summoned Sword if this wasn't Eggman.

"And you must be Robotnik." He looked up and down the hologram that was so clear he practically looked like he was standing there in the flesh, and the teen scoffed. "Jesus. No wonder they call you Eggman."

"Ah, yes. A childish nickname I've grown oddly fond over given the... stature of this body I've been shackled with. But I believe proper introductions are in order." He bent down and flashed Sorun a mocking smile as he held a hand out in the gesture of a handshake. "Dr. Ivo Robotnik, at your service, though these days I do indeed go by Eggman. Or Emperor Eggman if it suits your fancy."

"Sorun." The teen kept his hands in his pockets as he regarded his hand, and then looked back up to the Doctor. "Hey, Eggman, I'm gonna kill your nephew right in front of you in a hot second here if you don't stop wasting my time."

A bitter chuckle left Eggman as his image straightened its posture. "Ah, how I've missed dealing with humans and Overlanders. It's refreshing, honestly. Our kind always did have a certain bloodlust that made things all the more interesting. The frustrating part of fighting Mobians is that a majority of their kind lack this crucial drive. Ironic, really, given their ancestral heritage as common animals." He turned his head down to Snively. "Stop cowering and pick yourself up you fool," he groused. "This is why I suggested we make contact by remote drone, but *nooo* , you wanted to make it personal because it looked more 'professional'. Please." He looked back to Sorun. "And I'll have to ask you not skewer my nephew. As incompetent as he may be, he still has his uses, and keeps things *mildly* amusing from time to time. So put those things away."

Sorun watched as Snively stood up and hid behind Eggman's hologram. He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Well, maybe I don't feel like it," he said.

"Well, maybe I feel like taking my Egg Fleet out to carpet bomb all of Knothole if you so much as scratch Snively with one of those swords. Funny how that works, huh?"

The muscles in Sorun's body tensed, and his breath hitched. "You're not gonna do that," he claimed, voice dry from the threat he'd heard. "Knothole's been there how long? You can't tell me you could have bombed them at any time you wanted and haven't yet. That doesn't make any sense."

It really didn't. He may have had the ships- Sorun had even been on one- but if Eggman could use them to do something like that, he would have. And the conflict between him and the Freedom Fighters had been going on for an absurd amount of time. There was no truth to his words.

Except, now that Sorun thought about it, he *did* have the ships. And fitting them to drop bombs was, admittedly, probably trivial for a mad genius like Eggman. And the fact they scouted around Knothole for Sorun meant that they knew the exact location where Knothole City was. It would have been laughably easy for him to wipe it off the map if he chose to, actually.

... Why *didn't* he just carpet bomb the place?

"Oh my god you're being serious," Sorun realized with widened eyes.

Eggman smirked at the teen. "Pieced it together, have you? Now be a good boy and put the swords away."

A small, frustrated growl sounded from the back of Sorun's throat, but he obeyed and had all the swords shatter and disappear. It was right after that Eggman clapped his hands together with a wide grin.

"Excellent, he listens to reason! That's more than can be said for most people on this rock," he said. "But you're not from this particular rock, are you, boy?"

"And just how do you know that?" Sorun demanded.

"I've my sources." Eggman waved his hand to the side. "You strike me as somebody who knows what they want and who is willing to

get it as quickly as easily as possible. A very human trait if any, and one I can respect. The fact you were willing to kill somebody you just met mere moments ago proves that. Not only that, but you have power. I can use someone of that caliber, so I'll get right to the point: why not leave those filthy animals in Knothole behind and come join me?"

The offer was so out of left field that Sorun choked slightly in shock, and he had to hold a hand to his throat to regain his normal breathing. With wide eyes he looked to the hologram, but he couldn't tell how sincere Eggman was being. That smile he wore was just so unsettling and almost unnatural that he couldn't tell what it was. Snively was still hiding behind the hologram, and his expression, now holding nothing but contempt for Sorun, didn't help either.

Join Eggman? Of all the offers he was making, it was that? The lack of a carpet bombing didn't make sense, but this? This was downright madness. He didn't know what to expect from a mad doctor, but it surely wasn't this. He didn't understand.

"You want me to join you?" he repeated. "Let's pretend for a moment that I'm even *remotely* interested. Why in the world would I want to join you?"

"Oh, where to begin?" the Doctor said as he began to stroke at his mustache. "To have a place at the winning side of this conflict? You must have some sense of self-preservation, and you must know that the Freedom Fighters' days are numbered. You can't tell me you don't want an escape from that destruction."

"That... that doesn't-"

"How about the fact that you don't even like them?" Sorun stopped dead at Eggman's almost knowing words. How could he know? "Oh, poor Sorun. Ripped from his life in another zone and forced to work with his own captors. Strange animal people that took everything from you and expect to give everything in return. Don't be coy; you hate them, so why give your life for them? Come over to my side.

Humans and Overlanders may not be the exact same species, but we're kin nonetheless, regardless of what zones we are from."

He was right. That was the thing- he was right. Sorun truly didn't like any of the Mobians back at Knothole. He disliked the Freedom Fighters, and today's events had exemplified that fact. Leaving them to join somebody who was the closest thing he'd seen to a human since coming to Mobius? He was afraid to admit the idea sounded appealing.

But he was afraid. The fact that he agreed with everything Eggman was saying terrified Sorun, and he couldn't stop the slight tremors going through his body from just hearing how much he agreed with Eggman. The Doctor must have saw his reaction, too, because his smile was growing. That unnaturally wide smile on that unnaturally shaped body. The sight alone had the teen on edge.

"And if none of that hooked you, then think about this: I can get you back home."

Sorun's blood ran cold, and his felt his hands begin to tighten up as he grit his teeth. "You lie," he hissed out. "I need all seven Chaos Emeralds to return to my zone. Since one of them is stuck inside of me, I can't. There's no other way back."

"Really? Really now?" Eggman asked. "I'm capable of a great many things, Sorun. Unraveling the mystery that is your body and extracting that Emerald? Hah! Child's play. In the unlikely event such a thing is in fact impossible, then it's just a matter of finding an alternate route to your zone." He gestured at himself. "I'm Ivo Robotnik! The greatest mind to ever grace the world! Finding a way back to your zone may indeed prove to be a challenge, but it is one I would welcome with open arms if only to keep me occupied with something interesting. So what do you say, Sorun? Feel like joining the winning team?"

He wanted to. He didn't want to admit it to himself, but the offer was so enticing that he he couldn't help but desire it. A chance at getting

rid of this Emerald for a chance of getting the twelve years he lost back? A chance at going *home* ? That alone gave him pause. The prospect of going home, of finally getting to see everybody he'd left behind when he'd gone through that portal again, of returning to his life without having to risk his life fighting a hopeless war against robots? If that were really possible, he couldn't ignore it. And the hologram right in front of him was offering it.

There was a very real possibility he would take it, too. But he had to know one single thing before he made a decision.

"Answer me one thing," Sorun asked in a subdued tone. "Why are you acting like this? Why are you still fighting the Freedom Fighters if you could end it all-" he snapped his fingers, "- just like that?"

"It's simple, Sorun. Knothole and its Freedom Fighters are the last bastion of resistance on the whole planet. Conquering them means I've conquered the world, and I refuse to have my last hurrah be won at the simple press of a button. No, my victory will be absolute. I want to watch the hope leave the eyes of every single person there as my complete and total victory finally sinks in. I don't merely wish to conquer. I wish to *win* , Sorun. Blowing them up at the drop of a hat just won't do."

"... What...?" He was so dumbfounded by the explanation that Sorun couldn't even speak. He went as far as to wait for Eggman to continue, to maybe add in some crucial part of his explanation that would make it all clear, but he didn't. He was simply waiting for Sorun to reply. But he couldn't, because nothing that Eggman had just said made sense to the human. *"He's... he wants to personally... he's so fucked in the head that he would rather torment everybody into defeat than just bomb them?"*

It was an absurd notion to him. Beyond absurd. It didn't make *sense* . Sorun didn't understand it because there was absolutely no sense to be found in the man's reasoning. Hell, there was no reasoning!

"Why?" The question came out of Sorun's mouth in a choked whisper. "Why... do any of this? Take over the world, ruin everybody's lives... *why* ? What's the point of all this!?"

Eggman's expression changed. His mouth flattened into a thin line, and to Sorun it almost looked like he was disappointed by the question. "This is why I dislike people. Everybody always asks that question, over and over again. Why? It's infuriating I have to keep answering such a simple question," he growled out with a shake of his head. "Because I *can* , Sorun. Because my intelligence dwarfs that of every single being in this entire zone, which automatically makes me superior to everybody else. You need proof? Take a look around at the world." As he said this, Eggman swept his arms out to the sides. "I can do whatever I want because I'm better than everybody else. I'm *doing* this because it's *fun* . I want my own empire, and I want the thrill of crushing everybody under my boot who stands in my way. I want the challenge." His hologram leaned forwards. "That's the *why* of it, Sorun. If I want to take the world over, I'll do it at my own pace at my own leisure."

There was something terrify about how simple the reason was. The childlike simplicity of it. "Because I can and want to" was his answer. That was it. He remembered Sonic telling him basically the same thing when he'd asked, but Sorun hadn't believed him. Hearing it for himself though was an almost surreal experience. Eye-opening.

He had to hold his head, he was so taken back by his thoughts. Images made from Eggman's words flashed through his head, causing Sorun to sharply gasp at the sudden intrusion of pictures. He saw Knothole, destroyed entirely and burned to the ground. The Freedom Fighters all chained and watching in despair as the world around them burned. Humans and Mobians enslaved.

"Oh, hell no." There was still the fact that Sorun didn't believe Eggman could remove the Emerald from him. He trusted Athair and Tails more than the *thing* in front of him. Could he find a way back to Earth, though? He doubted that, too, especially since all seven Emeralds were needed to get him in the first place. Then again,

Eggman did have some amount of credibility to his words. Sorun truly didn't know, but the possibility was there. What Sorun did know was that he didn't want Eggman anywhere near Earth. *"No way. It's not happening. I'm not gonna work with this psycho if it means even a chance of him finding Earth."*

That just wasn't happening. He wasn't going to bring this insanity to Earth. He didn't trust him not to touch it. And he wasn't going to work with somebody who wanted to ruin everybody's lives just for the fun of it.

"Alright, here's the truth, Eggman," Sorun muttered out in a haggard voice. "You're right. I don't like the Freedom Fighters. They ruined my life, but at the very least I can understand the reason they did it." He pointed a shaky finger at Eggman. "I don't like them, but I hate you. You're insane. You're wrecking the whole world just because you feel like it! You're acting like a damn cartoon villain except you're *actually* ruining everybody's lives with all your batshit insanity!" Eggman's face was completely impassive so far, and he seemed almost bored as he drummed his fingers against his elbows, though this went largely ignored by Sorun. "No. No way. You're a psychopath. I'd rather work with people I can barely tolerate than you."

His fears over Earth went unsaid. Sorun wouldn't even dare to so much as put the seed of that idea in the madman's head. But above that, he wouldn't work with somebody who was enslaving people for fun. Ruining and ending people's lives just because he wanted to. It was almost incomprehensible at how wrong it all was, and Sorun was almost disgusted in himself in how he understood how simple the why of what Eggman was doing was. Just because he could. He found it absolutely revolting.

He shook his head as he finished and backed up from the hologram. Eggman was giving Sorun a critical glare, and then slowly sighed while he adjusted his glasses. "Truly disappointing, Sorun. Very well. We're done here."

Sorun paused in surprise. He hadn't expected that. "Wait, what? That's it? You're gonna leave it at that?" he asked in a disbelieving tone. "You're not even gonna threaten to bomb Knothole if I don't join? You're just letting me go?"

That had been a legitimate fear of his. A fear because he didn't know how he was going to counter such a move. But it didn't happen. Instead he was just being let go, which had been the last thing Sorun had thought would happen.

"Oh, please. What do you take me for? I'm not letting go of my last bit of fun at your expense," he said. "It doesn't matter anyways. I was just going to use you to keep the Freedom Fighters at bay so they could gather strength and put up a better fight against me. If you stay and continue to oppose me? It's just another opponent for me to crush, but at the very least you have the potential to bring something to the table to make the game interesting.

"So go on, Sorun. Fight me if you so dare. Take the Emeralds back and grow in strength. Entertain me." He snapped his fingers, and the hologram began to flicker. "Either way I will gain my victory. It's your loss."

The hologram finally cut out, and Sorun gasped out the breath he'd been holding as the drone closed up. It flew into Snively's hand, who quickly placed it in his pocket before looking up at Sorun. That affronted, fearful look was still in his eyes from Sorun's earlier threat, and he didn't so much as spare the teen a word before he turned around towards a nearby rock.

He wasn't having that. "Hey, Snively. One more thing."

The shorter man stopped and turned around as Sorun stomped up behind him. He opened his mouth to asked something, but was cut short when Sorun grabbed the collar of his jacket and punched him right in his already blackened eye. Snively cried out in pain and stumbled backwards, holding a hand to his aching eye while staring up at Sorun with an infuriated expression.

Sorun's response was to flip both middle fingers at him.

"Juvenile," Snively snarled at him before turning around and marching towards the rock. He sped up with a yelp when a blue sword stabbed into the ground behind him, and he practically dived behind the rock. The low hum of an engine reached Sorun's ears, and the teen watched as a white, saucer-like vehicle floated out from behind the rock with Snively riding on the top.

"Man. That was cathartic," Sorun thought as he watched the saucer carrying Snively float up into the night sky and disappear. *"Like, that felt really good. I can make a habit out of punching that guy in the face."* He just might, too, because that one punch had relieved more stress than he had expected. A lot more.

"Alright. So Sonic was right. Eggman's insane." He shook his head, pushed his hands into his pocket, and began walking back in the direction of Freedom HQ. He'd underestimated just how psychotic Eggman had been from Sonic's description, but after meeting him? Sonic hadn't been exaggerating at all. If anything, he'd undersold just how unhinged Eggman was.

And Sorun couldn't even tell if he was unhinged or not. For all his talk of taking over the world just because he could, no matter how much Sorun disagreed with it, there was one thing Sorun couldn't deny: the Doctor was technically right. Because he was winning and nobody could stop him.

That truly terrified him. That a madman like that could make such a terrible philosophy a reality because of his innate genius. That'd he'd unraveled Sorun and read him like a book within two minutes of meeting him. It was no wonder the Freedom Fighters were losing against him... he was a monster. Both in ideals and ability.

How was he supposed to beat that even with powers? He wasn't so sure he could. And he wasn't going to stick around to find out.

"Fine, here's what we're gonna do. I'm gonna find those six other Emeralds and keep playing at being a Freedom Fighter in the meantime. I'm not gonna touch any of them. I'm gonna find some way to get this Emerald out of my body, and once I have all seven I'm bailing from all this." He slowed down. *"But this world..."*

Those images flashed through his head again. Knothole burned, every Mobian there defeated. Chained. Dead. All with those terrible expressions on their faces. The Freedom Fighters. The citizens. Children. All the Mobians he'd met. Aurora and Athair's warnings still rang in his head. That fate was what awaited everybody if he really did leave them all behind.

He shook his head and sped back up.

"Not my problem. I'm not... this isn't my fight," he thought as he disappeared into the foliage. *"I'm going home. What happens to this world doesn't matter as long as I get home, but there's no way I'm working with Eggman to do it. I'll do it my way."*

Despite how resolute his thoughts were, he couldn't help but notice the painful, tugging feeling in his chest that appeared when those images flashed through his head.

On the other side of the clearing, a hooded figure watched as Sorun walked into the forest. He then stood up from the stump he'd been sitting on, and then stretched his arms above his head while groaning softly.

"Ah, good on you for not being an amoral psychopath, Sorun," Rubrum thought as he finished stretching. *"Just keep staying on the path and everything will work out. At least it will if I don't screw it all up."*

Humming in thought, the man in the red hood crossed his arms and dipped his head down at the ground. *"Did I mess up? I told the Neo-Walkers not to tell Sorun about me, but I didn't actually threaten*

them with anything. Maybe the fact I killed Feist serves as a good enough warning, but knowing them... eh, that's real iffy. But then again, even if they do go out of their way to talk to him they don't actually know enough about me to do any damage. Unless they describe my sword, but I don't see that coming up in a conversation. Nah, it should be fine. We're good." His head picked up to look at the empty clearing. *"I forgot to tell Eggman to not tell Sorun about me,"* his thoughts continued, *"but maybe that's a good thing. He probably would have if I asked him not to just to mess with me. And he seems like the kind of guy that doesn't want to admit I helped him, but even if he does gloat about me, he can't say anything that would reveal too much."*

Rubrum groaned again, and then moved his hand past his hood's shadow to rub at his head. *"This is all such a pain to keep track of. Should have wrote more details down when I copied that stupid list. Speaking of which..."* His hand reached into his pocket and brought out a piece of notebook paper, which he held in front of his shadowed face and scrutinized for a few moments. *"Alright, so... actually, there isn't a lot for me to do right now. Okay. Guess I'll just chill out for a bit, then."*

He folded the paper up and placed it back into his pocket. It was while his hand was in his pocket that he felt something else, and then removed it to take a look. The object he held was the same tape recorder he'd played for Eggman.

His thumb briefly rubbed at the faded-over, scratched two-tailed logo on its side, and a tired sigh escaped him.

"It's all in accordance with the First's will," Rubrum reminded himself before placing the recorder back into his pocket. He stepped deeper into the woods, quickly vanished from sight amidst the trees.

A/N- So this chapter was more of a little intermission break to get a feeling for everybody's thoughts before continuing forwards, as this chapter marks the end of what is basically the

"beginning exposition part" of this story. If I still did arcs this would be the end of arc one, but I elected to just go with the episode format I've been using. But yeah, thus far everything has all been foundation for the story ahead.

Everybody's a little mixed on Sorun. To be expected due to the way Sorun acts, but down the line he's gonna be spending time with everybody, so we'll see how that pans out. Sorun himself just wants to nope out of the world and go home no matter what it takes, but as much of a dreary jerk as he is, he at least has some standards. And then there's Rubrum, who's doing all his shadowy background man-behind-the-curtain things but seems worried about slipping up, because hey, everybody makes mistakes. Who is he and what is he trying to do? Who knows. I mean, I do, but I'm not telling. I'd love to hear your thoughts on it all, though.

Anyways, that's that. See ya in the next one.

Chapter 13

Recursion Error

Episode 13- I learn a new word

"Ohhh-ho-ho, man... this was such a mistake..."

Fun fact about couches, particularly about the one in Freedom HQ: they didn't feel good to sleep on. It wasn't even one of those couches that folded into a bed, either. No, it was just a normal couch, but seeing as Sorun hadn't had anywhere else to sleep that night, he was short on options.

His spat with Sonic was still ringing in his ears by the time he'd gone back to the HQ after his "dealings" with Eggman, and he had been in no mood to go back to Sonic's house at the time. That would have inevitably lead to talking with the blue hedgehog. And Sorun still didn't know what he was supposed to tell Sonic, because his feelings were still all over the place concerning literally all of his issues.

He'd actually fallen asleep trying to formulate some plan of what to say. While searching around the HQ he'd found a dictionary and had spent the night reading through it to try and find as many descriptive words as possible so he could accurately portray his feelings. This didn't work, but on the upside his vocabulary had increased by a couple of words. So there was that.

This lead him to waking up in the morning with his limbs splayed all over the couch with a open dictionary resting on his face. The first thing he noticed was that his back felt like a bolder had been dropped on it, followed by the uncomfortable stiffness in his entire body. The dictionary slid off his face as he sat up with a loud groan, and he heard all of his joints pop as he moved around before finally stepping off of the couch.

Moving away from the living room to the kitchen, Sorun saw that all the doors to the spare rooms in the HQ were all closed. Whether that meant everybody who lived in those rooms were still sleeping or were simply already out, Sorun hadn't a clue. Given his usual sleep schedule it was likely the latter, but given how he couldn't see the sun while underground, he didn't know for certain. Nor did he really care all that much as he finally stepped into the kitchen.

"Mm, breakfast. The most important- eh?" He stopped himself when he saw a digital clock on the kitchen's oven. It was five minutes until one in the afternoon. "... Lunch, the most important meal of the day," he corrected himself as he went to the nearest cabinet and began searching it for something to eat.

His searched led him to a sealed can of peaches.

"Hm. Sure." He was in the appropriate mood for the fruit. The problem, as was realized as he turned the can up and down, was that there was no tab on the lid to open the can. Nor a can opener in sight. "What am I supposed to... hey, that could work."

In a flash, a blue sword appeared floating by his side. He furrowed his brows in focus, and the sword began spinning in place so fast that the blurred blade became a solid circle. He carefully held the lid of the can out to the sword, and then winced at the loud, grinding sound that resulted from can being cut open. Thankfully, this only lasted for a few moments before the lid popped open, at which point the Summoned Sword shattered.

"Aw yeah, boy..." He held up the opened peaches to his mouth, and then stopped himself. "Wait. I ain't got a spoon."

He looked around the kitchen. There weren't any spoons in sight, and the drawers scattered around were so numerous that he wouldn't even know where to start looking around for the utensils drawer. And he was too lazy and hungry to search.

Frowning, another idea came to him and he had a Summoned Sword manifest once again. He grabbed it by the hilt and slowly dipped the point of it down into the can in an attempt to try and spoon the peaches out.

The endeavor was proving fruitless. Any of the juices scraped up fell right off of the blade and back into the can, and any peaches similarly slid off of the spectral sword and back into the can. He grunted in indignation and shattered the sword as he looked down thoughtfully at the can.

"Okay, so swords don't make good spoons." Somebody passed in front of him towards the fridge, though they were largely ignored by the teen as he continued pondering over the peaches. *"Maybe I can just drink out of the can? Nah, what am I? A savage? Then again, I don't really have anything else. Ugh."*

He tapped the side of the can with his finger in thought, pursed his lips, and then looked to his right when he heard the fridge open. He couldn't see who it was due to the fridge door obscuring their bent-over body, but he did notice two things sticking over the fridge's door. Two yellow, fleshy objects that looked distinctly like rabbit ears.

"... Whazzat?" Sorun's eyes narrowed in puzzlement as he bent his head forwards to get a better look at the two ears, which briefly twitched. They did indeed seem to be rabbit ears. *"Huh. I think I remember somebody that looked like a- oh yeah, the one with the cyborg bits- oooooh, yeah, the one I stared at."*

The fridge door closed shut, and he could see that, yes, it was the rabbit he'd been thinking about. The yellow-furred rabbit Mobian in the pink top he'd seen around on occasion. The one who seemed to have a completely mechanical lower half and left arm, for whatever reason.

He really hoped she never caught him staring at the cybernetics. He'd been too interested in them to ever look away.

Eventually, she brought what she had grabbed out of the fridge and took a bite out of it: a carrot, predictably enough. She stood back up while taking another bite, and her eyes roamed around the kitchen before passing over Sorun, and then did a double take at him before she turned her head fully in his direction.

The human was currently leaning against the counter with the can of peaches up to his mouth while he was looking at her over the can.

No words were passed between the two. An air of awkwardness began to settle in the kitchen as the rabbit slowly ate at her carrot while Sorun drank at the peaches. They eventually lowered their half-eaten items before Sorun cleared his throat and waved at her in greeting.

"'Sup." He looked to the left, to the right, and then back at her. "Uh... that's all I got."

Suddenly he was starting to regret never learning anybody's names. Maybe he should have listened to Sally when she suggested he talk to everybody.

The rabbit Mobian blinked her eyes- Sorun rose an eyebrow when he saw the eyelids on her green eyes were purple- and then gave him a curt nod. "Howdy."

"Oh god, she's Southern. How does that even work? Southern America shoulda got blown up with the rest of the- then again the Australian accent and French language survived the Xorda. Somehow. Yeah, why wouldn't a Southern accent survive then?" He was still fuzzy on the details of how such things were even possible, but he feared on asking the details. Never knew what crazy answer would come with it. *"Okay, Sorun, play it cool. She's a comrade. You gotta get to know those for the time being."*

Except that he didn't know what else to say past a greeting. He had nothing- and from the way the rabbit was looking around, he could

tell she was struggling to find anything to say as well. What a great start.

"... So I'm Sorun," the human began. "Er, my name, that is. Sorun. It's Sorun."

"Ah figured," she said. "Mah name's Bunnie."

Because of course it was. "... Hmh, neat." He sipped at his peaches. "So, uh..." His eyes flicked to her robotic arm, and then to the floor. "... Cyborg, huh?"

He figured it was an innocent enough question to lead with. Maybe she got asked about it a lot and would be annoyed by the question, but he had nothing else to go for. Sorun's hope was that she would understand, but he didn't like the way her body stiffened up.

"Yeah... cyborg," she confirmed in a worryingly toneless voice.

Sorun began to nervously tap his fingers on the counter he was leaning on with his free hand. "So, like, did you lose the, y'know... originals...?" He glanced at her legs. "'Cause, like... your whole lower half is-"

"Ah got tossed in a roboticizer if ya really gotta know." Bunnie took a very harsh bite from the carrot, and the loud crunch made Sorun wince. "Sonic saved me before it turned me inta a full robot."

"Oh." He should have started with something else, because the tension he was feeling was actually starting to make him lightheaded. "That's cool."

He saw her face scrunch in confusion at that. "'Cool?'" she repeated.

"Uh-uh-uh, well, I mean...!" The can was starting to shake in Sorun's hand, and he coughed to the side. "Not that you got thrown in a roboticizer, that's horrible, just the cyborg bit." He looked away. "Cyborgs are cool."

In his defense, he really did think they were. Unfortunately he hadn't put any thought into any possible social stigmas a world full of killer robots might have against people with cybernetics. Or her feelings over them since they were apparently involuntary cybernetics. And now he was regretting every single word he'd said.

Why was he so terrible at talking to people?

Bunnie's eyes widened at Sorun's words, and she mumbled something under her breath before turning her body fully to face him. "Sorun, it's okay. Ah ain't mad," she assured him, causing Sorun's shaking to stop. "Ah just... get some stares sometimes. Ya know?" She looked away. "They ain't exactly normal."

"Yeah, I can understand that." As he said this, a Summoned Sword appeared at his side. "This isn't exactly normal, either, but hey." It shattered. "Tell you the truth I probably would have taken a robot arm over the power to make swords out of nothing." Though with his luck the Chaos Emerald probably would have given him an arm that would break with overuse that he'd need to replace. Devil Breakers were even less ideal with Summoned Swords, but there was a very real possibility he only got powers from those games if his subconscious had anything to say about it.

On second thought, maybe Summoned Swords wasn't so bad a power. He didn't need to pay to refill them.

The rabbit gave him an unreadable expression, and then snorted a single laugh out. "Yer a strange one," she said as she finished off her carrot. "Why'd ya choose swords anyways if ya don't like 'em?"

"Hey, swords are cool," he defended. "And I didn't get to choose the power. The power chose me." Not technically accurate, but he didn't have a better way of phrasing it. "But it's, you know... it's serviceable. I can make it work, so it's whatever."

He hoped he could make it work. He'd be crushed if he threw a Summoned Sword at a Badnik and it just pinged off it like the baton

had.

"Ah guess." Bunnie shrugged. "Ah wouldn't really know a whole lot about swords anyhow. Now Antoine, on the other hand- oh, speakin' of which. Hey, sugar."

Sorun followed her gaze just as the French-speaking Mobian entered the kitchen. He returned Bunnie's greeting with a way of his own as he turned towards Sorun with a look of... mock surprise, oddly enough. Huh.

"Ah, Sorun! How very much of a coincidence it iz seeing you here where you usually are talking to Bunnie who just happened to wander in shortly before me!" Antoine exclaimed. "How is it you are doing?"

"... Okay, that was weird." Sorun blinked, shook his head, and faced the coyote with a semi-forced smile that quickly fell back into a neutral expression. "I'm good. Just talking about swords."

Antoine's eyes picked up in interest. "Swords, you say?"

"Yeah, check this out." Sorun snapped his fingers, and a Summoned Sword appeared floating by his side. The coyote had actually jumped in fright at it, which elicited a small chuckle from Bunnie, but he quickly got over his initial shock and leaned in closer to look at the sword. "Absorbed a Chaos Emerald, got a sword power." Lost twelve years of his life, too, but that would go unsaid. Whether he liked it or not.

There was a weird gleam in Antoine's eyes that Sorun couldn't place, yet felt familiar to him. Perhaps it was the kind of glare likened to a child looking at something shiny. He certainly looked interested in it. "May I... see it, s'il vous plait?"

"That means please, right?" At Antoine's nod of affirmation, Sorun shrugged and tossed the Summoned Sword into his hands. "Sure. Just don't break it. I only have an infinite amount of them."

If Antoine even heard the joke, he didn't give any indication. His sole focus was spent giving the blue sword in his hand an appraising look. He muttered something in unintelligible French under his breath, looked up and down the blade a few times, and then gripped the sword's handle with both hands before giving it a few slow, experimental swings. He muttered some more while still looking at the blade.

"Eet iz... very light," he commented, "and very balanced for a straight sword." He tapped at the W-shaped guard. "Ze guard has a very unique shape, non?"

"I think they're supposed to represent horns," Sorun explained.

"Oh, interesting." He turned the sword upside down, but then blanched when he looked at the end of the sword. "Eh, Sorun?"

"Yeah?"

"Why iz... why iz ze pommel made of skulls?"

Sorun took a look closer, and then made an "ah" of realization when he saw what Antoine was referring to. The pommel at the bottom of the sword's hilt was indeed carved to look like four skulls fused into a spherical shape, with a small spike peaking out of the pommel's top. He supposed that would be creepy to most people here.

"Because skulls are cool? I dunno. I didn't get to choose how it looks. Its shape is based off of Force Edge." As Sorun spoke, Antoine had gently placed the sword on the ground. He jumped again when it shattered, which caused Sorun to smirk for a second. "And Summoned Swords aren't really meant to be used as swords. They're projectiles. But yeah, the shape's based off a real sword."

As real as a sword from a video game could be, at least, but those were unnecessary details.

"Ze... Force Edge?" Antoine repeated. "This is a sword from your home zone, correct?"

Technically speaking. "Yeah." Sorun nodded. "Force Edge was a... I, uh... it's special to me for certain reasons. Well, I mean, not the sword, more like the... it's complicated."

Much of the confusion stemmed from the fact that he didn't really want to explain he'd technically stole his sword power from a video game character. Half because he didn't need the embarrassment, and half because he wasn't sure they would even understand the concept when he was barely grasping at it. But Sorun had seen those discarded comics in Sonic's room, so maybe for some it wouldn't be lost on them.

Well, regardless, he still didn't feel like elaborating on it to them. Not like they could help anyways since he was the only one in this world that ever played those 'Devil May Cry' games. But boy, was it making it difficult to explain Summoned Swords' origin.

"So anyways, yeah. That's why that's that," Sorun finished. "Make sense?"

"I zink so?" Sorun's couldn't say he blamed the lost look on Antoine's face. "So you practiced swordsmanship back where you are from then?"

Sorun shook his head. "Oh, no. I never touched Force Edge. Or any other sword for that matter."

"Ah, what a shame." A thoughtful look came across Antoine's face. "Well, Sorun, since you use swords, and I use a sword, and am very skilled in the sword where you are... not so skilled, I could, perhaps, help you? With ze swordsmanship?" he suggested.

"Um... wow, wasn't expecting that," Sorun mumbled as he looked away from Antoine. "I appreciate the offer, but I don't actually swing

these things. I just throw them. Not really strong enough to use a sword against robots, you know?"

It didn't make the offer any less surprising to the human. He didn't realize he was liked enough that somebody like Antoine would even offer to do something like that for him. The fact they were even having such a civil conversation was more than Sorun had expected out of pretty much anybody.

It caused a weird feeling in him he couldn't quite place.

"Oh hey, you guys!" Sorun's head picked up at the new voice, and he turned around. Sally was standing at the entrance to the kitchen, and for some reason she had a forced smile on. "Fancy seeing you all here. And Sorun! I didn't see you there."

Sorun's lips thinned. "Okay, what going on?" he asked, and the fake smile Sally was wearing fell away altogether. "Antoine was acting all weird when he came in, and now you're all weird. What gives?"

He may have been somewhat socially inept, but even this... whatever it was was so blatant that even he could spot it. And he already knew from the way Sally's face fell that something was up. He just wanted to know what.

"Look, Sorun, I can... Antoine, I thought we told you to act natural," the chipmunk scolded while rubbing the space between her eyes.

"I was!" Antoine protested. "I was acting as natural as was possible!"

"You really weren't," Sorun said with a shake of his head.

"Okay, okay. I can explain." A deep breath left Sally, and she crossed her hands in front of her. "We just wanted to, well... are you doing okay, Sorun?"

Sorun clicked his tongue, looked to the side, and looked back at Sally. "Where'd this come from?" he asked, genuinely confused.

"Well, Sonic told us about your issues with the Chaos Emerald. We wanted to make sure you were doing alright."

"And you decided that the best way of doing that would be to gang up on me in the most unsubtle group intervention ever?" Sorun asked while pointing at each Mobian surrounding him.

Sally rolled her eyes. "This isn't a group intervention. You're just not very approachable, so we planned this all out to ease you into talking." She looked down. "It didn't really work."

"Ah-huh." Sorun nodded. "Alternatively you could have just immediately went right to this without the whole song and dance. Like normal people do."

"Well, you... don't really act normal."

"Oh, I'm the weird one?" Scoffing, the teen turned towards the counter and leaned his whole upper body over it so he didn't have to face anybody. "You call me weird after setting all this up? Seriously?"

Something about being called weird when everybody around him was weird from his perspective felt wrong to him. Like everything else with Mobius. He couldn't be surprised with it at this point, but even now it was things like this that put him at a loss. Just how odd people here could be one second and then act completely normal the next. Examples of the former, such as what was happening right now, continued to throw him for a loop.

There was an uncomfortable-sounding sigh that came from Sally. "It's about your home, isn't it?"

The human found himself rolling his eyes. "When has it not been?" he asked. "Yeah. I might be stuck here. I might not. It all depends on if this Emerald is really irremovable or not." He paused, and then made a sigh of his own. "This isn't really a conversation I wanna have right now."

"I really feel that we need to talk about this, Sorun."

"You know, you *say* that, but do we really?" He turned around to face Sally and leaned back on the counter. The can of peaches were long forgotten by now. "Why do you even care? We're not friends. Our status as comrades is strenuous at best. Don't tell me it's guilt."

He could see that his friends comment caused Sally to be taken back slightly. There was an understanding look in her eyes, but even so she still seemed saddened by it. Antoine looked downright uncomfortable with the statement. Bunnie was less so, but there was a notable frown on her face. He supposed the truth hurt, but he wasn't going to lie at their expense. He just didn't have the energy for it.

"Be that as it may," Sally said, voice notably lower, "I just wanted to make sure there wasn't any animosity between you and the Freedom Fighters. But... yes, guilt does play a small part in it," she admitted. "We didn't mean to-"

"It feels like I've had this conversation a million times, Sally," Sorun interrupted. It really felt like he had, too, with the frequency this subject kept coming up in. Because no matter how much he tried distancing himself away from all these people, they kept bringing it up because they were all apparently so worried about his mental state. His incredibly fractured mental state he couldn't even share with anybody for fear of his heart stopping.

It was still touching, though. Enough that even Sorun felt a little moved by how much these people seemed to care, even if he couldn't understand it. So he sighed and tore his eyes away from Sally to look to the side.

"Look, I'll tell you the same thing I told Tails. I understand why you did it," Sorun said, and he could see from his peripheral vision that Sally had picked her head up. "I'm upset at being here, but I'm not upset at anybody. Mostly." He paused. "Okay, I'm still frustrated at all of you," he corrected himself, "but not so much that my ability to

work and talk with you all would suffer because of it. As for the whole 'may-or-may-not be stuck here bit', I'm... still thinking that over." He crossed his arms. "So I'm fine for the most part."

"That's..." Sally struggled to find the right word. When he looked back at her, he could see that she was somewhat surprised by his words. "That's good. As long as you're doing fine and can work with us without issue, that's... acceptable." He could tell she didn't think so from how forced that word came out, but she didn't look like she wanted to press the issue.

That was fine with him. The less he had to dodge around his feelings without risk of triggering a heart attack, the better.

"Oh!" The chipmunk's eyes lit up as if she just remembered something, and immediately she began digging into her vest. "Before I forget, Nicole said that she wanted to meet you. I know you might not really be in the mood to talk with anybody else, but at the very least it wouldn't hurt to meet somebody else on the team, right?"

He couldn't tell if she was being sincere or if she was just fishing for more excuses for him to socialize, though why she would do that, he didn't have a clue. Another try at getting him to open up, maybe. It wasn't exactly underhanded, but he couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the attempt nonetheless.

"Nicole was the AI, right?" Sorun silently wondered. *"Yeah, the one who was really good at video- oh, that's the strat,"* he realized. Get him to meet another member of the team, and if they had common interests, maybe put him at ease. He doubted that was the case when he thought on it further; Sally was too sincere for something as underhanded at that. But if it just happened to be a happy side effect of them meeting, then it was nothing but positives. So maybe it was intentional after all.

He silently laughed through his nose. The chipmunk was sneaky, but at the very least he could respect the hustle. Well, he wouldn't say no. He was too curious as meeting an actual AI, after all, and he

couldn't find an excuse to say no. He didn't exactly have much else to be doing right now, either.

"Er, hold on a second," Sally muttered as she held a small computer in one hand while continuing to root around in her vest for a second item. "She wanted to generate her body, so I... oh, here it is."

Sorun couldn't help but raise an eyebrow when he saw the second object she pulled out from a hidden pocket inside her vest: a golden ring. A really large ring that looked more like an oversized bracelet than anything else that the chipmunk was currently attempting to place into a slot at the top of the small computer's screen.

"Why's she putting a noodle in the computer?" Sorun thought to himself. The strange ring was successfully slotted into the computer. The small, green-tinted screen attached to the computer briefly flashed, prompting Sally to set it down on the kitchen table nearby. The black-haired teen continued to watch in mild interest as a green outline of a figure materialized right next to the table. The outline slowly began to fill in with more green light, and then textures and features began to take form as the figure shifted and wavered as more colors appeared.

By the end of it, the new person standing there might as well have been another Mobian from what Sorun could see. A feline-looking Mobian with dark brown fur, black triangle markings around her eyes, and covered in purple wrappings that Sorun assumed were supposed to serve as a dress of some sort.

Honestly, though, he was too busy trying to figure out how a little computer managed to generate a whole artificial body to pay much attention to any of Nicole's features.

"Sorun, correct?" He looked up from his musings. Nicole's light green eyes were affixed directly on him, and one of her large, triangular black-tipped ears flicked slightly. "It is a pleasure to finally be metaphorically meeting you in the flesh."

"Uh, yeah. Likewise." He pointed towards her body. "So you're a cat?"

"The body I chose to represent myself is actually a lynx."

A sharp inhale from Sorun. "I was on a winnin' streak there," he muttered, but he quickly picked himself back up and pointed at the computer sitting on the table. "So that little thing can seriously make a whole body?" he asked. "And it's a real body? Not like a hologram or something? How does that work?"

"Real is a rather subjective term considering the composition of this form." If Nicole minded the fact that Sorun was poking at her shoulder to test if she was solid or not, she didn't show it. "As for the actual process of me constructing this body, the method is a rather admittedly complex one. If you really wish to spend two hours learning how I-"

"I'm good," Sorun quickly said as he stepped back. "Maybe later. But I'm good on that front."

She gave him a small smile. "Perhaps for the best. Even with a Power Ring, my time in this form is unfortunately limited. It's a very power-consuming process." Her smile fell into a neutral expression, and she glanced over to Sally, who was making subtle gestures towards Sorun with her hand.

Nicole regarded the hand gestures for a single second before turning back to Sorun.

"In truth, the reason Sally deemed it necessary to bring me along was due to her being concerned for your mental state. It was her assumption that you would be more at ease around a larger group of people, though this assumption has proven to be false given your earlier statements." Sally froze, and the other two Mobians likewise grew uncomfortable. "I would like to apologize on her behalf for this rather roundabout attempt at making you more comfortable with us. She only had your best interests at heart."

The AI stopped, and then took a quick glance around the room. Sorun was staring at her blankly with an unreadable expression, Sally looked downright mortified, and Antoine and Bunnie looked like they didn't want to be there. She registered the facial expressions of everybody present, and then began to shuffle at her feet.

"Perhaps I said more than necessary," she sheepishly admitted.

"Little bit, yeah," Sorun agreed in an equally quiet voice.

Okay, so maybe he'd made too many assumptions about Sally trying to force him to open up. Everybody was just legitimately worried about him and was trying to make him feel better. And now he felt like a jerk for having acted so cold, and felt even worse upon realizing all the words he'd said were actually true and that he didn't actually regret anything.

"I wanna hate them but none of them are giving me reasons to hate them," he silently bemoaned as he ran a hand through his dark hair. *"It's the opposite, actually. Ugh, man... why's it gotta be like this?"*

"Well," Nicole continued, "In that case, perhaps it would be best for us to leave-"

"Actually..." Sorun interrupted. He had to take a deep breath, and then said to her, "I... heard you were pretty good at video games."

She nodded her head. "This is an accurate statement compared to the performance of the other Freedom Fighters." She missed the pout Sally threw at her.

"Ah. You... wanna play something with me?"

Part of him still felt bad at shafting Sally and the group's efforts at trying to make him feel better. Another part still felt completely justified at his actions, but he ignored those feelings in lieu of not wanting to look like a complete jerk in front of everybody. But above

all that, his gaming itch had begun to return, and he wanted a partner who was at least decent.

Nicole looked to him in surprise. "I suppose that would be acceptable if Sally does not mind leaving me here to-"

"No, it's fine!" Sally actually looked relieved at the turnabout, and went as far as to almost shove Nicole away towards the living room. "There's not much happening right now anyway, so go enjoy yourselves!"

She was given an odd look by the lynx, but it was soon dropped as she made her way towards the living room. Sorun's eyes followed after her, and then drifted back towards the other three who were looking towards him with apprehension.

He sighed. Nobody ever made any of this easy.

"Everything I said earlier still holds true. With that said, I... really appreciate the effort," Sorun admitted with sincerity. "I know I'm not really making this easy for anybody. But thanks anyways."

"I understand, Sorun." Sally gave him a small nod. "I realize this isn't easy for you. But just the fact you're at least trying gives me some hope." She held her hand out to him and offered a small smile. "I hope that eventually you can become friends with everybody."

Sorun regarded the hand with a frown. Try as he might, he honestly couldn't see him ever becoming friends with anybody. This was either gonna end with him running away from this zone and leaving everybody to a ruinous future at Eggman's hands, or him running away because he didn't want to touch the rest of the Emeralds. Which would also doom everybody.

That and he was dying against his will to save the people who'd brought him here to begin with and were indirectly responsible in some part for killing him. That was all assuming he didn't even die at some point before doing either of those things.

No. He couldn't be friends with them considering all that. They didn't deserve a friend who would abandon them, and he didn't want to befriend the people who had done this to him. So he shook his head and turned away.

"I don't think so, Sally." He glanced back at her as she lowered the offered hand, and the look of sadness and disappointment written on her face made him turn away once more. Antoine's face was mostly full of disappointment, and Bunnie's expression was reminiscent of Sally's. "It was nice meeting you, Bunnie, for what it's worth."

"... Likewise," she replied in a dejected tone.

He left them behind right after. That awkward air was beginning to settle again, and he didn't want to be in the middle of that. Sorun did his best to push all of that to the back of his mind as he approached the couch that had attempted to cripple him as Nicole finished her preparations with the game console.

"This world can make little computers that can project corporeal bodies powered by noodles or whatever but can't make a wireless controller," he internally groused as he grabbed one of the console's controllers and sat down on the couch. Nicole took a seat right next to him. *"Eh, I guess it's fine. Wonder what game Nicole- wait, hold on."*

Sorun felt a pit grow in his stomach when he saw it was the spaceship game. The one he'd got the perfect score in just because he'd had that urge to beat Nicole. Through all of that he'd neglected to think about how she would react over it. Would she even react that strongly due to being an AI? She seem sophisticated enough so far that he was debating with himself her apparent level of self awareness but Sorun just didn't know.

"You don't wanna start with a two-player game?" Sorun asked, a nervous bead of sweat rolling down his neck.

"I wish to gauge your level of skill before proceeding forwards. I find that this game's difficulty serves as an adequate benchmark for such measurements," Nicole explained. "How did you know this is only a one-player game?"

"Uh..." Sorun's eyes darted away from Nicole and towards the screen. "Mighty showed me it. I've played it."

"I see. So you must already have a score on the leaderboard." Sorun's heart rate began to steadily climb as Nicole took the controller from his hands and navigated to the score menu. "Let me just load in the scores so I can see for myself."

"N-nah, you don't have to. Really."

"You needn't be insecure about your score if it really was that l-"

She stopped dead once the scores loaded in, and Sorun only needed a quick glance to confirm she was staring right at the top name with the perfect score. The name that was right above hers. An almost inaudible whine sounded in the back of his throat as he nervously tapped at his knees.

Nicole herself didn't speak for the longest moment, And Sorun could have sworn the black locks of hair on her head almost flattened upon seeing the scores. Her eyes merely lingered on the leaderboard, and then slowly her black-colored hands placed the controller back in Sorun's lap. "... It appears you are quite skilled. More so than I originally anticipated." There was an almost an icy edge to her otherwise friendly tone, and a small smile began to form on her lips. A smile that he recognized all too well, as he'd seen it countless times on Earth.

The smile of a competitive gamer.

"Ah, I guess I am pretty good." Any worry the teen had melted right off when he saw that smile, and he almost started to feel excited. "Gettin' that perfect was nothing. I bet you could do it, too, with a bit

more practice." As he said this, he shot her an equally competitive smile. He knew she saw it when one of her ears twitched.

"Is that so?" The way she sat up off the couch was almost aggressive as she made her way towards the console. "Perhaps further testing of your skill is required. A two-player fighting game should be more than enough to suit this need."

Sorun settled further into the couch and grasped at his controller. "You're talkin' my language now."

So Nicole was good.

God , but she was good at video games.

Considering she was an AI, it was to be expected. He'd even seen it coming after seeing her score with the spaceship game, but *damn* , she was good. In their entire session of gaming, neither was able to get a leg up on the other. It was a back and forth game of Sorun winning, and then Nicole winning, and then the pattern would repeat over and over. At the end, Sorun was on a fifty/fifty win-lose ratio with the AI lynx.

It was more than just her being good due to being an AI, too. There was legitimate skill being displayed by her, and over time she would continually adjust her strategies to meet Sorun's own play style, who would in turn have to adapt to her. She was a great conversationalist, too, though any words between them were few and far between seeing as most of their focus was on the game. What little Sorun did get out of her though sounded so natural that he repeatedly kept forgetting that he was playing with an AI.

But all in all, he was having fun. Gaming with Mighty had been relaxing since he'd been so better compared to the armadillo, but with Nicole it was fun. Just like playing back on Earth. She was a great game partner.

It was almost enough to make him forget all the terrible things that had been happening to him. Almost.

"So your mistake here is that you chose your fighter character poorly," Sorun informed the lynx as his fingers flew over the controller. "The one I got has perfect frame advantage over yours."

Right as Sorun explained this, his pixelized character on the screen delivered the finishing blow to Nicole's character. Basking in the win, Sorun leaned back into the couch while shooting Nicole a smug glance.

Nicole, to her credit, was extremely humble when it came to losses. Winning was a different matter, as while she was infinitely better about being subtle about it, she could be as smug as him when victorious in a game. But now, right after losing, she was just giving him a small smile while setting her controller down.

"I must admit that this experience has been an unexpected one. But a very welcome one," she added as she turned her head to Sorun. "It was my expectation that this level of skill was beyond most people's capability after seeing the Freedom Fighters' performance. How did you attain this level of competency with video games?"

"An arguably unhealthy amount of practice," Sorun answered. "Video games were a big hobby of mine back home."

"I see." She gave him an understanding nod. "Your way of playing has given me... insight, as to adapting to to non-ideal situations. In terms you would understand, I believe this means I have learned from the experience." Nicole glanced at the TV, and then back to Sorun. "The likelihood of this experience proving to be valuable during operations is minimal at best, but at the same time I cannot deny the possibility exists. In the effort of being as prepared as possible in order to provide adequate support to the others, I would like to continue these sessions with you."

There were serious doubts in Sorun's mind that any of what they did would be any sort of help out in the field, but then again, she was an AI. So what did he really know? Practically nothing. But if she was offering he didn't see a reason to decline. Besides, he did have more fun playing with her than he thought he would have. A lot more.

"... Except I'm kind of planning to leave her behind to her death or worse along with everybody else, huh?" Sorun reminded himself as he looked down at his controller. Part of why it was so hard to form any kind of bond with anybody in the Freedom Fighters aside from the whole abducted bit was that. It felt almost wrong to accept anything like that considering his intentions.

Well. He did really like playing games with her on second thought. It was something he could overlook for now and reevaluate later on.

"Yeah, I wouldn't mind that. If we ever have time again I'm game." He cocked his head to the side when Nicole flickered. Her body had briefly gone transparent, and there was even a static-like sound that resulted from it. "Uh, you okay? You're kinda... glitching," he informed her.

She looked down to her hand as she flickered again, and she nodded before looking back up at Sorun. "I'm afraid my time is up," she said. "I'll be momentarily returning to my real body. If you would be so kind as to deliver me back to Sally at some point, I would much appreciate it."

He really didn't want to and figured Sally would just come back for it on her own later on anyways, but he was in a good enough mood after the gaming session to go ahead and commit to the favor. "Sure, no problem," he said.

"Thank you." Nicole's body began to fade more and more rapidly, and gave a final smile to him before disappearing. "It was very fun meeting you, Sorun."

She vanished right after saying that.

"..." Sorun didn't have anything to say in response, opting to instead just stare silently. He couldn't help but feel that the last smile gave him felt more livelier than any of the other ones.

She really was a spectacular gaming partner.

The teen continued staring at that one spot for a few more seconds, and then slowly stood up from the couch and turned around to leave. He yelled out and fell right back on the couch when he turned around to a blue hedgehog standing centimetres away from him.

"Jeez!" Sorun sputtered out as he brushed away the dark hair that fell in front of his face, then sent Sonic a scathing look. "Man, how long have you been just creepin' there!?"

"I... just got here a second ago?" Sonic tried. He held his hands out to Sorun, both of which were holding a bottle of soda. "So, I noticed you really like these. Can we talk?"

Of course he wanted to talk. Seemed like everybody wanted to talk to him today, though he actually expected this kind of thing out of Sonic, especially after what happened last night. Didn't mean he was looking forwards to it. "Ugh. Sure." He pulled himself off of the couch, grabbed one of the sodas from Sonic, and then gestured towards the HQ kitchen.

Walking to the kitchen was a journey that took seconds but felt like minutes for Sorun. He tried focusing on the cold sensation of the bottle he was holding, but it did little to distract him from the fact that this conversation was about to happen. He didn't imagine it would go so different from the one he had with Sally, but seeing as it was Sonic, he had no idea what the reaction would be. Sorun was mostly afraid he'd be a lot more stubborn over the issue rather than be accepting of it like Sally had been.

What to do in the event this was true was something Sorun had no clue on. He still didn't know what he was supposed to say.

They arrived in the kitchen, and Sorun found himself going over to lean on the exact same spot on the exact same counter as before. Sonic did the same, but on the table and facing him. They stared at each other for a few minutes with lost looks on both of their faces, at which point Sorun decided to summon a blue sword and have its tip float under the cap of his soda bottle. It wiggled around for a bit before the cap finally popped off, which Sorun had caught midair and placed on the counter as the sword shattered.

Sonic, who had watched the small displayed, gave the smallest of chuckles. "Is that really the best way to be using your power?"

"Yeah man, totally," Sorun confirmed as he took a drink from the soda. "I'll never need a bottle opener ever again thanks to these things."

"Hah, yeah. I guess." Sonic didn't even bother opening his own soda, choosing instead to set it on the table next to him. "So last night went okay?"

The hedgehog didn't waste any time apparently. "Yeah. Slept on the couch." Sorun nodded his head into the living room. "Fell asleep reading the dictionary."

"The... dictionary?" Sonic repeated. "Why?"

"I like to be as verbose as possible when I insult people so I can feel even more superior," Sorun lied. "I learned a new word, though: deracinate. Traditionally it's just a gardening term for pulling roots, but its original meaning refers to separating something from its native environment or even its culture. Kinda like if a foreigner went to a new land. Or if some random teenager, I dunno, got pulled into an alternate universe full of weird animal people he can't understand as a crazy example."

The meaning wasn't lost on Sonic in the slightest, and the hedgehog crossed his arms as a response. "What do you mean you don't understand us?"

"You're nice. I don't mean you. I mean all of you," Sorun elaborated, but then paused. "Most of you. Shadow's in this weird area for me, but you're all just so... *nice* ." He sputtered and pointed at his soda. "I mean, Jesus, I scream at you and throw a sword at you and your response is to get me a soda so we can try patching things up. That ain't normal where I'm from."

"What do you mean not normal?" Sonic asked, eyes scrunched in confusion. "We all just want to help you. That's what we do. It's... it's what everybody should do. Even *Shadow* wants to help everybody in his own weird way." He shook his head. "Why's that so hard for you to understand?"

Sorun threw his free hand up. "I don't know, man. It just is. Nobody on Earth... okay, fine, there were people like you in my zone," he admitted, "but there wasn't whole populations of people like that around. It was mixed. Everybody's personalities were super mixed."

"Then what were most people like?" Sonic asked.

"I dunno, me?" Sorun shrugged. "Kind of me but not really? Some better, some worse, everybody different in their own ways, but compared to everybody else I ever met I was pretty normal. And okay, yeah, maybe bein' the short guy in class made me a bit bitter over time, but overall that's how it was over there."

There certainly weren't many people on Earth that would bend over backwards as far as everybody here was at his expense. Hell, *he* wouldn't go as far. But they would, because Sorun suspected that Mobians were just so naturally nice.

"Eggman said something about them... what was it, a certain drive humans have that they don't? They can't not *be vicious, though. There's wars. These people right here are fighting in one. I don't know, maybe they're just... naturally nice? Or something? I don't know."* He blinked. *"Eggman..."*

Sorun didn't feel discussing what happened with the mad scientist was necessary. He didn't want to cause any more problems, and frankly they didn't need to know. The knowledge that the Doctor could casually just wipe out all of Knothole at any moment but wasn't because he just didn't feel like it was a sobering thought that had Sorun on edge, but there wasn't much to do on that front.

All the more reason to bail when he could.

"Well I'm not gonna pretend to understand what life was like over there, but over here we all just want to help you." He turned down to the floor. "We all really do feel terrible about what we did, but we don't want to help just because of that. We wanna help you because it's the right thing to do. But with everything else... you know." He picked his head back to up look at Sorun. "But... you said a lot of things last night. And I want to talk about it."

"I don't. We're gonna anyways since you're never gonna drop this, but for the record I really don't." Sorun took another swig of his soda and then set it down on the counter. "I'll be real. I've had this conversation with Tails and Sally already, and if I have to have it too many more times I'm gonna go crazy. So I'm only saying all this one more time." He took a deep breath before continuing. "Here's where we stand. I realize you all were desperate in bringing me here, and I understand why you did it. That doesn't mean I'm actually alright with it, just that I understand. But then yesterday got thrown at me, and now I got the possibility of being stuck here forever hanging over my head. What am I supposed to think of you all after that?"

Sonic drummed his fingers on the table. "It's still not a sure thing that you're trapped on Mobius," he reminded him in a quiet voice. "We're gonna find a way to bring you back. I don't know how, but we will. But, uh... you know, by some chance- a really small chance!" he rapidly stated. "Like, real tiny! Practically nonexistent! But, y'know, hypothetically speaking if you were actually stuck here forever-"

"Can we just cross that bridge if we get to it?" Sorun asked him. "I'm gonna have a lot of things to say if that really is the case, but I don't

want to waste the emotional energy if it's not even true."

Sonic readily nodded his head, which did enough to show Sorun that he wanted to avoid that topic as much as he did. Suited him fine. The less internal turmoil he had over all of this the better, and he just wanted this conversation to be over already.

"But even still... you're still upset at all of us," Sonic said.

"Sonic, I... yeah, look, I am, there's no getting around that," Sorun admitted. "It's not just the abducting thing or the trapped on Mobius thing, though, because if it was just those things we wouldn't be having this conversation and I wouldn't be avoiding everybody. There's... other factors." His life being in peril thanks to them chief among them. His forced silence was settled right next to that. Wanting to leave them behind to Eggman's mercy or lack-there-of was also a contributing factor.

"Then what is it?" Sonic asked, and there was a desperate edge to his voice that Sorun noticed. "If it's something you want to talk about, or if there's anything we can do to help, then-"

"I can't say," Sorun interrupted with a flat tone.

"What do you mean you can't say? Why not?"

"Because reasons, okay?" Sorun said, and then held up a hand to silence the hedgehog when he opened his mouth. "Just... listen, alright? As it stands, the Freedom Fighters need help with Eggman. I have the Summoned Swords power now, so I can help. I need your help getting the Chaos Emeralds, but you can't because of Eggman. Nothing's changed at that front. We're bound to each other because of mutual need." The human placed his hands inside his pockets. "I'll still be a Freedom Fighter. I'll cooperate with everybody and serve to the best of my ability, which is still severely limited swords aside. What happens past that?" He gave half of a shrug. "Who knows, but for now... that's the deal."

"... Okay." Sonic took a deep breath, and then pushed off the table. "I wish you would just talk to me about what has you so upset, but... fine, if that's how you want it. We can work with that." He gave Sorun a hopeful smile. "But maybe eventually we could be friends? You already get along with us, so... at least consider getting over whatever is bothering you? Please?"

Sorun gave a low sigh. "Why do you keep trying?" he asked him.

"Well, I... think you're cool. That's it," Sonic answered, causing Sorun's eyes to widen slightly. "I get it's hard for you, but even if you can't see it yourself, I can see you're trying really hard. And I just think it would be really neat to be friends with somebody like you." The corners of his mouth turned downwards. "I just wished I understood why you don't want to be friends with us. Are you sure we can't?"

The same thoughts that ran through his head when Sally asked him the same thing rand through his head now with Sonic asking. The deadly effect of the Chaos Emeralds. His intentions on leaving them all behind to their doom. Everything that was bothering him that he truly did want to tell Sonic but couldn't because of this damn curse.

Frustrating. Frustrating because it was making it so that nobody understood him. Frustrating because he just wanted to tell somebody so he could get it off his chest. But he had to keep holding all these thoughts in because he had no other choice. Sonic's words didn't help, either. Something about that little confession... it almost hurt. He didn't even realize the hedgehog respected him to such a degree. How could barely even understand why he was so respected, but deep inside he was genuinely grateful for it, like everything else the hedgehog had done for Sorun. It helped to make him feel like he really wasn't alone in this strange world.

But he just couldn't return that gratitude. Not with everything else going on. Not when Sorun wanted to bail on them all to save his own life. And the worst part was that he didn't know if he was sparing himself or Sonic by distancing himself so far.

"... We're comrades. Nothing more," Sorun decided. "I can't do anything closer than that."

Sonic's face fell, but he gave the human an understanding nod before a sad-sounding chuckle left him. "Why do you have to make things so complicated, Sorun?" he asked with an empty smile.

"Good question," Sorun muttered in response. "That all said, uh... mind if I move back in with you? That couch isn't working for me."

"It's cool," Sonic assured him. "But, uh... about what you said earlier. You really don't feel like you're fitting in with everybody else? Is that what you meant by that whole dera-whatever thing?'

It was more along the lines of why being so nice was so ingrained in Mobian culture, but Sorun had already given up on figuring that out and just settled on giving Sonic a nod. "Something like that."

"Well, we can't have that if you're gonna be working with us. I know you want to avoid people for some weird reason, but that just isn't gonna fly. And the swords are nice, but, well, some extra training wouldn't hurt you." A thoughtful look crossed Sonic's face, and a grin slowly began to grow on him as he snapped his gloved fingers. "That, that can work. I'd have to run it by everybody, but yeah." He grabbed his otherwise untouched soda and headed out of the kitchen. "Things to do gotta juice seeya at home bye!"

He left in blur right after that and was gone completely from sight before Sorun could even blink. The human was left wondering the meaning of Sonic's words, but came up completely blank.

"Ah, great. What's he planning now?" he muttered to himself before reaching over to the bottle so he could down the rest of his soda.

A/N- Fun fact, during the planning stage of this story deracinate was gonna be the title of the story. It didn't make the cut and was dropped pretty earlier because A) it didn't really fit with

what I was going for, and B) I thought to myself, "That's the most pretentious thing in the world, nobody's gonna know what that means. I didn't know what that word meant until I randomly happened upon it looking up words." But while it doesn't fit with the story, it sorta fits with Sorun's current plight, so it was a fun little thing I added in.

Chapter 14

Recursion Error

Episode 14- It's like boot camp but worse

Before today, Sorun had never before in his entire life been woken up by a trumpet.

He didn't recommend it.

It was still what he would consider morning when it happened. One moment he had been sleeping in the spare bed in Sonic's room, and the next moment he was being assault by the awful, blaring sound of a trumpet. He went from being in deep sleep to wide awake in an instant, and came out of his dreams screaming and flailing his limbs around in a confused panic before he and the sheets fell out of the bed.

Panting heavily with his heart beating rapidly in his chest, Sorun had picked himself up onto his knees with the bed sheets hanging off of him as he wildly looked around the room. He stopped right on Sonic, who was standing next to his bed and grinning at him. Sorun's eyes immediately locked onto the trumpet the hedgehog was holding in his hands, and then moved to a clock on the wall next to them. His eyes nearly bugged out of his skull when he saw the time.

"Man, it's six in the morning!" he yelled. "Why're you waking me up at six in the morning with a trumpet!? Where'd you even get a trumpet!?"

"It was in a box of my dad's old stuff," Sonic answered. He looked down at the trumpet, and then sheepishly turned his head towards the room's door. "You don't think that woke my parents up, do you?" he asked.

Sorun affixed the hedgehog with a deadpan expression. "You woke the whole neighborhood up with that thing. You woke all of Knothole up. Elias up in the castle is up and he's marching right over here because of you're being a public menace."

"Hah." Sonic's sheepish look turned nervous. "Wait, you're joking, right?"

"I'll let you figure that one out," Sorun grunted as he climbed back into the bed while pulling the sheets over his head. He'd only managed to close his eyes for five seconds in an attempt at going back to sleep before the trumpet was blasted at him again. "I'm gonna break that thing if you do that one more time!" Sorun threatened as he shot up into a sitting position, the sheets flying all the way to the other side of the room from the motion.

The trumpet was reflexively hidden behind Sonic's back as he took a step away from Sorun. "Hey, come on, this is my dad's," he said. "Don't take it out on my dad's things."

"Ugh..." Groaning tiredly, Sorun rubbed at his eyes before looking back at Sonic. "Dude, what gives?"

"It's training day!"

That held absolutely no meaning for Sorun, who responded with, "What? Nah, it's Wednesday. I think?" He blinked in confusion when he realized he hadn't been keeping track of the date. "Wait, what day *is* it?"

"It's Thursday," Sonic corrected, "and that means exactly what I meant: training day."

That phrase still didn't register to the teen, who shook his messy head in confusion at Sonic's words. "What is training day supposed to mean?"

"Well, you're a Freedom Fighter now," Sonic began. He placed the trumpet on the ground and hopped into the spare bed so that he was sitting next to Sorun. "But you don't really have any Freedom Fighter skills. You know, uh, coordination, teamwork, some other skills here and there." He lightly punched Sorun's shoulder. "You're not very fit, either."

"Sue me. I never played sports," Sorun grumbled under his breath. Playing video games and watching whatever suited his fancy at the time never left a lot of time for physical exercise. Sometimes even sparing time for food was dropped because of this. Probably the main reason he was underweight now that he thought about it, but he wasn't *that* bad. By normal humans standards he was below average at worst. And by Mobian standards he could have been an Olympic bodybuilder and he still would have come up short compared to the strength of a normal Mobian.

So, because of that, he didn't really see the point of ever physically training. Apparently Sonic wasn't seeing his point of view.

"Well it's still not good you're not trained," Sonic continued. "Normally we wouldn't let you go on missions right away without a lot of training, but we're... well, we just don't have the time, so you're just gonna have to learn off of practical experience. That being said, I asked around, and everybody's in agreement that we should probably teach you some basic things before going in so you're not... er, not..."

"Completely hopeless?" Sorun finished in a flat voice.

"Hey, no, I wouldn't go that far." Sonic lightly shoved Sorun's shoulder. "So I talked to everybody, and since everybody just happens to not be doing anything today, we all agreed to spend the day, y'know, getting you ready. So training day."

It was a shock and a half for Sorun, who never even dreamed most of the people in the Freedom Fighters would ever devote so much time for his sake. Especially considering he hadn't even formally

talked with half of them still. He really did find it baffling how supportive they could be to what could be amounted to a complete stranger.

"I don't know, man. Sounds like a lotta work." Unfortunately for them Sorun wasn't so sure he wanted to take advantage of all that kindness. "You sure it's even gonna help?"

"Sure it will! It's better than nothing, right? And besides, you don't have anything else to be doing today."

He had him there. "Alriiight, fine," Sorun sighed out as he began to run his hands through his hair to stop it from sticking out everywhere. "I'll go to your Freedom Fighter boot camp. But can I get a shower first? It's been a couple days."

"Yeah, okay. I'm gonna go make us some toast for the road, and then we'll get going." By the time Sorun finished giving the hedgehog a nod of understanding, he'd already left the room. Sorun stared after him through the room's half-open door, slowly blinked his eyes a few times, and then settled back on the bed's pillow before falling back asleep shortly after.

Five minutes eventually passed, and the door to Sonic's room quietly squeaked open as the room's owner poked his head in to check on Sorun. He shook his head in disappointment the moment his eyes laid on the sleeping human, and then he walked in, grabbed the instrument off the ground, and held trumpet up to his lips before blowing through it a third time.

Once more, Sorun fell out of the bed into a screaming heap. By the time he whipped his head up to the door Sonic had already ran away.

"That's it!" A Summoned Sword appeared in Sorun's grasp as he ran towards the door. "Get your furry butt over here, I'm cutting that thing!"

Chasing Sonic had been a mistake. It was a foolhardy endeavor to begin with considering he could run circles around Sorun faster than he could think of the word "circles", but he'd been too sleep deprived to properly focus. Thankfully the human did have enough sense to give up chasing him two minutes in before trudging back to the house for that shower while angrily grumbling under his breath, but by then the damage had set in.

That left him here: standing in Freedom HQ, body freshly washed with a new set of clothes identical to his last, but so exhausted that he was practically swinging on his feet. Right now a single piece of toast was all that was keeping him going, but he wasn't so sure how long that would last him.

He just wanted to go back to sleep.

"Alright, so it's great that you all made it!" Sonic, who was standing just in front of him, had clapped his hands loudly enough that Sorun was roused awake for a good second, but already he could feel his eyes begin to close of their own volition again. "So I was thinking-"

Words started to blur away from Sorun's perception. The whole world and all his senses began to fade away, actually, and a small sigh of content left his mouth as he finally went back to sleep. This blissful rest only lasted for a few seconds until something began shaking him awake.

"Hrk- huh!? I'm up, I'm up!" His eyes flew around the room, and then looked to Sonic who was shaking him awake with a wry grin on his face. "I'm up, jeez," Sorun repeated as he slowly swiped Sonic's hand away.

He took that moment to quickly glance around the HQ. True to Sonic's word, all of the Freedom Fighters had chosen to spend their day helping Sorun with his deficiencies. Including Sonic, it was all seventeen of them- eighteen, he reminded himself, because Nicole was likely in her computer somewhere- that he'd seen on the first day of him coming here, and during his introduction speech. Some

he knew and recognized at this point, others he'd yet to even speak a word to.

Well, by today that wasn't going to be true anymore. Sonic intended everybody to be spending some time with him to get him up to speed on the resistance side of things. He dreaded seeing what all those introductions he was due for entailed and how all these people would act towards him, but there was no way out of it now.

But, unfortunately, that's as far as Sorun's thoughts carried him before he fell asleep on his feet again. Sonic had been saying something to everybody, but Sorun wasn't even able to register it. He did register it when Sonic once again shook him awake.

"Dude, I said I'm up..." Sorun tiredly mumbled as he weakly slapped Sonic's hand away.

"You sure don't look it," the hedgehog disagreed. "We just went over today's schedule. You did catch all that, right?"

He sure didn't, but Sorun didn't want Sonic to know that for fear of making himself look even more incompetent than he already was. "What do you take me for? 'Course I got all that," he defended.

Sonic's eyes narrowed slightly, though a playful grin had grown on his face. "Repeat one thing I said."

"... One thing I said," Sorun echoed.

The blue hedgehog's response was slap his palm against his own face. "Alright, slight change of plan," he announced. "Sorun, you're with me first. We're gonna go for a little run and do a few laps around Knothole to wake you up before anything else."

"Are you serious?" Sorun groaned as Sonic. "It's workout in of itself just walking to this place, and now you wanna take me back to the city just to run around it?"

"Hey, cardio's important. I would know." Sorun didn't say anything in response, but he did groan some more under his breath as he was practically dragged up the steps by the hedgehog. "Besides," Sonic continued, "it'll get your blood flowing and wake you up."

"If that was true I'd already be up," Sorun complained, but otherwise didn't resist as he was dragged out of the HQ by Sonic.

"Okay, stop! Stop! I need- oh, man, I need a break..."

Well, Sonic hadn't been lying. His brand of training for Sorun had quite literally just been running. He hadn't been lying about running around Knothole, either, because that was all they did once they reached Knothole's outer perimeter. At the very least Sonic had purposely slowed himself down just so he could keep pace with Sorun as he jogged around the city, but the human could tell that doing such a thing was straining to the hedgehog from the antsy look on his face. He supposed that going so slow would be tough on somebody with super speed.

Well, tough. If they were doing this they were going at his pace.

In his defense, Sorun had managed three laps around Knothole City before he collapsed on the ground from exhaustion. That wasn't even factoring in the walk to and from Freedom HQ, so by Sorun's account he was doing pretty well all things considering. But now Sorun was on his back, muscles burning and lungs breathing so hard that they felt like they were going to pop in his chest. Sonic, who was leaning over him, looked no worse for wear.

Sonic was right about one thing, though. He was wide awake now. That wouldn't be the case for long if his heart gave out from all this exercise, but for now he couldn't go to sleep again if he tried.

"You know, uh, Sorun..." The hedgehog raised an eye ridge as he looked down at the human, and said, "Usually this kind of distance is something a child can manage."

"A Mobian child, maybe," Sorun retorted as he sat up. "You even... you even get tired from running?"

"Eh... not really," Sonic answered with a shrug.

"Oh, well good for you," Sorun said with a roll of his eyes. "Why are we doing this again?"

"Told ya. Cardio." Placing his hands on his hips, Sonic stepped closer so that he was right in front of the sitting human. "Gotta get that endurance up so you don't collapse like this right in the middle of a mission."

"Ah-huh." He saw the logic in that, but just knowing that didn't make it any easier on his burning muscles. He huffed out a breath and, with slight struggle, managed to pick himself back up to his feet. "Well, I got tons of other things to do today and my legs feel like they're gonna melt. Think we can call it here so I can move on to my next thing?"

Admittedly it was mostly just him being lazy, but the idea of him maybe conserving some strength for the day ahead did cross the teen's mind. The teenage hedgehog standing right in front of him probably had the same idea from the thoughtful look on his face, and to Sorun's relief, gave a nod.

"Yeah, alright," he said in agreement. "It's around the time Amy wanted to start your mobility training anyways, so let's go."

"Ah, great. Yeah, let's-"

"After one more lap," Sonic said quickly, a mischievous smirk on his face.

"MAN, WHAT!?"

Following behind the two female Mobians as they lead him towards Freedom HQ's little training ground, Sorun decided that, just maybe, he should think really hard about what he wanted to say before he formally introduced himself to the two. They'd exchanged some greetings before they started leading him, of course, but they hadn't actually talked yet. He mostly just wanted to make a good impression so that this training session wouldn't go any worse than what it was likely heading towards.

One was that pink hedgehog he'd took note of way back when. Amy, if he recalled. She seemed like a nice person at first glance, but he didn't have anything else to say about her otherwise.

The other one leading him was another echidna like Knuckles. Had more of a pinkish-purple-y fur color than he did, but what drew his eyes as he walked behind her was the single, artificial dreadlock at the front of her head, more cybernetic bits at the ends of the dreadlocks behind her head, and the cybernetic left arm. Sorun unfortunately didn't recall her name, but somewhere in his memory he did recall it starting with a "J". He figured that maybe asking her about the cybernetics would be a good opening, but after remembering what happened with Bunnie, he decided against it. Then he thought about just asking her name, but he didn't want to seem rude for having never learned it prior.

After swallowing the lump in his throat, he decided to go ahead and try his luck with Amy.

"So, Amy." It was right as the trio were crossing a small, wooden bridge leading over a small river did Sorun walk right next to the pink hedgehog to gain her attention. "I introduced myself in front of everybody, but Sonic and Sally wanted me to at least introduce myself personally to all the Freedom Fighters. So hey."

The way she turned her head towards him with such a surprised expression had Sorun wondering if he really was that bad with people. To his relief it was an expression of pleasant surprise, however, as a small smile shortly formed on her mouth as she

looked at him. "O-oh! Um, right. I'm sorry if I looked surprised there, but you never really looked that talkative, you know?"

"I... yeah, I'm working on that," Sorun muttered in a stilted tone. "Anyways, I'm Sorun. You already knew that, but... yeah."

"Oh, okay. Well, Sorun, I'm Amy Rose."

The name was enough to make Sorun do a double take on Amy at how normal-sounding the name was. Compared to all the other names he heard that one had him at a loss. "Wow, really? Jeez, I think I knew somebody named Amy Rose in elementary school. Or, no, wait, was it Anthony?" He looked ahead and scratched the side of his face in thought. "It was A-something. Agh, can't remember." He looked back to Amy. "So, er, I heard from Tails you use a hammer? That right?"

"Mh-hm!" She gave him a bubbly nod. "Wanna see it?"

Sorun quirked an eyebrow, and then looked down at Amy's gloved but empty hands. "See it? But you don't- whoa!"

He wasn't really sure what happened. Amy had simply held her hands out, and in a small puff of smoke, a hammer appeared. An absurdly large hammer colored red and gold with a head that was almost as big as Amy's whole body. A hammer that looked so heavy that Sorun just knew he wouldn't even be able to lift it, and yet Amy was twirling it around like it was a baton.

It just wasn't fair sometimes. Why did he have to be so weak?

"That's neat," Sorun said, mildly dejected at the feat of strength he was seeing as he kept glancing from Amy's arms to his own. "I can kind of do that, too."

A Summoned Sword appeared in his hand right after he said that. It was more to just make him feel better than anything else, but he

didn't even get that from the way that Amy was eyeing the sword with so much intrigue.

"Ohh, coool...!" she marveled as her green eyes looked up and down the sword. "You can grab a weapon out of nowhere like I do with my hammer, too!" she cocked her head to the side in confusion. "But how come yours is all... blue and glowy?"

"It's special," Sorun answered. His eyes wandered ahead and he saw the echidna in front of them had glanced back to look at the blue sword Sorun was holding, but she quickly turned her head back forwards when she saw Sorun looking.

Movement on the corner of his eyes drew Sorun's attention back to Amy, who was holding the head of the hammer out to him as they continued walking forwards. "I heard you got a strange power from a Chaos Emerald you and Sonic got, but I didn't think it'd be something like that. It's kind of cool!" she exclaimed. "Nobody else can just grab a weapon out of nowhere like I can. We can totally be weapon buddies!"

"Uh..." The pink hedgehog was acting a lot more jubilant than anybody else he'd met so far. It wasn't even that she was acting this way that was surprising, but that she was acting this way towards him. It left him somewhat surprised, but when he saw her slightly shake the hammer head at him, he decided to go ahead and bump the tip of his Summoned Sword against it. "Yeah, sure. Weapon buddies," he said, and then instantly regretted it when his words caused Amy's eyes to light up in glee.

"Sweet!" The hammer in Amy's hand disappeared in another puff of smoke, and right after she looked up ahead and pointed to the echidna leading them. "Oh, and that's Julie-Su. She-"

"I can introduce myself, you know," she called back to the two. Amy's mouth clamped shut at that, while Sorun passively looked between the two of them. Eventually he just shrugged and continued walking.

Around a single minute of the trio walking passed before he felt something softly jab into his sides. He looked to the right and saw that it was Amy, who was jabbing him with her elbow to gain his attention. She was nodding her head forwards towards the echidna and silently pointing at her.

Sorun, who had no idea what she was trying to say, shook his head at Amy's action. "What?"

"Go introduce yourself," she whispered. "You said you were trying to do that with everybody, right?"

He had indeed said that. Not that he wanted to, but at this juncture it was becoming more work to avoid people than to just talk. "Yeah, I'm goin'," he mumbled in response as he walked up ahead of Amy so he could go to the other Mobian's side.

As he was approaching her, Sorun had noticed that the echidna's pupils had been following him from the corner of her eyes, though she faced forwards again when he slowed to a walk by her side. Being too nervous to ask about the cybernetics he couldn't think of anything else to lead with, so he decided to just go ahead with introductions.

"So I'm-"

"Sorun, yeah, I know," she replied. "And you already know my name. Nice to meet you."

"... Yeah, same." That was more succinct than he was expecting, but he wasn't gonna complain over it. "Nice to meet you, Julie."

Her violet eyes flicked to his direction. "Su."

Sorun turned his head to her. "I seriously gotta say that every- alright." His head faced back forwards when she turned to him with a scowl. "Julie-Su. Understood."

The scowl being directed at him lessened when he said the name properly, and she faced back ahead. Sorun, in response, breathed out a small sigh and turned his head just slightly enough to get a better look at her.

"Kind of a weird name, but whatever. Everything here's weird." He found his eyes looking down towards her body so he could find *something* for them to talk about. *"Man, I'm not seein' anything, though,"* he thought. *"Teal boots, some weird black and teal top... pfft, she's got a utility belt. With a... gun clipped to it... waaaait a minute here..."*

That was a gun. He knew guns, and while he didn't recognize the strange, double-barreled pistol that Julie-Su had holstered to her golden belt, he knew for sure that it was a gun. Which he thought were basically taboo to Freedom Fighters based on everything Sally said.

There better have been a good explanation for this.

"Hey, how come you get a gun?" Sorun asked her, his head fully turning to meet her again. She sent him a quizzical look in response, causing him to point down to her belt. "Your gun," he repeated.

"My photon gun?"

"Yeah, how come you get one?" he asked. "When I tried getting a gun Sally told me that they weren't allowed in the Freedom Fighters. So how come you get to have one?"

Julie-Su blinked at him, and then quickly understood his question and nodded at him. "Probably because I'm not officially a Freedom Fighter," she answered, causing Sorun to tilt his head back in confusion. "I'm with Knuckles and his group," she explained, "and it used to be we kept to ourselves and dealt with things up on Angel Island. But then Eggman became a problem for everybody, so he dragged us all down here to help." She glanced down at the gun. "But truth be told, echidna culture differs pretty greatly from the rest

of Mobian culture. We're not exactly afraid of guns like everybody else. Some of us, anyways."

"I... see?" He didn't, not really, but he didn't feel all that compelled to ask further.

"So you really want a gun?" she asked him.

Sorun huffed. "Well, I *did* , but I have Summoned Swords now and those are arguably better than a gun." He rolled his eyes. "I still feel cheated, though." Felt like everybody got to have a gun but him. First the plane, now this? He honestly did feel cheated.

"I'm struggling to see how a sword is better than a gun," Julie-Su said.

"'Cause I can do this." To accentuate his point, a blue sword formed next to him. It pointed towards a nearby tree, and then shot forwards and embedded itself into it faster than a speeding arrow. "They don't really run out, either," he continued as the sword in the tree shattered, "so yeah. Shooting swords."

"They're decent." She looked mildly surprised at the display, and then faced back forwards with a small grin on her face. "Bet I could shoot one of those out of the air."

"You probably could, yeah."

She glanced back at him, and her features turned back to neutral as they continued walking.

The rest of the trip was spent in silence, though thankfully it had only lasted for a few more minutes until they arrived at the training ground. It wasn't much to Sorun's eyes: just a small clearing among all the trees. What did catch his eye, however, was that it was full of posts. Tall, wooden posts that were so numerous that they filled up the entire clearing.

Stepping forwards, Sorun reached a hand out and brushed his finger along one of the posts in the first row of posts filling the clearing. It felt like an ordinary piece of wood to him, which caused him to turn around and give the two Mobians a questioning look.

"So what are we doing here?" he asked. "And what's with all the posts?"

"We're here because we gotta get a sense for how mobile you can be," Julie-Su told him as she stopped right behind Sorun. She bent her knees slightly, breathed out, and then jumped up into the air. *Far* into the air. So far that she'd sailed over Sorun, done a backflip, and then landed on top of the wooden post Sorun had touched with her arms extended to each side. Smirking down at the gawking human, she continued with, "You gotta be limber enough on the battlefield to dodge anything coming towards you. You're no good to anybody in the hospital."

"It's more than just dodging, too. Just being able to keep yourself on your feet no matter what is a big part of any mission." As Amy said this, she as well performed a backflip onto the wooden post next to Julie-Su. "So get up here and show us what you got."

Well, he hoped they were ready to be disappointed, because he sure as hell didn't have any of *that* . He couldn't do a cartwheel, let alone a backflip. Or even jump ten feet into the air at that. He wasn't sure he could even balance on one of those posts without falling down.

But training was training. He wasn't so sure this kind of training was physically possible for him the further it went, but that's why they were doing it in the first place: to test his limits and prepare him more for going out on the field. He was just worried they were greatly overestimating those limits of his here.

"You know it's physically impossible for a normal human to jump up there, right?" The post itself was a good ten feet off the ground, but the two females were still staring down at him expectantly. "I'll, uh... find a way, then."

The teen stepped over to another post next to him, and then looked it up and down in thought. Jumping was out of the way. He might be able to jump up far enough to grab the top with his hands, but he wasn't sure he had the strength needed to pull himself up, and even if he did, there was barely enough surface area on top of the post to plant a single foot down, let along enough to support his body as he pulled himself up. So that was out.

"Could I climb it? Just, wrap my limbs around it and inch my way up?" he wondered. *"No, not strong enough. Stab swords into it and use them as stairs? Not sure anybody will appreciate me damaging the training equipment. But that does give me an idea."*

He narrowed his eyes in focus, and right after a Summoned Sword appeared, facing parallel to the ground and facing the left. Next to that sword and in a position above that sword formed another, this one pointing to the right. More and more swords appeared in this fashion until they formed a ladder leading up past the post.

So he climbed the ladder of Summoned Swords by their hilts. It was an extremely slow and cumbersome process, and there were multiple times he had nearly fallen off onto the ground, but eventually he reached the top and tentatively stuck his foot out to the top of the post. He realized with dread that it really was so small that his one foot barely fit on it, but he managed to successfully balance on it albeit with great difficulty as his sword ladder shattered.

"O-okay- whoo, alright..." Sorun mumbled, his entire body trembling as he struggled to maintain balance. He looked up at Julie-Su and Amy, who were both giving him rather unimpressed looks. "I did good, right?"

The look Julie-Su was giving him didn't make him feel like he did good. "I admire the ingenuity of climbing up," she said, "but that was way too slow."

"Yeah, but good job getting up!" Amy praised.

He knew she wasn't being patronizing, but Sorun still felt his shoulders slump from what Amy said. "Yeah, awesome. So what now?"

"Now we see just how mobile you can be." Right after saying this, Julie-Su backflipped once more and landed upside-down on a post behind her while balancing on a single hand, and then pushed up into the air with the one arm and landed on a single foot on a post behind that one. "I'm not expecting you to be that good immediately, so for now just try getting on another post and we'll go from there."

"Right. Easy." The black-haired human looked at the nearest wooden post behind him and gulped. "No sweat."

He said that, but there actually was a slight amount of sweat running down his face. That post was close enough, but for him it might as well have been miles away for how good his acrobatic skills were.

"Why does everybody here get to move like a professional gymnast but me?" he silently asked himself up. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't envious over the kind of acrobatics Julie-Su and Amy were displaying so casually, but he didn't know how much of that was just Mobian biology and how much of that was just them being trained resistance fighters. Probably both, now that he thought of it.

And here he was lacking both of those things.

"Alright, let's do it." There was a voice in the back of his mind screaming at him not to, but Sorun ignored it and bent the one knee balancing him on the post. *"Aaand go,"* he thought as he jumped to the next post.

There was about a second and a half of time Sorun managed to register as he transitioned from one post to the next. A second and a half where he had focused on his goal and had attempted to stick his foot out to try and land on the post successfully.

He failed immediately when his foot slipped off, causing his face to smack right into the post before he tumbled down onto his back.

"Oh my gosh, Sorun! Are you okay!?"

He wasn't. He barely even managed to hear the panicked cry from Amy as he laid flat on his back staring up at the sky. He felt dazed, and his face burned and stung so much that it was almost numb. He did manage to perceive the pink blob that he assumed was Amy pull him up to his feet, at least. He was glad he was able to do that much.

"Where's the leak, ma'am...?" Sorun slurred as he was helped up into a sitting position.

"Oh no, he's delirious," Amy worriedly mumbled as she gently pulled the human up to his feet. She patted him a few times on the back, and more clarity appeared in Sorun's eyes as he blinked a couple of times and then held a hand to his head. "Are you okay, Sorun?"

"Agh... Sure..." His head was throbbing and his face was still burning, but at the very least there wasn't any blood when he pulled his hand back. And he didn't feel anything broken or out of place. "Alright." He dusted his hands off and walked of out Amy's grasp and to the nearest wood post. "Let's try again."

As the human began climbing another ladder made of Summoned Swords, the two Mobians cast each other worried glances before they focused back on Sorun. "You sure you're good?" Julie-Su asked. "We can take a break if you're not feeling up to it."

"Nah, it's- ohp, it's fine," Sorun breathed out as he nearly lost his balance upon stepping back onto the post. "Just gotta... focus and land on the target," he whispered to himself as he looked straight at the post he intended to jump onto to. "Alright, this time for sure."

He jumped again. On the bright side he hadn't hit his face, but unfortunately he still missed and landed right onto his stomach. Both Amy and Julie-Su winced at the human's misfortune, while Sorun

himself loudly moaned in pain as his body slid off the post and fell back onto the ground.

"Alright," he groaned under his breath, "this may take more than a few tries..."

"Hah, what a loser," Rubrum laughed from his position hidden amidst the trees as he watched Sorun continually slam into post after post.

"Okay, Sorun, remember that you're gonna want to be mindful of your center of mass-"

Slam!

"Ooh, that isn't, ah..." Julie-Su sucked in air between her teeth as she tried her best to look away from the human that crumpled onto the ground.

"Guys... guys, listen." Sorun heaved out a long breath as he attempted to stand up, failed, and then sat back down while leaning against the post. "We've been at this for an hour. I think I gotta call it quits for now."

"I... think that's probably for the best," Amy agreed as she jumped off her own post and approached Sorun as soon as she landed on the ground. The echidna near them did the same. "Are you sure you're alright?"

He couldn't manage any words, but Sorun did manage to flash her a thumbs-up. It was more of an affirmation that he was still conscious than him actually being okay, but at the moment it was all he could care to give.

Sorun couldn't blame the two Mobians for at least trying. And they'd tried, too- every time he'd fallen in the past hour one or both of them would give him some hint or pointer and how to do anything he was

doing better. Amy had mostly stuck to trying to fix his balance whereas Julie-Su had tried her best to help him actually make a landing.

But none of their advice had stuck for him. He'd tried his best at internalizing it all and implementing it, but after a whole hour of them trying to instruct him he hadn't made any progress whatsoever. And now all he had to show for it was a body riddled in throbbing bruises from smacking into those posts over and over.

"Sorry for wasting your time, you two," Sorun grunted as he slowly rose to his feet. At least the throbbing in his body had gone down enough that he could finally stand up, but now he had to look at two pairs of Mobian eyes staring right at him. "I know you both tried really hard, but I couldn't do it."

The echidna held a hand out to him. "No, Sorun-"

"Yeah, I suck, I know."

"Would you let me finish?" Julie-Su snapped, causing Sorun to shut his mouth and look right at her. "Look, your performance... yeah, it was pretty bad," she admitted, "but at least you're *trying* . I'd be more upset at you if you gave up after the first few tries."

"'More upset' implying that you're a bit upset?" Sorun asked with a raised eyebrow.

She backed up and shook her hands out in a disagreeing manner. "Hey, that's not what I'm... you're just not very good and it's a bit frustrating to watch." She looked to the side and began rubbing at her bionic arm. "I mean, really. This is basic stuff and I know people that are hopeless that manage to get the hang of this faster than you."

It was right after she said this that Amy jabbed her elbow into the echidna's side. "But," Amy said, "we think it's very admirable that you're putting effort in, and nobody is good at everything, so it's okay

if you're not so good in some areas as long as you're better in others." She snapped her head to Julie-Su. "Isn't that *right* ?"

She blinked at the pink hedgehog, and then looked back to Sorun. "Yes, completely," she agreed. "And don't say that we're wasting our time with you. We're training you because we want you to be better so you don't get hurt. We wouldn't be here if this was a waste of time."

It was practically the equivalent of being handed a participation trophy. And Sorun had received one of those in the past, and the feeling he had now was about the same one he had back then. But while he was both irritated at himself and at them for the words they were saying, he at least appreciated the effort they were going through for his sake. The kind words had helped, too. They didn't make him feel any better but they at least took some of his mind off the pain.

"Thanks," Sorun mumbled as he pushed off the wood post. "So Sonic told me that after you guys that somebody named Espio was supposed to look after me next. One of you know where he is?"

Julie-Su gave him a nod. "Yeah, he and a few of the others are a bit deeper in the woods that way. They said they'd be waiting for you around this time." She pointed towards the right side of the clearing, towards a direction that lead into the forest. "Just keep walking that way a bit and you'll find them. They're pretty hard to miss."

"Got it. Thanks." He waved the two girls off, and then began limping towards the forest.

"And don't worry!" he heard Amy call out from behind him. "You'll get the hang of this eventually! It just takes time!"

He didn't have the energy to respond.

On the bright side by now the throbbing pain in his body had turned into a dull ache, so he was able to walk normally about halfway through his trek through the forest. He was still pretty sure the bruises would still be there, but those would heal away in a few days. So it'd be fine as long as the rest of the day didn't require anything too physical.

Hopefully whatever Espio had planned wasn't too physical. Or anybody else later on for that matter.

"Which one was Espio? He was the... yeah, I never bothered," Sorun thought as he ducked under a wood branch. *"Damn, but who's actually left that I don't know? There was that purple guy with the horn, those two bees, that bat... oh, that short yellow squirrel guy, too. So it's gotta be one of them, right?"* He made a quiet hum. *"Don't even know what the name 'Espio' means. Is it the kind of thing that fits on a bee? Nah, not really... but that probably means it is one of them. Unless it isn't."* He squinted his eyes when he saw a gathering of figures in the distance past all the trees. *"Well, that's them up there. Might as well ask."*

Once Sorun made it through the dense brush, he made it to a section of forest where the trees were more spread out to make a more open area. There were four figures there talking among themselves, but he only knew one of them, and that was just because Knuckles had mentioned him one time. The tall crocodile Mobian Knuckles had identified at Vector was hard to miss.

The other three? Sorun didn't have a clue.

Two of them were the bees he remembered seeing. Two Mobians he was relatively sure were bees based on the black and yellow abdomens they had and the small pair of wings they were flying around with. They were short, too. Shorter than he was, which made him feel moderately more confident for once. Then he saw the large, knife-like stingers they had on their abdomens and the confidence dropped back down to zero.

The last one was the purple one with the horn he remembered seeing. Like almost everybody else he was solely going with the shoes-and-gloves combo. There wasn't much else to say about him aside from that yellow horn and the weird, coiled tail he had, and any other thoughts Sorun had were cut off when he looked over in Sorun's direction. The other three followed his gaze to look at Sorun, and all at once all four began making their way towards him.

"Hey there! Wow, what happened to you!?" The first one to make contact with him was one of the bees, this one having a boyish voice. He was flying in circles around Sorun as his amber eyes looked up and down Sorun's bruised body.

"I got beat up by some stationary wood," Sorun answered with a slump of his shoulders. The bee stopped and hovered right in front of his face, and Sorun couldn't help but squint in confusion when he saw the black, helmet-like object he had on his head with a maroon rim. *"I can't tell if that's a helmet or just part of his body,"* he thought. *"Maybe it's just a weird shell thing that looks like a helmet. Like the thing Meruem had. God, I miss anime."*

"You lost a fight against wood?" Sorun looked from the bee towards the purple Mobian with the yellow horn. He stopped right in front of Sorun and crossed his arms as he regarded Sorun with his own pair of yellow eyes. "How on earth did that happen?"

"They were real tough, man. Came outta nowhere. Whole legion of 'em," Sorun answered as he turned his body to face him. "Real talk though I just failed miserably at gymnastics training."

The purple Mobian chuckled under his breath and lowered his head. "Well, it happens to the best of us. Don't feel too bad about it." He lifted his head up to meet Sorun's eyes. "Pardon my rudeness, but I believe we have yet to make introductions. It's Sorun, correct? My name is Espio."

"Oh, this is Espio. But what actually is he?" Definitely something reptilian considering he was covered in scale-like skin instead of fur.

The coiled tail and black spines on his back were big hints, too, and he was fairly certain he'd seen lizards on Earth with horns. But for the life of him he couldn't remember which ones those were, so he decided to guess based on the first lizard that came to mind. "Espio the... Gecko?"

"Chameleon."

"Goddammit."

"Hah! Sorun called you a gecko," the bee Mobian laughed as he pointed at Espio.

Espio closed his eyes as a strained smile replaced the previous, easy smile. "Yes, Charmy, I heard him perfectly." He opened his eyes back to Sorun. "This one is named Charmy," he told him. "The other bee is Saffron."

"Hi!" In response, the bee gave Sorun an energetic wave. The other, more yellow bee, a female one of the same stature as Charmy, gave him a more shy wave.

"Hey." Sorun gave the two bees an unenthusiastic wave of his own and turned towards crocodile. "You're Vector, right?"

"You know it." The voice that came out of the reptile nearly had Sorun reeling. It was way rougher than he had been expecting, and loud enough to the point that he could have sworn the headphones and gold chain hanging off his neck vibrated from the volume. "What's up m'man?"

Sorun looked up at the crocodile. He was a bit taller than Sorun was. He didn't like that. "Nothin', man, nothin'," Sorun answered before turning back to Espio. "So what's in store for me today?"

There was something concerning about the way everybody's expressions had flashed from friendly and playful to almost deadly serious. The sudden change of atmosphere was so jarring, in fact,

that Sorun had taken a step backwards from the sheer intensity radiating off of them all. Espio in particular.

"Yes, your training," Espio said as he reached into one of his gloves. He pulled something out that was alarmingly familiar to Sorun- a shuriken. A shuriken made of wood. "A majority of Freedom Fighters enjoy the upfront approach when it comes to enemy combatants. It's a philosophy that even many in the Chaotix share."

"Mainly Knux and Mighty," Vector mumbled under his breath.

Espio, who heard the comment, shot the crocodile a look. "Be that as it may, even they have to admit that there are times where a more stealthy approach is appropriate for the situation. They've experienced it too many times firsthand to deny it. Everybody in the Freedom Fighters has." He turned back to the human. "The point is, sometimes sneaking into the fortress full of killer machines is more advantageous than rushing in head-first. It's an approach I take a personal preference in."

"That's a shuriken," Sorun observed as he watched Espio twirl the object in his fingers. "What, you're a ninja or something?"

"It's a training shuriken," Espio corrected. "And yes, I am."

Oh. Sorun didn't have a single comeback for that except for raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"We've been made aware that your status as a human makes you more physically... limited compared to a normal Mobian," Espio continued. "There's no shame in that, but it does mean that taking the stealthy approach to operations will be extra important to somebody like you. And it's a basic skill everybody in the Freedom Fighters possesses, anyways, so all the more reason for you to learn."

"So sneaking?" Sorun summarized. "You're gonna teach me to sneak?"

"Essentially," Espio said with a nod. "We tossed around a few ideas how to go about it, but at the end we decided with..." He stopped, and then took a deep breath. "We decided to go with-"

"Hide and seek!" Charmy exclaimed as he flew between the two. "We all got to put our ideas in a hat and mine got drawn!"

Sorun blinked at the bee, and then he turned his gaze down towards Espio with a flat expression. Espio decided to look away from Sorun's glare while coughing into his gloved fist.

"It suited our purposes well enough and nobody raised any objections," he defended in a low voice. "I would have you know that my idea was much less childish."

There was a loud scoff from Vector. "Yours wasn't any better at all! You wanted to play capture the flag."

"You be quiet." He pointed at the crocodile to make him quiet, and then turned his attention back to Sorun. "So yes. Essentially we're tasking you to hide somewhere. We'll find you and, depending on how long it takes us to find you, will instruct you on how to hide better the next time around. We'll do this for the next hour."

Seemed simple enough. Hide from the Mobians. At least he wasn't getting smacked by poles this time. "Alright. Sounds easy enough. So just hide anywhere?"

"Anywhere is fine," Espio nodded. "Just don't go too far away. We'll say within two-hundred or so feet."

"Okay. What if you don't find me?"

At that, Espio smirked. "We'll find you." For whatever reason, he began to shimmer and slowly fade away. "But please try not to make it too easy for us."

And then, he disappeared. Completely. Sorun was left with his mouth hanging open wondering what just happened before he opened his mouth in clarity.

"Ohhh, because he's a chameleon and they can change colors..." he slowly mumbled. "Wow, okay, so just straight invisibility." He turned to Vector. "So can all chameleon Mobians do that?"

"As far as I know, yeah," he said with a shrug. "You're on the clock, y'know."

Sorun didn't even widen his eyes before he set off running.

"Alright. They'll never find me here."

After a bit of searching, Sorun had found a hollow log nestled between a couple of fallen trees. Just big enough for him to fit in but also hidden well enough from the other trees that the opening to the inside of the log wasn't so obvious.

So obviously he'd chosen to hide inside of the log. A content sigh whistled out from his mouth as he sat back in his spot to stare up at the canopy of leaves right above him with his hands interlocked behind his head for cushioning.

Any peace he had was interrupted when a wooden shuriken flew in from nowhere and embedded itself into the wood next to his head.

Sorun yelled out in panic, and then shot right up into a sitting position with his torso leaving the log. Immediately after a saw a shape shimmer next to him, and soon enough Espio's body was revealed to be standing on one of the fallen trees next to him. His arms were crossed and he was giving the startled human a stern look.

"Try not to choose obvious places like that when hiding from an adversary," he advised the human. "Go find somewhere else and try again."

Sighing, Sorun gave the chameleon a nod and began climbing out from the log. "Yeah, yeah..."

"Leaf man. I'll be leaf man this time."

Sorun had always been one for ghillie suits, because the idea of hiding in plain sight using a suit camouflaged to look like the surrounding nature always seemed cool in his eyes. Unfortunately he didn't have a ghillie suit on hand to use in this situation, but he did have a ton of dead branches and leaves on standby all around him.

He didn't have anything to apply much camouflage to himself, either, so he stuck as many dead branches with leave in any crevices in his clothes he could find and then crouched down in a bush full of similar leaves. It wasn't long until after he'd hidden in the bushes before he heard a small buzzing sound. Sure enough, Charmy had flown into view and was hovering right over the spot Sorun had been standing before entering the bushes.

"Hm... HM... HMM..." The human found the exaggerated hums being made by the bee strange, but he began to feel excitement well up in him despite the breath he was holding when Charmy looked in all directions, including having directly stared at his bush, before shrugging and flying off.

Slowing exhaling, Sorun allowed himself a small smile of victory in successfully hiding from Charmy. This was cut short when he felt the bush he was hiding in rustle, and he found himself looking towards the source of the rustling before stopping dead at a pair of yellow eyes staring at him through the leaves.

"Boo!"

Sorun yelled out in surprise and tumbled out of the bush, his camouflage falling off him in the process. It wasn't long after that Charmy rose out of the bush, holding his hands to his stomach and laughing at Sorun's expense as the human scowled up at him.

"Ha ha ha! Nice try, Sorun, but you made way too much noise doing that," he told him. "You gotta be quieter."

"Mh-hm, yeah," Sorun grumbled as he rose up to his feet. "Thanks for the advice."

This time he'd found a giant pile of dead leaves. A pile that, upon looking closer, Sorun realized that he could easily fit inside of. So he'd dug a small hole out of the pile with his hands- going extra carefully as to not make too much noise- and slowly crawled inside. There was still an uncomfortable amount of crinkling from the leaves he was trampling, but eventually he'd managed to fully insert himself inside the pile.

A few minutes passed, and Sorun heard footsteps slowly approach him. He couldn't see anything in the darkness of the pile, but Sorun felt his muscles tense up and heard his heart beating in his chest as he heard the footsteps stop right in front of the pile he was hiding in. His heart soon feel when all the leaves were scattered away with a quick kick, revealing that it was Espio who had found his spot.

"You left the hole you used to enter open," he told him. "Don't leave evidence of your presence next time."

Sorun's face fell into the leaves. "'Kay..."

"Okay, let's try the bush tactic again."

After some searching he'd found some more bushes. Thick, numerous bushes all bunched together all nice-like. So thick that he wouldn't even need camouflage this time as long as he hid himself well enough.

And he needed to hide himself well enough soon, because he saw Vector coming his way. The crocodile hadn't noticed him yet, but he

was walking rather fast and Sorun didn't have time to find another hiding spot.

So he'd entered the bushes, going slowly as to not make too much rustling to give himself away. It was right after he finally settled in his spot that Vector appeared in his vision, stopping right in front of the bushes. He crossed his arms, looked around the area, and then settled to looking down at the spot Sorun was hiding in much to his alarm.

"Those bushes are poisonous, you know," he called out.

"AH!" Panicked, Sorun jumped right out of the bushes and began to frantically claw the leaves off of his body. He continued to do so until he heard laughter coming from the crocodile, causing Sorun to pause and slowly look towards Vector. "What!?" he yelled.

"I-I was just kidding around!" Vector laughed, pointing at Sorun with one hand while the other held his head. The human's jaw dropped in response. "I didn't actually know if you were in there! I've been making up all kinds of stuff all over the hiding spots everywhere! I didn't know you'd actually fall for it!" He sighed, and then wiped an imaginary tear away from his yellow eyes. "Seriously, though, that wasn't half-bad. Just, uh, don't fall for something like that next time around."

Fuming, Sorun gave Vector a stiff nod and stomped away from him. "I'll keep that in mind," he grumbled out through grit teeth.

He hadn't even gotten two minutes into the next round before a wooden shuriken flew into the tree next to his head. Sorun sighed, and then turned to the direction the shuriken was thrown as Espio's form materialized to reveal the chameleon clinging to the surface of a nearby tree with his limbs.

"Lower your form," he instructed the teen. "You make less noise and you won't be as noticeable."

"Yeah, but that's really rough on my knees," Sorun complained.

"Rougher than being discovered by a Badnik?"

Sorun mumbled under his breath, but otherwise didn't disagree as he watched Espio disappear once again.

"Er, uh... Sorun?"

Sighing, the human turned around from his position hidden behind the large tree he was hiding against. He didn't even react when he saw Saffron floating in the air right behind him.

"I know, I know. Too out in the open," Sorun said out as he walked past the yellow bee.

The teen about had it right there after yet another wood shuriken flew into the ground between his feet.

"Oh, come on!" Sorun exclaimed as Espio appeared standing right in front of him. "What'd I do wrong that time!?"

"Your footprints," Espio said, and then pointed behind Sorun. The teen looked behind him and then noticed the small path he'd unintentionally made when he'd trudged through a large patch of dead leaves. Face abashed, he turned back to Espio.

"Alright, I'll give you that one."

Finally, and much to Sorun's relief, they decided to call the stealth training to an end. The group of five had reconvened near where they'd originally met up, and the four Mobians decided to all turn towards the sole human of the group to give him their critique. Critique that he was sure would be very harsh and not too full of praise.

He'd never been chewed out by a bumblebee before. At the very least it would be an interesting experience.

"Well, that was kinda fun!" Charmy began, his body hovering up and down in the air as he looked to Sorun. "And you weren't too bad, Sorun! You know, near the end. All that much."

"What he's trying to say is that you have a... semi-solid grasp of the fundamentals," Espio said, shooting Charmy a glare. The bee gave him a nervous smile and floated near to Vector, causing Espio to shake his head and look back to Sorun. "You're not great. Or good by any definition of the word. I don't mean to sound demeaning in any way but I'm being perfectly honest calling you decent seems a stretch-"

"Oh, what would you know?" Vector asked with a roll of his eyes. "I don't think Mr. I'm-a-ninja-that-can-turn-invisible can judge anybody on being sneaky. What would you know, anyways?"

Espio crossed his arms in a huff. "I'd know plenty," he muttered under his breath, looking down at his shoes.

"Anyways, Sorun, don't listen to them. Ya did fine," Vector assured the human while giving him a thumbs-up. "I mean, yeah, sure, you coulda done better. Like, way better. But for your first time not so bad."

The teen exhaled. "Boy, that sure means a lot, Vector," Sorun muttered out with eyes narrowed at the crocodile. "Thanks a ton."

"No problem, pal." Whether sarcasm was lost on the crocodile or not, Sorun couldn't tell, though he suspected it was the latter given that Vector had the cheek to go and wink at him after saying that. Sorun merely scoffed while shoving his hands into his pockets.

Okay, so being a stealthy person was a million times more hard than all the movies and video games made it out to seem. He thought maybe he'd at least be decent considering he'd managed to sneak

up on that Egg Pawn the one time, but living beings were evidently much harder to sneak around than robots.

It wasn't a complete failure like the mobility training, at least. It wasn't a success either since Sorun had been caught every single time and never even made it past ten minutes once he actually began hiding, but it wasn't an absolute failure. And these people were nice enough. In their own ways. Once one looked past all of their idiosyncrasies. And they'd still volunteered all this time to help him, so he felt just the tiniest bit obligated to thank them.

"Well, thanks for the help with this, you guys. Even if I am mediocre," Sorun said as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry if I didn't really live up to your expectations."

"You weren't that terrible," Saffron informed him, who had chosen to float next to Charmy. "I'm sure with a little bit of practice you could be even better."

"She's not wrong," Espio said. "We need to end it here for now, but perhaps later we could work on some other things. You're not completely hopeless." He paused, and then gave Sorun a small, sincere smile. "But don't let what I said make you lose heart. You're doing fine."

"Uh... right." Sorun waved at the group of four, and then turned around to leave. "I gotta head to the next training thing, but I'll catch you guys later. I guess."

He turned around too quickly to catch all the farewells they had given them, but he heard enough to get the message. All in all, so far it could have all been worse. Could have been a million times better, too, with him actually doing well, but at least it wasn't nothing. And everybody being supportive was probably one of the only reasons he hadn't outright given up yet. But they were nice people, those Chaotix.

Sorun tried not to think too hard about the fact that he was going to abandon them all to Eggman at the end of all this.

Sitting back on the kitchen table's chair, Sorun shot Sally with an incredulous look. "Tactics? I dunno, man, tactics ain't really my thing," he admitted. "Is it really that important?"

Sally, who stood at the other end of the table, placed her hands on her hips and gave Sorun a displeased look. "Yes, Sorun, believe it or not having a plan before jumping into the fray and knowing how to react to a variety of situations can be a life saver out in the field."

He saw where she was coming from, but he wasn't too thrilled about the idea. Thinking tactically had never been his thing. Never had the mind for it. He stayed away from all those Xcom games for a reason- he just plain wasn't good at strategy, real-time or turned based. But he supposed that in real life maybe having such a skill set was at least a little important.

Didn't stop him from not wanting to learn it.

"Don't people usually just let you handle the tactical side of things, though?" Sorun asked.

"More than I'd like, yeah," Sally mumbled under her breath. "But," she continued in her normal voice, "I'd like you to at least try, so we'll go through a bunch of scenarios that are likely to happen and you tell me how you'd best deal with it."

Sorun groaned, but otherwise gave the chipmunk a nod. "Fine. Hit me."

"Alright, we'll start off easy. Just you in front of a Badnik, and the Badnik is heading right towards you with the intent to kill. What do you do?"

"I stab the robot with a Summoned Sword," Sorun answered.

"Okay." Sally nodded. "Now what if it doesn't stop?"

"I stab it with a lot of Summoned Swords." Wasn't even a question. Sword didn't work? Use more swords. Easy math.

"Sure, that works. Now let's try a different Badnik, this one with a shield. What do you do?"

"I stab it with a Summoned Sword."

Sally paused, and then gave Sorun a questioning look. "Sorun, uh... for the sake of practice let's pretend the shield blocks your swords," she tried. "What do you do then?"

Sorun rubbed his chin in thought. "Stab it with a Summoned Sword... but, like, really hard."

He got the feeling that wasn't the answer she wanted to hear when he heard Sally slap her palm against her face. "No, Sorun, that isn't-" She stopped herself and took a deep breath. "The shield is impervious to damage. No amount of stabbing will hurt it. So what do you do in response?" When Sorun gave her a blank look, she tried giving him a hint. "Try to find a different angle to your problem," she said in a helpful tone. "There's more than one ways to deal with a problem usually."

"A different ang- ohh, I get it," Sorun realized as he tilted his head back. "'Cause swords can stab at different angles, yeah. I get it. So I stab it with a Summoned Sword but differently." Simple. Why hadn't he thought of that earlier?

"That's..." A forced smile found itself on Sally's face, and she gave the human a congratulating nod. "Yes, we'll go with that. Moving on..."

"A lot of the time we encounter a lot of locked doors since, you know, we're breaking into Eggman's places all the time," Rotor said as he

used a pair of pliers to move around a bundle of wires set on the lab's table. "The doors are usually electronic, but more often than not they run on a closed-circuit system that can be bypassed. The hardest part is usually just getting the panel for the door control off, but after than it's just a matter of rewiring some things here and there to close the circuit off and trick the door into opening. You get that so far?"

Scowling down at the pretend door circuit Rotor had made for him, Sorun, who was sitting next to Rotor at one of the tables in the HQ's lab, murmured something unintelligible under his breath as he moved around a wire with his own pliers. "Mm-hm, yeah." There was a small zap and the human cursed under his breath as he shook his hand.

"Great, so," Rotor continued, "you gotta be careful not to cut the power supply, because otherwise that door isn't gonna open. That said, that's not always the case: if it's something like a magnetically-locked door you either need to get to some kind of control center to open it the right way, or you really do need to cut the power to knock the magnets out. Usually you can just pry open doors like that easy enough, but like I said, that's just for magnetically-locked doors. Eight times out of ten it's the kind of door that won't open without power, so you need to bypass it. *Without* cutting power. Because then it won't open. Unless you're somebody like Sonic, in which cause you can just go through the door. But you're not. So you need to bypass it."

"Yeah, so... the blue wire goes to the red wire... red wire goes to the... purple... wire..."

The walrus raised his eyes ridges and looked over to Sorun. "Uh, Sorun? There is no purple wire."

"Really?" There was another zap from the circuit as it shocked Sorun again, and the human rose bleary eyes up to meet Rotor's gaze. "You sure, 'cause they all... they're all kinda lookin' purple, man..."

"How many times has that thing shocked you?"

"Ah, you know... cou-... couple..." Sorun slurred. "I can't feel anything, Rotor."

Zap!

And just like that, Sorun fell out of his chair and onto the lab's floor. Rotor stared after the fallen human, sighed, and tiredly rubbed at his face.

"This seems a bit out of my league," Sorun grunted as he lifted the weighted bar above his head. "You guys know humans aren't as strong as Mobians, right?"

It was the main reason he'd wanted to avoid strength training. It was virtually useless since everything in the world was stronger than him by default. That and he was frankly too lazy to go through the endeavor if it had such little gain in the long run. But Knuckles and Mighty hadn't seen it like that, so they'd practically forced him onto a bench press they had in the training area near the woods and started making him lift a barbell.

He was only three lifts in and he already started to feel his arms give out. And there were only five-pound weights on each end of the bar. In his defense the bar itself was heavy.

"Sounds like excuses to me, Sorun," Knuckles said while rooting around in a box of weights.

" *Biology* isn't a good excuse?" Sorun breathed out as he lifted the bar. "Y-you can't be serious."

He heard a loud scoff from Mighty, who was standing right behind Sorun's head and acting as a spotter. "You know, you might actually see results if you bothered to drink that protein shake I made for you."

"That thing wasn't fit for human consumption," Sorun gasped out as he lifted the bar again. He looked to the side, and then visible blanched when he saw Knuckles approaching with a large, twenty-pound weight. "Hey-hey-hey, wait, what're you thinking!?"

"Oh, come on. You're not gonna get anywhere by lifting these little things," Knuckles claimed as he began slotting the weight into the bar Sorun was holding. "Relax, you're gonna get results way faster with this one."

"Knuckles, wait-!"

Sorun's warning came out too late, as the moment Knuckles slotted the weight in the barbell fell right down onto the teens neck. With his airway constricted, the he began making loud, choking noises as his feet wildly kicked up and down the table. The Mobians were quick to lift the barbell off of Sorun, who sat gasping for breath the second the bar was lifted off of him.

"So..." Mighty hedged as he awkwardly kicked at his feet, "are me moving to the dumbbells now, or...?"

Sorun fainted on the bench press before he could formulate a sarcastic remark.

Tails was watching Sorun with a critical glare. Sorun, sitting on the pilot's seat of the Tornado, was carefully looking over the controls of the plane with an intense look of focus. Finally, he took a deep breath and looked up to the fox leaning over the plane's windshield.

"... Raw."

"It's yaw!" Tails screamed out in frustration while grabbing at his ears.

"Is this really the best way to be utilizing your time at the moment, Sorun?"

The words reached Sorun's ears, and after a few moments he paused the game, set the controller down, and looked to the holographic lynx sitting on the couch next to him. "Look, I needed a break, okay?" he said.

Nicole set down her own controller and frowned. "I believe I was supposed to be instructing you in something to broaden your skills as a Freedom Fighter."

"Hey, you didn't say anything when I came up to you and asked if you just wanted to play video games instead." When the lynx continued to frown at Sorun, he sighed, unpaused the game, and pressed a button to cause a sprite on the screen to explode. "Oh no, Nicole, your K/D ratio."

Immediately Nicole scrambled to pick her controller back up and began playing the game again. Sorun chuckled under his breath and turned back towards the screen as he began using his own controller.

Tracing the ring drawn in the ground around them in tape with his eyes, Sorun regarded the cybernetic rabbit standing across from him with an unsure expression. "Yeah, I'm not really sure hand-to-hand training's a real good fit for me," he said. "I can't really damage a robot with my bare fists. It just doesn't seem that useful."

"Sho' it's useful," Bunnie argued with a shake of her head. "What's gonna happen if ya'll ever find yerself fightin' somethin' that's not a robot, huh? Like another Mobian? Then you'll be glad I taught ya this."

"Ah, then I'll still get torn limb from limb. 'Cause I'm human." He snapped his fingers and manifested a Summon Sword that floated at

his side. "And I got these things, so I don't really see the point. It's not like they run out."

"Look, ya never know when this'll become useful later on, alright?" She rose her robotic arm and made a "come hither" gesture with her finger. "Now come ovah here and try hittin' me."

With a roll of his eyes, Sorun shattered the sword and walked over towards Bunnie. "Sure, but I still have a lot of objections towards this."

When Sorun had finally walked within an arm's length of Bunnie, he attempted to hit her with his right fist. It wasn't a particularly good punch, even by his standards. He'd put practically no power behind it and barely had the willpower to even raise it to begin with. He was still shocked when, in a flash of movement, the rabbit dodged to the side and grabbed his arm, and then did *something* that ended up with Sorun slamming onto his back on the ground. He wasn't sure what that something was, because it had happened so fast it had all been a blur to his eyes.

"Okay, lesson... one..." Bunnie trailed off and then dropped the arm she was still holding after she looked down at Sorun's dazed face. "Uh, you alright?"

"Relatively speaking, yeah..." Sorun said with a cough. He pushed his arms on the ground to lift his body up, and then looked up at Bunnie. "What even was that?"

"Ah, uh... ah I jus' threw ya. It's a standard takedown move."

Sorun nodded in vague understanding, and then closed his eyes and flopped back onto the ground. "'Kay, gimme, like, twenty minutes here before we start again."

It was safe to say that learning CQC from a cybernetic rabbit that threw him faster than he could comprehend was a fool's errand from the get-go, because by the end of the training session he wasn't

even seeing straight. But at least Bunnie had been nice enough to lead him back to the HQ and promised him she'd go slower next time.

He wasn't really sure he wanted there to be a next time.

Crick!

"Mulligan," Sorun muttered.

Crick!

"Still warming up."

Crick!

"That one was defective."

Crick!

"I'll take that one."

"I only have so many spare lockpicks, you know."

Sorun paused in his actions, and looked up from the lock he was staring at to the white bat that was sitting on the desk next to him. He didn't have much to say about her. All he learned was that her name was Rouge, and that was as far as that introduction got before she lead him into her room, gave him a set of lockpicks, and gave him some basic instructions before sitting him down at a desk to watch him unlock a lock she had on said desk for him.

She dressed weird, though. Of all the observations he had about the bat, that was probably the only one he had concerning Rouge. She had these weird high boots and pants and this weird pink and white top that only covered her front. He didn't understand how a piece of clothing could make somebody covered it fur look revealing, but it did the job of both doing that and giving Sorun a headache thinking

about it. So he tried to keep his mind off it and went back to trying to pick the lock.

The lockpick he was using promptly snapped with a *crick!* noise, and he grumbled under his breath as he tossed the broken pick into the growing pile at his side.

"What exactly are you trying to do there?" Rouge asked. "I've never seen somebody break so many picks trying to pick a lock. And that was the simplest lock I could find, too."

Sorun slowly exhaled, and then inserted a new lockpick. "I'm trying to find the sweet spot with the lockpick and then unlock the lock with the torque wrench," he muttered. That's how it always worked in video games, and he'd broken about a million picks in those situations, too.

He really hated lockpicking.

"... What sweet spot?" Rouge asked. "It's a lock. You're supposed to lift all the tumblers into the unlock position and then use the torque wrench."

"..." That did make a ton more sense when she put it like that. "Right," Sorun muttered, and then carefully position the lockpick deeper inside the lock. "So when am I ever gonna use this again?"

Rouge rolled her eyes. "In case you ever need to open something that isn't electronically locked."

Ask a dumb question... "Ahhh, of course. And where'd you learn to do this?" he absentmindedly asked the bat as he worked the pick.

"Around. You pick up a lot of handy things in my line of work."

Sorun hummed in response. It was a somewhat vague answer, but his focus was mainly on trying not to break another lockpick before he finally managed to open the lock.

His eyes widened when he heard a series of short clicks, and when he turned the small wrench he had in the lock it twisted all the way, causing the small latch locked on top of the lock to fall away. That really was easier than finding a nonexistent sweet spot.

"Hey, I did it," Sorun announced as he removed the tools from the lock and stood up. Rouge slid off of the desk, leaned over the lock, and then gave a hum of approval while giving the human a nod.

"Hey, yeah, look at that," she said in an approving voice. "You went through five lockpicks in the process, but I'll let that slide since it's your fist time. I'll give ya a solid D."

As far as he was concerned, that was a passing grade. He'd take it. "Good enough for me. Thanks for the help."

She nodded. "Sure. Come back some other time if you want and I'll get you a lock a that isn't beginner-level." A beat passed. "But good job learning how to pick a lock. The basics of it, at least."

"Er-"

"The door's over there," she said while nodding to the door in her room.

Sorun looked to the door, back to Rouge who was looking at him with en even expression, and then the teen began to move towards the door. "Yeah. Thanks."

He left the bat's room feeling more awkward than he had entering it in the first place.

"Explosives? Seriously? You want me of all people near explosives?"

"Ah, you need not worry, Sorun. Eet is not like you are the one making ze explosifs. You are just arming zem."

Sorun's incredulous eyes flicked towards the coyote, and then flicked back to the bomb set up on the table. He'd once again been taken to a large clearing near the woods, this one full of wood panelings and tables, where Antoine had showed him what he planned on teaching the human. In this case, arming explosives.

He couldn't even believe they were letting him touch a bomb, let alone mess with one.

"Also, eet iz just a paint bomb. Not so deadly at all."

Ah, that was why.

"Okay..." Sorun stepped closer to the table so he could look at the actual bomb. It looked about what one would expect a bomb to look like: Some tubes of paint connected to one plastic brick connected to another plastic brick via a bunch of wires that were all connected via even more wires to a small, digital clock taped to the front of it all. "So we're just going over arming, right?" he questioned. "No cutting any wires or disarming or anything like that?"

"Non, we will be disarming right after ze arming." Antoine turned around and walked towards a table that held a small toolbox. "Just let me grab something before we are getting started."

"Ah-huh." While Antoine's back was turned, Sorun leaned in closer to the bomb to examine it further. "It looks simple enough," he whispered. He saw a series of three switches next to the clock's digital display, and absentmindedly flicked the topmost one in the other direction.

This was a massive mistake, as the digital display lit up to life and displayed a countdown timer going down from thirty minutes.

"Uh-oh." Alarmed, Sorun quickly flicked the switch back into its previous position. To his growing worry, the countdown wasn't affected at all, nor was it affected when he tried flicking all three of the switches in various combinations. "Uh..." He looked closer at the

bomb, and then noted a blue wire going from the countdown timer to a small, plastic box taped to the rest of the bomb that had a small lightning bolt painted on it. "Okay, that's the power supply feeding the timer, and according to Rotor those are important, so... pull that to stop the bomb?"

It seemed like a logical enough bet. No power to the timer meant it couldn't count down to zero and blow up. Sorun nodded at his answered, gripped the blue wire between his thumb and index finger, and pulled the wire out from the timer.

The timer went down from twenty-nine minutes to thirty seconds.

"Ooh!" So he'd been completely wrong for some reason he couldn't fathom. He stared down at the bomb with shaking eyes, and then whirled towards Antoine who was coming back with a pair of small clippers in his hands. "Antoine, I, uh... I turned the bomb on by accident."

"Huh?" His footsteps slowed, but then the coyote shrugged and continued at his usual pace. "Eh, eet is no big issue. We will just be moving on to ze disarming right away."

"No, you don't understand-"

"Eet is fine, Sorun, I am ze expert here. I put a thirty-minute timer on ze bomb, so we are in no danger."

The human teen bit his lower lip, and then in a split-second act of self preservation turned the bomb around and walked past Antoine. "Why don't you do it first?" he suggested as he made his way towards an empty table. "I'll just watch from over here."

Antoine's eyes trailed off after him in confusion. "If you are sure," he agreed with a shrug as he stopped in front of the bomb. "Are you sure you can zee from back there?" he asked, craning his neck back look at Sorun.

"Yeah, dude! Yeah!" Sorun was in the process of turning a table on its side, flat end pointed towards Antoine and the bomb. After turning it in the correct position, Sorun crouched down behind the table and poked his head up over the top to address Antoine. "Yeah, man, it-it's fine, yeah, don't worry! Just go for it!"

"Alright, then."

Sorun grit his teeth worriedly and hid completely behind the table.

"Now Sorun, when it comes to ze disarming of explosifs, you must be mindful of all parts and which bits are connects to which bobs," Antoine instructed as he turned the bomb to face towards. "First you will want to- SACRE-!"

BOOM!

Following the explosion something wet splat against the table Sorun was using to shield himself. The human breathed out, and lifted his head up right after to survey the damage. He winced when he saw that the table, as well as the entire area around where the bomb had been, was completely drenched in pink paint. He tried searching for Antoine, and his eyes landed on a pink, Antoine-shaped form laying on the ground that was blending in completely with the paint-soaked ground.

"Uh... oh, wow," Sorun mumbled as he stepped out from the table. He sheepishly walked towards what he assumed was Antoine's body, and then stopped right in front of it as he nervously chuckled. "Welp!" he said with a clap, "that, uh... about wraps it up, I think. You okay, man?"

He got his answer when Antoine's blue eyes, the only discernible feature in the mess of pink Sorun was looking at, opened up and looked right at the human. They narrowed considerably once they locked on to Sorun's own eyes.

Sorun, flinching from the intense glare the paint-covered coyote was sending him, weakly pointed in a direction away from the paint explosion. "Yeah, I'll, uh... go get some water to clean you off," he said before quickly running off.

The last person in the whole of the Freedom Fighters that Sorun had yet to meet until now had been a shorter, golden-colored squirrel named Ray. Seemed like a nice enough guy once Sorun had met him, if not a bit jittery. They hadn't talked all that much after meeting, but Sorun suspected that was mainly due to the golden squirrel being so timid to the point he stuttered in his words. It was what he observed, anyways, so he hadn't expected a shy guy like Ray's training to be all that intensive .

He was wrong.

"You want me to climb that tree?" Sorun deadpanned as he looked up at the large oak tree the pair had stopped in front of. A *very* large tree. Noticeably larger than most other trees in the forest around Knothole. He couldn't even see the top. "Okay, but why?"

Ray fiddled with the small, blue jacket he had on, and then looked up at Sorun. "W-w-well, climbing's important, r-right?" he stuttered. "Y-you never know w-when you might need to climb something, and if you f-f-fell while trying or something w-worse, that would be bad."

"... Sure," Sorun agreed with a small sigh. "I've never actually climbed a tree before."

"Oh, it's e-easy!" Ray said. "Here, just do what I do."

What he did was grab onto the tree and scamper up it at a rate that Sorun would expect from a squirrel. That is to say, inhumanly fast to the point that Sorun's eyes had trouble keeping up with him before he finally stopped a quarter of the way up the tree. He hadn't even used any of the branches to climb, either. He'd just used his hands to climb up its surface.

The teen looked down at his pale, human hands. He was fairly confident his fingers couldn't cling to a tree like a squirrel's.

"Dude, I'm not a squirrel!" Sorun yelled. "I can't do that!"

"... Oh." A look of realization crossed Ray's face, and he looked down briefly before pointing to a branch close to the ground. "O-okay, just climb up one branch at a time. It's l-like a ladder."

"Ladder. Sure. A really uneven and wooden ladder." Walking forwards, Sorun looked up at the branch right above him, leaped up, and grabbed the branch with his hands. He tried pulling himself up, failed, and then planted his feet on the tree and tried pulling up while pushing against the tree and walking on its surface. This proved to be much more successful as Sorun had finally managed to make it to the top of the branch, breathing moderately heavier as he looked up at Ray.

"Hey, you're d-doing it!" The squirrel flashed him a thumbs-up. "J-just keep going a-at it like that, okay?"

Sorun nodded, and then looked towards a series of branches next to him that lead further up the tree. These branches were clustered enough together than he actually was able to use them as a ladder, and slowly but carefully his feet down on them. He pressed his weight down on them to test their integrity, and with a satisfied hum he grabbed the branches above him, and then pulled his body up while planting his feet down on any branches he passed.

"Okay. Alright, yeah, this is pretty easy," he thought as he continued climbing. *"Yeah, I got this."*

"That's the way!" Ray cheered as Sorun climbed past him. "Now make sure th-that you're sure of your footholds and that you don't grab any weakened or d-dead branches, because you might-"

Snap!

Ray's words were cut off when a branch snapped off the tree and fell past him. Unfortunately, said branch had been a branch Sorun had been holding on to, and following the branch was Sorun's screaming body as he fell past Ray. The squirrel looked after him in fright, but reflexively closed his eyes when he heard the human's body hit the forest ground. He slowly opened them and heavily winced when he saw Sorun lying flat on his back at the foot of the tree.

"... Sorun?" he weakly called down. "Are you okay?"

"... Ow..."

So far today he'd been battered, beaten, and electrocuted in all sorts of different ways, and while the only physical evidence of any of this was bruising all throughout his body, it still hurt. On the bright side, he only had one more training session to go through today. One more and then he was done and he could hopefully sleep all this off.

The downside was that it was with Shadow.

"Oh boy, here we go..." Sorun morosely thought as he stepped into another clearing of forest used for training. This one was was full of wooden crates stacked everywhere, though for whatever reason there were quite a few charred spots on the ground and some burned pieces of crate scattered around in some areas. In the middle of all those crates was Shadow, who had crossed his arms and was staring intensely at Sorun as he waited for him to arrive. *"So how bad is this gonna get?"*

He still didn't know what Shadow's deal was with him, and frankly, Sorun was too scared to ask. He couldn't hate Sorun completely- he wouldn't have made that suggestion to Sorun about a weapon otherwise. Looking back, Sorun didn't even know if there was any hate in any of the words the hedgehog has said to him. It sounded more like displeasure than anything else, and he had no idea what that meant.

It didn't help that Sorun got the impression that he was a bit of a social pariah, either. Bits and pieces of gossip he'd picked up around suggested that Shadow just wasn't a friendly guy in general, though most of this had come from Sonic. Unfriendly, but also not directly antagonistic against everybody. Kind of like Sorun himself now that he thought about it.

Well, at least they had something in common. Too bad Sorun didn't know what to make of it, or what to make of the black and red hedgehog in general.

"Hello." The greeting the dark hedgehog had given him was a lot more subdued than Sorun was expecting. He stopped right in front of Shadow, who looked Sorun's body up and down with his crimson eyes before scoffing. "You've certainly been busy."

"Yeah, it's been a rough day," Sorun agreed. "So what are we doing here in crate land? Don't tell me you're gonna have me stacking boxes or something."

Shadow shook his head. "No, nothing as inane as that." He tapped his fingers against his elbows. "You have Chaos Control."

Sorun cocked his head to the side in confusion. "I... don't know what that is." He heard it mentioned back when that Chaos Emerald had been stuck to him, but he'd never asked on what it actually was. He just knew it was something Shadow could do.

"The ability to manipulate Chaos energy."

"... I guess?" In response, Sorun made a Summoned Sword appear at his side. "I mean, if making these things counts as Chaos Control, then yeah, sure, I have Chaos Control."

Shadow cast an inquisitive look at the floating, blue sword. "Would you mind if I held that for a moment?"

Why did people keep asking to hold his sword? "Sure, here." He grabbed the sword and tossed it to Shadow, who caught it mid-air and immediately went to inspecting it. He was examining it rather thoroughly, too, with the way his eyes were scrunched in concentration as he ran a hand along the spectral sword's surface.

Finally, Shadow sighed and tossed the sword back to Sorun, who let it go so that it would float back at his side. "How did you make such a technique?" Shadow demanded. "I understand the composition of the blade, and I can even discern how much Chaos energy was used to produce it, but I can't understand how you create it."

He wasn't so sure "because I liked a certain series of video games" was going to be a satisfactory answer to Shadow, but he didn't have anything better than than the truth. The truth he really didn't want to divulge for petty, personal reasons. Vague answer it was. "I don't know what to tell you, Shadow. I absorbed a Chaos Emerald and got this power out of it. I didn't put any thought into it; it just happened." He looked to the side at the sword. "It looks like Force Edge, though, so there's that."

Shadow hummed. "And what exactly is Force Edge?"

"It's a sword from back on Earth," Sorun cryptically answered. "I always really liked it, so I guess I just... subconsciously made the power." He turned back to Shadow. "That's all I got for you."

"I see. Subconscious." Shadow closed his eyes in thought, and then opened them back to Sorun. "Well, regardless of how that power came to be, I'm the only real expert on Chaos Control around willing to help you train that power."

Sorun stiffened. He stiffened so hard that his concentration broke and the sword besides him shattered.

Oh, no. He wasn't going to have somebody walk in and tell him how to use his Summoned Swords, even if it was Shadow. It was *his* stolen power and he was the only one in this whole world who'd ever

seen it used properly. Shadow even outright admitted he couldn't make Summoned Swords of his own, so what would he know?

"Shadow, I know how to use my Summoned Swords," Sorun told him. "I don't need help in that regard. If anything I need help in literally everything else but the Summoned Swords."

"Really?" Once again Shadow crossed his arms. "So you, a human who has never even heard of the concept of Chaos Control before today, are suddenly an expert on Chaos Control?"

"No. But I am an expert on Summoned Swords."

"How so?"

Sorun sharply inhaled. Keeping their true origins hidden really was becoming a pain for him. "Because I just know how they work, okay?" he said. "What makes you such an expert on Summoned Swords, huh? You haven't even seen them until today and you're over here tellin' me you know more about them than I do."

"I gleaned plenty from just looking at it a moment ago." After saying this, Shadow held up his right hand. Greenish-yellow energy began to crackle around his hand, and Sorun stepped back with widened eyes as a bolt of roiling green energy that was vaguely shaped like a spear formed in his hand. "This is a Chaos Spear," Shadow explained to him. "It's a basic technique of Chaos Control, and much like your Summoned Swords, it's a weapon as well as a projectile."

He turned his back to Sorun in order to face a pile of crates, and without any hesitation, Shadow threw the bolt of energy at the pile. The second it made contact the Chaos Spear exploded in a large fashion, and the whole pile of crates was practically vaporized from the release of energy.

That done, the dark hedgehog turned back to the human, who was staring wide-eyed at the spot where the crates had once been.

"Compared to my Chaos Spears, your Summoned Swords are incredibly weak. They have no power behind them," he declared.

Sorun's eyes snapped back to Shadow, affronted. "That's not true at all."

"Then prove it. Throw a sword at one of those crates and prove me wrong, human."

"Alright, I will." Right as Sorun said this a Summoned Sword appeared at his side, pointed towards a crate near the back of the training area, and shot forwards towards the crate. The sword made contact, but unlike the Chaos Spear, the sword merely embedded itself into the crate's face.

Admittedly, a sword that stabbed into things was a lot less impressive than a spear that blew up now that Sorun saw it first-hand. A practically microscopic, pleased smirk formed on Shadow's face when he saw comprehension flash through the human's features.

"As I said. No power," he said. "It's not a completely useless ability since they can still cause damage, but don't presume that they are even close to the level of a Chaos Spear."

"Hm." Sorun slowly nodded. "Yeah, I guess. Hey, how many can you make?"

"What?"

"How many Chaos Spears can you make?" Sorun repeated.

Shadow furrowed his brows in confusion, but obliged the human and made another Chaos Spear in his hand. "I can only make one at a time," he answered. "Though with a Chaos Emerald, my abilities are amplified. I could make even more at once if I had one in my possession."

Interesting bit of information, but the one-at-a-time bit really had Sorun interested. He grinned. "That so?" Four Summoned Swords appeared at his sides. "You wanna guess how many of these I can fire off?"

Understanding was slowly coming to the hedgehog's eyes, causing them to narrow. "I would assume four based on the number of swords you have floating around you."

"Hah. Nope."

Sorun began firing his swords one at a time towards the crates in front of him. As he did so, however, a new sword would reappear to take the place of one that was fired, only to shoot off again soon after once the swords around it had fired. The rate at which the Summoned Swords were flying away from Sorun at such a rapid pace was almost akin to a machine gun, and it was only after ten full seconds of a rapid onslaught of swords did Sorun stop making more.

By the end, the field of crates in front of the two was filled with hundreds of Summoned Swords stabbing into crates. A second later, the hundreds of swords had shattered, though the sheer amount of small glass pops added together made it so that all of the crates were blown to pieces from the combined small explosions. Sorun was looking at the devastation with a smug smirk while Shadow's was much more subdued yet irked from the way his eyes were so narrowed.

"Yeah, sure, ya got me beat in quality," Sorun admitted as he turned to Shadow, still grinning. "But who needs quality when you can just chuck a million swords at a dude's face?"

"... I see," Shadow breathed out, voice strained. "Well, since you're so confident in your proficiency with those swords, then why not put them to the test?"

With a eyebrow raised, Sorun watched as Shadow walked further into the training area, around twenty feet away from Sorun. He

stopped, and then turned back around to face the human.

"Here's what we will do: I want you to try and hit me with at least one Summoned Sword," Shadow instructed. "If you can so much as scratch me, we'll call your training with those swords complete."

Sorun's lips flattened in suspicion. That sounded almost too good. "That's it? Just hit you?"

"That's correct," Shadow confirmed with a nod. "But don't think I'll just stand here and take it. We'll treat this as a real combat situation. That is what this training is all about, after all." His strange, metal sneakers scraped against the ground as the hedgehog's stance slightly widened. "So don't come crying to me if you get hurt."

A dry chuckle left Sorun. Fight Shadow and win by scratching him with a Summoned Sword? Honestly, part of him was terrified from the prospect, but the part of him scared of Shadow was overridden by the desire to prove to him that his Summoned Swords were just as good as his Chaos Spears, if not better. The desire to correct that insult was just too great, and the idea of cutting training short by cutting him was even more enticing.

He just couldn't resist the offer. Sorun nodded.

"Okay, Shadow. I'm game." Four Summoned Swords appeared at his side. *"Wellll... I've never actually done this before. But I've got the swords. Vergil's swords. If I have his swords, then I can use his moves then, right? His Spiral Swords and Storm Swords... Blistering Swords and Heavy Rain Swords... I played with them all back on Earth enough to know how they work. Since the Chaos Emerald let me get away with stealing Summoned Swords, I'll just steal the moves, too."*

Might have been a bit scummy, but pride be damned. He didn't care how lame it was as long as it worked. And it wasn't like anybody on Mobius was going to be able to call him out on it.

"Why don't I start us off, then? We'll go at- three-two-one-go!"

A single sword shot off towards Shadow with as little warning as Sorun could give. The hedgehog frowned, and then lazily stepped to the side as the sword flew past him. "I'd be worried if you're already resorting to petty tricks," he said as he affixed Sorun with an unimpressed expression.

In response, more and more swords began to fire off towards Shadow. Unfortunately for Sorun, the hedgehog was dodging all of them, and even worse still he was making it look easy. No matter how many sword flew towards him Shadow would almost fluidly dodge past each and every one, whether it be just stepping around them, dodging under them, or jumping and flipping over them. And not only was he avoiding them with ease, but with each dodge he was coming closer and closer to Sorun.

"Man, he's fast. Jesus HE'S FAST!" Sorun thought as the dark hedgehog began to rapidly approach him. Eventually, Shadow decided to dodge out of the stream of sword altogether and began running at Sorun from a different angle. The swords floating next to Sorun pointed towards him and began firing in the new direction, but this proved to be a futile effort as Shadow had dodged all the way to the other end of Sorun's vision while still moving closer. He continued to zig-zag his way towards Sorun while dodging any swords thrown at him, causing Sorun to scowl in frustration. *"Alright. Let's try this."*

The sword stopped firing altogether, and the four next to Sorun shattered. Shadow saw this as an opportunity to rush forwards, and with interest Sorun noticed that the bottom of his shoes began emitting flames like a jet engine. The jets at the end of his shoes propelled him forwards faster than Sorun had expected, and to his bemusement the way Shadow was moving with the shoes while moving his arms in an out was reminiscent of someone ice skating.

Well, ridiculous-looking or not it was propelling him right towards Sorun just like he wanted.

Right when Shadow was nearing Sorun, the telltale *bring !* sound of the Summoned Swords appearing rang out. This time, however, it was eight swords. Eight swords that surrounded Sorun in a circle and pointed outwards as they all rapidly spun around Sorun's body. Shadow had nearly run right into the deadly ring of spinning swords, but he'd stopped right before making contact, and then backflipped a fair distance away much to the human's disappointment.

Sorun made a "tsk" sound as Shadow landed back on the ground. He'd almost had him that time, too. "I call this one Spiral Swords," he called out to Shadow before looking down at the Mobian's shoes. "You-you seriously have rocket shoes? For real?"

Shadow scowled he he straightened up to his full posture. "They substantially increase my mobility."

"Pfft, sure, if you don't mind looking like a figure skater when using them."

He actually looked genuinely insulted by that remark. So much that, in a movement so fast it was indiscernible to Sorun's eyes, he'd curled up into a ball and began spinning. Spinning so fast that he became a perfect black and red sphere in a move that was eerily familiar to Sorun.

"Hey, isn't that Sonic's...? Oh, he's pissed," the teen realized as Shadow's spinning body jumped up into the air, only to change directions midair and fly down directly towards Sorun. *"He's going over the Spiral Swords. Well, let's see if he can dodge Blistering Swords while in the air."*

Eight more swords, four at each of Sorun's sides and all perfectly lined up on top of each other, appeared and moved around in unison as their tips tracked Shadow's body. They all fired, going two at a time in pairs, at speeds that were even faster and more rapid that the normal swords Sorun fired. As the swords approached him, Shadow unrolled out of ball form and used the momentum he'd built up by twisting his body out of the paths of the swords. He'd dodged them

just as they past by him, and then he briefly activated his sneakers so that the jet of flames would push him past the eight swords circling Sorun.

"Okay, he can," Sorun thought as Shadow rolled to a stop on the ground. *"Aaaand Blistering Swords right into Storm Swords."*

Once again, eight swords appeared in a circle. This time, however, they appeared circling around Shadow, and unlike Sorun's circle of swords they were all pointed inwards and towards Shadow. The hedgehog scowled, and then attempted to jump up and over the swords circling him. His scowl deepened when the circle of swords followed him and perfectly maintained their positions even as he jumped away and landed in a different spot.

"You can't outrun those ones," Sorun called out. "Hurry up and get scratched so I can go home already."

The eight swords spinning around Shadow began to slow down. The hedgehog had twitched his body slightly to the side, and his eyes slightly widened when he saw the swords hadn't twitched along with him. Right as the eight swords pulled backwards, he jumped in the air. After his feet left the ground the eight swords shot forwards and passed through the one spot he'd been standing previously before they all continued to fire outwards.

The hedgehog landed back on the ground, and then turned his head towards a surprised Sorun. "So, they stop tracking right when they fire off," he observed.

Sorun slumped his shoulders. "Yeah, I was really hoping you wouldn't figure that out." The swords circling protectively around Sorun all shattered at once, and more swords began firing away from him and towards Shadow as he began to back up. *"None of this is working against him. He's too good. And the only thing I have left is Heavy Rain Swords, but there's no way that's gonna work! He figured Storm Swords out in like a second! Wait, hold on."* As the continuous stream of swords continued to fire from the four positions

at Sorun's sides, he manifested yet another sword into his hand. *"Why am I limiting myself to just Vergil's moveset? Dang, it's my power now technically. Can't I just do whatever I want with it? I mean, jeez, Dante did some pretty creative stuff with them when he got his Summoned Swords in Five. And I kinda need creativity right now."*

When it boiled down to their intended use, Summoned Swords were supposed to be a utilized as a utility, nothing more. Their original user in those games had used them as a tool for stunlocking and manipulating enemy positions so he could continue combination attacks; they weren't *intended* to be sole damage dealers. But Sorun didn't have a magic weapon to attack with, and even if he did he didn't have the strength, speed, agility, or even raw skill to use it. So Summoned Swords was all he had to fall back on.

But without that crucial piece, without the fact that he couldn't actively attack, they were little more than projectiles that had very limited and set patterns. That may be fine for fighting mindless foes, but against Shadow they were proving more and more useless, because he was either just dodging them or he was figuring out the patterns he was using and avoiding them thusly. He was too *smart* for these to work, and too fast to boot. They were too slow and too predictable.

Sorun needed to be unpredictable. The opposite of what he was doing right now.

Fortunately the fifth game in particular had a character just like that he could gank from.

While Shadow continued to slowly advance on Sorun while dodging the swords being flung at him, Sorun slowly began to back up as four more Summoned Swords appeared floating behind his back. *"Okay, Dante. Don't fail me now."*

The swords firing from Sorun's sides ceased. At the same time, the four blue swords floating at Sorun's back began to spin around like

helicopter blades. They flew out from his back, all four spinning blades heading right towards Shadow. His crimson eyes widened slightly, but right as the spinning blades reached him he dodged and flipped over every single one.

That would have been the end of it, too, if the four rapidly rotating blades hadn't turned around and flew back towards Shadow. The hedgehog dodged the four swords again, but no matter how many times he dodged they would round back on him in an attempt to cut him over and over.

Grunting in frustration, Shadow clenched his hand around a newly-formed Chaos Spear and threw it just as two of the spinning swords approached him. They were close enough that when the Chaos Spear impacted it flew through both, destroying the pair of swords while exploding on the ground behind them. Realizing they could be broken, Shadow immediately whirled around with another spear in his grasp and threw it at a third sword, and then a third spear at the fourth sword.

He allowed himself a satisfied breath once the final sword was shattered. Afterwards, though, his ears perked up as he heard a whirling sound right behind him, and he spun around and slid to his knees just as four more spinning swords flew over him. He rose up to his feet, and then grit his teeth as the incensed hedgehog laid eyes on Sorun.

The human was sitting down in what looked like a lawn chair completely made of his Summoned Swords. His hands were interlaced behind his head, and he was grinning cheekily as the four rotating swords spun in a circle around him. "I can throw these things all day, you know!" he reminded Shadow as the spinning swords were flung towards him once again.

"C'mon..." Sorun thought as he watched Shadow destroy the swords with more Chaos Spears. *"Ugh, he's getting mad like I wanted, but he's not actually losing focus."*

That'd been his hope, at least. To throw Shadow off as much as possible that he would make the smallest slip and get cut by the sword, because unpredictability wasn't cutting it, either. The only reason he'd even bothered with the chair was for the hope that the mere sight of something so ridiculous would make him stumble just a single step.

Well, he was getting more mad, alright. But the problem was that, if anything, Shadow's focus was becoming even sharper for it. Because while he wasn't reading the Round Swords as well as he had all the other swords, he was still adapting to them well enough by destroying them.

Correction: *had* adapted to them. The swords were all shattered now, and Shadow had turned his burning gaze towards Sorun. The only warning Sorun got of his next move was the loud, grinding *vreee!* noise he heard before Shadow, once again in spinning ball form, launched right towards Sorun.

The teen looked worried at the approaching ball of destruction, but otherwise remained sitting in his lawn chair of swords as Shadow approached. Before the ball hit him, four blue swords crossing their blades in a diagonal pattern appeared right in Shadow's path, with the swords acting like a shield as the spinning ball ground into it. Unfortunately for Sorun, the momentum of the spinning hedgehog was so great that Shadow remained suspended in the air, spinning against those swords. Worse still was that the four swords acting as a shield were beginning to crack.

This time Sorun did jump out of the chair right as Shadow smashed through the four swords and crashed into the sword chair, destroying it. *"This isn't working, either. Screw it, I'm using everything."*

Before Sorun was even to pick himself up, Shadow was right on top of him as he ran out from the cloud of blue particles that had once been the lawn chair. When he was mere inches away from Sorun, a blue sword appeared by his side and jabbed forwards towards Shadow. He dodged away, but continued to eye the sword as,

instead of flying away, it returned to Sorun's side. Three more swords appeared at Sorun's sides, and all four continually jabbed forwards at Shadow in random patterns. The hedgehog dodged all of the pointed jabs, though, and carefully watched the swords until he found an opening to approach Sorun.

Right as he moved to capitalize on this opening, however, the four swords swung out at Shadow. He flipped onto his hands and pushed himself away as the four floating swords followed and swung at him in random arcs and in random directions, and leapt away entirely when all fours swords lined up into a large sword and swung at him.

He landed on all fours a large distance away from the swords with a huff, but then froze when he noticed a large amount of blue light reflecting off the ground. His striped head looked up just in time to see twenty Summoned Swords suspended in the air above him, and all pointed directly down. He jumped just outside of the cloud of swords, and had done so just in time as all the swords rained down to impale the ground he'd been standing on right as he moved.

But, as he was sliding backwards after dodging away from the cloud, he noticed a tinge of blue light appear in his peripheral vision, and clenched his teeth upon realizing that he'd been forced to turn his back to Sorun to dodge away from the falling swords. But right as he attempted to correct this-

Slck!

- a single Summoned Sword flew right past his cheek, just barely nicking him. A nick made by the passing blade that had left an incredibly thin, red line on his tan muzzle. He slid to a stop and quickly touched the spot with his hand, and brought it to his eyes to examine. The small amount of red left on his white glove was immediately recognizable

"... Whoa, wait." All the Summoned Swords that had been summoned shattered away, and Sorun's eyes lit up with surprise as

the elated teen jumped up to his feet. *"Holy- I actually managed to cut him! Ha ha! Oh, man, I can't believe I did it!"*

His expectations for himself had been low to begin, and while he had definitely wanted to win he'd gone into it knowing it was a long shot. But he'd actually managed to win, and it had sent such a great feeling through Sorun that he was lightly laughing at the sight.

Shadow, by contrast, looked anything but happy. In fact he'd clenched the stained glove, and then glared towards Sorun with an absolutely infuriated expression.

And then his disappeared.

Sorun wasn't exactly sure what happened. It wasn't that Shadow had moved; he'd simply disappeared from the spot he'd been standing in and had reappeared in the same moment in front of Sorun with his foot pressed against the human's chest. By the time Sorun even registered he'd been kicked, or that Shadow had even changed positions somehow, he was sent flying backwards and right into a crate.

The teen's body smashed right through the wooden box, and he ended up on his back and coughing due to the fact the wind had been knocked out of him. After a few seconds he managed to suck in a large gulp of air, and then held an hand to his aching chest as he looked up at Shadow, who was standing right above him. "Man, I thought we were done once I hit you," Sorun groaned out as he sat upwards.

The burning eyes aimed down at Sorun softened considerably when they saw the human coughing and wheezing on the ground. Shadow turned his head slightly, and then held out a helping hand to the teen. "My apologies. I... was not expecting that. You surprised me."

"I surprise you, so you kick me?" Despite his irritated tone, Sorun still took the offered hand and allowed the hedgehog to help pull him up

to his feet. "What even was that?" he asked him. "You went from standing over there to kicking me."

Shadow looked back towards the spot where Sorun was gesturing to with his hand, and then looked back at him. "One of the benefits of Chaos Control is that I can momentarily stop time," he explained. "It's a rather strenuous ability compared to my others. But you cut me, so-"

"You can stop time?" The angered tone was gone from Sorun completely, and Shadow could only look in confusion as the teen eyed him with awe. "Dude, I thought that was just teleporting, but that's even better! Why didn't you lead with time stop if you can do that!? I never would have beat you if you used it!"

"I was... holding back for your sake," Shadow uneasily answered as he stepped back. "And I can teleport. I just chose not to."

The teen's eyes only widened even further. Time stop, teleporting... Shadow really did have a lot of amazing abilities. The kind of abilities Sorun would have taken a hundred times over for Summoned Swords. The kind of abilities he wasn't even sure were physically possible like a lot of other things he'd seen, but apparently Chaos energy worked miracles.

But even so, he had to wonder how he'd even beat Shadow. Then he registered what had been said and shot Shadow an incredulous look.

"Holding back? You flipping and spinning all over the place was holding back?" Sorun gasped out. "Man, I barely managed to nick you with all that alone! It took everything I had just to do that much!"

"Well, I didn't want to make it too easy for you. That said, it wasn't even my intention to get hit in the first place." Shadow rose his fingers to brush the wound on his cheek. There was a small, green glow that left the tip of his gloved fingers, and when he removed them the small scratch was gone entirely. "I'm truly sorry for the kick.

I was out of line. I just... I really wasn't expecting you to land a hit on me, and I reacted too rashly."

Sorun breathed out, and then shoved his hands into his pockets while looking away. "Yeah, well, I guess I didn't really help all that much," he muttered. "I, uh... I kept taunting you because I was trying to get you to make a mistake, so it's mostly my fault you were so mad."

"I still should have had more self control than that." He glanced towards Sorun. "It was a good effort, but I'd advise against such a strategy in the future, Sorun. Robots aren't ones to be affected that much by taunting, and it's a waste of energy that's better spent in the fight against anybody else." He lowered his head and sighed. "That won't stop a certain someone from trying, though."

"Sonic?" Sorun guessed.

Shadow nodded. "Yes, him."

He wasn't surprised in the slightest. "Hey, speaking of which. That Spin Dash move. Isn't that technically Sonic's move you're copying?"

Shadow's face immediately picked up from the ground, and he looked almost insulted at what the teen had said. "The Faker can *claim* he devised it first," he said, "but I'm still the older one. If anything, he's copying me."

"How old are you, anyways?"

"That is something you needn't worry about." Shadow blinked. "Perhaps another time."

Sorun shrugged, but otherwise didn't press the issue. Shadow's age wasn't nearly a pressing issue as what he had told Sorun.

He'd held back. Severely, if he really was handicapping himself by not using all of those abilities of his. Come to think of it he hadn't so

much as thrown a Chaos Spear directly at Sorun, but he doubted Shadow had intended to grievously harm him during a single training session. He couldn't hold that against him. He *could* hold the kick against him, but from how Shadow looked almost embarrassed over the kick, Sorun assumed it genuinely was an accident.

But still. He was happy he won, but he didn't know how much that victory meant if Shadow had been holding back. And he wanted to know.

"So when you say you were holding back," Sorun began, "how much were you holding back?"

Shadow looked back to him with surprise. "Less than you're probably thinking," he informed him, which brightened Sorun's mood. "Just because I was holding back on my powers doesn't mean I didn't put in considerable effort into dodging all of your attacks." A beat passed, and he crossed his arms. "You're... quite adept at controlling those swords," he noticed. "More than I would have expected considering how you only acquired the ability a short time ago. I'd go as far as to say you're a natural at handling them."

Chuckling, Sorun bashfully looked to the side as he rubbed the back of his neck. It almost sounded like praise, and something like that was one of the last things he expected from somebody as stern-sounding as Shadow. "Ah, well, I had some pretty good reference material."

"I don't know if I would be so pleased over a single scratch."

Sorun's face fell as he looked back towards Shadow, though his face picked back up when he saw the small smirk on the hedgehog's face. "Yeah, yeah. Do I get the Shadow Stamp of Approval, then?"

"As far as going into live combat with those swords? You should be fine," Shadow said with a nod. "As long as you're with somebody and nothing unexpected pops up, those swords should service you well enough."

"Oh, cool." That was a relief. Sorun had been left wondering how much a single scratch really amounted to, but apparently against somebody like Shadow a single scratch went a long way. Even if he had to pour maximum effort into inflicting such a minor wound. A minor wound he apparently could heal in an instant.

Well, he never saw Egg Pawns display a level of agility even near Shadow's, so maybe he had a point in that he would be fine. At the very least Shadow sounded like he knew what he was talking about, and Sorun was more willing to trust him than trust his own logic which over the course of his stay on Mobius had been spotty at best.

"Tell me one thing, though," Shadow requested, with said request rousing Sorun from his own thoughts. "How do you manage to manipulate those swords like that?" he asked. "One pattern in particular, the one where you protected yourself by surrounding yourself in swords, caught my eye. I just wonder how you're able to move all of them without physically touching them."

How he managed to move the Summoned Swords around? Great question- Sorun wasn't so sure of it himself. "I dunno, they just kind of do what I want," he answered. "I think it and, oh, they go do it."

"I see." A look of thoughtfulness crossed Shadow's face, and he fully turned away from the human. "As agreed, I'll let you go now," he said. "You've given me much to think about, and I'm sure you'd rather be somewhere else right now. Should you ever need more help with your abilities, you know where to find me."

"Er, sure thing." Sorun almost gave a nod to Shadow, but stopped himself when he realized the hedgehog wouldn't see it. "See you later then, I guess."

Still nothing from the black and red hedgehog, who looked deep in thought. Sorun decided to leave it at that and left the training area.

Finally, it was dusk. The signal of the end of the day that also signaled the end to all this hellish training Sorun had been subjected to throughout the entire day. A day that was ending with him leaning against the cobblestone wall at the bottom on Freedom HQ's hill that the door was connected to.

It was a day that had gone about as well as he expected. That is to say, it went terribly. But his mind was less occupied on everything he failed at- because he knew he'd be terrible at all that from the get-go- and more focused on the one aspect of training he expected to go well. And while he had technically passed it, it was anything but well.

Sorun wasn't very confident about his Summoned Swords after his bout with Shadow.

They were intended for utility as opposed to direct offense, he understood that. But that was in-game logic, where he could throw dozen's of swords at an enemy's face and not have it affected in the slightest just because it barely even whittled its health bar. But this was the real world, where so much as a single sword going through somebody's face would be more than enough to deal with them. He'd hoped that difference alone made up for the fact Summoned Swords weren't designed to be a sole source of offense.

Shadow proved that woefully wrong.

Bombard him with swords? He'd been too fast.

Try to use complex but set patterns against him? Shadow had dissected them all in the heat of the moment and avoided them all.

Try to trip him up with unpredictability? Shadow was too adaptable.

Try to falter him with taunts? It wasn't *exactly* ineffective if the kick said anything, but the hedgehog's discipline made it so that any results of such an endeavor were practically negligible if not detrimental.

In the end, the human teen only won because Sorun had given up and had just decided to throw everything he had at Shadow all at once, and even then he probably only landed that scratch due to the sheer dumb luck of accidentally forcing Shadow to turn his back to him for a second. He hadn't even planned for that- it had been a happy accident. One he had capitalized on, sure, but that wasn't exactly a strategy he could rely on in the future.

Sorun didn't doubt that the swords would be effective against the cumbersome robots he'd seen thus far. Shadow even lead credence to the fact they'd be usable against them. Anything beyond them, though? Anything stronger than basic fodder? Sorun wasn't so sure. Not when at his absolute best Sorun had only managed a single scratch against Shadow, and that was with a Shadow that was holding back for his sake. And while he didn't know where to put Shadow when using him as a benchmark to gauge the rest of the Freedom Fighters, Sorun had enough sense to know that he likely couldn't beat any of them with just Summoned Swords, either. People like Knuckles or Mighty would probably just punch his swords away. Sonic? Sorun wouldn't even pretend at thinking he could ever hit him with a sword- he was just too damn fast. The rest of them? He was sure they'd find ways around them. So what did that say for any foes they were going up against?

They weren't enough is what it said. What happened if he ran into something and couldn't beat it with Summoned Swords alone? Sorun couldn't imagine what they could possibly be, but there had to be enemies of such power if the Freedom Fighters were at the losing front of this war. Enemies roughly equal to them in power on Eggman's side; it couldn't *just* be through sheer numbers the fat man was winning, Egg Fleet or no. What would happen if Sorun had to fight one of those adversaries? What if somebody wasn't there to help him? He'd likely die in a situation like that.

"Power... I need more power..."

He shook his head. That kind of thinking hadn't done Vergil any good, the game character whose power the Chaos Emerald had

given him. It'd lead him to a ruinous fate, even if he did become somewhat redeemed at the dead-end of the series. It wouldn't do Sorun any good, either, seeing as every new power he got from an Emerald would cost him twelve years of life. And at that point he'd be playing right into Aurora and Athair's wishes.

No. He'd find some other way. He didn't know what way, but he'd find it.

But that was for later. He was just so done with today and wanted to go to sleep. He couldn't go just yet, though, because Sonic wanted to go home with him and Sorun was too weak to refuse. And even if he tried walking back on his own Sonic would just catch up anyways.

Soon, though. Soon he'd be able to go to sleep, forget about today, and hope it wouldn't haunt his dreams in place of all his other nightmares.

"Sorry for taking so long!" The door to the HQ burst open and Sonic walked out, closing the door behind him. "Had something to talk about with Tails. So..." He stopped in front of Sorun, and scanned his green eyes up and down the teen's body. "You had quite a day, huh?"

Rolling his eyes, Sorun pushed off the wall and began the familiar walk back to Knothole. Sonic was walking right besides him. "That's one way to describe it," Sorun replied. "My way is a lot more explicit, but we'll go with that. Yes. I've had 'quite a day', Sonic."

"So how'd it go?"

Dryly chuckling, Sorun rose his hands up to count off his fingers. "Well, I failed in just about everything everybody tried training me in. I came out of Shadow's training alright, but that was more of an outlier than anything else." He extended his fingers as he began counting. "I got no physical aptitude whatsoever compared to you guys, I can't get flying down, I can't sneak for jack, tactics are way over my head, and I'm pretty sure the electronics in the lab are

conspiring to kill me for some reason. Also, I blew Antoine up. He's fine by the way." He looked away from Sonic. "Pretty sure, at least," he whispered.

"Well, you passed Shadow's training. That's a plus, right?" When Sorun looked back to the blue hedgehog, he saw a supportive smile dominating his features. "I actually overheard him tell Rouge he was impressed with you. That's the highest possible praise you could have gotten out of anybody considering how high his standards are."

"Yeah, I got one pass out of I don't even know how many fails. Woo-hoo." There'd been the lockpicking, too, now that he thought on it, but he didn't know if breaking all those picks to open a single lock even counted as a success. He remained quiet on the subject.

"You don't gotta be so hard on yourself, you know." Sonic stepped closer to Sorun and gave him a friendly jab with his elbow. "Nobody's expecting you to get any of this stuff immediately. I mean, we've all been doing this since we were kids. Of course we'd look so good when we've been doing all this practically our whole lives."

He had a point, but it wasn't enough to get Sorun spirits up. "Yeah, I know, but I don't have years to gradually learn everything like you guys with the whole Eggman problem." He looked down at his bruised body. "And I really don't think I can do another training day like this. I'm barely staying awake here."

"Look, you're trying, and while it's not great progress, it's progress. You're doing the best you can, so you shouldn't worry about it," Sonic reasoned. "Besides, we're probably not gonna be able to do something like this again anyways. There's missions we all gotta run, but most of the time there's somebody around. It'd go a long way if you could just ask somebody every once in awhile for help in something."

Sorun doubted he would unless he was bored enough at first, but as long as he didn't have to run through a literal gauntlet like today and it was just little one-off sessions, the idea sounded appealing

enough. Surely it would be better on his body considering he wouldn't spend an entire day on it. And he did need the help.

"I'll think about it." They'd be brief thoughts, but they'd be sincere ones.

"Great. Any hey, you finally met everybody!" Sonic gave Sorun not just one, but two thumbs-ups. "I heard people talking, just so you know. Everybody was pretty pleased to meet you. Only had great things to say, and they're all happy you're trying."

"Mm-hm."

"So what do you think of them?"

"They're fine enough, I guess." Considering the bleak future ahead of them he was trying very hard to not grow attached to any of them, so he was void of any serious compliments towards any of the Freedom Fighters. "I don't have any problems with them."

"So... what you're saying is that you don't *dislike* their company..."

Oh, he saw were this was going. It was another attempt by Sonic to goad him into friendship. Sorun wasn't having it. "You think your mom'll make her pancakes tonight?" Sorun suddenly asked. "I could really go for those pancakes."

Sonic's mouth froze, and then he rose an eye-ridge in confusion. "Pancakes? At night?" he asked. "Really?"

"Come on, man, after the day I had?" He wasn't even joking; he really wanted those pancakes. He was starving for anything, really, but the pancakes made by that woman were out of this world.

Sonic blinked, and slowly made a smirk with his mouth. "Gee, I dunno, Sorun." He interlocked his fingers behind his quills. "Pancakes at night? Sounds kind of like a friend-only kind of dinner. If we were friends that'd totally be okay, buuuuut...!"

"I'll pass then."

Sonic's arms fell limply to his side, and he regarded Sorun with a frown. "Seriously, Sorun? Still? After all this?"

"I already told you. We're not friends," Sorun said. His eyes remained locked forwards, but when no response from Sonic came he looked over to him and saw an alarming mixture of a sad frown but determined eyes. "You're really not gonna give up on this, are you?"

"Not until you tell me what's bugging you so I can help."

"It's not happening, Sonic." He'd already tried, after all. It hadn't gone so well for his heart. "I just wanna focus on getting the rest of these Emeralds."

"Okay." With a huff, Sonic crossed his arms. "Be that way, then."

"I will."

"Fine."

"Fine."

"Swell."

"I'm not playing this game."

He huffed even further, but remained silent right after. Sorun allowed himself a small, victorious smirk as he looked forward to enjoying the rest of the walk home in peace. Too bad that he passed out from exhaustion halfway there, forcing Sonic to carry him the rest of the way back before he deposited him in the spare bed.

A/N- Jeez, so I planned out the whole "training chapter that also served as a little introductory to the rest of the characters" chapter to give Sorun some development and to introduce

everybody who hasn't been introduced at once so I didn't have to bother with it later and move right into the development, but it ended up taking way longer than I thought it would. Well, that and to show off the limits of Summoned Swords, which basically amounts to "they're good, but in Sonic World they ain't that good".

On another note, I've decided to take on a semi-active role down here in the Author's Notes section in regards to Stardown, who's been a real big support to the story, who asked about the inclusion of the rabbit child and her weird blob pet named after coagulated milk in the story. Short answer is that they were in the OG Archie universe I'm working in, so I don't see why I wouldn't. As for the fact I'm adding Sonic characters that weren't in the OG Archie universe, I'm not naming names, but at the same time it's not really that many. There's one character from the games exclusively in particular I'm adding in that may be a bit iffy, but for what I have planned I have to put that character in. But those are long-term goals that'll be set up in the short-term.

Answering questions in the A/N isn't really something I've done before, but I'm trying new things with this story so I'm open to answer any questions I see in reviews from anybody in a non-spoiler fashion if I so choose. Just throwin' that out there.

That's all, I out.

Chapter 15

Recursion Error

Episode 15- Baby's first foiled evil scheme

The monotony was setting in.

A whole week following the "Pain Day", as Sorun liked to refer to it, absolutely nothing noteworthy happened. Were exciting things happening in the outside world? Probably: Sorun noticed a lot of the resistance fighters leaving and coming back every single day after that day. Was he involved in any of it? No, he wasn't. Which suited Sorun just fine, but damn was he bored.

Not that he hadn't been busy. Every now and then somebody would have some free time, and if they just felt like it they approached Sorun- and that was another thing starting to happen, the other Freedom Fighters approaching him of their own volition- and would ask if he wanted to brush up on the skills they were trying to teach him. He of course always said yes to avoid looking like a flake. Had he made any significant improvement during that time?

No, not really. It wasn't *zero* progress exactly, but it wasn't stellar progress, either. And that was just on the mental and skill side of things. Physically speaking that really was going nowhere. Except for the cardio- Sonic still had him on that hellish running regime. And Sorun would admit that *maybe* he was breathing just a little bit easier after each run, but it was still extremely slow progress.

But that was all then, and this was now. Chilling in the HQ's living room. *Again* . Because the only places in Knothole he was actually comfortable going to was here and Sonic's house, because he really doubted he was welcome at the castle and he REALLY didn't want to go back to that nightmarish boutique Honey owned. Anywhere else

was completely new and foreign to him, and while going around and meeting the other people that lived in Knothole was an option, he didn't want to. That rock incident was still fresh in his memory alongside the abandonment plan.

So without anywhere else to go, he was here at the HQ once more. But these underground walls were growing dull. And almost everybody was out on missions.

"Hey, Sorun!"

"Mm, hey, Sonic," Sorun said with a wave as the hedgehog passed the couch. It wasn't as if he could do anything better with his time. Running was about the only physical exercise he could tolerate and he'd already done that for the day. He was pretty sure Tails was around, but he heard mention that he was gonna be busy doing maintenance things on something or another. Only other two people left were Sonic and Shadow. He didn't want to bother with either.

Jumping up off the couch and heading towards the kitchen, Sorun couldn't help but wonder about the sporadic pattern everybody was always deployed it. The decision of who went where to do what was usually decided by Sally, and when he asked her she had said something about rotating all the Freedom Fighters regularly because of this and that and other tactical reasons that had largely went over his head. Why-

"Hey, Sorun."

"Hey... Sonic?" Sorun mumbled as he looked away from the fridge and towards the end of the kitchen. Sonic was passing by the entrance and waved at him, and the human slowly waved back at him. "Didn't he just...? Weird." He shrugged and opened the fridge.

Why so many just happened to be gone today, though, was something he'd paid mild attention to when the matter had been brought up. Multiple attacks everywhere, low-level threats across the board, nothing anybody couldn't handle and so everybody but the

three Mobians left behind went because it was their turns to get rotated out in Sally's management system that was borderline arcane in its complexity.

She took Nicole out with her, too, when Sally left with everybody else, so he didn't even have anybody decent to play games with.

"Ah, man, I dunno." He walked to the edge of the kitchen and sipped at the bottle of water he'd taken from the fridge. He idly looked towards the right when he saw some movement. *"Eh? What's Sonic doing?"*

The Mobian in question was walking through the door leading to the HQ's lab. Which in of itself was odd. Sorun had been in there multiple times. There wasn't anything interesting in there but all of Rotor's and Tails' science projects and the computer that the Freedom Fighters used. The thing was, for as little as Sorun actually cared to learn about Sonic, one thing he had noticed was that, while he knew how to use one, Sonic wasn't that big a computer person. And unless somebody was in there he wanted to talk to Sonic never entered that lab.

Maybe it was out of curiosity, or maybe it was out of sheer boredom, but whatever the case Sorun decided to follow the blue hedgehog into the lab.

So that's what he did. He set the water aside, walked to the lab door, opened the lab door, and walked through the lab door. His eyes immediately locked onto the back of the lab, towards where the computer was. Sonic, oddly enough, was standing there and looking around for something while clenching something in his right hand.

Strange.

"Uh, Sonic?" The hedgehog stiffened and whirled around towards Sorun, who stepped behind him with a puzzled expression on his face. "Whatcha doin', man?"

"Oh. Sorun." The human's dark blue eyes traveled down to the object he'd noticed Sonic holding prior. It was a flash drive- a black flash drive with a red *something* emblazoned on it, though Sorun couldn't see it fully since Sonic's gloved hand was covering it. "What are you doing here?"

Sorun continued looking at the drive, then looked back up at Sonic. "I just noticed you wander in here," he answered. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Hm, ah, you know. Stuff."

"Stuff, huh?" He looked back down to the drive. "What's with the flash drive?" he asked.

"... Sally asked me to copy some sensitive files we have off the computer," Sonic answered in a level tone.

"... Sally," Sorun repeated. "Sally, who left for a mission this morning."

Sonic nodded. "Yeah, she asked me before going. I'm just getting it to it now, 'cause ha, I'm so scatterbrained sometimes, you know?" He made a circling gesture with his finger near his head. "She just wants a backup of the files on this computer in case something ever happens so we don't lose everything."

That didn't sound *not* reasonable. Sorun couldn't imagine what kind of logistics the files on that computer held, but he knew that Sally and Nicole used it a lot. Seemed odd that she'd choose now of all times to make a backup of all those files- Sorun would have thought somebody as practical as her would have backed them up sooner. But maybe she backed them up regularly and this was just another scheduled backup. Sorun would assume it was something Nicole took care of, but then again she was out with Sally and Sonic was here. And everybody trusted Sonic.

Sounded legitimate to him.

"Alright," Sorun said with a shrug. "You need help with something? You look a little lost."

"Yeah, you know where the slot for the drive is on this thing is?" Sonic asked. "I can't find it anywhere."

"It's on the side of the keyboard there," Sorun said, and then pointed at the small, rectangular slot at the side of the keyboard installed onto the computer console.

Sonic smiled, and then held up the flash drive up as he turned around to slot it in. "Ha, great. Thanks. Been looking everywhere for this."

"Yeah, no prob-" Sorun's voice caught in his throat, and he narrowed his eyes considerably when he got a better look at the red etching put on the black flash drive.

He'd seen that symbol before. Back on that Egg Carrier when he, Sonic, and Tails had gotten that blue Emerald. It'd been stamped right on the side of the ship's hull. A red cartoon sketch of Eggman's face.

That didn't look right at all.

"Hey, Sonic, how come you're using the most evil-looking flash drive ever to get those files?" Sorun asked, the hands inside of his pockets suddenly clenching.

Sonic froze, and then slowly turned his head over his shoulder to look at Sorun. "It's just tech we salvage from the field," he said. "Lot more efficient to recycle parts already there than to make our own. Say what you will about Eggman, but his tech's top-notch."

Alright, that tore it for Sorun.

"Wow, that's probably the first time I've ever heard you compliment the man," Sorun commented. It really was, too. Sonic had a lot of

things to say about the evil Doctor, and not once had Sorun ever heard any of those things be positive. A suspicion started growing in him. "I mean, last night alone when we were having those awful chili dogs you keep forcing on me for dinner you went on this whole tirade about how much you hate the guy."

"I can't hate a guy and compliment his stuff?"

Well, that was strike two and three right there. Two because they didn't have chili dogs for dinner the previous night and three because he didn't go on any sort of rant like that. Sorun was tempted to add a fourth strike just for the fact Sonic hadn't even reacted when he called chili dogs awful. He practically revered those things for some reason.

"Is this... not Sonic?" Sorun silently wondered. *"Nah, that's... that's too crazy. Is it? This is Mobius."* He blinked. *"Ah, man, pretty much anything is fair game in this zone for how weird everything is."*

But this was outlandish even by Mobian standards. Or was it, considering everything else? What was this compared to alien invasions and time-stopping talking hedgehogs? Was it actually him being paranoid or was he actually right here?

He didn't know. What he did know was that something wasn't right, but he couldn't well prove what. So he'd do the next best thing: be a bit active.

"You know, Sonic, you're not the greatest with computers," Sorun drawled as he moved his eyes from the flash drive to the computer. "You might screw something up. Why don't you just let me make those backups?"

The hand holding the flash drive protectively clenched around it. "Pretty sure Sally asked me to do it, Sorun," Sonic said with an icy edge to his tone.

Okay, second best thing, then: wait. "Theeeen... let's just wait for Sally," Sorun suggested. "She'll be back by, what, around nighttime? Maybe a bit sooner? What's gonna happen to that computer from now 'til then, really?"

Sonic rolled his eyes and turned to the computer. "Sorun, come on, I know what I'm doing," he claimed as he moved the drive towards the slot. "Don't you have anything better to do than come harass me about-"

The drive never made it to the slot, as a blue, spectral sword appeared right in front of the slot and blocked Sonic. The hedgehog sighed, and then turned around to Sorun.

"Just a few hours," he continued, eyes narrowed completely at Sonic. "What's the harm?"

"Sorun. Dispel it."

Sorun looked the the Summoned Sword, and then back to Sonic. "Nah, don't think I will," he said. "How about I just go get Tails?" he suggested. "Tails is better at computers than the both of us. He wouldn't even be bothered."

"No. Dispel the sword." He flashed the human a smile. "Come on. It's me. Don't you trust me?"

Making a "tsk" noise, the teen slowly shook his head. "Trust's a strong words. Bit stronger than what I would use." And that applied to the Freedom Fighters as a whole.

The two teens stared at each for what was possibly the longest possible minute, until eventually Sonic sighed and slumped his shoulders. "Alright, alright. I don't know what's got you so riled up, but we can wait. Fine." He raised his hands up in a surrender gesture, and in response the sword covering the slot shattered. "We'll wait for Sally. It's all good."

As he walked past Sorun, the human held a arm out to stop him. "Mind if I hold onto that drive?" he asked.

"A little, yeah," Sonic answered. When Sorun didn't lower the arm, he sighed and held the flash drive up. "But whatever, Sorun, fine. You can have it if you want it. I'll take it back later."

"Sure. Sure thing." Sorun snatched the drive out from Sonic's hand. The hedgehog didn't say anything more, and simply turned his back to Sorun and headed to the lab's door to leave. Sorun silently watched the hedgehog's spiked back as he left, humming and rolling the drive in his hand.

"Alright, where's Tails?"

Of course the first place Sorun went to look for the fox was in the most obvious place that first came to mind: on the airstrip, near the hangar working on his plane. He did find the plane, but there was no two-tailed fox in sight of it.

It seemed kind of odd to Sorun considering the young fox spent so much time around that plane.

"He's not here?" Sorun muttered under his breath. "Where else would he be? Ah, don't tell me he's at home. I don't know where his house is."

"Hey, Sorun."

The teen jumped, and then spun around. He let out a relaxed sigh when he saw it was just Tails who had seemingly inadvertently snuck up behind him.

"Ah, Tails. Scared me there," Sorun greeted.

"Heh. Sorry about that. So what's up?"

"Nothing much. You seen Sonic lately?" he asked.

Tails nodded. "About half an hour ago, yeah. Why?"

"He act, I dunno... kinda weird to you?" Sorun asked. "'Cause I just ran into him messing with the computer at HQ because Sally asked him to make some backups of the files on there."

"Yeah, she does that sometimes," Tails informed him. "Sonic didn't act so out of the way to me. He asked me for the computer's password, but that was it. I figured it was for something like that."

Sorun cocked his head to the side. "Wouldn't the password to the computer be something Sonic would already know?" He hoped Sonic would know the password. With something so important like that computer he would think that everybody in the Freedom Fighters would know the computer's password in case anybody needed to ever access it for whatever reason.

Then again, Sorun didn't know what the password was, so what did he know?

"Well, you know Sonic. Him and computers- egh. Doesn't really surprise me the password slipped his mind," Tails explained. "What did he do that was so weird?"

"He tried slotting this into the computer." Sorun held up the flash drive to Tails' eyes. "I saw the Eggman logo on the side and figured, you know, maybe we shouldn't slot something from the evil technology man into the computer. He said he was just using it because you all liked recycling tech, but-"

"That's not true at all!" Tails exclaimed, eyes widening in shock. "Sure, we'll scrap things for parts if we ever need them, but we never take anything intact past parts! You can't trust anything Eggman makes, brilliant pieces of work that they are aside."

Sorun rose an eyebrow at that last comment, but waved it off and instead handed the fox the small drive. "Well, could you take a look at it?" he requested. "I dunno, something about it seems off. Might be the fact Eggman's face is on the thing, but the way Sonic was acting with it just didn't seem right."

Because he didn't know if it really was Sonic, or some weird... Sonic impostor. Or Sonic being mind controlled by an evil flash drive or something. Hell, for all he knew the hedgehog was just having an off day and he was just being too paranoid. But something about the way he acted and the Eggman logo on that flash drive set off too many warning flags in Sorun's mind to ignore. And what was he supposed to expect from this wacky world? He needed a second opinion on this.

Tails blinked, and then blankly looked down at the flash drive that had been handed to him, almost as if he was in disbelief. He slowly closed his fist around it and let out a small chuckle before looking back to Sorun. "Sure thing! I'll go to the lab right now and go take a look. I'll get back to you when I'm done."

"Awesome, great." Sorun waved Tails away as the fox walked off towards the HQ. *"That Tails. Such a dependable guy. It's almost enough to make me forget he's the one that grabbed me and pulled me through that portal."* He wistfully sighed. *"Almost."*

He didn't know what the deal with that flash drive was, or what Sonic had to do with it or why he'd been acting so off, but maybe Tails could coax some answers out of it for him. He was good with technology after all. Way more than Sorun at least. He'd just break it if he tried. Tails, though? Kid was a genius.

"Well, now what to do?" Sorun thought as he interlocked his fingers behind his head. *"Could try talking to Sonic about the lab thing. Nah, probably not the best idea. I'll wait for Sally to get her input on it. Yeah. That works. But what am I supposed to do until then?"*

Skrrt!

The sound of something grinding to a halt right behind Sorun caused him to wince at the harsh sound, and he immediately turned around to see just what that noise was. But any annoyance he had was completely placated when he saw it was Shadow who stopped right behind him.

The angry scowl he had on his face was scaring Sorun.

"This is the last time I do a personal favor for you, Sorun," he said in an angry tone. "She didn't even have any clothes for me to deliver to you."

"... Huh? What favor?" He didn't remember asking Shadow a favor. He would have remembered digging up the courage to do such a thing. It would have been a memorable moment.

"You asked me to go to the owner of that clothing shop for your laundry." Shadow shuddered- actually shuddered- after saying that, and Sorun felt all his misgivings for Honey justified. "If I ever have to deal with that fiend again it'll be too soon. She tried measuring me."

"Yeah, she does that," Sorun attested, "but I never asked you to get my laundry."

Shadow paused, and a slow breath left his nose. "What?"

"Dude, I do my own laundry. And by that I mean Sonic's mom does my laundry," Sorun explained. "I only ever go to Honey when she sets up my next outfit because I made the mistake of making this weird sponsorship deal with her for clothes. Or sometimes she finds me. She does what she wants, really."

"Then why did you come to me half an hour ago and ask me to pick up your laundry from Honey because you were too busy doing something important with the Faker?" he demanded.

"Because I... didn't?" Sorun tried. "This is the first conversation I've had with you all day."

Shadow's eyes narrowed. "I thought all the injuries you sustained from last week healed. Don't tell me there was lasting brain damage affecting your memory."

Sorun opened his mouth to respond, closed it because that remark actually stung Sorun a bit, and then opened it again. "Hey, man, come on, I don't have brain damage."

"Hmph." In response, Shadow crossed his arms. "I'm finding that more and more difficult to believe." He glanced behind Sorun. "Let's just ask him what was so important you sent me on such a pointless errand."

"I don't know where you're going with this," Sorun said as he began turning around, "but I'm telling you, I didn't-"

Sonic was behind him. He seemed very puzzled and was flashing his eyes back and forth between Sorun and Shadow, but he was there. And for some reason Tails was next to him and was as equally confused as the hedgehog next to him.

That didn't seem right.

"Hey, what's going on?" Sonic asked before Sorun could get a chance to open his mouth. "Shadow, we saw you running over here. What was so important that you needed us?"

Now it was Shadow's turn to look confused, and he showed it when he regarded Sonic with furrowed features. "Excuse me?"

Tails stepped forwards. "You walked up to me about ten minutes ago while I was working on the plane and asked me to get Sonic. You said you needed to talk to us about something," he explained.

Sonic nodded. "Yeah, so what was so important you decided you needed to talk to us?"

"I never did such a thing," Shadow denied as he shook his head. "I wasn't even anywhere near Tails ten minutes ago. I was occupied dodging a deranged cat with a tape measure."

"I don't know if you noticed, Shadow, but there ain't a lot of other black hedgehogs with red stripes running around," Sonic said, "so unless you're saying Tails is colorblind or something-"

"Faker, I am telling you-!"

Any further words between the two was drowned out as the conversation devolved into a conversation unintelligible by the two bystanders idly watching them. Sorun was watching the display with a nervous look on his face while Tails looked almost bored at the heated interaction between the two hedgehogs.

"They always like this?" Sorun asked Tails.

With a sigh, Tails nodded. "They have a really competitive history," he informed him. "They never let it affect their work, but it really does feel like they spend all their time together trying to one-up each other."

"Ah." So it was one of those rivalries. Sorun supposed he could relate- he had a somewhat similar rivalry with David concerning video games. It rarely turned into yelling like this, though. "Hey, what happened with that flash drive?" Sorun asked as the thought suddenly hit him. "Did you already examine it? Because man, you work fast."

One of Tails' ears twitched in confusion. "What flash drive?"

"... 'What flash drive?'" Sorun repeated in his head. *"What does... that wasn't even five minutes ago I gave him... wait, if Tails was with Sonic looking for Shadow,"* he thought as he looked towards the arguing pair, *"and Shadow's saying he saw me when I* know *I didn't see- ohhhhhh I see what's going- oh, goddammit- OH SHIT THE DRIVE!"*

Dammit, it all made sense. He'd seen it in so many cartoons and comics that he couldn't believe he didn't see it sooner. That weird interaction he had with Sonic *twice* this morning, the weird way Sonic was acting, the weird way Tails talked about Eggman and acted around the drive, the sheer confusion everybody was displaying... the only possible explanation that correlated with all these events was if something was going around pretending to be everybody.

A shapeshifter. Or something that could mimic people. A shapeshifter that was trying to access the HQ computer. Probably sent by Eggman if his logo being on the drive meant anything.

And Sorun had taken its flash drive away only to give it back twenty minutes later.

"Damn, I got played." An irritated sigh left him as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Alright, guys! Shut up, I know what the problem is!" The arguing between the two ceased, and the two hedgehog's snapped their heads towards him while Tails continued to stare at the human with a tilted head. "We... might have a shapeshifter problem."

"A shapeshifter?" Sonic repeated. "Ha!" He barked out a single laugh. "Sorun, come on, isn't that kind of... a stretch..." He slowed down as the realization hit. "Oh wait, yeah, that actually makes sense. Uh-oh."

The revelation came to Tails and Shadow at relatively the same time, with the former growing a worried expression while the latter's face tightened to nearly a vicious glower. "Sorun. Explain," he ordered as he turned towards the human, the other two doing the same.

"Okay, look, I saw Sonic this morning. Twice. Around twenty-five minutes ago." Sorun glanced to Sonic. "You said hi to me twice."

Sonic shook his head. "I said hi once. You were on the couch!" His jaw dropped. "Oh, man, I think it really is a shapeshifter."

"And then," Sorun continued, "I saw Sonic go into the lab. I followed him, and I saw him messing with the HQ's computer." He didn't like the pit that formed in his stomach when he saw all three Mobians stiffen. "I asked what he was doing, and he said that Sally asked him to backup all the files on the computer."

"No, that isn't right," Tails said. "Nicole always handles that side of things. She wouldn't have asked Sonic." He sheepishly glanced away from Sonic. "And honestly, that's probably for the best."

A beat passed, and Sonic glanced towards Tails. "Hey, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Focus," Shadow snapped. "Sorun, what then?"

"I noticed that the flash drive he was trying to use had Eggman's logo on it. I got really suspicious afterwards when he said straight-up incorrect things," Sorun said. "I didn't let him put the drive in and took it away, convinced him to wait for Sally so we could straighten this out."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sonic slump his shoulders in relief. "Oh, that's good," he breathed. "You still have the drive, right?"

Sorun grimaced. "I... did until I gave it to Tails to examine..." he trailed off as he looked down at the very captivating dirt ground.

He heard Tails gasp besides him, and he could almost feel the rage roil off of Shadow. "You gave it back the flash drive!?" Shadow yelled.

"Hey, you can't say squat!" Sorun countered as he rose his head back up. "I'm the only one that even noticed there's a shapeshifter in the first place!"

The dark hedgehog didn't have a response to this, and if anything Sorun statement just made him angrier as he turned his own eyes down to the ground.

"That isn't good," he heard Tails mumble. "That computer has *everything* on it, guys. Our data files, notes, some of our plans and strategies, Rotor and I keep some our project files in there... if Eggman gets that-!"

"Bad, yeah, we get it," Sorun finished.

Really bad, actually. Cripplingly bad by the way everybody looked so grim. One of the things Sally kept drilling into him in those strategy lessons of hers was how the information war was just as important as the actual war, if not more so. He didn't know exactly how significant the files on that computer, but if it was so bad everybody was reacting like this, then it probably meant that Eggman getting them would be disastrous. Fatally so.

Game over if he got the files, then.

"That flash drive likely has a program Eggman wrote to steal all the files from the computer," the fox continued. "Could be a worm program, or... I dunno, I'd have to look at it, but we can't let that shapeshifting... whatever it is get those files back to him if it really is from Eggman!"

"Well isn't that computer encrypted or something?" Sorun questioned. "You can't tell me you guys have something so important without some means of defense."

"Yeah, Nicole triple-encrypts the computer constantly," Tails supplied, "but if that flash drive really does have a program written by Eggman, at *best* those encryptions will slow the drive down when it tries to access the computer. Unless..." Suddenly, the fox's face fell. "Oh, I was wondering why you wanted the computer's password so bad, Sorun..."

Ah, he never asked for such a thing! "Okay, we gotta get to the HQ," Sorun decided. "Faster the better, we might still have time-"

Before he could even finish Sonic and Shadow shot off towards the HQ in blurs of their respective colors. Sorun's mouth hung open as his eyes trailed after the blurs, and then he sighed and looked back to Tails.

"Hey Tails, can you carry me back? I-I'm not fast like them."

Tails couldn't fly nearly as fast as those hedgehogs could run, but even still the speed he could fly in was such a higher magnitude of speed compared to how fast Sorun could run at his best that it may as well have been the same difference between fire and water. It was fast enough that when they got to the HQ they just caught Sonic and Shadow heading in, which alone was a good enough indicator of how fast he could fly. And that was while carrying Sorun in his arms.

Sorun was pretty sure he had whiplash by the time the fox set him down on the ground. The panic of a shapeshifter breaking into the computer managed to keep his mind off it for the most part.

Surprisingly, they managed to reach the lab entrance just as Sonic and Shadowed entered. Everybody's eyes locked right onto the computer, and then widened when they saw the figure standing in front of it. Sorun's eyes probably widened the most, though, seeing as he was watching himself mess with the computer.

It was definitely him, too. Same height, same skin, same hair, and even though his back was turned to him Sorun could recognize he even had on the same clothes that Sorun did. The most alarming of all was that he was removing that Eggman flash drive from the computer.

"Thing jacked my face," Sorun angrily thought as four Summoned Swords appeared at his sides. He was halted from firing them, however, when he felt Shadow roughly shake his shoulder.

"Don't. You might miss and hit the computer," he whispered.

Sorun scoffed, but he relented and made the swords shatter. At the same time, the Sorun lookalike turned around as it made to make it out of the lab.

He, or it, froze when the he and-or it saw the four of them standing between whatever it was and the exit. The only sound that could be heard besides their own breathing was the low buzz of some of the machines around them, and the fake Sorun standing in front of them remained completely still as they all glared at him. And then he pointed an accusing finger at the true Sorun.

"... Wow, guys, you caught the impostor!" The real Sorun felt his own jaw drop when he heard the shapeshifter say that in his own voice. He was actually trying to fool them all again. "I noticed something was off with Sonic this morning when he-"

"Dude, you're not fooling anybody," Sorun interrupted. "Give us the drive."

Not-Sorun rolled his eyes. "What, so you can come back later and steal the files yourself with it? Fat chance of that." He looked towards the three Mobians around Sorun. "Guys, he's playing you all for fools. It's a mind game. He intentionally told you about himself to give himself credit so when you ran into me it makes it look like I'm the-"

With his tolerance for this nonsense reaching its absolute limit, Sorun re-summoned the Summoned Swords to his sides. "Hey, if you can make these, too, then we can play this game. How about that?"

Not-Sorun blinked in surprise. The other three Mobians continued to glare in hostility at him, and he shrugged. "Well, worth a try."

He then proceeded to melt.

It was a quick process. So quick and so unexpected that all four of them had reeled back in shock as the fake Sorun's skin and clothes

dissolved almost instantly into a silvery, liquid substance that disappeared and receded into the body under all of it. And that body? A robot. A robot that was practically a stick-like skeleton with silvery limbs and a torso that was little more then a flexible tube, and a spherical head with two red lights for eyes and a circular speaker for a mouth. It rose up its flexible, needle-like fingers that was holding the flash drive, looked at the four, and then went and actually screeched at them in a horrible, metallic-sounding scream.

The scream had been loud enough that the three Mobians and sole human were forced to cover their ears, and in that one moment the machine looked up towards the leftmost wall, where there was a small grate near the ceiling. The shapeshifting robot jumped right towards the vent, clinging to the wall with its free hand while one of its legs reached up in a grotesque display of flexibility in order to rip the grate off with its foot. Shadow, who had been the first to recover from the stunning screech, shook his head clear and attempted to form a Chaos Spear, but by the time the weapon fully formed the robot had crawled out into the vent.

"It's gone," he growled as the Chaos Spear disappeared from his hand.

Groaning while rubbing a finger in his ear, Sorun stared out at the vent the robot had crawled through. "Yeah, we're not going after it through there," he said. The vent was too small for any of them to fit through. For an incredibly skinny robot like that monstrosity had been, though, apparently it was the perfect size. "Why do you guys even have ventilation down here?"

"It's to help cool all the electronic equipment off so it doesn't overheat," Tails groaned as he removed his hands from his ears. "Those vents lead outside. That's probably where that Badnik's going."

"Then we need to go right now." Without missing a beat, Shadow turned around and began stomping towards the exit. "If it makes it to Knothole, we'll never catch it."

Sorun twisted his head to Shadow. "What makes you think it's going there?"

"What would be easier for it? To try and hide in the woods where we would find it or to hide in the densely populated area full of people in can blend in with until it finds an opportunity to escape?"

"Oh, man, he's right." The other three didn't even hesitate before they began following the black and red hedgehog out. *"How many people are in Knothole? We'll never be able to find that thing if it shapeshifts in the middle of all those people."*

That was if it reached Knothole. And then who knows what would happen once it got away with the drive. Sorun could imagine the possibilities, but he didn't want to.

The four burst out of the HQ's door, looking around in the surrounding woods wildly for any sign of anybody. No such luck. They'd even gone as far as to follow Tails towards the vent that lead into the HQ's lab, but to their dismay when they arrived the grate was already removed. The robot was already headed towards Knothole.

"Alright, here's an idea," Sonic announced. "Me an' Shadow can go all the way to Knothole and work backwards. Sorun and Tails can work towards Knothole, and hopefully we'll manage to corner this thing somewhere along the way."

"Our enemy is a machine capable of shapeshifting into any one of us, and you wish to split us up," Shadow countered with a deadpan stare.

"Hey, we're all smart enough to tell who's who now that we know what the deal is," Sonic countered. "Besides, it can't copy abilities since it couldn't make Sorun's swords. We can figure it out easy if it tries tricking us."

"I, for one, agree with Sonic's plan and would like to quit arguing about it before it gets away!" Sorun angrily hissed at the two.

"Fine, fine!" The jets beneath Shadow's sneakers flared up. "Let's go already!"

Once more, the two hedgehogs took off in straight blurs towards Knothole. Sorun breathed out a sigh, and then looked towards a nervous Tails. "Alright, how do you wanna play this?" he asked.

"I'm thinking we both go towards Knothole, and that you should take the left side of the forest and I'll take the right," he said. "Should we make a code phrase or something so we know we are who we say we are in case we run into each other?"

"That is... a very smart and practical thing we probably should have thought of before Sonic and Shadow took off, yeah." Sorun would blame the high amount of stress the situation was putting on him for disrupting his thinking. "Okay, sure, we'll do... I dunno, apples to pineapples, there."

Tails opened his mouth, and then notched his head backwards in bewilderment at Sorun's suggestion. "Apples and pineapples? Seriously?"

"I couldn't think of- Tails, no time!" Sorun yelled, partly in embarrassment.

The fox quickly nodded, and then spun his tails up before lifting up into the air and taking off into the forest. Sorun ran three steps behind him, and then slowed to a halt when Tails' body quickly disappeared past all the brush.

"Yeah, I... still can't move that fast," the human mumbled to himself. He shook his head with a sigh, and then moved to a different part of the forest to search. "Run it off, Sorun, run it off..."

So obviously, forests were pretty large in terms of surface area to search. More than that, it was full of so many trees, bushes, rocks, and all sorts of other things to hide behind that it would take too long for Sorun to search behind every single nook and cranny.

If it was just him searching, it'd be next to impossible, especially at his speed. Tails searching on the other end of the forest improved those odds a decent bit, and with how fast Shadow and Sonic was, well, a decent chance turned into a chance high enough to be feasibly possible. It still wasn't a high enough chance that Sorun was comfortable with the odds, but they had so little time to even think of anything that Sorun wasn't complaining.

Besides, it was Sonic's plan, anyways, so if it did fail the blame could at least be shifted to him. But considering the plan failing meant their imminent doom if the files got out Sorun would still try his best to see this through. Even if he doubted his best was gonna cut it here.

"Ergh... this thing could be anywhere," Sorun thought to himself after checking behind a large rock, and then poking his head up to scan the trees all around him. *"Don't even know if it's limited to turning into people or if it can turn into rocks or junk, too. Why'd Eggman even send a shapeshifting... no, the guy's insane. Sounds like something he'd do, actually. Guy uses robots, so why not send a robot to infiltrate us? Makes it easier since it's only the... four of us here and... everybody else is out because of the increase in Badniks. That he commands. Huh."*

He didn't want to think that this was all some elaborate plan orchestrated by Eggman just to get the files on that computer, but it sounded crazy enough to be something he thought of, and if what he said that night meant anything, he was practically bored with the Freedom Fighters at this point. The more he thought about it the more it made sense he'd try something wacky like this just for the heck of it. Sorun could understand it; he'd done plenty of pointless things out of boredom in games he'd power leveled in until he was practically invincible.

Sorun reflexively scrunched his face when he realized he understood the madness behind what may have been a madman's evil scheme.

Well, whether this really was a convoluted scheme or not didn't really matter. What mattered was finding that damn shapeshifter.

He tensed up when he heard footsteps crunch down on some nearby leaves. Slowly flexing his hand to grab a Summoned Sword at a moment's notice, Sorun slowly moved around the rock towards the source of the noise. He took a deep breath, and then yelled out as he jumped out from the rock.

Tails, who had been the one behind the rock, jumped out and did the exact same thing. They both blinked owlishly at each other, and before anything else Tails pointed at him and yelled out, "Apples!"

Sighing, Sorun slumped his shoulders. He should have picked something better than the first thing that came to mind. "Man, are you serio- god, pineapples," he grumbled, and Tails' form relaxed. "So nothing at your end?" Sorun guessed.

"No," Tails admitted with a frustrated huff. "This thing is pretty crafty for a Badnik. I keep wondering how it's even able to shapeshift like that."

Sorun shrugged. "Eh, I've seen it before. It's a robotic endoskeleton covered in a polymimetic alloy or something similar that can change shape. The actual robot's probably so thin so the alloy can change into a lot of different builds for who it mimics."

A beat passed between the two of them, and Tails faced Sorun with an expression mixed between looking impressed and looking suspicious. "That's... an awfully specific thing for you to know, Sorun," he said with narrowed eyes. "Where'd you hear of something like that?"

"... Terminator Three?"

"..."

"I-it's a movie from where I'm from." Sorun rose his hands up when Tails continued staring. "Man, c'mon, I already said the code word! I got it from a movie, I swear!"

Tails scrutinized him for a few more seconds, and then softened his features while letting out a defeated sigh. "Sorry, Sorun, I'm just making sure," he apologized. "It will be really bad if that Badnik gets away with those files."

"Yeah, I know, but it's not gonna come to that." Probably not his best choice of words. Sorun didn't believe it himself, and from the withering look Tails gave him he didn't even sound all that convincing. "Look, maybe Sonic or Shadow-"

Boom!

Both of them reflexively ducked down when they heard the loud explosion in the distance, though Sorun's ears perked up at the peculiar sound of that explosion. That explosion with the slightly static-y sound effect following it and the strange warble the initial decibels of the explosion carried. It was the same sound Shadow's Chaos Spears made.

"That must be Shadow!" Tails had formed the same thought Sorun had, and before the human could even speak he lifted off with his tails, grabbing Sorun's arms in order to carry him off as well. A few seconds later and Tails had flown the both of them into a small clearing of forest, where they saw Shadow kneeling down on the ground.

Tails, upon seeing Shadow, immediately let Sorun go and let him fall to the ground while to fox hovered over to Shadow. Sorun landed with a small grunt, and walked over in the same direction while waving to get Shadow's attention.

"Shadow!" Tails touched down on the ground and bounded towards the hedgehog. "We heard that explosion! Are you okay?"

"Fine," he grunted, and then stood up. "That thing put up a hardier resistance than expected. It ran off before I could destroy it, but I don't know in which direction."

Tails groaned and rubbed at his forehead, while Sorun blinked blankly at Shadow. "Hey, Shadow, quick check make a Chaos Spear," he said.

Worryingly, Shadow paused, which caused Sorun to back up a step and for Tails to snap his eyes up at Shadow. The hedgehog looked between the human and the fox, and then backed up a step. "That last attack was more exhaustive than-"

Sorun narrowed his eyes. He knew for a fact Shadow didn't get tired after throwing a single spear. "It's the fake, get him!" he shouted.

Right as he said this, Shadow made a snarling face as his right arm shifted and dissolved into the same, silvery material they'd seen on the robot before. Tails was the first to react and leapt right at the shapeshifter, who hissed and waved his half-liquid arm in front of him. The arm made contact with Tails, who rolled down onto the ground from the strike.

"Ah, what the- ah!" Some of the silver material had scraped off from the arm when it made contact with Tails, and to Sorun's shock he saw the small amount of silver liquid flow around Tails' arms and legs and bind them together. "I can't move!" he cried out.

At hearing a metallic, distorted growl in front of him, Sorun looked up from the bound fox and to the Shadow lookalike, which was glaring at Sorun before it lashed its arm out again. Some of the silver fluid was flung off the limb and flew towards the teen, who yelped and held his arm up just as four Summoned Swords crossed their blades protectively in front of him. The silver fluid hit the swords, and after they shattered it fell harmlessly to the ground. Unfortunately, when

Sorun looked up he saw that the shapeshifter had used the momentary distraction to flee further into the woods.

"Sorun, go after it!" Tails yelled as the young fox continued to struggle against the silver bindings.

The teen's eyes flashed towards Tails. "But you-!"

"I'll be fine, just go!"

For a single second he'd hesitated, but then he nodded at Tails before turning in the direction the shapeshifter had fled in and bolted right after it.

It was a great thing it couldn't copy abilities, because if it could go even close to Sonic's speed Sorun wouldn't have a chance at catching up with it. But, while it wasn't nearly fast enough that Sorun lost sight of it completely, it was still a rather nimble robot that couldn't become exhausted. And Sorun wasn't the best runner around. He wasn't losing the robot as he chased it past all the trees, but he wasn't gaining on it, either. And unlike it he would eventually tire out, though he didn't know if that would happen before it even reached Knothole. Then he really would lose it.

Fortunately, out of the corner of Sorun's eyes he saw a blue blur zipping past all the trees and heading straight for the half-formed Shadow. It ran right into the running robot as it neared a hill, where they began to roll down after Sonic had collided with it. Sorun cursed under his breath once the two rolled out of sight, and then ran straight for the hill. Shortly enough he'd made it to the top of the hill, looked down, and then lowered his body slightly as he carefully shuffled down the steep slope before finally making it to the bottom.

Huffing out a tired breath, Sorun looked forwards where his eyes caught a large amount of movement. There were two form wrestling with each other on the ground, and Sorun approached the two with the intent to help Sonic deal with the shapeshifter. However, his feet

slid to a halt on the ground when his eyes fully registered the scene playing out before him.

"Oh, you gotta be kiddin' me..."

Sonic was grappling against Sonic. Two hedgehogs that were equally blue and whose features, shoes, and gloves were completely identical were grappling and pressing against one another as they tried to overthrow the other. They had both briefly glanced towards Sorun, though the struggle they were part of drew most of their attention as they attempted to overpower their opponent.

"Sorun, get him already!" the Sonic on the left grunted. "Hurry up before he tries something and gets away!"

"What the- Sorun, he's the fake one!" the rightmost Sonic yelled out in exertion. "He's tricking you!"

A single Summoned Sword appeared at Sorun's side, though its tip was continually aiming back and forth between the left and right Sonic as Sorun, his expression completely unsure, only mumbled out a low "Um..." as his eyes kept snapping from one Sonic to the other.

"Come on, Sorun, don't listen to him! He's just trying to psych you out!"

"I'm not trying to psych anybody out! Sorun, I'm telling you, he's not the real me!"

"Oh come on, which one is it!?" Sorun's mind raced as he tried his best to discern which one was real and which one wasn't, but their details were too similar to tell apart. Even their voices sounded too alike for him to tell. *"Gah, if I don't hurry he's gonna trap Sonic with that silver gunk and then he'll get away! But what do I... wait, maybe?"* An idea came to him. *"Can Sonic- of course he can, it should be fine!"*

As Sorun thought this, the two hedgehogs pushed away from each other by a few inches. This caused Sorun's eyes to widen, and he and his Summoned Sword faced the left Sonic who immediately caught his staring.

"Wait, Sorun," he pointed to the other Sonic, "he-!"

The Summoned Sword sailed forwards and pierced right through Sonic's forehead.

The rightmost Sonic flinched in surprise, and then gawked in surprise at Sorun. Sorun, breathing heavily, kept his eyes locked on to the Sonic whose head he just stabbed as the blue hedgehog remained completely still, his eyes slowly rolling upwards. The stabbed Sonic just continued standing still while the other Sonic kept staring on in shock, and when nothing began happening Sorun started to dread that he'd just made a horrible mistake.

When he saw blue, electric sparks begin to arc out of the wound, Sorun heaved out a large sigh of relief.

After he shattered the sword, a black, oil-like substance began to freely flow from the wound in the Sonic lookalike's forehead. At the same time, his skin, fur, shoes, and gloves began to lose color, liquidate, and quickly slough lifelessly off the robotic endoskeleton underneath as the machine tipped backwards and fell right onto its back. Both Sonic and Sorun cautiously approached the fallen machine, though the both of them exhaled the breath they had been holding when they saw its red eyes were completely dark, the wound from the Summoned Sword still in its true head.

"Oh, man. That was too intense," Sonic breathed as he swiped a hand over his forehead. He looked down at the ground after, and then made a hum when he saw something sticking out of the silver puddle surrounding the dead machine. He bent down to pick it up, and then let out a "ah-ha!" when he straightened up and held the flash drive in front of him. "Great. He didn't stash it somewhere."

Smiling, he turned his head towards Sorun, who was looking down at the robot in disbelief. "That was smooth work, Sorun!"

"Huh?" The human shook his disbelief away and looked up towards Sonic. "Er, yeah. We got him. Go team."

"You know it!" Laughing lightly, Sonic held flattened his free hand and held it towards Sorun for a high-five. After some heavy internal debate, Sorun sighed and weakly slapped the hand with his own to reciprocate the high-five. "Seriously, though, I didn't think you'd be able to figure it out that quickly! I'm really impressed!"

"Yeeeaah..." Sorun looked back down at the dead shapeshifter. "There aren't any more of these things, right?" he asked. "It's only the one?"

"Eh... I know Eggman's style. If I were a betting hog, I'd say it's only the one," Sonic answered. "Doing more than one would be too easy for him."

"Okay, then."

There was some rustling in the bushes near them, causing both teens to look towards the sound. They both grew tense, but then relaxed at the body of yellow and white fur that jumped out of the bushes.

"Sonic, Sorun!" Tails quickly ran towards them, but then slowed to a stop when he saw the wrecked machine laying behind them. "Oh, you... you guys took it out!" he exclaimed with a happy smile. "Did you get the drive!?"

"Yep!" As Sonic held up the drive to show the fox, Sorun felt a gust of wind blow past him as something running at high speeds stopped near him. He glanced behind him, and saw that Shadow was standing behind him and looking at the shapeshifter's corpse. "I managed to stop the Badnik, but when Sorun caught up it tried

looking like me to trick him," Sonic explained. "And Sorun, oh man, Sorun saw right through it and took him out!"

When he felt the astonished look from Tails fall on him along with the surprised look from Shadow, Sorun chose to shyly step away from the group and give them all a quiet nod of confirmation as he continued to stare down at the Badnik's body.

"Oh, thank goodness. That's that, then. Phew!" The fox's two tails began spinning as he rose up into the air. "I'm gonna go back to the HQ and change the password on the computer for safety's sake. Gonna have to talk to Nicole about better security later, too. Could you carry that thing and the flash drive back to the lab, Sonic?" he asked. "I wanna take a look at them later."

Sonic gave Tails a thumbs up and walked over to the shapeshifter's body. "Sure thing, pal!" He crouched down, bent forwards, and then picked up the mechanical body before slinging it over his shoulder and standing up. "Oh, Sorun."

The silent teen was taken out of his musing and looked towards Sonic. The large smile on his face was hard to miss, but instead of saying anything the teen merely gave him a blink of acknowledgment.

"Great work. Seriously. We'll celebrate later on, my treat," Sonic said.

Once more Sorun just gave Sonic a silent gesture in the form of a small nod. He'd taken that as his cue to leave, and quickly disappeared with the robot corpse over his shoulder as he sprinted off. Tails wasn't that far behind him as he flew off in the same direction, leaving Sorun and Shadow alone in the clearing, the former of which went back to staring silently at the silver puddle made by the deceased robot while the latter quizzically stared at the human.

"So you really managed to take it down?" Shadow asked after a long moment of silence.

"Yeah, Summoned Sword to the head. Went down real easy." Which was a relief in of itself, seeing as a fear Sorun had was that they wouldn't have enough power to pierce robots. That along with the fact he'd actually managed to shoot the robot to begin with was leaving him in a stupefied state. "Where were you?"

"It restricted my movement in that silver substance it covered itself with," Shadow answered. "I was in the process of removing it, but suddenly it had lost all resistance and fell right off me. I assume that was in response to you disabling the shapeshifter."

"Mm. Probably."

Some more silence passed, and Sorun kept staring at the silver pile even as Shadow stepped next to him. "Out of curiosity," he began, "how did you discern which was the real Sonic and which was the fake?"

"... Huh?"

"How did you tell who was who?"

"Oh." Sorun glanced up at Shadow. "I didn't."

"... You didn't," Shadow repeated, followed by a deep breath that entered in through the hedgehog's nose. "Are you trying to tell me that you just randomly chose a Sonic and guessed right?"

That wasn't entirely true, but Sorun had gotten lucky and nailed the right one on the first try. Part of why he was so shocked it ended so fast, really. "Well I figured, you know, since Sonic is so fast he'd just dodge the sword if I shot at the real one. So then I'd just shoot the other one." He shrugged. "I managed to hit the shapeshifter first."

Shadow sharply exhaled, closed his eyes, and rubbed at his eyelids. "That was your plan?" he mumbled. "What if he hadn't dodged?"

Sorun sent him a flat look. "Dude. It's Sonic. He woulda dodged." It wasn't even unsound logic, either. Shadow dodged his Summoned Swords like they were nothing, so for somebody as fast as Sonic it shouldn't have even been an issue.

It didn't seem that Shadow was sharing the same way of thinking from the way his eyes opened to give Sorun an irritated look.

"Okay, so what if the shapeshifter had sufficient enough reflexes to dodge your Summoned Sword?" he challenged. "What were you going to do then?"

He didn't have an answer for that. "Okay, so I didn't think that far ahead," Sorun admitted. "I'm not good with plans, alright? Why are we even talking about this?" He gestured to the puddle of silver liquid. "Robot's dead, crisis averted."

"We're talking about this because you decided that the best solution for this problem, instead of waiting to see if the shapeshifter gave away any tells or testing to see which Sonic couldn't display the real one's abilities, was to simply shoot at them until you found the real one. The only reason you only had to shoot one sword was because you got lucky."

Rolling his eyes, Sorun fully turned to face Shadow and gave him an equally irritated look. "Oh, excuse me for putting a little logical faith into the abilities of my comrade. Isn't that what this whole team thing is about? Trusting each other's capabilities to get the job done?" he asked. "You're being so critical right now over nothing. It's *done* . It's over."

In truth, maybe he hadn't completely thought the plan through, but it was the heat of the moment and he thought he did pretty good all things considered. The results certainly spoke for themselves, and yes, *maybe* Sonic wouldn't have taken kindly to getting shot at if Sorun chose wrong, but he'd bet his life that he would have been able to dodge it.

But Shadow had a point now that he thought on it- Sorun didn't know if the shapeshifter could dodge. Evidently it couldn't, seeing as he hit it so easily, but he tried not to think of the grim what-ifs. What-ifs like what was he going to do if it did dodge. Though that was probably Shadow's point in that he didn't have a plan for that grim what-if. And that the shapeshifter probably would have gotten away because of that.

Sorun must have had some look of understanding in his eyes that Shadow saw, because the hedgehog's expression softened the slightest amount as he looked down at the silver puddle. "I'm not saying you didn't do good. You did, but you need to have more than one plan before you act in case it doesn't work out," he said.

"Yeah, I hear ya," Sorun mumbled, and looked down at the puddle with Shadow. "You know, it... both times I talked with it, it kept complimenting Eggman's creations. It was probably talking itself up since it *was* a Eggman creation, but he programmed it with emotions, so maybe I could have, I dunno, talked trash about Eggman's work and made it mad enough to slip up," he said. Probably a weak idea in hindsight, but it was something. And for he knew it probably would have worked, too.

Shadow hummed. "Maybe. It's hard to say with his creations how they'll ever react." He glanced at Sorun from the corner of his eyes. "But the idea has *some* merit at the very least. You should have thought of it long before you took a shot at one of the Sonics if you knew for that long, though."

"Hey, it still worked out."

"I know," Shadow agreed. "And I suppose there is some logic in assuming Sonic would have just dodged your sword. I would be severely disappointed in him if he didn't. But even if by some miracle you did hit him, I doubt your Summoned Swords could even harm him."

"... Hm?" Sorun rose an eyebrow, though kept his face down at the silver puddle. "What do you mean?"

Shadow scowled. "That hedgehog is... durable, for lack of a better term. Unnaturally so," he said. "I'm unsure of the exact details, however. You would have to ask him if you're interested."

Well, he'd been on somewhat of a happy turn about his accomplishment of being able to stab a robot to death, deep inside. But now that Sorun heard that he just felt mixed on the subject. More than that, it brought him back to the thoughts he'd had on Summoned Swords a week prior. About them being insufficient.

Those thoughts were quickly shoved to the backside of his mind; things like that didn't matter right now. What mattered was that they had won against the evil robot, and for what it was worth, at the end of the day, Sorun felt pretty good about that. So he didn't want to deal with any more negative thoughts for the rest of the day.

"Well, since the day is saved and everything," Sorun said while looking up, "you want to-"

Shadow had already left before he even started speaking.

"... Oh." Slumping his shoulders, Sorun glanced around at the forest around him, and then made the realization that he didn't recognize any of the surrounding woods. "Wait, which way is it back to town again...?"

A/N- So I realize in one of the other Sonic comics there actually is a shapeshifer (shape-shifter? Shape shifter? Everybody always spells it differently) character, and I know it might be a little weird for me to say I'll add in characters from other Sonic medias and immediately do this, but I didn't want to add a whole new character for a one-off chapter like this. So I just made a throwaway robot.

Chapter 16

Recursion Error

Episode 16- It's just like my Japanese video games

"So you're telling me... you found another one." With a small grunt, Sorun hefted himself up onto the lab's table, slung a single arm over the one knee he'd propped up on the table, and regarded the chipmunk standing in front of him with a curious expression. "But we might not be able to get it."

Waking up and opening the front door to Sonic's house to find Sally standing on the other side mid-knock hadn't been one of the things he expected to wake up to, but considering everything else that had happened lately, it was a nice enough change of pace. What was so urgent that it required his attention, though, Sorun hadn't a clue. Sally had merely told him something important had come up and that he was needed at Freedom HQ.

So he followed Sally there, where he was lead into the lab and to the computer in the back. Some files and images were already pulled up on the screens, along with a host of other pieces of information Sorun had idly glanced over, and before Sorun could even ask what the deal was she'd explained the situation to him: they'd located another Chaos Emerald. A Chaos Emerald that was out of reach, in her words.

A great interest to him for more reasons than one, but he didn't like the part where she said it was out of reach.

"It's not that we can't get it," Sally reworded, "it's that acquiring it would be extremely difficult from our end."

Rubbing the still-present sleep from his eyes, Sorun stifled the yawn that threatened to come up and said, "Okay, Sally. Why don't you tell me what the problem is?"

A new voice spoke up. "The problem is that Eggman already got his grubby mitts on the beauty."

"Ah, yeah, I guess that would be a problem" Sorun admitted as he turned towards the third person in the room. He gave the white bat that sauntered next to the table a cursory glance before greeting her. "Hey, Rouge. You're the one that found it?"

"The Chaos sensors did, and I volunteered to go retrieve it," she said. "But by the time I got there, the Doctor's forces were swarming all over the place. No chance of stealing it out from under them. Guess he learned from the last time you and Sonic stole that one from him."

"Yeah, fun times." Sorun drummed his fingers over his knee. "So the Emerald?"

"Don't worry, I tracked it down. Wasn't that hard; I just snuck on one of his ships, though I had to bail out when I saw where they were taking that Emerald." She pointed to the monitors. "He took the Emerald there."

"'There' being one of Eggman's personal storage buildings," Sally finished off. "That's why getting in there and taking the Emerald would be risky."

Sorun looked towards the structure being displayed on the monitor. It didn't look like the kind of building he'd put things in if he were a mad tyrant. He'd spring for a warehouse, not what looked like a skyscraper from what the image was showing him.

"So why'd he stash the Emerald there of all places?" he asked. "Something special about the building?"

"Eggman's a man of *very* questionable taste," Rouge began. "The things he stores there aren't mundane objects like resources or spare parts. He has all the warehouses he could ever need in his fortified city for that. The things he keeps in that tower are personal."

Sorun rose an eyebrow at the bat. "Personal," he echoed.

"What can I say?" Rouge said with a shrug. "He's a man who takes gratuitous amounts of satisfaction from his conquers. The whole upper floor of that building is basically a trophy room dedicated to his most proudest moments by way of all sorts of memorabilia he's collected."

"It's storage for his junk," Sorun summarized. "Why in the world is he putting the Emerald in a trophy room? Wouldn't he want to actually use the thing? The shiny rock of literal infinite power?"

He heard a loud, annoyed sigh from Sally. "It's an ego thing with that maniac. Always is," she bemoaned. "If I were to guess, I'd say that he's so confident in his victory over us that he thinks that he doesn't even need the power of the Chaos Emeralds, so he's putting it somewhere where we can't get it while he can admire it."

"Well, he wouldn't be wrong, now, would he?" Sorun thought. And it made sense, in its own twisted logic. How many times in games had Sorun collected all the rarest things that game's world had to offer only to shove them inside of storage chests and never look at them again? Was it practical? No, not at all. But what mattered was that he had it and they were tucked away in a chest no game NPC would ever be able to go into. His and his alone to admire. From a distance, of course.

That's what that tower was in Sorun's eyes. A storage chest for rare loot Eggman would never use but wanted to own by virtue of having it.

"So what's so scary about this tower?" Sorun asked Rouge.

"I've been in there on a mission before, and even back then getting in and out was dicey. The topmost floor is clear, but literally every single floor below it? Nothing but traps and security layered on top of them with even more traps mixed in," Rouge answered. "And that's a hundred-floor tower we're talking about here. It's the most inefficient use of space in the world, too, but you know how extravagant Eggman can get."

Sorun hummed. "If you've already been in there, then what's stopping you from getting in again, getting the Emerald, and getting out?"

Rouge frowned. "That was months ago. Security's probably been beefed up tenfold since I was last there. For all I know he did some renovation and changed the layout, too." She sighed, and shook her head. "It's unknown territory, and that's dangerous."

"But we need that Emerald," Sorun said as he looked back at the monitors. "I need that Emerald."

The word "need" being subjective in this case. He'd only get use out of it if he could get the Emerald in side of his body extracted and go home after collecting all seven. He had absolutely no intention of touching this new Emerald for another power. But he was sure the Freedom Fighters could find some use for it in the meantime; at the very least more use than it just sitting in storage.

Getting it was better than doing nothing, he supposed.

"So what do you want to do?" Rouge asked him. "Go steal it?"

"... Sure, why not?"

His answered must have surprised both of the Mobians from the way they did a double-take on them. He merely shrugged at the action, and then added, "It's not gonna get any less dangerous the longer we wait, right? So what's stopping us from just going there and taking it now?"

He was even surprised at himself for being so proactive in this discussion, but he really needed that Emerald.

"You do realize that building is one of the most secure locations on the whole planet thanks to Eggman's defenses," Rouge reminded him.

"Oh, yeah?" Sorun turned towards the bat. "I thought you were this super-stealthy secret spy. Here I was thinking if anybody could break in there it'd be you, but hey, if you're saying it can't be done-"

"It can definitely be done." He could see a twinge of irritation appear in the bat's features, and she went as far as to cross her arms in indignation. "It just won't be easy. Question is how bad do we want that Emerald?"

Both Sorun and Sally gave her a deadpan expression. She sighed at the sight, closed her eyes, and shrugged.

"Alright, I guess I can't blame you. I want that gem just as bad as everybody else," she admitted, and then looked towards Sally. "Well? Am I going or not?"

A thoughtful look crossed Sally's face, and her eyes glanced to the side as she mulled over the question. "It's true that acquiring that Emerald would be beneficial for us, but I don't want to commit to a risky mission like that unless you're sure you could go in there and out with that Emerald."

"That's... a very tall order considering what we're talking about here," Rouge said. "If it were any, and I do mean any, other place on Mobius other than New Megaopolis itself, I'd say yeah, I could do it easy. You're talking to someone who could sneak up to Castle Acorn and steal the king's crown right off his head without noticing." The narrowed glare sent her way from the chipmunk wasn't lost on Rouge, who grinned. "But that place?" Her expression turned serious. "It's risky."

"Then you should bring a partner with you," Sally suggested.

"A partner?" A short laugh left Rouge as she shook her head. "I appreciate you're so worried about my health, really, I am, but who exactly among us in this ragtag little resistance is stealthy enough to keep up with me? Because unless you're suggesting I bring Espio in on this-"

"No, he's with some of the Chaotix out on a different mission," Sally interrupted. "Come to think of it, half of our forces are out right now and the other half are out of rotation at the moment." Her head tilted up as an idea came to her. "Unless... you'd be willing to bring me along?"

The bat blinked, and then cupped her chin in her hand in thought. "Well... I know you. I wouldn't be uncomfortable sneaking in there with you. And if you brought Nicole with you to deal with anything electronically challenging, then... yeah." She nodded her head. "We could make that work."

"I wanna go, too."

Well now they both were really looking at him in surprise. Like he'd suddenly grown a extra head and was addressing them both with each head. Their expressions weren't that much better, either. Sally looked unsure about Sorun's decision, whereas Rouge looked like she wanted to flat-out refuse Sorun.

"Sorun, no offense, but you're still pretty green when it comes to, well, anything," Rouge told him. "I don't know if this is the kind of thing you should be doing."

"Yeah, probably not." He wasn't gonna deny that logic. He could barely believe he was even suggesting such a thing, but that Emerald was too important to him in the event he could go home. "If this was for any other reason I'd agree with you and sit this out. But I'm not gonna sideline myself when there's a Chaos Emerald on the line here."

Placing her hands on her hips, the white bat frowned at the human. "We can handle this perfectly on our own, you know."

"I'm not saying you can't. I'm just saying bringing along some extra help wouldn't hurt you." Translation for he wanted to make sure they had the biggest chance of success possible in stealing the Emerald from Eggman.

"You'll slow us down."

A cough from Sally drew the two's attention. "Normally I'd agree with Rouge, Sorun, but... you did do well during that shapeshifter incident a few days back if what Sonic said is true. And I would assume you have been steadily getting better in sneaking with Espio's help."

That was highly debatable. He still couldn't hide from Espio for more than a couple minutes. He *always* managed to find him somehow. But Sally didn't have to know that.

"And Shadow *did* say he was confident in your ability to use those swords..."

If copying all his moves off of video game characters showed proficiency, then sure, he was a master with them.

"I suppose it wouldn't be the worst idea to bring you along for some extra protection," Sally finished off. "If you're really up to it?"

"I wouldn't say I'm up for it at all," Sorun told Sally, "but that Emerald's too important. So I'm going."

She nodded. "Alright then. I'll talk it over with some of the others, try and come up with some plan. We'll hit the place tonight."

"Tonight?" Sorun repeated. "Really? You don't want to take a day or two to plan this out?"

"We already have the location, and even if a lot has changed Rouge already has somewhat of an idea for what we'll encounter inside. We

can't really get much better intel than that, and you weren't wrong when you said the sooner the better." Sally walked past the table Sorun sat on and made her way towards the lab's exit. "Do yourselves a favor and get some rest before we head out tonight. You're both gonna need it."

The door closed behind her, leaving the sole human and bat behind. They glanced at each other briefly before Rouge hummed and walked towards the same exit. "Hope you're ready for this, Sorun."

"Yeah," he murmured to himself as the spy left the lab, "I really hope so, too."

The actual target building itself was on the outskirts of New Megaopolis, a few miles out from the city's outermost limits. As planned, they'd been dropped off at the dead of night, right around midnight. From a hill cresting nearby the whole group was able to get a good look at just what they would be infiltrating.

Yeah, it was a tower.

Crouching down near the foot of the hill, Sorun was able to see just what the situation was. The building itself: giant, as to be expected from a hundred-floor tower. The compound surrounding it: equally large and full of constantly-patrolling robots with enough light fixtures set up everywhere that it may as well have been daytime down there. The outer perimeter: it was a giant, twenty-foot wall with large turrets at the top of each corner with giant searchlights constantly fanning the area in repeating patterns. And from what he could see, there was no actual entrance or gate past the wall. It was solid all the way around.

Yep, it was about as fortified as Rouge had warned them, if not more. Enough at least that Sorun was already having doubts over all this.

"Can't help but notice there isn't a way past the wall," Sorun noted. He craned his head behind him, where Rouge was standing nearby and examining the area with him. Sally was leaning on a nearby tree, and somewhere in one of her vest's pockets was Nicole.

"Everything that comes in and out of this place is airlifted," Rouge informed them. "There's a landing pad in the compound around the building near the front."

"How'd you even get in the first time around?"

She gave him a flat look, and the black, leathery wings on her back momentarily flitted. "I can fly."

"... I see." He looked back towards the tower. "Isn't this place kind of removed from his city?" he asked. "You'd expect that something like his own personal museum or whatever would be somewhere deep in the city. Or, you know, in the city at all to begin with."

"I think he likes flaunting the fact that all his private things are in a building out in the sticks and we still can't touch it," Rouge said. "Makes him feel powerful."

Sorun rolled his eyes. *"Everything with this guy, I swear..."*

"So how are we getting in?" Sally voiced from behind them. "I'm assuming the front door's out."

"Ha! That's one way to put it." Rouge stepped to Sorun's side at the edge of the hill and pointed towards the tower. "He's got so many Badniks patrolling the compound that finding blind spots to sneak through to the front door is practically impossible. Front door itself would have so much security that it'd be too much to bother with."

"Garage?" Sally suggested.

"Mm, last time I was here the garage doors were ID-locked to identity chips installed in Eggman vehicles specifically assigned to this

location. We *could* go and steal one, but a vehicle deviating from its usual route would raise an alert. Even if we hitched a ride on one going to the garage, I got no idea what'd be in there. Too risky."

"Windows?"

"Alarmed with pressure sensors, all of them." She glanced down at Sorun. "You wanna take a guess?"

What would Sorun do if this was a stealth mission in a video game? The classic, tried-and-true method was already thrown out the window: he couldn't mark targets on a minimap and slowly but methodically stealth kill all the robots until the area was clear so they could sneak in. Rouge implied that the routine patrols here were too strict; so much as a single Badnik out of place was gonna raise alarms, and Sally had been very clear on the ride over here that any alarms before they even got into the building called for a retreat.

So they were ghosting it, then- completing the mission without touching a single combatant or letting a single combatant even release they were there. Any entrances with any guards weren't ideal. Windows were out. What would he do if this was a stealth game and all these factors were in place?

Probably sneak in through the back.

"There a backdoor or something?" Sorun guessed.

"As it happens, there is," Rouge said with a nod. "It's a maintenance access way for, shockingly enough, Badniks programmed to conduct maintenance on the building. Electronically locked twenty-four/seven, but I'm trusting Nicole can take care of that problem."

"And the wall?"

"We'll circle around towards the back where the door is and go over it. I'm flying. Sally over there brought a grappling gun. Don't know what your plan is."

Sorun froze, and then glanced back at Sally. "Hey, how come I didn't get a grappling gun?" he asked.

"Because we're in a spare parts deficit back at HQ," she answered, though she did cast a concerned look towards Sorun. "Do you have any way over the wall?"

He shrugged. "I'll just ladder my way up with Summoned Swords."

"Huh? Oh, no." Rouge crossed her arms in a "no way" gesture. "Those glowing things are too noticeable."

Blinking up at the bat, Sorun looked back towards the tower. "There any cameras on the wall?"

She shook her head. "No, but there are cameras monitoring the outside compound and interior of the tower."

"Any exterior patrols?"

"... No."

"Then we're good!" Sorun exclaimed while clapping his hands together silently. "It'll be fine, c'mon, let's go."

As difficult if not nigh-impossible as it was going to be sneaking around once they went over the wall, going around it from the outside proved to be almost laughably easy as literally all of the security was beyond the wall. The four of them had still been cautious, of course, and maintained a healthy distance while circling around the perimeter towards the back. It proved nerve-wracking for Sorun, though, who felt his own nervousness grow more and more the closer they approached towards the back. He idly wondered if Sally or Rouge felt the same tenseness he did, but whenever he glanced at their faces he saw nothing but stone-faced expressions with razor-focused eyes.

Girls were completely in the zone. Meanwhile he was doing his best not to drop down from all the pressure.

They finally reached the back, where Rouge pointed up towards a spot at the top of the wall near the center. She, of course, simply flew up. It was with passing interest that Sorun noticed that those wings of hers *barely* even flapped as she rose up in the air, and to him it looked more like she had just floated up and those wings were just for show. Sally, for her part, walked to the end of the wall with Sorun, reached into her pocket, and pulled out a gun-like object with a tri-pronged hook at the end. Classic grappling gun.

"You know, I could just carry you up. It'll support both our weight," Sally offered.

"Nah, it's fine." One loud *bring!* later and a ladder of blue, spectral swords appeared in front of them. "I got this."

"If you say so." She aimed the gun up, fired the hook at the top of the wall, and then tugged on the wire to ensure it was secure. And then she pressed a button on the grappling gun and was carried all the way to the top of the wall in seconds.

Sorun blinked up after her, and then sighed loudly as he began to slowly scale the sword ladder. "Why the hell didn't I just let her carry me?" he quietly grumbled to himself as he climbed.

Considering it took him two minutes to fully scale his way to the top of the wall, it wasn't nearly as an impressive climb as displayed by the other two, who took mere seconds to reach the top. He couldn't tell what their faces looked like since he did his best to avoid eye contact one he made it to the top while shattering the ladder behind him, though he did let out a low groan when he walked to the wall's edge and looked down at the twenty-foot drop.

He didn't want to climb the sword ladder again.

"Rouge," he said with slumped shoulders, "can you carry me down?"

"I dunno." The human teen could *feel* the smug grin being beamed at him from behind. "Usually I get a please for requests like that."

"Rouge, man, come on."

"Heh, kidding, kidding. Grab on."

Grumbling under his breath, Sorun hooked his arms around one of Rouge's arm as the bat lifted off again. She carried the black-haired human all the way to the bottom of the wall on the other side, while behind them Sally had rappelled down using the grappling gun. Once Sorun had removed himself from Rouge, the group of three plus one immediately took off towards a nearby metal crate with a large Eggman logo emblazoned on its side, where they crouched down for cover.

After the group crouched down, Rouge peaked her head over the side, with Sorun doing the same over the top of the crate. By some miracle, the building wasn't completely in the center of the square wall surrounding its perimeter. While the front was a giant compound of patrolling machines, the only thing separating the back of the building was a dirt road that stretched the entire rear side. And right dead ahead of them was the most average-looking metal door imaginable with an electronic lock bolted next to it.

A large, four-wheeled rover driven by an Egg Pawn passed by them. Rouge watched the rover drive off, counted to three, and then quickly nodded her head. "Okay, go," she whispered, and the three of them sprang out from behind the crate and ran towards the door.

The first to make a move was Sorun, who formed a Summoned Sword in his hand and used it to quickly pry off the outer casing of the electronic lock to expose the electronic internals. Next was Sally, who removed Nicole from her vest, pulled an extendable cord tipped with an electronic connector at the end from the computer, and plugged the connector in to an appropriate slot on the electronic box.

"Alright, Nicole. Think you can get it open?" Sally whispered down at the computer.

"It's a simple enough lock," the computer said back, "but I will need a moment. Please hold."

Tens of seconds passed with them standing motionlessly at the door, waiting for it to unlock. Sorun began to tap his foot anxiously on the ground while Rouge was keeping her eyes behind them and on the left side of the road.

"How long's this gonna take?" she quietly hissed. "They're gonna make another round any second now."

Click!

A small whirring sound followed by a small click drew everybody's attention. At the same time, Sorun reached over to the door and pressed down on its handle. It turned all the way without resistance, and the door swung wide open.

As this happened, however, another one of the rovers had rounded past the building's corner and was approaching them. Working quickly, Sally disconnected Nicole from the lock and stashed her back in her vest, while Sorun quickly propped the case back on the lock. Rouge held the door open for them, quickly waving at them to usher them in through the door. They quickly slipped past her, with the bat quickly but quietly closing the door right behind them.

Afterwards, the three of them had pressed their backs against the walls as they heard the rover approach them. The lights from its headlights briefly shown through the crack underneath the door, but it quickly faded once the rover drove past them. Sorun in particular let out a small breath once it left.

"Man, this is stressful," he thought as he looked forwards. The door hadn't lead them to anything special- just a narrow hallway. But in

was in. "So this way?" he asked while pointing in towards the hallway.

Rouge began walking down the hall with a nod. "Yeah, this way leads to a small storage area that leads to another hallway that goes into the main lobby. We'll figure out what to do from there."

The walk through the corridor had been uneventful. The amount of light was so low that Sorun could barely see his hand in front of his face, so he had to trail behind right behind Sally just so he could follow the sounds of her footsteps. They reached another door, hacked this one open like the first, and slipped through to the door into the storage room Rouge had mentioned.

At the very least, this room had a light switch Sorun had managed to find after fumbling the wall for it. A series of light bulbs hanging on the ceiling lit up, causing Sorun to wince from the sudden influx of light. The room itself wasn't all that much. It looked more like a large broom closet full of pallets of various janitorial gear and spare electronic... things and some tools stacked everywhere. The good part was that the entrance way to the next hallway was right in front of them.

The bad part was that the entrance to the next hallway was littered with dozens of red lasers.

"Oh, that's not good," Rouge worryingly murmured as she stepped closer to examine the lasers. "Yeah, that's what I thought," she sighed before turning to the other two. "These are those special sensors Eggman loves to put all over his property. Anything organic that walks through them trips them. Works fine for robots of course, but, well..."

Sorun hummed, frowning at the lasers. He looked around the storage room in deep thought, but then something out of the corner of his vision caught his eye and he began to approach it.

"Can't we just plug Nicole in to deal with the lasers?" Sally asked as Sorun walked away from her. "Or just rewire the thing to turn them off?"

Rouge shook her head. "Circuitry's all behind the walls, and the lasers are embedded too deep in the architecture to get to them. No way to mess with them unless we somehow got to the central security center."

While they continued conversing, Sorun closed in on the object that had caught the human teen's attention. The object in question was cardboard box. It was full of spare rivets, bolts, and screws, but nonetheless it was a cardboard box. And that alone gave him an idea.

"Alright, then can we just slip past the sensors?"

"Princess, are you seeing how little space there is between those beams? Even you aren't that flexible."

"Well there's no other way-"

Sally was cut off when Sorun overturned the box of metal bits, causing them all to pour onto the floor in a chorus of metal clinks. The box thankfully emptied after a few seconds, with Sorun shaking it afterwards to dislodge any spare metal bits that hadn't fallen out. After the last bolt was freed from its cardboard confines, he looked back towards Rouge and Sally, who were staring over at him with perturbed expressions.

Undeterred by the looks they were sending him, he held the cardboard box up. "You two ready to see something stupidly simple?" he asked.

Upon their silent, blank looks, he rolled his eyes and carried the cardboard box over to the wall of lasers. Tentatively, he held out the box to the lasers, and though the box did interrupt the red lines, he

didn't hear any alarms go off. He pulled the box back with a satisfied hum.

"Oh my- Sorun, *do not* tell me you're going to try and sneak past those inside of a cardboard box," he heard Rouge groan out from behind him.

"I won't say it, but I'm still gonna do it," Sorun said as he crouched down while holding the box over him. "Unless one of you two has a better idea of course."

"Sorun, maybe you should wait-" he heard Sally begin, but by then he'd already dropped the box over him.

The chipmunk's words died in her throat, and she stepped back with a sigh as she saw the box slowly slide forwards as Sorun pushed it from the inside. Rouge had a conflicted look on her face that was crossed between wanting to rush forwards and pull Sorun back and just running right now, perhaps in fear that he was about to trip the sensors, and Sally began to fidget as she feared the same.

But nothing happened as the box Sorun was crouching inside of passed the lasers. In fact, both of the Mobian's jaws dropped open entirely when Sorun's box made it all the way to the other side of the lasers. After crouch-walking a few steps past those lasers, Sorun stood back up to his feet while removing the box from him. He turned back to the two girls, a neutral but otherwise accomplished look on his face, and then set the cardboard box on the ground only to kick it past the lasers to the two.

"I still can't believe that dumb trick worked..."

"You shouldn't underestimate the power of the cardboard box, Rouge," Sorun admonished as the trio walked down the hallway following the laser trap. "The cardboard box is the ultimate tool for stealth infiltration. Light, compact, easy to hide inside. Nobody ever

expects you to hide in a cardboard box. It's unassuming to the witless and at the same time too obvious to the witted. It's perfect."

He heard an exasperated sigh from the spy walking in front of him. "Sorun. It's a box. This isn't just coming from somebody both formally and informally trained in the art of stealth and espionage. This is coming from somebody coming with common sense, too. It's just a box."

"A box that got us past those lasers."

Rouge didn't bother to deign that with a response, but she didn't need to. Sorun knew he was right.

"Speaking of which, Sorun," he heard Sally from behind him begin to ask, "why are you still carrying it?"

Well, of course he wasn't just going to abandon the perfect stealth tool back in that supply room. Not with the stakes they were playing with right now. So Sorun was currently carrying the cardboard box in front of him with both of his hands. It may have been cumbersome, but in his eyes it was worth it.

"Because I'm not gonna abandon the cardboard box to that dingy storeroom," he told Sally while craning his neck back to look at her. "It's been too good to us. It doesn't deserve that kind of treatment."

He saw Sally squint her eyes in confusion. "I think you're putting too much stock into a normal box, Sorun."

"You wouldn't understand. You were only in that box for so long," Sorun huffed as he faced back forwards. "You should spend more time in the box, Sally. Then you'll understand the magic. The magic of the box."

"I... don't think I want to understand."

"Then forever remain ignorant of the box."

They continued walking forwards for around another minute until another female voice spoke out from inside of Sally's vest. "I thought that Sorun's idea of camouflaging your biological signatures with a cardboard box was rather intuitive," Nicole said.

"Ugh, finally. *Thank you* , Nicole." He knew that if anybody could appreciate the teachings of Solid Snake, it would be her. His one true gamer friend amidst the rest of these uncultured people. The only person that could think on his level and that could completely relate to him in matters such as these.

There were amused smirks and eye-rolls all around the group, but their expressions turned back to serious, focused looks once they reached the end of the hallway. One hacked doorway later, and they slipped through yet another door into what Rouge had described as the building's main lobby.

The lobby looked about as one would expect a lobby to look: large, open room with a reception desk in the center and with stairs leading up to a second level near the back. There were large, square, metal pillars lining each side of the room, too, all in front of doors under the floor of the upper level leading to more rooms. The human, two Mobians, and computer came out of one of those doors, and then immediately set to moving towards and taking cover by the nearest pillar.

Peaking his head out from behind the pillar, Sorun had to suppress a groan when he looked out into the lobby. Egg Pawns were roaming around the place. More than a dozen Egg Pawns painted a navy blue with large, almost comically oversized truncheons in their robotic hands patrolled the lobby, and that was just on the first floor. If he listened closely, he could hear the thud of even more robotic footsteps on the second level of the lobby above them.

"Well, here's our new problem," Rouge whispered to them as she peaked out from the other side of the pillar. "Pretty safe to say every single door in this building is going to be locked. Nicole can bypass them all for us, sure, but there's so many Egg Pawns patrolling down

here that we're not gonna have a large enough window to stand next to a door without one seeing us."

"Taking them out still not an option?" Sally questioned.

"No, too risky. Might raise an alert if they don't check in or if something notices them off patrol," Rouge said with a shake of her head. She looked up towards the second level, and a small smile grew on her face. "You know, interesting thing about elevators. People almost never lock them. And it looks like when Eggman took over and retrofitted this building he never saw fit to. Look."

Both Sally and Sorun followed Rouge's gaze. Up on the second floor was a indentation in the wall that lead to a well-lit side room, with six elevator doors on each side of the wall in that room. Every so often an Egg Pawn would patrol past that room, but none would ever so much as step foot inside of it.

"You seriously want to take the elevators up?" Sorun incredulously asked as he turned to the white bat. "There isn't a less conspicuous way up? Like the stairs?"

"If you want to go up a hundred floors worth of stairs to the top-"

"So tell me about these elevators," Sorun quickly interrupted. "Why won't we get caught using them?"

"Think of it like your precious box," Rouge reasoned as she glanced her teal eyes at the box Sorun had set down next to him. "It's so obvious that nobody would ever think to use it. And the last time I was here Eggman didn't bother putting so much as a camera in those things. Elevators are completely clear."

Sorun raised his eyebrows. "But you don't know if he changed the elevator security."

Rouge sighed, and then looked back at the elevators. "Quick lesson on tactical espionage, Sorun. Sometimes you just don't have the

intel you need, and sometimes you just don't have a better alternative but to take a chance. In this case both of those are true. So we take a chance on the elevators. A chance I feel *very* confident about because, trust me, they never think secure the elevators."

It wasn't the most faultless logic in the world, but he wasn't the master spy that could break into anything. And Nicole and Sally weren't giving them any better alternatives. Hell, it was a kind of logic Sorun had adopted playing stealth games, but he really didn't want to bring examples like that into this very real and life-threatening mission where he didn't have quicksave.

Alright, fine, elevators it was then.

"Any suggestions on how we're getting to those elevators?" Sally asked. "Those patrols are looking a little too dense for comfort."

"Well, there's no cameras," Rouge quietly noted as her eyes scanned the lobby. "We got that going for us. I can just wait for a break in the patrolling Badniks' sight and fly up to the ceiling, and then wait for an opportunity to get to the elevators."

Sally, for her part, looked up towards the lobby's ceiling. "There's a lot of scaffolding up there," she said. "I can grapple up there and just climb across, but I don't know if Sorun's agile enough to climb if I brought him with."

"Yeah, and there's no way you're gonna be able to use those swords. Too noticeable."

Valid points from both of them, as much as it hurt Sorun to silently admit. But while he may not have had something like wings or superhuman agility, he had the next best thing sitting right next to him: a cardboard box.

"You let me worry about that," he said as he patted the box next to him. "I'll just sneak over there in the box."

Rouge snapped her head back to the teen. "Sorun, no, that's stupid. Think of something else."

Affronted eyes turned towards Rouge. "Box'll work."

"It's not gonna-"

"Rouge, Jesus, they're robots, they're patrolling in set patterns. All I gotta do is look at the patterns, go forwards, wait when a robot gets near, and keep going when it leaves," Sorun argued.

"And if they look at the suspicious box that keeps moving around for some reason?"

"They're not gonna look at the box! It's a box!"

"That is *exactly what I am saying*- !"

"Would both of you quit it?" Sally harshly hissed, causing the both of them to quiet down. She looked to Sorun. "Do you really think you can do this?" she asked him, tone serious. "You know what happens if you get made?"

Sorun quietly gulped. Possibly overrun, taken prisoner. Or worse. Likely so much worse. Which was why he wouldn't be offering to do this if he wasn't confident. "I'm sure," he said with a nod.

She let a slow breath, and then turned to Rouge. "Let's trust him with this," Sally said. "Let him make it to the elevators first, then we'll go down and call one."

The look on Rouge's face made it seem like she had many reservations over the plan, but she finally gave the pair a stiff nod. "Alright, fine. Don't screw it up, Sorun."

Because that didn't add any pressure on him at all.

As they had planned, Rouge had examined the patrol routes and had flown up towards the ceiling when she saw a break in the sight

lines. Sally, similarly, used her grappling gun to climb all the way to the scaffolding bolted to the ceiling, where she scampered across towards the end near the elevator in yet another example of agility far superior to Sorun. All that left was Sorun. Sorun and his cardboard box.

He took a deep breath. *"Okay, man. You got this. You've done it a hundred times before in a hundred different stealth games. You're even going up against AI, too. AI way smarter than video game AI, maybe, but they're nothing like Nicole. They wouldn't be going back and forth in those patterns if they were. Just examine the patterns. Find the breaks. Move forwards slowly but methodically. And don't fuck it up because we're all done for if you do."*

Pale hands reached out to grab the box next to him. He could do this.

"This is never gonna work," Rouge quietly groaned as she ran a hand along her face. The white bat, floating up near the ceiling, watched the human teen below in what amounted to a mixture of dread at the impending alarm and disbelief at the levels of foolishness happening down below her. "He's not gonna last a minute sneaking around in that."

"Just give him a chance," said Sally, perched at the end of the scaffolding next to the floating bat. She, too, was nervously looking down at the teen. "It's not the worst idea in the world, and Sorun sounded confident in the idea. You know how rarely he ever sounds confident in anything?"

It was rare enough that Rouge didn't even know it was a possible occurrence, but even so, she wouldn't relent on the idiocy of using that box. "He can't even see out of that thing," she argued.

"Sure he can. There's a little handle slot on the sides for him to peek out of," Sally reasoned. "And he has a point. Those are just Egg Pawns down there, and it's not like their AI is notorious for being

overly intelligent and analytical. As long as he goes slow and knows what he's doing, it should be fine."

She had a point, as much as Rouge would begrudgingly admit. She was still making plans in the back of her mind on how to escape for when the alarms were inevitably sounded.

The teen below them began moving in his box. The box would stop and press down on the ground to conceal the feet beneath it when a security Egg Pawn would walk past, but as soon as it passed the box completely Sorun continued to move.

To Rouge's complete shock, the plan was working. He'd had to stop multiple times, but no matter how many Egg Pawns saw that box, or even walked near it, not so much as a single one even appeared to pay any mind to the box. He'd even made it up to the steps to the second level without so much as an issue, and he was moving slowly towards the elevators with the same ease he had making it to the stairs in the first place.

"I can't believe it." Years of experience told her that the box was such a bad idea that it shouldn't be entertained. Years of experience told her that using a cardboard box as a disguise was a surefire way to get discovered by the enemy. Her very common sense told her that under no circumstance was hiding as a box that would move around when nobody was looking a safe and reliable means of conducting stealth behind enemy lines.

And yet, somehow, Sorun had inched his way past all those robotic guards in nothing but a cardboard box.

"What was that you were saying about the box?" The speed at which Rouge turned towards Sally was downright lethargic, and she couldn't hold in the sigh when she saw the smug look being sent at her. "Because from what I'm seeing the box is looking pretty effective. Maybe Sorun's onto something here."

Rouge's wings slowed in their flapping as the bat lowered towards the elevators. "It only worked because they're robots," she muttered under her breath, gritting her teeth when she heard the mocking giggle above her.

If there had been a stealth game out there, he'd played it to perfection. Metal Gear, Splinter Cell, Assassin's Creed, Hitman, Deus Ex, and every other stealth game under the sun. He got his hands on a game. He mastered the game. And over the years this proved to be easier and easier as he gained a deeper understanding to the mechanics and rules that were universal across stealth games and their AI.

Hiding against the Chaotix and training stealth with Espio had gone to show Sorun that these skills weren't at all that useful. The tricks he'd learned in those games simply didn't apply to real life and real people. Living people heard and noticed a lot more than those games gave people credit for, and were much more investigative and responsive towards anything out of place. Hiding in shadows didn't automatically make you invisible. Plainly speaking, stealth was much more difficult to pull off against people than what the video games he'd played showed.

But these weren't people. They were robots. Robots with AI that followed rudimentary functions that, while they may be advanced due to being made by Eggman, still had hard rules to follow concerning patrolling and keeping out for intruders. Hard rules that could be exploited for their faults if one with a trained eye looked hard enough.

And for once in his goddamned life since coming to Mobius Sorun was able to actually use that trained eye accrued from all those video games to make it to the elevators. Above all that, though, he had a cardboard box.

They never stood a chance, really.

The teen stepped out of the box, walked up to one of the elevators on the left side of the wall, and hit a button on the control panel. The elevator silently rumbled to life as it sent the elevator down, and while waiting Sorun pressed his back against the wall while crossing his arms. Right as he heard the elevator doors open he looked to the side and saw the teenage princess and spy walk right up to him, to which he pointed a thumb at the open elevator.

"Ladies first," he quipped, though he made extra sure to give Rouge a look full of as much vindication as he could muster. The bat, in response, merely rolled her eyes and stepped into the elevator with Sally. Sorun entered last, turning around and forlornly looking at the box sitting in the middle of the elevator room.

"What, you're leaving your almighty box behind?" he heard Rouge remark from behind him.

"Won't fit in the elevator," he answered back. "Give me a minute to say goodbye to it?"

Rouge regarded him for about a single second, and then reached past him to press the button for the top floor of the building. "No."

The doors closed as the elevator began to rise up, and Sorun gave the bat a dejected slump of his shoulders. "I'll never see that box again. You've forever deprived me of a heartfelt farewell with that box. That box is the only reason we've gotten so far. You..." His stone-serious face collapsed when a short laugh left him, causing Sorun to shake his head. "I'm just messin' around. 'S just a box."

Rouge made a scoff with an eye roll, but he saw the corners of her mouth pick up slightly. Sally was less subtle about her amusement with the smile she made. Sorun smirked as well, and then leaned on one of the metal bars on the elevator's side as it rose up.

Nothing was said between the group as they watched the digital number above the elevator doors slowly count upwards. At some point a slow jazz melody began to flood in from the speakers as they

climbed up and up. Sally didn't show any reaction to the music. Sorun slightly cringed from the sound, and he saw that Rouge was tapping her foot to the music's beat.

The jazz cut out when the elevator stopped right on the fiftieth floor. The elevator itself stopped moving, too.

Everybody blinked their eyes in surprise, and then snapped their gazes towards the floor counter on top of the elevator doors. Before anybody could say anything, a high-pitched, electronic voice rang out from the speakers above.

"Hello!" it cheerily greeted. "You are currently on the -fiftieth floor-." Its tone grew monotonous when it said the floor number. "Please present proper identification in order to proceed to the -hundredth floor-. Thank you. Glory to the Eggman Empire."

It cut out right as a small slot just big enough for a card to fit in opened up on the elevator's button panel. While Rouge glowered down at the slot, Sorun sent her a withering glare.

"'They didn't put security on the elevators, guys, there's no way'," Sorun said in a mock tone of Rouge's voice. "'No way, no how. We're aces.'"

Rouge took a deep breath. "How about less mocking and more helping, huh, Sorun?"

Fair enough, he decided. "So there's no way to move without a card?"

"Doesn't look like it." Rouge moved closer to examine the button console, but when she hit a button, nothing happened. "Yeah, you need an ID to get to the higher floors. We're stuck here until security comes to check on us if we take too long." She hummed. "Dunno if Nicole could hack this, either. The panel in here just controls the cable winch for the elevator, and we're probably locked out. Actual door controls are on the outside."

"I could try prying the doors open with a Summoned Sword."

She shook her head. "No, doors are still powered. Even if you could get a good grip I doubt we could get them opened."

"Guys, what about this?"

The two turned towards Sally, who was pointing up at the ceiling. Their eyes traveled up from the finger to the roof of the elevator, where there was a small hatch. One thrown Summoned Sword later and the hatch was off completely, leaving a small, square hole.

A very small, square hole.

"I'm betting that there's a maintenance shaft or vent or something in the actual elevator shaft that leads to the other side," she told them. "One of us could take Nicole, get her to the other side, and have her open the door from there."

"It's a good a plan as any," Rouge admitted with a nod. "Don't think I'll be able to fit through that, though. My wings will just get caught."

Sorun gave off a contemplative hum. He was skinny enough to fit through easily, but he wasn't thrilled about the idea of climbing around an elevator shaft. And that was while holding onto Nicole. He'd rather not drop himself and/or Nicole to their respective deaths because of butter fingers.

"Looks like you're up, Sally," he said.

"Looks like it," she agreed. The chipmunk bent her knees slightly, and then jumped up towards the hole in the ceiling. She grabbed the edges with both of her hands, and then rolled her body forwards so that she flew through the hole legs-first. She landed on top of the elevator and called down to the other two, "I'll see if I can get to the other side to open the doors! Just hold on for a bit!"

So that was that. Sorun and Rouge were stuck in the elevator until Sally pulled through and freed the both of them. The remaining pair glanced at each other, and then wordlessly chose to sit down on the elevator floor as they waited.

Not one to let boredom set in, Sorun decided that he'd try talking with the bat. And not knowing where else to start, he decided to go with the elevator music as an opening.

"So... ya like jazz?"

At the topmost floor of the tower were a multitude of rooms that contained display cases and stands for various trophies and other pieces. One room was wider and more open than any of the other, but while there were multiple displays lining the room and other pedestals holding various objects littering the area, the center of this particular room was otherwise empty.

This remained true until a peculiar warbling sound of space tearing apart rang throughout the room, followed by loud footsteps as somebody carried a heavy object towards the center of the room.

"I'm never gonna understand what Shadow sees in this thing," the individual, a human covered in a red cloak, grunted as he set down the motorcycle he'd been carrying over his shoulder. Rubrum hummed, and then grabbed the motorcycle and moved it closer towards the middle of the room. "Eh, that should be close enough," he mumbled to himself. His hooded face looked down at the side of the motorcycle, and then he gasped. "Ah, shit, I forgot the sidecar. Sorun needs that."

He turned around and ran back in the direction he came from. The sound of space being torn apart rang through the room once again, and a minute later rang through a third time as Rubrum ran back to the motorcycle while holding a sidecar.

"Fuck fuck fuck, how do I put this thing on?" he heatedly muttered as he crouched down to inspect the side of the motorcycle and sidecar. "Okay, so there are four holes here at the end of the sidecar's bar, that lines up with these holes on the bike here... dammit, I'm not a mechanic." His head picked up. "Wait, there was that book on that workbench next to where I found the bike! That probably says what to do!"

Rubrum spun on his heels, and then once again ran back to where he came from.

"All I'm saying is that there's a lot of subtle intricacies to jazz that is severely underappreciated within the jazz enthusiast community."

"Huh." Sorun could safely say he knew more about jazz than he ever wanted to know. He was still internally debating with himself if he should have lead with that question or not.

Because there were all sorts of things that Sorun was interested in learning about Rouge. How she got into the spy gig, what working at G.U.N. had been like before the Eggman occupation, or even how she managed to fly when those wings she had were so small. Something to pass the time waiting for Sally to open the doors. But he had to ask about her taste in music.

Apparently she was very knowledgeable on the subject.

"Well, Rouge... that was certainly fascinating," Sorun drawled out as his head rolled in the direction of the elevator doors. "And somehow through all that Sally didn't get the doors open."

"She's doing fine. Just give her some time." He was glad Rouge could just wave away the issue like nothing, because he was getting nervous. "So. Sorun. I told you something about me. Tell me something about you."

His head rolled back to the bat. "What did you wanna know?"

"Mm, just something. How about your name? 'Sorun'. I've met a lot of humans over at G.U.N. and none of them ever had a name like that. Is it something common in your zone?"

Honestly, he was surprised this kind of question hadn't come up sooner. Everybody he met on Mobius had just gone along with his name. "Nah, it was a weird name back on Earth, too," he said with a shake of his head. "It's Latin. Latin being a dead language where I'm from," he elaborated when he saw Rouge's confused face.

"So... you're Latin?" she asked.

"Hah, no, not really. See, uh... where do I start with this?" he mumbled. "So, my mom's a doctor. And in the medical field they use Latin for a lot of the medical terminology since Latin's a dead language, meaning the words and their meanings never change so all the terminology can remain consistent. And I guess when she was learning all of this in med school it really stuck with her, 'cause for some reason whenever she names something she uses a Latin name. Including me," he said with a sigh. "I don't even know what it means other than it's Latin."

Rouge nodded in understanding. "Oh, I get it. Your mom seems like a really... interesting person."

"Yeah, she was. IS," Sorun quickly corrected. "She, she is. Really cool. I miss her a lot." His knees pressed against his chest as his head dipped downwards. "I miss everything over there."

"... Are you still worried about not being able to go back because of-?"

"I don't want to think about that right now, Rouge."

Thankfully, she got the message and tried a change of subject. "So what about your dad?"

And just like that, Sorun hopped right up to his feet. "What's taking Sally so long with those doors?"

As if the universe was just waiting for him to ask that question again, the doors opened right after Sorun complained about them yet again. As expected, Sally was on the other side and holding Nicole, who was plugged into the control panel on the other side.

"Sorry if I took a bit," Sally apologized as the other two climbed out of the elevator. "I had to climb up the elevator's cable until I found a vent, but then I got a bit turned around in the ductwork. We managed to work our way back to you, though." She turned towards Rouge. "So, let me guess. Stair time?"

For a few moments Rouge continued to eye Sorun, but eventually she shook her head and turned to address Sally. "Yeah, we're gonna have to since the elevators are out," she said. "We're gonna have to look around a bit to see if we can find a stairwell."

"You think it's through here? Past this door with the word 'stairwell' printed right above it?" The two girls turned their heads down to the end of the room full of elevator doors, where they saw Sorun standing and pointing at a door. As he said, "stairwell" was printed in block lettering above the door. "Seems out there, but what do I know?"

"Yes, Sorun, I would say that it's a safe bet that the stairs are past that door," Rouge remarked as she and Sally walked over to his position. "The door locked?"

He looked down and gripped the handle. To his surprise, it turned completely without any issue. "You guys won't believe this, but it's actually unlocked," he said with a small laugh as the door swung open. He took a step forwards, saying, "Jeez, I can't believe they leave the door-"

For some reason, gravity started to carry him downwards when he walked into the room. When he looked down, he immediately saw

why: there was no floor.

Yelling out in shock and panic, Sorun flailed his limbs around wildly as he began falling forwards. Thankfully, he felt something grab onto his arm and halt him from falling right before his other foot left the ground. Panting heavily, he looked behind him to see Sally standing at the edge with him, her hands grasping at his wrist.

After being pulled back into the doorway, Sorun gave Sally a very rapid nod as he continued to gasp heavily. "Ah, ah thanks. Thanks a million, Sally."

"Anytime." She clapped him on the shoulder and gave him a playful smile. "Look down next time, huh?"

His only response was to give her a thumbs-up before he straightened back up and approached the door's edge again- making sure to grab the side of the door so that he wouldn't accidentally fall in. Sally and Rouge stepped next to him and peered down as well, with all three of them blanching when they saw the room in its entirety.

The room was so large that it looked like it encompassed nearly the entire fiftieth floor, to the point that Sorun could just barely see the left and right ends of the room. The missing floor revealed a chasm that looked like it went down five whole floors, but even with the poor lighting he could see the large, metal spikes pointing upwards that completely covered the ground all the way down there.

On the upside, they could see the door that actually lead to the stairs on the opposite wall. It was just hanging in the air since there was no flooring, but there was a window on that door that quite clearly showed part of a stairwell through it. But there was about a twenty-five foot gap between them and that door, with nothing but a bed of spike awaiting in the pit below.

"Who designs a building like this...?" Sorun muttered in wonder as he looked down at the spikes. "This is just... *why* ?"

"One of Eggman's traps," Sally muttered besides him. "We're actually lucky that we managed to skip most of them with the elevator. He's infamous for putting all sorts of traps in all of his structures?"

"Sure, but a spike trap? A *spike trap* , man?"

With a sigh, Sally nodded. "This is actually pretty tame compared to most of the traps he makes. Usually it's things like lasers, pneumatic crushers, water traps, cages... spikes. Spike traps. Spiked pneumatic crushers. You get used to this kind of thing after a while."

Sorun was starting to wonder how close he actually was when he made that cartoon analogy back when he talked with Eggman. He'd only been half-serious at the time, but now he was really starting to wonder if he actually managed to hit the mark on the head. Because this was sheer lunacy.

"It looks like this is the only door on this floor, too," Rouge mentioned as she looked back into the elevator room. "Figures. Fiftieth floor is a stopgap for people without IDs. Even if they get out of the elevator they're still trapped unless they make it to the vents like Sally did." She looked into the spike trap room and at the door. "I wouldn't be surprised if he put the entrance to the stairwell over this spike pit just to taunt somebody."

He probably did, because Sorun felt it working on him. "Well, we need to get to those stairs," he said.

"Sure, but how?" Rouge asked. "I can just fly over there, but that's not a distance you or Sally can just jump over. Nowhere to grapple to, either."

Sorun nodded, and then flashed the spy a grin as an idea came to him. "I got it covered."

"Okay, found the manual," Rubrum mumbled to himself as he stepped back next to the bike. "Ah, man, this thing's like three-hundred pages," he said as he flipped through the book. "Okay, index... sidecar... where's the- oh, here."

He made an irritable hum, flipped through some more pages, and then stopped when he found the correct page. He looked over the words, and then slightly crumpled the whole book upon learning some distressing information.

"Dammit, I need some bolts!? Ugh, okay, there was more stuff on that workbench."

Once more, he ran back.

"Sorun, are you sure these things won't break?"

"Uh... yeah," Sorun assured Sally as he did his best not to look down. "Just don't stomp on them or anything."

"Sorun!"

"Sally, they're not fragile! Much. They can break, but they're not gonna break from you stepping on them!"

It was remarkable how many problems he'd been solving with his Summoned Swords without using them for their intended purpose, i.e. stab something. Take what he had done here for instance: making a rope bridge completely out of Summoned Swords to connect the doorway to the entrance to the stairwell.

Seeing as it was completely made of spectral swords, it wasn't pretty. The floor boards were swords, the guard rope was all swords horizontally stacked against each other, and it was all held up by even more Summoned Swords. Sorun was really glad these things could float, because otherwise this would have never worked.

Insert Sally and Sorun, who were slowly walking across the bridge of swords with Sally up in front with Sorun just behind her. Rouge was floating near the door leading to the stairwell, having gotten it open and was currently waiting for the pair. Sally had elected to grip any handles she saw on the guard rails made of swords, Sorun doing the same behind her, and slowly both of them were walking with one foot in the other as they crossed on planks made of spectral swords.

Sally had looked slightly nervous at the prospect when he pitched the idea, but her expression was slowly melting into easiness as she crossed further and further. Sorun's face was perpetually nerve-wracked, and Rouge was smiling in mild amusement at the both of them as they slowly inched their way closer to the door.

"Try not to look so worried there, Sorun," Rouge advised the human as she let out a small chuckle. "It would be a real shame if you lost your concentration and all those swords just suddenly went poof, you know?"

"Rouge, shut up," Sally snapped as her grip on one the of the sword's handles tightened.

"Oh, don't worry, Sally, if you fall I'll catch you. Can't say the same for Sorun, but he's got magic swords. He'd be fine."

Sorun found himself rolling his eyes. He technically would, but he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of admitting it. "You're enjoying this, aren't you, Rouge?"

"Me?" She held her hands to her chest in mock hurt. "Why, I would never find any enjoyment in seeing you both treacherously trod through a shoddily-built bridge made of swords right over certain death. Perish the thought."

"Yeah, I'd like to see you make a bridge out of swords just by thinking about it," Sorun shot back. "This ain't easy."

"Oh, yeah? How hard is it, then?"

Admittedly, not much. All he had really done was just make a mental picture of a bridge made of Summoned Swords while thinking about his Summoned Swords. But he wasn't going to give her more ammo to work with against him. "Ah, you know. Hard. About as hard as it looks."

She didn't look convinced in the slightest. "Uh-huh. Just try and not think about how bad Sally will feel if she falls because your swords broke. Because then they might actually break."

Sally began to grow irate. "Rouge...!"

"Or falling. Don't think about that, either."

" *Rouge* !"

"Sal, relax, you're at the end," Rouge said as the chipmunk reached the end of the sword bridge. She practically leapt off of it and onto the stairwell right after she reached the end, and Sorun wasn't far from doing the same thing as he stepped off the bridge right behind her.

The bridge of swords shattered right after Rouge flew into the stairwell with them, closing the door behind her. Both Sorun and Sally took a deep breath from the ordeal, and then looked at each other and gave themselves a small nod before they looked up along with Rouge. As to be expected, there was nothing but stairs. Metal stairs that lead all the way up to the top.

And unfortunately for Sorun, he was good enough at math to know what plus fifty equaled a hundred- the floor they needed to go to. "We seriously gotta climb fifty flights of stairs?" he groaned with slumped shoulders.

"It's only fifty flights," Sally said, a tinge of confusion to her voice. "That's not many at all. We'll be fine."

"Well, I know I'll be fine," Rouge informed them. "Since I'm just flying up."

Slowly but loudly exhaling out of his mouth, Sorun hung his head as he walked towards the first step. He already knew how much of a disaster this was gonna be.

Crouching down next to the motorcycle, Rubrum looked towards the sidecar, and then to the manual he held in his left hand, before finally landing on the pile of bolts in front of him.

"Okay, so... insert bolt C into intersecting holes A through D as indicated in the picture..." he read out. "Bolt C? What the hell? The only bolts I found in that garage were B-bolts!"

Groaning loudly, he looked towards the entrance of the room, which was thankfully still empty. He looked back down at the bike.

"They're gonna get here any minute," he angrily whispered. "Screw it, I don't have time to solve a damn puzzle. I'm jamming them in." He picked up a bolt and began to forcibly insert it into the holes to connect the sidecar and bike with his bare hands. "It's gonna strip the holes, but if it works it works, so I don't care. It's not my bike anyways."

"Damn athletic chipmunk and flying bat..."

These were the times he hated the most. The times where the people around him were so physically superior to him because of simple body mechanics and gene bomb tomfoolery. Maybe Chaos energy, too? He didn't know. He didn't care. He was tired.

First fifteen floors had went fine. Sixteen to twenty was bit harder. Twenty-one to thirty had been a struggle. He had to stop at forty.

He'd dropped down to all fours due to having been so exhausted by the time he'd reached fortieth flight of stairs. The familiar feeling of pained lungs and the stress of heavy breathing was greeting him once again just like it always did during one of Sonic's training runs.

"You doing alright, Sorun?" He tried to squash down that small amount of shame that rose up in him when he saw Sally kneel down in front of his fallen form. It didn't work. "You don't look so good."

She looked fine. Extremely fine. Wasn't even so much as winded. He blamed her limbs that deceptively hid her well-developed muscles.

Mobians had it all, he swore.

"I'm... I'm good," Sorun gasped out as slowly got up to his knees. "Just... all these stairs."

Sally held a hand out to him, and Sorun took it so that she could help him up to his feet. "And here I was thinking all that running Sonic is having you do was helping with your stamina."

"Oh, it is," Sorun tiredly assured her. "If this was a week ago I would have collapsed two flights earlier."

She gave him a forced smile. "That's... an improvement? I think?"

"It's more than nothing." Sorun breathed out a large sigh. "You gotta give me break. I ran off a diet of mainly french fries back on Earth."

"That doesn't sound like a very nutritious diet at all."

"You're right, it wasn't. But it got me through the day." And damn if they didn't taste great. Until his endurance became a requisite for surviving in this world it seemed like a great idea to live off that french fry diet. Even now he was still debating with himself if it was worth it or not.

Sally rolled her eyes, and then gestured for Sorun to follow her as they continued climbing steps. "You're as bad as Sonic is with food,"

she claimed.

"Oh, no. You don't get to lump me in with him when he keeps shoving those hate crimes in a bun down his throat," Sorun panted as he climbed the stairs right behind Sally. "French fries are an art form. Those chili dogs are... they're... they're trash... slow down, I need another minute."

Apparently he hadn't recovered as much as he thought he had from the climb up to this point, so Sorun was forced to stop halfway up another set of stairs to lean over the stair railing. He heard Sally go back to approach him, but he was too embarrassed and exhausted to turn his head to look at her.

"Are you gonna make it the rest of the way?" she asked him.

"It's like eight more flights. I can do it." He said that, but he really didn't feel like he could make that distance. He must not have looked like he could, either, when he could feel the doubtful look Sally was casting on him.

"You know, if you want I can just carry you the rest of the way," she offered. "It'd probably be smart for you to conserve energy for the rest of the mission."

"No. No-no-no, I'm fine. I can do it." That wasn't happening. He felt like everybody already had low views of him, but what were they gonna say if it got out a princess had to carry him up stairs? A princess that was way more fit than him, but still. He'd never live something like that down.

Plus Nicole was *right there* in her pocket. He refused to look so pathetic in front of her. He'd make it up the rest of those stairs even if it killed him.

That was the plan, at least, until he finished climbing up the flight of stairs he stopped at before collapsing at the top. He didn't even have to say anything before Sally bent down to pick him up.

"Oh my, what's this?" he heard Rouge jeer as the pair of them finally made it to the top. "I miss something while waiting for you two up here?"

Sorun couldn't hold in the embarrassed groan that left him after hearing this. Of course the first thing Rouge would think to say once she saw Sally walk up the stairs carrying Sorun bridal style would be something like that.

Why did he have to be carried bridal style? It couldn't have been something at least a little more dignified? She couldn't have just slung him over her shoulder or something like that? He would have taken her just grabbing one of his limbs and dragging him up the rest of the way compared to this, even if this way was really comfortable. But that comfort wasn't worth the embarrassment.

Fortunately, Sally let go of him right there and slowly placed him on his feet. "Guys, please don't tell anybody back at Knothole about this," he asked them.

"What, you're asking us to keep this all to ourselves and miss out on what people would say?" the bat teased him.

Sorun opened his mouth to counter her, but when he came up with nothing, he indignantly shook his head and walked towards the door leading out of the stairwell. "Whatever, let's just go." He wasn't going to press the issue. She was likely just kidding around with him, anyways.

Hopefully she was.

The door leading out of the stairwell led to a small maintenance hallway, which in of itself was barren of any noticeable features besides another door nearby. Behind *that* door, though, was the interesting room. Being a maintenance door, it opened right in the middle of another, more larger, hallway. And at the far end of that hallway was two of Egg Pawns painted to look like security guards

standing side-by-side to large, wooden double doors that were decorated with golden filigree.

Every single gamer sense Sorun had was telling him that the large, golden doors were important.

"And with that, I think we hit bingo," Rouge whispered as she peeked out to look in the direction Sorun was staring in. She seemed to have the same idea he had by the way her eyes lit up. "Only problem I'm seeing is the two guards next to the door and the cameras."

"Cameras?" At Sorun's question, Rouge pointed up to a spot near the ceiling. Indeed, right in the middle of the hallway wall where they were was a spherical camera installed on the ceiling slowly swiveling left and right, with another camera right across from it. He hadn't even seen those.

"Okay, it looks like we're right under one of the cameras, so we can avoid that one by staying in its blind spot easy enough," Rouge began. "Alright, yeah. Sorun, Sally, when the camera across from us turns all the way to the right, hug the wall and go left towards where those big doors are. I'd bet anything that the room we're looking for is past them."

"And what about you?" Sally asked.

"Gonna go take care of the guards before you get there." Her bat wings slowly began to flap. "Not really worried about check-ins when we're this close to the goal, so we should be good. And they're the only two up here anyways. I'm gonna fly up and deal with them now. Don't get caught by the cameras."

And like that, she slinked away from their position hiding behind the door and flew up towards the ceiling right as the camera across from them passed. His head still peaking out, Sorun tried looking up to the darkened ceiling to find any sign of where Rouge had flown to, but he couldn't even so much as see any movement.

The shearing sound of metal being cleaved apart took his attention away from the ceiling and drew it back towards the gilded doors. The Egg Pawn who had been patrolling on the left side of the door was crumpled onto the ground, its body completely cut in half to reveal sparking circuitry as it went offline. Standing above the defeated robot, to Sorun's amazement, was Rouge, one hand placed on her cocked-to-the-side hip as she looked across at the other Egg Pawn.

It was right when the robot began turning to investigate the noise of its companion being cut down did Rouge leap right at it. She'd kicked out with her right leg at a speed Sorun could barely perceive and, to his even further amazement, managed to cut through the other Egg Pawn completely. Rouge paid the robot barely any mind, and by the time its two halves fell all the way to the ground she had begun to work on the door.

"She managed to kick them in half. With just her leg." Sorun was momentarily taken out of his thoughts when Sally tapped on his shoulder and pointed up at the camera across from them that was turning right. He nodded, and they both slipped out from their hiding spot by the door and pressed their backs to the wall as they began moving towards the door. *"I didn't even see her get over there. She stealthed her way to the door like it was nothing."* And here he'd thought that his trick with the cardboard box had been good, but he wasn't sure he could ever match that level skill. He surely didn't think he'd ever get to a point he'd be able to kick robots in half.

He guessed she wasn't some government-type agent or whatever G.U.N. classified itself as for nothing if that was the kind of stuff she could do.

"Door was locked with a good old fashioned lock. I picked it open," Rouge told them as they finally reached her position.

"Aw, what, didn't want me to handle it?" Sorun half-joked as both he and Sally peeled themselves off the wall.

Rouge shrugged. "You were taking forever to get here. And you're only halfway decent at lockpicking."

"Tch, c'mon. I don't even break the picks anymore. Most of the time."

"On the basic locks, maybe." The white bat reached forwards and pushed the doors open. "Anyway, who cares? We're in."

He couldn't argue that point. He wasn't sure he could even if he wanted to, anyways, as his voice caught in his throat once they entered the room past the doors.

The atmosphere inside this room was completely different from how the rest of the building had felt. Where the lighting in everywhere else had been low-light and rather poor, the lights hanging off the ceiling in this room illuminated everything and was almost warm in their glow. Where the walls had been cold, solid metal, here it was bright linoleum tiles lining the floor and high-quality wallpaper covering all the walls to give it an appearance of wood.

It was big, too. So big there were thin walls without any doors separating the room into multiple sections, but Sorun was paying less attention to all that and more attention to all of the items the rooms were holding.

Lining the walls all around were displays, cases, and stands holding all sorts of important-looking things. Paintings, pieces of paper and scroll-esque items being displayed in glass cases. Statues and other artistic structures on stands. Artifacts that looked like they were made from a wide variety of cultures that looked like they belonged in a museum more than some madman's tower.

And Sorun would probably appreciate it all more if he actually recognized a single thing they walked past.

"Any of you know what any of this stuff is?" Sorun asked as he stopped by a glass case containing a large, golden mask displaying

a depiction of... some kind of Mobian something or other. A cat or a tiger or some other feline. He couldn't really tell.

"Hard to say. There's stuff here from various settlements and tribes all around Mobius over here, and in that room over there I'm seeing some Overlander and human things," Rouge told him as they walked into another room. This one, of course, had even more artifacts that Sorun didn't recognize. "I think I recognize some pieces. A few of these are some old, outdated weapons used during the Great War. Others are cultural pieces Eggman took from settlements he conquered just because he wanted to fill this space up and stroke his ego."

"It's disgusting," Sally angrily stated. "They're nothing but trophies to him. And I wouldn't even be surprised if he stole some of these things from the UF cities his forces occupied."

Stopping to admire a banner depicting a symbol Sorun was clueless on, Sorun asked, "You guys think there's any, you know... old world stuff here? From my time?" he asked as he turned to the two. "Not *my* time specifically, different zone, but I mean from before aliens bombed the planet."

"I really doubt it," Rouge told him. "One of the UF cities or Station Square *might* have had something like that, but that was from so long ago that I honestly don't think anything like that would survive. And besides, I think they were more focused on surviving over preserving human culture."

Sorun felt his shoulders slump in disappointment at that. It felt bad knowing a world much like his was just *gone* and nothing but a faded memory to the new world that had been built right on top of its body. This very, very strange world. Hard to believe that a culture that was likely identical to the one he knew could just disappear like that, but he supposed aliens bombing the planet and thousands of years of the aftershocks of that would do it.

He felt a hand press down softly on his shoulder, causing him to look behind him at Sally who had a concerned look on her face. "You doing alright?" she asked.

"Are *you* ?" he asked back, not wanting to answer. "It's not my culture that's being hung up all over the walls like this. My culture's a whole zone away."

She removed the hand and stepped back. "I'm not seeing anything relating to the Kingdom of Acorn here, but..." she narrowed her eyes and looked away at a nearby room. "I'm pretty sure he has a space lined up for that since he thinks he'll take us over one day."

There was, indeed, a small room off to the side full of empty display cases. The large acorn symbol over its entrance said enough.

"Still," Sally continued, "it hurts seeing what he's done to this planet and all its people. Always does," she mumbled under her breath.

"Eesh..." Sorun didn't know how to respond to that. He hoped Nicole, resting in her pocket, would offer some encouraging words in his wake, but evidently she was speechless too seeing as she remained quiet. This caused Sorun to internally sigh as he rubbed awkwardly at the back of his neck. "Well, hey, we're working on the problem, right?" he tried. "That's about the best anybody could do in this situation."

"I just keep wondering if we're enough," she morosely replied, but his words did get the barest of smiles out of her. "But thanks for that anyways."

He wasn't even sure an attempt of cheering her up as pathetic as that deserved thanks.

"Oh, what the...!?"

Both of their heads picked up at the sound of Rouge's voice, causing them to spin towards the entrance to another room and run towards

it. They stopped upon entering, both looking towards Rouge and staring in confusion as they watched the bat gawk at the object sitting in the middle of the circular room.

Said object was a motorcycle.

Keeping an eyebrow quirked, Sorun slowly stepped closer to the motorcycle while Sally remained at her spot. It was, for all intents and purposes, a motorcycle. Two wheels, engine, everything, and it even had a little blue sidecar attached to it. Its color didn't match the bike itself, which was painted completely black with strange, red tribal swirls painted on its sides.

"Why in the world is Shadow's bike here?" Rouge murmured to herself as she stepped closer to inspect it.

That gave Sorun pause. "Shadow's bike?" he repeated. "Shadow owns a motorcycle?"

Rouge nodded. "Mm-hm, yeah."

Explained the paint job, at least, but that didn't explain why it existed. "Why does Shadow need a motorcycle?" he asked. "The guy can run faster than a motorcycle?"

"He says it's because of G.U.N. protocol saying the team needs a vehicle, but he put so much care into this thing in his off time I always wondered," she answered him as she ran a hand along the bike's exterior. "We had to abandon it in the garage at G.U.N. headquarters when Dr. Eggman overthrew them. Didn't have time to grab it. He wouldn't stop grumbling about it for a month straight." She shook her head in disbelief. "Can't believe Eggman went through the trouble of bringing it all the way here. Even left the keys in the ignition." Rouge tilted her head closer. "Fully charged, too? Huh. Convenient."

Sorun would have responded, but a glow off to the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned towards it, and then had to take a

step back in shock when he recognized what he was staring at.

Aligned along the back of the room were seven small pedestals, three in the front and four slightly larger pedestals in a row behind them. They were all empty of anything, save for the middle one in the front which held a yellow, glowing gem that had an extremely familiar shape. The same shape as the blue gem he'd accidentally absorbed to gain his Summoned Swords.

The Chaos Emerald.

"Yellow, huh?" Sorun thought to himself as he slowly approached the Emerald. *"These things really do come in all sorts of colors. Never was a fan of yellow, though. Hmm."*

"You find what we were looking for, hon?" he heard Rouge call out from behind him.

"Yep," Sorun called back as he stopped right in front of the Emerald. He looked down at his hand, frowned, and then made a Summoned Sword. "How 'bout you hold onto it, Rouge," he said as he swung the blue sword to bat the Emerald off its pedestal.

The yellow Emerald sailed briefly through the air before it was caught by a surprised Rouge. "You really want me holding it?" she asked with barely-contained shock. Behind her, Sally was giving Sorun an equally puzzled look.

"I don't think touching that would be a good idea considering what happened last time. Don't really wanna fall unconscious in a place like this." He didn't want to touch it period just so he could save as much of his life as possible and maybe get home as well, but for now he'd go with a practical excuse and make up a bunch of other ones later if they asked.

The excuse seemed good enough for the two Mobians, Rouge in particular shrugging. "If you say so. Hey, while we're at it, there were

a bunch of non-Chaos but equally shiny gems back thataway, so if we're not in a rush-"

There was a fake cough from Sally. "Rouge. Focus."

"I kid, I kid." Based on the soft sigh she made, Sorun had to wonder if she really was kidding. "Alright, so we got the Chaos Emerald. Now we need to think up a way of getting out of here."

"Can't we just go back the same way we came?" Sorun asked. "Sneak back to the elevator, work backwards, simple." Best of all was that he would be reunited with his box again.

Rouge glanced at him with half-lidded eyes. "The elevator that got locked down and is waiting for an ID card?" she questioned. "The other elevators that will probably lock down the same way once we call them to the fiftieth floor?"

Oh. That did present a problem. "Don't tell me we gotta take the stairs all the way down to the first floor," he groaned out. He knew for a fact he couldn't make a trip like that. That was a hundred floors worth of stairs. He'd didn't want to have Sally carry him again.

To his immense relief- and confusion- Rouge shook her head. "No. Stairs are an option, but..." she trailed off as she turned to the black and red bike. "I want to bring Shadow's bike back along with us."

It was Sally's turn to look confused. "What? Why?"

"I got an idea for getting out of this building real fast." The bat turned to the other side of the room opposite of the seven pedestals, where there were giant, plate glass windows in place of where the wall was. Windows that lead right outside. "Fact is for all we know we tripped a silent alarm by removing the Emerald," she explained as the bat looked out of a window. "Even if we didn't, I wouldn't put it past Eggman to put some kind of sensor system in place to detect Chaos energy readings if someone tries moving it through the building. And even if this is all paranoia on my part and we really are home free,

there's no telling what's waiting for us once we get down to the bottom floor." She started running her finger along the glass. "I'm thinking we take a more... *direct* route out."

A bad feeling was beginning to grow in Sorun's gut, and he found himself gulping. "Uh... direct route?"

"Maybe. I got a plan, but that depends on you, Sorun." Rouge turned back to the very confused teen. "How fast could you use those swords to make something in a split-second's notice? Say, oh, I don't know... a ramp for instance?"

Oh, he really didn't like where this was going...

That bad feeling of Sorun's had proven to be completely accurate when, out of the top hundredth floor of the tower, a black and red motorcycle came crashing out from one of the floor's windows. Driving the motorcycle was Rouge, who had her eyes squinted in intense focus as gravity began to carry the bike down. Sitting behind her was Sally, who had her arms wrapped rightly around the bat's midsection as she held on for dear life.

And then there was Sorun. The teen was sitting in the side car and was holding its edges with both hands in a death grip, and was letting out a shrilly scream at the top of his lungs as the bike fell down.

In an act that Sorun was dead-certain defied gravity, the wheels of the bike touched down on the wall of the tower. Rouge, in turn, revved the bike's engine, and it was all Sorun could do to not pass out as the bat drove the motorcycle down the wall of the tower.

"Oh my god! Oh my god we're gonna die what the fuck were you thinking Rouge!?" Sorun's mind screamed as he watched the ground grow closer and closer at an extremely uncomfortable rate. *"This doesn't even make any fucking sense how the hell is she driving like this!?"*

Was driving at an impossible angle like this just something that Mobians could innately do on top of everything else? Could one actually drive down the side of a building with sufficient training? Sorun truly didn't know. There was probably some rule of gravity that said such a thing was impossible, but there were a lot of things he thought were impossible before coming here. So what did he know? Really, a white bat driving a motorcycle down the side of a tower was one of the less stranger things he'd seen.

It didn't help that Sorun was terrified out of his mind because *that ground was getting real close-*

"Sorun!" Rouge shouted over the engine of the bike, the wind rapidly rushing past them, and the human's screaming. "Now would be the time to do your thing!"

He didn't even bother trying to formulate a response as the teen, his hair whipping wildly passed his face, focused on the approaching ground. He didn't think he could say anything past all the screaming if he tried.

Down on the ground they were all heading towards, there was a loud *bring!* sound and a flash of light and blue particles as a ramp that curved downwards into the ground appeared from nowhere. The patrolling Egg Pawns, of course, became extremely confused upon seeing a bridge made completely from blue swords appear out of thin air, and when a motorcycle came screaming down from the tower's surface only to hit the ramp and curve smoothly onto flat ground, they became highly alert.

There wasn't much to be done, though, as the speed of the bike combined with the momentum picked up from riding downwards like that had given motorcycle enough speed that all Rouge had to do was drive forwards before they began to approach the wall. Like before, another blue ramp made of swords appeared in front of them, this one curving upwards.

The throttle on the bike was revved again, and the motorcycle roared up the blue ramp before making it to the top and jumping right over the wall.

It felt like the bike had maintained airtime for minutes. The moon was shining brightly down on them, and though they'd just cleared the wall Sorun was still screaming while holding onto the edges of the sidecar. Everybody save Nicole, still in Sally's pocket, grunted loudly when they were jostled upon the bike hitting the ground, though it remained in one piece as the bike drove away from Eggman's tower.

"Aaah! Oh no! Ah! AH! We're gonna die! We're- we- uh..." Sorun's screaming slowly tapered off when he didn't feel his bones and internal organs be torn apart by a sudden impact or explosion, and then slowly opened his eyes up. They snapped right open when he saw the bike driving on an old, cracked road with trees whipping past them, and then slowly looked to his left to see both Rouge and Sally giving him blank looks.

He couldn't care less about the looks they were sending him. He was too busy registering the fact that they'd even survived that crazy stunt. And once it did hit him, he began smiling widely as the euphoria hit.

"We made it!" he cheered as he threw his hands up. "Oh, jeez, I can't believe we just-!"

A yellow laser went past his head.

"Oh man we're gonna die!" he screamed as he ducked back down into the sidecar. He picked his head up to peek over the edge of the side car, and then visibly paled even further when he saw multiple saucer-like flying vehicles chasing after him, all of them piloted by Egg Pawns and all of them firing yellow lasers out of turrets at the front of those saucers.

"Ah, great!" Rouge shouted as she veered the bike to the side to dodge a laser shot. "Sally, how long 'til they come to pick us up!?"

"They should be homing in on our position, but it's gonna take a minute or two!" Sally shouted back.

More yellow lasers flew past them as Rouge continued driving forwards. "Sorun!" she yelled. "You think maybe you can use those swords of yours to do something about this!?"

Sorun's head rose up higher. Yeah, he supposed he should make sure they don't get shot.

He focused on the nearest saucer and focused a ring of Storm Swords on the Egg Pawn piloting it. A ring of eight swords appeared spinning around the robot, who looked up in confusion right before all eight swords stopped, and then shot forwards to impale the robot. It went offline immediately after eight impalements, and without a pilot the saucer crashed into the ground behind them and exploded.

This would be the routine Sorun had set up for himself. More saucers would close in uncomfortably close, and he'd shoot at their exposed pilots with Summoned Swords. The robots would die and the saucers would hit the ground and explode in a spectacular fashion. It was all well and good for making sure they weren't being shot at anymore, but there was seemingly no end to the amount of saucers chasing after them. It seemed like a new one would approach from the distance every time Sorun down one.

"They just keep coming and coming!" Sorun shouted over the roar of the motorcycle. "When's it getting here, Sally!?"

"I don't know! It should be- wait! There!"

Right as Rouge drove the bike around a curve, they'd hit a part of the road where the right side of the ground gave out to a large, steep cliff. And from that cliff rose up something that covered the moonlight and cast a shadow on the entire road Rouge was driving on. It was a long, silver ship that looked like a cross between a jet and a spaceship, though with its size Sorun had immediately mistaken it for a spaceship when he'd first seen it.

He'd had a lot of questions when he'd first seen that thing in Knothole's hangar.

"You guys seriously have a spaceship?" Sorun said in awe as he looked up at the large, sleek ship parked inside of the hangar. Tails' plane, which was parked right next to it, was practically dwarfed by the giant aircraft.

"Ah, well, it can achieve suborbital altitude, but I wouldn't go as far as to say it's a spaceship," Rotor said as he tapped away at a small tablet he had that was connected to the bottom of the ship via a few cables. "The Freedom Fighter Special sure is something, huh?"

"Cool, that's cool..." Sorun bounced on his feet. "Can I look inside it?"

Rotor lowered the diagnostics device and shot Sorun a smirk. "Oh, did I finally find something that excites you?"

"Man I don't- s-so what if I do? Space stuff is cool, okay?" Giddy and practically bursting with poorly-contained enthusiasm, Sorun ran towards the ramp so he could go explore inside of the ship. Rotor stared after the human, and then lightly chuckled as he brought his terminal back up to his face.

He thought spaceships and space things were cool. And the Freedom Fighter Special may not have been a spaceship, but it was close enough that he didn't care at all. It was big and it looked cool. That was more than enough for Sorun.

And to think he'd been riding around in Tails' dinky little biplane when they had this thing the whole time.

It'd been chosen for this mission on the grounds that it had been the only aircraft they had available at the time. It suited them all fine, as it was the only thing they had on hand that could fit a whole

motorcycle inside of it. This was a function they desperately needed as these saucers chasing them were relentless.

The large ship flew alongside the motorcycle, and from the back a large hangar door began to open as a long ramp extended out from the interior of the ship. Lasers began flying past them all again, but Rouge paid them no mind as she focused in on the ramp extended out to them.

In a single move, she twisted the handlebars of the bike and caused it to veer right. It careened right off the road, and all the occupants experienced a couple more seconds of airtime as the bike flew towards the ramp. With a loud squeal wheels touched down on the metal platform, the bike having slid sideways from the momentum. Sorun's sidecar was unfortunately in a position that it had dangled off the edge of the ramp for a bit, making the human scream again, especially when a few bolts flew away and the sidecar began to jostle. Rouge was quick to orient the bike so that it pointed into the ship's hangar and gunned it forwards. Seconds later and the bike was safely if not a bit haphazardly driven into the hangar, with the ramp and door rapidly beginning to close behind them.

Finally, the door was sealed completely shut. There was the sound of laser shots pinging off the outer surface of the ship, but there was a sudden lurch as the Freedom Fighter Special sped off into the sky, and soon all that was heard was the sound of the motorcycle's engine and the heavy breathing of three of its occupants.

Everybody remained motionless for the longest minute until Rouge gingerly reached out to shut the bike off. It died instantly once she turned the ignition, and the white bat let out a loud sigh before slumping forwards.

Sally, who was still behind Rouge, slowly leaned back to look at the ceiling. Her hair was disheveled from the high-speed chase and here eyes were still wide open from all the excitement, but at the very least her breathing was beginning to level out. "Thanks for patching

us into the Freedom Fighter Special's comms, Nicole," she quietly muttered.

"You are very welcome," the voice in her vest said in response.

Sorun's appearance was about in the same condition as Sally's. Hair that was disheveled and wild from the motorcycle ride, and skin that had an even lighter pallor than its usual light tone. He'd become so winded from the experience that he couldn't even speak, and had to settle for leaning over the side of the sidecar he was sitting in.

"Ah... so." Tiredly leaning against the bike's handlebars, Rouge turned her head towards Sorun. "That was a fun ride, huh?"

With a loud groan, Sorun's body slid completely out of the sidecar and collapsed onto the ship's floor.

"Well, everybody, it was a fun little adventure we all had, but I think we should call it a night here."

It was right as Sorun's hand touched the door leading into Freedom HQ that the bat's words reached his ears. With an rueful chuckle, he turned around to face the bat.

"Rouge, I worry for you if you consider anything we did there at that tower fun," he said in a flat tone. "That was the most stressful thing I've done in my entire life. I don't know how you manage to do that stuff for a living."

"Ah, come on. You need to loosen up, Sorun. We just snuck into one of the most highly secure buildings on the planet and managed get away with the loot. Did we get shot at?" Rouge shrugged. "Sure, but that kind of thing is normal at this point. Plus we had some laughs, didn't we?"

Sorun opened his mouth to respond, paused, laughed once, and turned back to the door. "Okay, yeah, maybe it was a little fun. A *little*

."

The laughs they shared at the very least were fun. Everything else had been a nightmare. Getting shot at and driving down the side of a tower had been a nightmare. And he wasn't going to forget about what happened on those stairs anytime soon.

But, other than all that... it did have its good moments. It wasn't enough to make Sorun ever want to do something like that again, but at least he had those memories. For whatever those were worth, at least.

And just when he thought he could end the night on a high note, the door to the HQ flung right open and sent Sorun sprawling to the ground. With a groan, he sat up onto his rear and looked up to see a very livid black and red hedgehog standing right in front of Rouge.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

"Really, Shadow? You're gonna do this now?" Rouge asked him with an innocent smile on her face. "A girl comes back from such a stressful mission like that-"

"They radioed ahead and told me about my bike. Rouge, I swear if you ruined the suspensions by driving it down the *side of a building...* !"

Laughing lightly, Rouge held up her hands in a sign of surrender. "Shadow, relax. Your bike is fine. I left it in the hangar. We can go get it now if you want."

Shadow didn't even give do so much as her a response. All Shadow had done was angrily huff and stomp past her towards the direction where the hangar was. Rouge stared off after him, scoffed, and then gave a little shrug before looking back at Sorun.

"Well, I gotta go do some damage control now." She winked at the still-sitting human. "It was fun working with ya, See you again some

other time."

"Ahem. Rouge?"

Smiling innocently, Rouge held up the yellow Emerald she had been holding on to. "What? I was gonna give it back," she claimed as she tossed the Emerald to Sally, who was standing nearby. "Seeya around, princess."

Sorun silently watched the bat walk off after the hedgehog, and then shook his head with a low sigh as he heard another set of footsteps approach him. "I want a vacation," he said as he looked up at Sally. "Freedom Fighters get some of those, right? Vacation days? I wanna cash a few in."

Chuckling in amusement, Sally shook her head. "We'll see what we can do." She bent down and helped him to his feet. "Come on. Let's get you back inside."

There weren't any arguments from Sorun, who gladly followed the princess back into the HQ. He didn't care what happened next as long as at least he got to relax for the rest of the night. And Nicole was right there. Maybe she'd be up to play something with him.

As great an idea as it was, though, Sorun saw the likelihood of that idea plummet when he descended the stairs into the HQ's living room with Sally and saw a red form and a blue form already on the couch playing something. He didn't know how likely they were going to give up a spot, but if the scores he saw said anything, Sonic had some skill. Maybe he'd get Knuckles to ragequit and let Sorun play with him. Then Sorun could crush him at whatever game they were playing and he could cap the night out on that high note he wanted so bad.

Yeah. That was a great plan.

"Aw, come on!" The plan was already coming together when Knuckles looked ready to throw his controller while Sonic quietly

chortled right besides him. He almost did throw it, too, but when he turned around to chuck it he saw Sorun and Sally standing right him and staring. "Oh, hey. You two are back. How'd it go?" Knuckles asked as he set the controller down on the couch's arm.

In response to his question, Sorun hopped over the couch to sit down between Knuckles and Sonic. "You know how it is," he said. "We came, we saw, we plundered. Some other stuff happened, too, but we don't talk about that."

"You mean like how you were screaming the whole time while on the bike?" he heard Sally teasingly ask from behind the couch.

Without even looking back, Sorun lifted his arm up and pointed back at her. "Yeah, that. Among other things."

"Oh, you mean with the sta-"

"Zip it with the stairs!"

"Right, of course." With a large smirk on her face, Sally stepped besides the couch, and Sorun caught the yellow shine of the Chaos Emerald as she removed it from the inside of her vest and handed it off to Knuckles. "It wasn't easy, but we got what we went there for."

"Yeah, it was super perilous and everything, hey, Sonic," Sorun quickly said as he leaned back in the couch and looked to the right at Sonic, "what game're you two playing?"

Sonic blinked at the unexpected question. "Er, it's a racing-"

"Cool, great, room for one more?"

Wanting to get away from the stair topic was a factor, but more than anything else, his attempt at drawing attention towards the game was an effort to get everybody's mind off that Chaos Emerald. His own mind so he didn't have to think about it, and everybody else's minds so they didn't get any ideas. Ideas like what would happen if

he touched it. It was a conversation that would come up eventually, but the hope was that he could stall them for tonight and wind down from the mission and then think of something tomorrow-

"Hey, Sorun," he heard Knuckles from besides him ask.

Oh no.

"... Yeah?" he hesitantly answered as he looked to the left. He felt his heartbeat increased when he saw the echidna fondle at the yellow Emerald, and then pass a thoughtful look at Sorun.

"The last time you touched a Chaos Emerald... you got those weird swords, right?" He held the Emerald up for the human to see. "You think that would happen again if you touched another one?"

No, no, no...

"Hey, that's a great idea!" To his utter dismay Sonic seemed completely onboard with the idea. "What do you think, Sorun? Wanna give it a try?"

He most certainly did not. *"Okay, think fast,"* he quickly thought to himself. "Uh, y'know guys, I... I'm pretty sure that first time was a one-time deal," he said. "You know. One and done. That's the feeling I got, at least. Sounds like a waste of time trying to get more powers. Probably won't even work."

Nothing but absolute lies, but lies were all he had. But unfortunately, they weren't good lies. Looking around, he saw that absolutely nobody looked at all convinced by what he said. It wasn't hard for him to see why considering all they had to do to check was have him touch it. And he knew it would work, too. The problem was that he'd lose another twelve years of life.

He'd hoped that Sally would bring something up, but she was just watching on in interest. He silently cursed and tried to scooch away from Knuckles.

"You sure? Here, just come touch it." Almost as if he was voicing his fears, Knuckles leaned towards Sorun while holding the yellow Emerald out to him. "Worst case nothing happens. What've you got to lose?"

Twelve years of his life, for one. "Y-yeah, sure, but-but what if this one get stuck in me, too?" Sorun stuttered as he continued scooching back from Knuckles and the Emerald. "Getting home's already gonna be hard enough with-"

"Well, you already got one stuck inside of you, right?" Sorun had to hold back from snarling at him when Sonic pushed him further towards the Emerald. "Nothing's gonna change by you taking one more in. Just try it."

It would most certainly hurt, but that wasn't the problem. Desperately, Sorun tried worming his way out of Sonic's push without seeming too worried, but it wasn't working. "Can't we just do this in the morning?" he asked, voice slightly higher. "Guys, come on, this can wait for a bit-!"

Knuckles had tossed the Chaos Emerald in Sorun's lap. He hadn't meant to touch it, he really didn't, but in an unconscious response Sorun had reflexively tried to shove it off of him with his hands. His fear of the thing had just been too great, so he'd done it without any thought.

Because he'd used his hands to try and shove it, though, he'd made contact with both palms. And unlike the first time with the blue Emerald, much to his subdued horror, this second Emerald had adhered to him almost instantly upon making contact. And as he held the stuck Emerald up to his face, he could already see yellow sparks of power arc out of the gem and onto his arms, and he could already feel his muscles seizing up from the raw power coursing through them.

Taking in a large, slow breath, both to calm himself and brace him for the coming pain, Sorun sent Knuckles a searing glare. "Knuckles,

you son of a-"

The overwhelming surge of energy that ran through him from the Emerald had cut Sorun off, and just as soon as the pain hit him he'd gone unconscious.

Chapter 17

Recursion Error

Episode 17- Knuckles Buster

It was with a multitude of bad feelings running through him, both mental and physical, that Sorun opened his eyes up.

Once again, he'd been knocked out by a glowing rock. And once again he'd woken up on his back staring up at the ceiling. If there was an upside it was that there weren't any strange visions he couldn't remember and he didn't feel like he was going to pass out again, but the aches and lingering pains of being shocked unconscious was still present.

The first thing he noticed as his vision cleared, though, was the red blur hovering over his form that slowly became more clear as Sorun blinked focus back into his eyes. Eventually he came to realize that the person looking down at him was Knuckles. And any of the physical pains his body was experiencing was overridden with the mental ones. The mental ones that were screaming at him that he'd just lost another twelve years of life because the echidna had forced that Emerald on him.

He wanted to punch Knuckles right in the face.

So he did.

It wasn't one of Sorun's arms that punched Knuckles, though. He hadn't even gotten up to make the motion. The only thoughts that had been running through the teen's mind were ones saying they wanted to punch Knuckles, so something shot out and punched him. A large, blue, spectral arm to be specific had shot right out of Sorun's body and punched Knuckles right in the face.

The force of the punch had been so great that Knuckles had flown all the way clear across the living room and into the wall. He'd bounced off the wall, but mid-bounce the spectral arm had shot forwards, wrapped its clawed fingers around his head, and slammed him back into the wall.

"Knuckles, you...!" By now Sorun had risen up to his feet, his face completely livid and teeth bared as he stared at the pinned echidna. The blue arm holding him against the wall trailed all the way to the lower back of Sorun's right shoulder, and on his left side jutted another feathered, blue arm that was hovering protectively over Sorun. "You... why did you do that...!?"

Again. It had happened again. Another Emerald inside of him, and another twelve years of his whole life lost. And he'd tried, *tried* , to avoid it, but even when he was trying to get away what did Knuckles go and do? He practically shoved the thing right into Sorun's hands! And now his life was cut that much shorter all because Knuckles *hadn't listened* !

It was so rage-inducing that Sorun couldn't help the growl that came out of him as the arm holding Knuckles cocked backwards before shooting forwards and slamming Knuckles into the wall again and again.

"Sorun, stop it!" He felt somebody shake his arm roughly, and he whipped his head to the side to see Sonic was the one shaking him. He looked extremely concerned, but there was something in his eyes that was giving Sorun pause. An angered edge accentuated by the way his lids were slightly narrowed. For whatever reason it was enough to send a small twinge of fear through Sorun, and that was enough to snap him out of his blind rage.

The blue hand holding Knuckles' face opened and let him go, and the echidna fell down off the wall and onto his knees. He coughed a few times, and then shakily got up to his feet as he cast his violet eyes towards Sorun. The anger in them was a lot less subtle than the anger in Sonic's eyes.

"What was that!?" an angered Knuckles yelled as he stomped towards Sorun. "I check to see if you're alright and you slam me into a wall like that!?"

Sorun roughly shook Sonic's hands off his arm and matched Knuckles' stomping as he approached the echidna. "Why did I do that!? Why did you give that thing to me when I didn't want it!? You couldn't have warned me!? You know how much that hurts!?"

Sonic had zoomed forwards in a blur and was attempting to push Sorun back. Sally, who had still been in the room, was doing the same to Knuckles. Their efforts proved to be successful, and eventually the two angered teens were pushed to a complete stop. Knuckles' gloves were still dangerously flexing while the spectral arms behind Sorun were flared out, but under the harsh and stern glares of both Sonic and Sally the two eventually sighed.

"Don't. Do that. Again," Sorun slowly told Knuckles as the blue arms lowered. "Seriously. I meant it when I said I didn't want to touch it."

Knuckles exhaled heavily through his nose, but relaxed his fists and gave Sorun a small nod. "I'm sorry. I'll ask next time."

All Sorun gave in response was a single blink and a shake of his head before he turned away from the trio of Mobians. At his will, he made the two spectral arms stretch forwards so he could examine them.

Upon closer inspection, they were less arms and more feathered wings that were in the shape of arms given the wing-like plumage of blue, spectral feathers attached to the elbows of the arms. The two feathered arms ended in spectral hands, each one tipped in five long, opposable talons in place of fingers.

Sorun only needed a second's glance to recognize them.

"What the... aren't... aren't these Nero's Bringer Claws?" he thought to himself before promptly frowning. *"Aw, you gotta be... what, is*

every single power I get from an Emerald gonna be from 'Devil May Cry'? And they're not even gonna stick with Vergil? They're just gonna give me powers from whoever? Shit ain't even consistent."

He'd suspected that perhaps him getting powers exclusively from 'Devil May Cry' was a possibility, a strong one at that, but he had really been hoping that wasn't the case. There were so many other powers from other games, movies, and anime he'd seen that were so world-breaking that, if he really was going to be saddled with powers, he could at least get something along those lines to make life easier on himself. But now there was a pattern with this second power. Likely just because he liked that series so much and played it last shortly before coming here, the same reason Aurora had alluded to.

"So much for getting Rinnegan eyes," he silently lamented. *"I could have gotten up to some real shit with those eyes. Or, fuck, literally ANY Stand from 'Jojo'. Electric powers from 'InFamous' would have been nice seeing as I'm fighting robots that run on electricity here. Infinity Gauntlet. Could have had any of those things, but* noooo *, they all get locked out because apparently I'm stuck with 'Devil May Cry' stuff."*

Why the Bringer Claws though, he had to wonder. Getting the swords from Vergil made sense- he'd been his favorite character. He'd played him the most out of everybody. Nero was a close second for sure, but why not another power from Vergil? Why, out of everything else, a power from Nero?

"Is it just because Nero was Vergil's son? Is that a close enough relationship that... agh, but this doesn't work using genes from fake video game characters! It works because my stupid subconscious wants it!" he internally groused. *"I mean yeah, sure, Nero was great since he was the only character in the whole series that could do command grabs, but-"*

He stopped himself right there. He looked down at the arms, and then blinked in realization as the two spectral hands slowly flexed

their talons.

"... Oh yeah. Command grabs. Inescapable command grabs that interrupt enemy attacks and do a shit ton of damage. That's why I liked Nero so much." He looked up from the arms. *"Nah, I can run with this."*

There would be a lot of thinking about these arms, but that was for later. For now he needed to process it all. And for that he needed sleep. It had already been a long enough day from the heist he just committed. His tolerance for the day was done.

The Bringer Claws folded into Sorun's back, with the talons resting over Sorun's shoulder as the feathered elbows hung off his back, giving the appearance that he had two blue, spectral wings hanging off of him. He slid his hands into his pockets with a sigh, and turned back around to face the three Mobians he turned his back to.

At the very least, the tenseness that had permeated the whole room had subsided. The slight anger was still present in Sonic's eyes, and now he looked worried on top of it. Sally mostly just looked worried. Much of the anger had faded from Knuckles, and while there were still some vestiges of rage left on his features, he looked more confused than anything else.

"... I'm going to bed," Sorun told them as he turned towards the stairs. "I'm tired."

He was surprised he even made it halfway to the stairs before he heard Sonic call out to him. "Sorun-?"

"Sonic. I'm tired. Later." Really tired, actually. More than he'd initially thought he was, now that he thought on it. He rubbed at his sleepy eyes, and then shook it off. "We'll talk later."

Sorun ascended the stairs and, too tired to even remove his hand from his pocket, willed his right Bringer Claw to remove itself from his shoulder, reach out, and open the door for him. He walked through

the door, and once he made it through the other side the Bringer Claw reached behind him and slammed the door hard enough to cause the three Mobians to flinch.

It was right after Sorun stomped out of the HQ that Sonic let out a frustrated sigh while he began to pace. "I can't believe he did that," he grumbled in an irritated tone. "What was he thinking!? I just- I think I finally start to get him and he pulls something like this! Do any of you guys have any idea what Sorun's problem is?" he asked as he turned to the other two. "He acted just as bad when he got the sword things."

And try as he might, he couldn't fathom why. He would readily admit it and say that they should have held off when he said he didn't want to touch it yet, that was their bad, but even so! Even if they did make a mistake it didn't warrant beating Knuckles against the wall with those... arm-things that had come out of his shoulders! He couldn't even place that look Sorun had given the arms once he got a good look at them, only that he seemed much more calm afterwards. Calm and tired.

It didn't make any sense at all. Like a lot of things about Sorun.

"I don't know," Knuckles groaned as he rubbed the back of his head. "Those arm-wing-whatever things he got sure pack a punch though. Ow." He winced, and then slowly removed his hand. "What even were those?"

"His new power, I guess." Sonic gave a shrug. "I'm so fed up with trying to figure out what makes him upset." He started tapping his foot in thought. "The first time was after he found out the Emerald might be stuck in him, that I got, but this time it happened so quick. So what happened this time!?" He looked towards Sally. "Was he acting like that during the mission?"

To the hedgehog's greater confusion, she shook her head. "No, not at all. If anything he was more collected than normal." She reached

into her vest and opened Nicole's computer body up. "Nicole, you heard all that. What do you think?"

"His aggression levels did seem to spike to abnormally high level following his contact with the Emerald," she answered. A beat passed, and she added, "I'm worried for his mental state."

"I'm more worried about Knux's head!" Sonic exclaimed. "Where does Sorun get off on doing something like that!? I get he's upset for some reason that's way beyond me, but that's no excuse to go attacking people!"

"Sonic, I'm fine," Knuckles grumbled out as he rubbed at his head. "You ever try talking-?"

"No, that's the thing! That's the thing with him!" Groaning in frustration, Sonic thrust his arms up in the air while he began pacing again. "He's got some internal issues he absolutely refuses to talk about, and I know it for a fact because he told me to my face he's keeping things from us, and he just will not open up because... I don't know, ah, because he's Sorun!"

His arms and shoulders went slack with an exhausted sigh, and he flopped right onto the couch behind them with his feet dangling over the edge. He stayed motionless for a few moments, and then slowly turned his head to the side when he saw Sally walk up next to the couch.

"I seriously don't get him, Sal," he admitted to her. "One minute he's fine, another minute he isn't, and I don't... I don't know if it's a human thing, or if people just act like he does normally in his zone, or if Sorun's just weird... I don't know. Might not even be any of those things." He slapped a hand on his face. "It'd be so much easier figuring this all out if he'd just talk!"

"I know how you feel," she said. "He can be unusually reserved at times."

Which was odd, because Sorun never gave off the impression that he liked hiding stuff. He'd had a lot of conversations with the human, and not just him, but all the other Freedom Fighters. It was never much, but he always talked about little things from his previous life on his zone if somebody asked him out of curiosity. It was always little, inconsequential things, but he always seemed fine talking about it.

He didn't even go as far as to hide the fact he didn't want to befriend them. He'd seemed uncomfortable when he'd said it, too- Sonic had seen it in his eyes. Uncomfortable to the point that he seemed like he wanted to keep it to himself, but he hadn't. Because he knew Sonic was going to press the issue over and over, so Sorun had decided it would take less effort being straight with him than being secretive.

So why was this the exception to that experience? Why wouldn't he tell them why he was so touchy around the subject of Chaos Emeralds? What was the problem he had that was so important that he was going so far out of his way to keep it from all of them? And for that matter why did he seem so familiar with these powers he kept receiving? There was confusion among all the Freedom Fighters over the abilities and why they were manifesting the way they were, and if anybody should have been questioning it the most, it should have been Sorun. But, just like with those wings, he seemed almost intimately familiar with them.

None of it made sense, and Sonic knew it would if Sorun just explained himself, but he wouldn't. "Because reasons" he had said. He hated that excuse so much.

"I don't even care if it's with me," Sonic said after a long moment. "I wish he'd just talk about this with *somebody* so he could just deal with his issues. But he never even goes out of his way to talk to anybody."

"That statement is false," the computer being held in Sally's hand said. "There have been multiple occurrences where Sorun has

actively sought me out specifically."

Sonic's head shot right up off the couch at that. Sally looked down at the computer she was holding in muted shock, and even Knuckles near the back was looking towards them oddly.

"... We're talking about the same Sorun here, right?" Sonic asked. "Sorun? The human guy?"

"Who else would I be referring to?" Nicole asked. "Sorun often desires to play video games with somebody, so he seeks me out. I always accept when I can. He is very skilled and offers an interesting experience every time we play together, so I find myself making time available for whenever he asks."

"Well yeah he's good, I saw the score that night, but why doesn't Sorun ever ask anybody else to play with him?" the hedgehog questioned.

There was a pause from Nicole before she answered. "... I believe it is because I am the only one among us that can actually keep up with him. Sorun does not like easy challenges when it comes to video games."

Sonic took offense to that, and wrinkled his face in displeasure. "Hey, I'm plenty good-!"

"Not compared to him you aren't," Nicole interrupted. "I've seen both of you demonstrate your skills. You don't come close to Sorun, I'm afraid."

He opened his mouth to object, but with a small grumble he closed it in silent acceptance. So Sorun was amazing at video games. Sonic had seen it for himself; he wouldn't argue the point. Especially if Nicole was vouching for his skill. But he was more interested in Sorun's frequent interaction with the AI over anything else. He didn't frequently interact with anybody on a regular basis as far as Sonic knew.

"So... you and Sorun talk a lot?" he pressed.

"Sometimes," Nicole answered. "Most times we are more focused on playing more than anything, though we do take time to converse with each other between sessions. Sometimes it will be him giving me advice, and other times it will be casual chatter. Why do you ask?"

The thought of Sorun going out of his way to casually chat with anybody was a foreign concept to Sonic, but it made sense once he realized that Nicole was probably the only one among them who could have gotten through to Sorun through video games. It was practically the only thing he liked as far as Sonic knew. It was a pleasant surprise, but more than that it gave him a spark of hope for the human along with an idea.

"You think that maybe you could get Sorun to talk?" Sonic finally asked her. "I know this sounds a bit weird coming from me, but I wouldn't be asking if there was any other way."

Because there wasn't any other way. Not at the rate they were going and with how closed off Sorun was to everybody. But if unlike everybody else he had somewhat of a good rapport with Nicole, then maybe there was a way.

Unfortunately, the answer that Nicole gave wasn't too encouraging to that idea.

"I... believe that if Sorun wishes to keep certain thoughts to himself, he then must have a reason for doing so," Nicole answered, causing Sonic's mood to deflate. "I do not wish to pry into an issue he is taking active steps to keep to himself."

"Nicole, I know, but-"

"He has the same right to his own privacy as everybody else," she said. "If he wishes to divulge whatever it is that is unsettling him, then I trust that he will come forwards with it on his own when he is

ready. But I do not want to stress the trust he has in me by attempting to force a confession out of him. I'm sorry."

Sonic held his hands up. "Hey, nobody was saying you had to go that far, but... yeah, I get what you're saying," he sighed out as he rubbed a hand through his quills. It was probably for the best, anyways. The last thing Sonic wanted to do was jeopardize the biggest step Sorun had taken towards befriending anybody just so he could get his answers. And he respected Nicole's choice enough to call it good.

But he still wasn't going to let the physical assault against Knuckles slide without a conversation.

"I'm still gonna talk to him tomorrow about what happened with Knuckles," he finally said to them as he crashed back down onto the couch. "That wasn't cool. He can't go around slamming people into walls just because he feels like it."

"That's probably for the best," Sally agreed as she closed Nicole and placed her back inside her vest. "I'm going to call it for a night here. Good luck with tomorrow."

"Yeah, same," Knuckles called out to them.

Sonic waved them off, and then softly sighed as he interlaced his fingers behind his head and looked up at the ceiling in thought.

The next morning for Sorun was just that. Another morning.

Sonic hadn't been in his race car bed when Sorun woke up. Whether that meant the hedgehog had both came in and left while Sorun was sleeping or he'd never returned to begin with, Sorun didn't know, nor did he really care all that much. After what happened last night he needed some distance away from the blue hedgehog.

So where did that leave him? In the house's kitchen, seeking breakfast. But unfortunately, it seemed he'd woken up way earlier than he usually did, and because of that the other occupants to the house, Sonic's parents, weren't up. Which meant Sonic's mother Bernadette couldn't make him her pancakes.

Damn.

"Damn." Grumbling incoherently, Sorun stomped over to a nearby cabinet and opened it up. After a quick search he'd found a package of bread. *"Sandwich it is, then. Ugh."*

It was a great that the concept of stacking stuff between bread wasn't lost on him, because that and throwing french fries in an oven to bake, and the use of microwaves and toasters were about all his cooking skills amounted to. A good thing those were all the skills he needed, then, since all he'd done was toast two pieces of bread and make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

All one needed to get the day started was a sandwich. Pancakes were preferable, but he'd make do.

He hadn't bothered to egress all the way to the dining room to eat his sandwich, so Sorun had just elected to lean on the kitchen's counter as he nibbled at his cobbled-together meal. His eyes slowly roamed over the kitchen until they landed on the kitchen sink. A kitchen sink that was full to the brim in dirty dishes that needed to be washed.

"Hm. Somebody better get on that," Sorun thought to himself as he ate the sandwich. *"For all that praise people always give Sonic, he sure is a terrible son. Leaving all this work to his poor mother. Woman's a saint. She doesn't deserve this mess."*

A hum of slight irritation left him, and at the same time a flash of blue light lit from his back as his Bringer Claws appeared, hovering over his shoulders. *"How much dexterity can I get out of these things, anyways?"* he thought. *"I'm like, what, a quarter of the way through*

this sandwich? I got the time. And I gotta test out the fine motor control on these things. Sure, let's go for it."

So the Bringer Claws were amazing apparently.

It was to be expected, Sorun supposed, that being able to manifest two arms that could reach out however far they could go- he had yet to test that distance- and grab/punch things with unworldly strength- which by this world's standards was probably normal, but again, testing- was pretty great in of itself, but as he'd discovered they were capable of finer things, too.

Thing was, he didn't control the Bringer Claws like he would control an arm. It was much the same way he controlled the Summoned Swords: he just thought of what he wanted them to do, and they followed his will. They were somewhat autonomous in that regard, though they moved so naturally to his thoughts that Sorun himself could barely tell the difference. It was a lot easier to have the spectral arms do things as opposed to his normal arms, though, as he didn't feel any physical exertion from them.

So washing dishes? Easiest task in the world for the Bringer Claws. All he'd done was lean back and continue to eat his sandwich while he watched the Bringer Claws go to work at the dishes at what was a dizzying, almost supernatural speed. Those blue, clawed hands had been scrubbing those plates so fast that he was worried they were going to get scratched or broken, but even though the hands were working at breakneck speeds they'd efficiently cleaned each and every dish without leaving so much as a single mark.

All in all, they managed to do a half hour's worth of dishes in about three or four minutes. He'd barely even finished his sandwich by the time they'd finished.

"Wow, these things just trivialize everything," Sorun thought in wonder as the feathered arms retracted back onto his back while

grasping at his shoulders. *"They'd be the best thing in the world if I didn't have to spend another twelve years of life for them."*

And that was the real kicker right there. His plan of not touching another Emerald after the first was completely shattered thanks to Sonic and Knuckles, and because of that he had two inside of him now. Twenty-four years of life taken from him in total, and with the sixteen he'd already spent living normally before being dragged to Mobius that added all the way up to forty.

Forty years. In terms of lifespan he was already forty. He sure didn't look it, because he'd checked extensively in the mirror this morning. Aside from all the stress he'd endured making it look like he hadn't slept in a billion or so years, he still looked as youthful as the day he came to Mobius. He sure didn't feel it, though. His movements felt more lethargic than he would have liked, and he suspected the reason he'd woken up so early was because his natural sleep schedule was being interrupted.

"This sucks." About the only conclusion he could draw, really. *"How'd I already hit forty years? Friggin' math."* He ran a hand over his face. *"All because fuckin' Knuckles went and... it's fine, he didn't know, it wasn't his fault, it's fine, it's not fine, AGH!"*

His right hand had balled up and almost struck the counter he was leaning on, but after a deep, calming breath he lowered it back to his side. He sighed, but with his mood it came out as more of a high-pitched, saddened whine.

"What am I gonna do now? Keep collecting the Emeralds?" he wondered. *"I don't have to touch any of the others, but now with two in me, I... I haven't even gotten any closer to figuring out if there's a way to get them out or not. Everybody keeps saying they can't, and the longer this goes on the more likely it looks..."*

"O-oh my. Sorun?"

The teen was snapped from his terrible thoughts when he heard a female voice say his name. He looked towards the kitchen's entrance and saw Bernadette standing there, looking back and forth between the kitchen sink and rack full of dishes, Sorun, and the Bringer Claws folded into wings on Sorun's back. Bringer Claws that quickly disappeared completely when Sorun grew self-conscious of them.

"Er, hey, Mrs. Sonic's Mom the Hedgehog ma'am," Sorun shyly greeted.

The hedgehog woman warmly giggled at him. "Sorun, I keep telling you that it's alright if you just use my first name."

"I... it just seems kind of rude, y'know? Doing. That." He averted his eyes away from her. "You just get up?"

"Yes. I was surprised to find you up already at this hour." Bernadette stepped into the kitchen and made her way towards the sink and dishes. "I had planned on cleaning all these dishes later in the afternoon." She looked to the human. "Sorun, did you...?"

No denying this one, he supposed. "I, uh... saw them all and figured I'd just do them to save you the trouble," he quietly murmured.

"Oh, dear, you didn't have to do that!" She stepped closer to him, and a very meek Sorun tried to take a step away. He was too nervous, though, and remained rooted to the spot. "You're a guest as long as you stay here, so you don't-"

"It's fine," Sorun interrupted. "It was no trouble. Really. Your life must be stressful enough since you're a mom and everything, Sonic's mom especially, so I thought you deserved a break."

If it was almost anybody else, he wouldn't have bothered. But he'd always had a soft spot for mothers, and Bernadette had grown on him somewhat. Particularly because of the pancakes. The fact that

he needed something to test the Bringer Claws out on had just been a convenient enough excuse for himself.

Though he really didn't know what to feel when the motherly hedgehog leaned in and gave him a chaste peck on his cheek. He'd practically seized up, actually.

"Well, dear, thank you for giving this hedgehog the afternoon off. Maybe I can finally catch back up on some of my reading," she said with a wishful sigh. "Do you at least want me to make you something before you head out? It's the least I-"

"No I'm fine really no problem!" Sorun quickly shook his head in denial, and reflexively tried hiding his face behind his dark hair when he felt his cheeks burning red in embarrassment. "Bye Mrs. Bernadette."

He walked away too quickly to catch her reaction, but he felt his cheeks burn even hotter when he heard her giggle again from behind him. "Have a safe day, dearie! I'll make you something special for dinner tonight when you and Sonic come home!"

The pale human couldn't have gotten out of that kitchen fast enough. One of his greater vulnerabilities that was even more devastating than mothers: nice mothers like her. Sorun blamed his own mother. The fact that Bernadette kind of reminded him of her wasn't helping matters at all.

But even still, she was a nice woman. Hard to believe someone like Sonic was born from her, but Sorun supposed all those heroic traits had to come from somewhere. But thoughts of the other, teenage blue hedgehog slowed Sorun's tracks as he made it past the kitchen and dining room.

"Ah, man... Sonic... he's probably gonna want to talk about what happened last night." And that was a fun conversation waiting for him. He didn't have any justifiable reason to give them for being upset enough at Knuckles to slam him like that. Not any he could say

without stopping his heart, at least, and even then he still felt a little justified over it. Somehow he didn't think Sonic would see it that way. *"I got not idea what I'm supposed to say to him. Guess I'll just play it by ear. Because that strategy's had such a great record so far..."*

"Going already?"

Sorun stopped himself at hearing the male, synthesized voice, and turned towards the living room. His eyes were drawn towards a lone figure sitting in a chair with his head facing towards Sorun. It was Jules.

"... I'm not in a rush or anything," Sorun hesitantly answered as he moved his hand away from the front door he'd been reaching for.

"Ah. Good." Jules leaned forwards in his chair. "So you have time to have a chat with me, then."

"... Sure," Sorun said as he slowly walked into the living room. He felt something brush by his leg, and looked down to see the small family dog rubbing against him. He softly pushed Muttski away with his boot, and the dog whined a little before going towards its bed in the corner. "Hey, Mr. Jules," the teen greeted as he looked back up at the metallic hedgehog.

Whereas Sonic's mother always made Sorun nervous due to her motherly nature, Jules was just intimidating. Sorun knew he didn't mean it; the older hedgehog seemed like a normal person and talked normally enough during the dinners Sorun had participated in with the hedgehog family. Part of that intimidation may have stemmed from the fact he looked like a deadly robot, but there was something more to it.

It was possibly because, underneath that steely exterior, metaphorically and literally speaking, there was a war veteran from what Sonic had told him at one point. A war veteran that fought, and very possibly if not for certain, killed Overlanders. That might have

had something to do with it. He was always friendly enough around Sorun, but even still, that intimidating aura was still there.

"So Sonic told me about what transpired last night." Apparently he was going right into it. "You really went and attacked his friend Knuckles?"

Sorun took a deep breath. "I had what you would call a momentary lapse in judgement," he informed the robotic hedgehog. "Absorbing mystical rocks of unlimited Chaos energy will do that. I'm not exactly used to it."

The red sensors that were Jules' eyes regarded Sorun silently for a few moments before his metallic fingers interlocked. "I saw what you did in the kitchen for my wife," he added.

"Well, your wife is a very wonderful person. You're a lucky guy."

"You don't know the half of it." Jules briefly looked down at his metallic exterior before focusing back on Sorun. "You've lived under my roof for a while now, Sorun, and I've gotten to know you a bit. I will admit I had some... reservations at first about having a human sleep in the same home as my family." An awkward pause hung between them. "I realize that every individual regardless of who and what they are deserves a chance, but I won't lie and say the war didn't implant some small bias within me regarding your kind. But at the time we met you didn't seem like an overly malicious boy, and my own son vouched for you. So I gave you a chance and let you stay here."

Sorun darted his eyes to the left and right of the metallic hedgehog. "This is kind of coming out of nowhere. What did-?"

"We're having this conversation because of what you did to Knuckles. I'm getting there."

"... Oh." He hadn't realized what he did would be this significant. He wouldn't have decked Knuckles across the face with a Bringer Claw

if he had known.

... No, he was mad enough at the time that he probably still would have, anyways.

"And over time, you proved that Sonic was right to put his trust in you. You began to seriously embed yourself into the resistance, and my son has been talking of you fondly over it." Jules slowly started to get up off his chair. "Of course you haven't been all that friendly, but I'd chalked that up to your unusual circumstances. But then this incident with Knuckles happens, and I begin to worry my initial, biased assumptions were correct after all. And right when I begin to worry I turn my back and you decide to go out of your way and save my wife an afternoon by doing dishes for her." A low, tinny sigh came out of his mouth speaker. "I'm just very confused Sorun. And I just want to know what's going on through your head to make sure you're not a danger."

The statement rose a chuckle out of Sorun. "Me? A danger?" He made a light scoff. "Jules, even with the arms and swords pretty much any one of the Freedom Fighters would beat me in a straight fight. I couldn't be a danger to anybody if I wanted to."

"That wasn't what I was referring to," Jules corrected him. "I sincerely believe you're beginning to worry some of the others with the way you've been acting. Sonic in particular voiced a lot of his frustrations about your attitude at me last night. I'm only telling you so you can understand how the way you have been acting has been affecting those you've been working with in the resistance."

So that was the issue, then. Sorun somewhat saw where the older male was coming from, especially considering his perspective. Sorun himself still wasn't completely used to the way most Mobians were so friendly and open. He wasn't surprised they found him and his mannerisms weird in turn, but what was he supposed to do about that? He couldn't say anything. Which was the crux of the issue.

And now here he was. Attacking people without explaining himself adequately. Maybe people were right to start worrying about him like this.

He found himself sighing. The most practical and easiest solution, talking, was out of the picture due to the gag curse. So what options did that leave him? Ignore it? They sure weren't going to. Really all he could do was roll with it and hope he could string something together so that they would at least drop it for the time being.

"I have issues," Sorun finally said to Jules. "It's not that I don't want to talk to someone about them. It's that I can't. For various reasons." He looked down. "I didn't mean to lash out at the guy like that. I'm not a violent person. But all this stuff just keeps adding up and I slipped. That's all."

Probably a really pathetic excuse, but it was literally all he had.

"I know that it has been extremely challenging for you. But these types of problems... I will tell you from firsthand experience that keeping it all to yourself isn't going to help you down the line," Jules said. "I don't understand why you refuse to discuss it even though it sounds like you *know* you need to talk to someone, but... I would assume you have your reasons if you are that aware of the problem. You do plan on eventually doing something about it, correct?"

"... Yeah, of course," Sorun lied.

Jules hummed in response, and stepped closer to Sorun. The teen flinched back when he rose his right hand up, but went still when he felt the artificial appendage softly touch down on his shoulder.

"You're a good boy, Sorun. Rough around the edges by a large margin, but I can see you're at least trying. Just... please try not to get violent anymore. I'm sure everything will work out fine if you keep working at it." His mouth turned up into a small smile. "And don't tell Bernie I said this, but I wouldn't mind if you continued giving her a break like that every now and then. I don't want to think about what

she'd do if she found out I asked a guest to do some of the chores around the house, even if it's for her sake."

"Eh-heh. I can imagine." Sorun stepped back and pointed his thumb at the door. "I gotta go." He turned to open it, but paused when his hand grasped the doorknob. "... Thanks."

"Anytime, Sorun," Jules said as he returned to his chair. "Just be safe and remember that everybody is there for when you're ready to finally talk."

The little grin that had grown on Sorun's face lowered moderately. "Right," he whispered under his breathed as he stepped through the front door, closing it behind him after he left.

He collapsed right back on the door after closing it.

"And now we're lying to robot dad. Robot dad that I thought didn't like me but is actually cool with me. Gah..." He ran a tired hand along his face. *"I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this. I feel awful."* He pushed himself off the door. *"To the HQ, I guess. Ugh, I really don't feel like walking... unless."*

A thought came to him, and in a flash of blue his Bringer Claws appeared. They stretched out past his back, and Sorun gazed thoughtfully at the wing-arms.

"... Can I fly with these things?" he silently asked himself. *"In the game the most Nero ever did with them was do extra jumps and glide, but he did fly in that one cutscene when he first got them. Dunno if that means they were limited for gameplay purposes or because that was when he got his Devil Trigger."* He looked up to the sky in thought. *"Man, I wonder if one of the Emeralds will give me a Devil Trigger? That'd be nice. I could actually keep up with everyone with that."* He looked back at the Bringer Claws. *"Well, I can already do stuff with Summoned Swords that weren't in the games. Makin' chairs and ramps and stuff. Flying should be in the realm of possibility, right? They're wings. Sort of."*

With a deep breath, he furrowed his brows as the Bringer Claws stretched above his head. *"Yeah, I got this."*

"I-don't-got-this-I-don't-got-this!"

Flying, evidently, was really hard. Could he get air? Yes, he could. The Bringer Claws were strong enough to get him into the air. Maintaining altitude and maneuvering with them, though? He didn't have any idea how that worked.

Birds made it look so easy.

By some miracle he had made it to the hill Freedom HQ was under, but the ride there was less him flying and more him zipping and jittering randomly in the air as he attempted to figure out the subtle intricacies of how flying worked. So far all he figured out was "flap the wings occasionally to maintain or gain altitude", but the more advanced things like steering were beyond him. In fact he was pretty sure he only managed to make it to Freedom HQ because he'd started out facing its direction, because he hadn't sussed out turning.

Another important thing he had yet to figure out? Landing. Which was why the human teen had turned into a screaming human missile as he tumbled through the air towards the ground. Right when he was nearing it the Bringer Claws reached out to grab at tree branches to try and slow him down, but his momentum was so great that anything they grabbed snapped off. It did slow him down some, though. Enough that he landed with a roll and tumbled head over feet for a fair distance before Sorun stopped on his back with a loud gasp.

"... Man." A loud, heavy breath left his lungs as the panting teen slowly sat up. *"That's really hard. Ow."*

"Nice landing there, pal."

Sorun turned his head towards the voice, and then rolled his eyes when he saw the speaker while the Bringer Claws on his back disappeared. It was Sonic, who was sitting on a nearby stump with his elbows resting on his knees.

He didn't look particularly happy. The hedgehog was frowning at Sorun with creased eye ridges. Sorun recognized the unhappy demeanor, and then sighed as he got up to his feet.

"You don't look very glad to see me," the human noticed as he turned towards Sonic.

"Really?" Sonic sarcastically remarked as he jumped off the stump he was sitting on. "Gee, Sorun, what do you think has me so down?"

"Ah, I don't know, you're usually such a cheery guy. Could be a multitude of reasons you're so sour right now," Sorun, his tone completely dry, said as the two teens stood face-to-face. "If I had to guess I'd say it's about Knuckles."

A calm breeze blew between the two. Sorun's expression remained calm for the most part while Sonic's maintained an unsettling air of frustration that was unfamiliar to the human teen.

"That thing with Knuckles isn't going to happen again, Sorun." The way he said it was almost commanding, and Sorun was taken back by the amount of raw seriousness to Sonic's words. "You *do not* go around hitting people like that. Especially using your powers."

"It's not gonna happen again." He meant it, too. Relieving a minute amount of stress by punching somebody wasn't worth it if this was the fallout he had to deal with afterwards. Even if it was a thoughtless punch done in the heat of the moment.

Sonic crossed his arms. "Are you sure?" he asked him. "You said that you wouldn't have a problem working with the Freedom Fighters. That this whatever-issue of yours wasn't going to affect anything. It sure looks like it's affecting things to me, Sorun."

"Sonic, it was a one-time slip-"

"Was it, Sorun? 'Cause I don't know if it was." Throwing his arms out the side the side, Sonic irritably stepped past Sorun before turning back to him. "You know, we wouldn't be having this problem if you just talked. I wouldn't be over here worrying about you if you just *talked* ." He roughly shook his head. "Why won't you just tell us what's the matter with you?"

Sorun didn't answer Sonic. Instead, he simply closed his eyes with a sigh, looked down, and slipped his hands into his pockets as he tried thinking up a solution.

"You really screwed yourself here, Sorun. Now Sonic thinks my issues are becoming a serious problem. He's not wrong at all, but I still can't talk to them about anything because of what Aurora did. But I can't even tell them about that. Ugh, he's not letting it go, either..."

He'd been fine with keeping it all under wraps and just ignoring it. It hadn't been an issue until he'd freaked out so much about the Emerald and reacted like that to Knuckles. Now Sonic wanted answers. Answers Sorun couldn't give without his heart stopping. So what was he to do? Lie? Or try stalling for more time? He hadn't thought up of a good lie yet, so stalling was his only solution. But how to go about doing that?

Well, Sorun had one idea. It had some risk involved, but it would buy time. Hopefully enough time that he could plan out his next escape from this subject the next time around.

"Look, Sonic, my issues with the Emeralds is something I really don't want to talk about." Sonic opened his mouth to argue, but Sorun held up a hand to stop him. "Just listen. I know what I did to Knuckles was wrong. I shouldn't have attacked him. I shouldn't attack anybody. I'll be the bigger man and say that it was my bad. But I know that isn't enough for you. Right?"

Sonic shook his head. "I wasn't happy you were keeping things to yourself, but I was fine with dealing with it as long as it didn't cause problems. Well, now it's causing problems." The expression in his green eyes hardened. "I'm not going to ignore it if it's going to put my friends at risk. And believe it or not that includes you."

Sorun's eyes widened the slightest amount. Sonic saw the movement in the human's eyes, and then sighed out loud.

"I know you don't consider us friends for some reason, reasons you won't talk about like everything else, but that just doesn't go both ways." He blinked, and then sent Sorun a pleading look. "Please just tell me what's wrong, Sorun. I just want to help you."

Sorun bit the corner of his lip. Something inside of him was twisting terribly, but he just didn't know what it was. "I won't," he said. "But," he added, "I'll tell you what. This isn't going to become an issue ever again, but if for whatever reason it does, Sonic, I'll lay it all out. Everything. That's the only thing that'll get me to give up everything going on inside of my head. Is that okay with you?"

It was a total lie, of course. He couldn't even if that happened because of the restriction put on him. But as long as he watched himself and didn't react too violently again, he wouldn't have to have this discussion again. All he had to do was keep himself clean if Sonic agreed.

Sonic, in response, narrowed his eyes. "You promise?" he asked. "You promise that if this issue comes up again, you'll fess up everything that's been bothering you so we can actually talk it out?"

"Yeah, I promise." And now he just felt like he was shearing off pieces of his soul.

The blue Mobian's eyes narrowed even further, but eventually he let a breath out and gave an agreeing nod much to Sorun's relief. "Alright. But I'm gonna hold you to that."

Sorun didn't doubt it in the slightest. That's what he was so scared of.

Both teens wordlessly turned towards the HQ door right after and began to walk towards it. They passed through the door, and then began making their way down the short hallways towards the actual HQ.

"Hey," Sonic had said while they were walking, "you're gonna apologize to Knuckles for what you did."

"Yeah, yeah, I will," Sorun muttered in response.

"I'm serious, Sorun."

"Dude, I said I would." They emerged through a door and began walking down the steps towards the living room.

The place was unusually packed compared to how it was most days; Sorun saw that around half of the Freedom Fighters were already here. He reasoned that maybe there weren't any missions going on today, so most of everybody was down here socializing.

Most of everybody included Knuckles, who was off to the side of the living room talking with Julie-Su. Sorun tried backpedaling away from the pair, but Sonic stood in his way and was actively pushing him towards the pair. The human shot him a look, but eventually relented and trudged towards Knuckles.

Knuckles must have seen Sorun approach from the corner of his eyes, as he said some parting words to the other echidna before he turned towards Sorun and began approaching him. They stopped a arm's distance away from each other, both holding off on saying anything.

If anything, Knuckles didn't look nearly as upset as he did last night. As far as Sorun was concerned that was the best possible start to this thing.

"Hey... Knuckles," Sorun awkwardly greeted. "So... what happened last night with the whole arm thing shouldn't have happened, but it did happen, so... yeeeah..." He began to rapidly scratch at the back of his head. "I'm super sorry, man. I shouldn't have hit you."

The long silence that passed after his apology was having Sorun fear that his lackluster sorry wasn't nearly convincing enough. Eventually, though, Knuckles barked out a short laugh and gave him a small grin, which made Sorun's upper body slump forwards in relief.

"Ah, don't worry about it, man. It happens." Knuckles held one of his open, spiked fists out to Sorun. "We're cool, right?"

Sorun blinked down at the hand in surprise. He hadn't expected forgiveness that easily. In fact he expected to jump through a lot more hoops than just saying he was sorry before any kind of apology was accepted, so seeing the hand being outstretched to him with that genuine grin on Knuckles face had Sorun completely flummoxed.

He was so flummoxed, in fact, that while he willed something to reach out and reciprocate the handshake, he couldn't actually move his arms. So instead a third, blue and spectral arm appeared and reached out to grab the hand. Knuckles' eyes had widened slightly when the clawed hand grasped his own, but he still held it firmly and gave it a shake.

"Yeah," Sorun mumbled as the Bringer Claw squeezed Knuckles' hand in return. "We're cool."

"Great, then there's no problem." Knuckles let go of the spectral hand, wincing while shaking his own hand. "That thing is pretty strong, huh?" he pointed out. "What is that, anyways?"

The blue glow of the sole Bringer Claw was beginning to attract the attention of everybody around, and they began to eye the arm curiously as much as Knuckles was. This did not go unnoticed by

Sorun, who shyly folded the arm back onto his shoulder before addressing Knuckles again.

"It's the new power I got. My Bringer Claws," Sorun quietly answered.

"... Bringer Claws, huh?" There was a pause as Knuckles scrutinized the spectral hand resting on Sorun's shoulder, and the blue feathers jutting out of the arm connected to the hand. "Why'd you name it that?"

Sorun narrowed his eyes in irritation. "Because it's a cool name," he hotly defended. "When you start eating Chaos Emeralds for powers then you can name them whatever you want, but it's my power, so I'm calling it whatever I want. They're Bringer Claws." Plus he had too much respect for the things to name them anything differently then their proper names. It was the principle, dammit.

"Hey, just asking," Knuckles rose his hands up in defense. "Still, though... these powers of yours keep on getting weirder and weirder. The swords I kind of got because of Chaos Spears, but hands? I've never seen anything like that."

"Mm, couldn't tell ya," Sorun airily replied. "All this Chaos stuff is still new to me, and I don't get to choose the powers."

"Fair enough," Knuckles said with a shrug. "But seriously, how strong are those things?" he asked Sorun as he held his gloved hand up to examine it. "The grip on them is real strong."

A great question. Sorun truly didn't know. They were stronger than his real arms, he knew that much. A lot stronger. How much stronger was anybody's guess, and he didn't know if that strength was proportional to his actual strength or not. All he knew was that they could grab things, throw things, punch things, claw things, and do menial labor for when he couldn't be bothered to do it himself. Fly, too, but that was a work in progress.

"I haven't actually tested how strong the arms are," Sorun answered Knuckles as the single Bringer Claw extended outwards. "I can tell ya for free they're way stronger than I am, though."

"Is that right?" The grin on Knuckles' face grew a bit wider. "Well, why don't we test it out right now?"

In response, Sorun tilted his head to the side. "I'm not following," he said. "What, do you wanna... arm wrestle the Bringer Claw?"

"That wasn't what I had in mind, but sure, why not? That works." Knuckles nodded at him. "You gotta test its limits, right? And I'm pretty interested myself to see how strong they are."

Sorun continued looking into Knuckle's eyes, but no matter how long he looked the echidna seemed completely sincere in the suggestion. His eyes moved from him to the right Bringer Claw, and after a few moments of consideration Sorun came to a decision.

"Yeah, alright. I'll play that game." The teen looked towards the kitchen, and in the blink of an eye the Bringer Claw shot across the living room to the kitchen, grabbed the circular table, and pulled it all the way back. Knuckles and everybody else around had blinked in surprise at how rapidly the table had been away, though Sorun paid them no mind as he set the table down in the middle of the living room.

As he was grabbing two chairs from the kitchen with his Bringer Claw, Sorun heard a rapid pair of footsteps stop next to him. "What's going on, Sorun?" he heard Sonic ask. All around everybody else slowly began to approach in growing interest at the display.

"Knuckles wants to arm wrestle my Bringer Claw," Sorun answered as he set down the chairs. "I gotta school him."

"Oh, that's how it's gonna be, huh?" Knuckles sat down in one of the chairs that Sorun had provided, his grin growing competitive.

"Alright, bring it," he said as he slammed his right elbow down on the table.

Sorun sat down at the chair next to him, and then crossed his real arms as the Bringer Claw set itself down on the table. After the human and echidna nodded at each other, the two arms grabbed each others' fists. They both counted to three silently in their heads, and then at once began to push against the other to try and bring their competitor's hand down on the table.

Funnily enough, Sorun didn't feel any exertion from wrestling with the sole Bringer Claw. He felt resistance, though saying he sensed it might have been a more accurate term. Something in his mind was telling him that something was pushing against his Bringer Claw, but otherwise it wasn't tiring at all exerting the thing against Knuckles. The same couldn't be said for Knuckles, whose tan muzzle began to grow red from the effort he was putting in trying to push the spectral claw down. Sorun merely continued to calmly sit in his chair with his arms crossed.

"Come on, Knuckles!" There were cheers for them, of course, but for the most part they were directed towards Knuckles' favor. Likely because the only people cheering in addition to spectating was the Chaotix. And likely because the only one among them actively cheering was Charmy, who was flying his small body around them in circles. "You could beat a weird blue arm wing thing any day of the week!"

"Yeah, you got this, Knux," Vector called out. "Hey, Espio," he half-whispered to the purple chameleon next to him while bumping him with his elbow, "between you and me, who do you think's gonna win?"

Espio rolled his eyes. "Do not tell me you wanna bet on this."

"I wasn't saying that at all! Buy hey, if you wanna put a little down on this-"

"Vector..."

"Lay off, I'm jokin' with you."

The small conversation went largely unnoticed by either Sorun or Knuckles, though Sorun did frown at the fact people were cheering Knuckles on and not him. He turned to his left, where he saw Sonic and Tails standing nearby. "Where's my cheers?" he asked.

"You look like you're doing fine on your own," Sonic told him with a small grin.

Sorun gave him a flat look, and then turned to Tails. The fox gave him a small smile and an encouraging thumbs-up, which caused Sorun to laugh with a small shake of his head as he turned back to Knuckles.

"Man, Knuckles, all these people cheering you on. You're so lucky." At Sorun's will, the Bringer Claw began to slowly push Knuckles' hand back. "Be a shame if you lost or something," Sorun continued. "Like this."

"What the...!?" Knuckles grunted as his hand slowly began to be pushed down from the Bringer Claw. He grunted with exertion and tried pushing back against it, but not only did he not make a single budge, but the rate at which his hand was being pushed down wasn't decreasing in the slightest. "You were holding out on me!?"

The human teen shrugged. "Mm, maybe," he admitted. He hadn't wanted to risk accidentally hurting Knuckles by going at it with a hundred percent strength with the arm out the gate. Even so, he could feel the spectral arm struggling against Knuckles. Not much, but it was there, and by now he was making the arm give it all it had against Knuckles.

"Oh, come on, Knuckles. Don't tell me you're gonna let the newbie beat you." This tease had come from from Julie-Su, who was

standing behind Knuckles. "I don't think I could ever let you live it down if you let it come to that."

For reasons that were beyond Sorun, the words seemed to have given Knuckles a new sense of invigoration. He'd stood up from his chair and was now using his body weight in addition to his muscles to try and reverse the pin the Bringer Claw was exerting on his arm. Alas, it was for naught.

"You know, if I really wanted to I could call you out on using your weight like that." As Sorun said this, the Bringer Claw finally pinned Knuckles' hand onto the table. "Don't really think it matters, though," he said with a smirk.

There were collective groans and sounds or surprises all around, though the one who looked most surprised was Knuckles. Even after Sorun had removed his Bringer Claw the echidna had continued to stare down at his hand in muted shock, his eyes periodically flicking from his hand to Sorun. The pale teen had begun to worry before Knuckles made a smile, reached out, and patted Sorun on the shoulder.

"Nice win. Those things are really strong after all," Knuckles congratulated before he sat back in his chair. "Wanna go with the real arm now?"

Reflexively, Sorun held his real right arm close to his chest. "No way, man. You'd beat me in a second with the real one. I'm quitting while I'm ahead."

This earned a laugh out of Knuckles, as well as some other chuckles from those around the room. Sorun had joined in on the light laughter, but his quickly tapered off as he glanced thoughtfully at the Bringer Claw.

He hadn't expected for it to have been physically strong enough to beat Knuckles, but now that he knew it did and had enough witnesses to its feat to last him a lifetime, he felt good. Winning

against Knuckles and proving that, at the very least, his Bringer Claws were stronger felt good.

And he wanted more.

"So..." Sorun called out as the Bringer Claw raised itself into the air with a slight shake. "Anybody else want a go?"

He was always going to dislike these powers of his due to the fact that the Chaos Emeralds were sapping the life out of him in exchange for them. That was a fact that just wasn't going to change for Sorun. But it was the little things like this that were making the ordeal all the easier and making him feel, amazingly enough, positive. And the only time he ever felt positive on Mobius was when he was playing video games. Preferably with Nicole.

Using the Bringer Claws to beat everybody in arm wrestling, though? Close second. Because Sorun was feeling great.

"Feel free to give up at any time, Amy," Sorun said as he leaned back in his chair, Bringer Claw slowly but surely pressing the pink hedgehog's hand down to the table. "There's no shame whatsoever in admitting defeat."

Eventually the word that Sorun was challenging people to arm wrestling with his weird new arm power had gotten around, so more Freedom Fighters who weren't already at the HQ had come to spectate and participate. All in good sport and fun, of course, as today was an off day for them all. Which so far was going amazing for Sorun, because nobody he'd arm wrestled thus far was actually as strong as Knuckles. And the Bringer Claws just didn't grow tired. So he was blowing his way through all the competitors like it was nothing.

Most had abstained from participating entirely when they saw him beat Knuckles, while those that still tried had been laughably easy when using the Bringer Claw to beat them. A couple were more

resistant- those bionic arms Bunnie and Julie-Su had were for sure stronger than organic Mobian arms from what he felt, but again, still didn't compare to Knuckles. Sonic, surprisingly, had been unusually strong, too, compared to everybody else. But he lost all the same.

Right now he was on Amy, and in terms of raw arm strength at least, Sorun was struggling to decide whether he should place her below or above Sonic. Mostly due to the fact that it was hard to gauge strength since he was sensing with the Bringer Claw and not actually feeling. But he supposed she had to have more than just above average strength to twirl that giant hammer of hers around like it was nothing.

Still wasn't enough to beat a Bringer Claw, though.

"Don't listen to him, Amy-girl, ya got this now!" Bunnie had cheered from the sidelines. She looked down at her robotic arm right after. "Golly, but that new arm a' Sorun's really does pack a wallop. Ah hope he didn't jostle nothin' important."

"It should be fine. He didn't go that hard on it. And it's gone through worse than that anyways," Sally, who stood besides her, said while rubbing at her wrist.

Amy was relentless in trying to pin the Bringer Claw to the table, Sorun would give her that much. With teeth grit in exertion, she'd given up entirely on playing fair and was attempting to pin the spectral hand with both of her arms at once while using her feet to push against it. It was a vain effort as Sorun was slowly pushing her hands down to the table, but she was trying. He could respect that much.

And then he pinned her hands and won.

As he removed the Bringer Claw, Amy let out an exhausted sigh as her arms limply slid off the table. "Ah, gee. They weren't kidding when they said that thing was strong," Amy gasped out.

"Tell me about it." Interlacing his hands behind his head, Sorun let out an easy sigh as he closed his eyes. Felt kind of good to finally be marginally good at something. Fulfilling, almost. He might have even gone as far to say he enjoyed it if he hadn't had to spend twelve years of life for it.

He heard a new set of footprints approach him, and at the same time everybody quieted down. It almost felt like the air around chilled slightly, too, and Sorun didn't even have to think hard to guess who it was. So he wasn't surprised at all when he cracked an eye open and saw Shadow standing in front of him.

"'Sup?" Sorun greeted.

Shadow didn't even so much as nod as he looked around at everybody gathered and then back to Sorun. "I'd heard there was some commotion back at the base, but I didn't think it'd be because of you," he said. "What is all this?"

"I needed help testing some stuff with the power I got from the Emerald last night, so I've been arm wrestling everybody that's been willing."

The dark hedgehog paused for a moment. "... Why arm wrestling?"

"'Cause of the arms." Sorun demonstrated the ability by making the Bringer Claws appear. "I got arms from the Emerald."

If he was at all taken back by the sudden appeared of the Bringer Claws, he didn't show it. "Arms," Shadow repeated. He scrutinized the blue arms extending out from Sorun's back, but he slowly furrowed his eye ridges in confusion at the sight. "The power you gained was arms?"

Sorun shrugged. "They double as wings, too."

"Why of all...?" Shadow shook his head and refocused on Sorun. "Why did you gain arms? How did it even-?"

"Shadow, I have absolutely no idea," Sorun half-lied. "Powers I get from the Emeralds are practically a lottery. Sort of."

"'Sort of?'"

The human teen tensed up. "Yeah, you know how it is. Probably better than I do. You're the Chaos expert," he said as he leaned further into his chair. "I don't really know how it works, but as long as it works, I don't care. Too much." He glanced at the spectral arms. "Woulda liked some choice, though," he grumbled.

"Right..." Sorun didn't like the way Shadow trailed off on that word, or that way his eyes were slightly narrowed. Almost in suspicion. But after a second they widened back into their neutral expression, and his form relaxed. "So you decided that the best way to test your arms out is by arm wrestling everybody."

"Ah, come on, man, don't be like that. Nobody had anything else to do so we all decided to have a bit of fun with it. Besides, I already know how the arms work. I'm just testing the strength limits."

Shadow folded his arms. "You seem to be rather confident in those arms despite the fact you haven't even had them for a day."

"... Dude, they're arms," Sorun deadpanned. "Not a lot of complexities there."

"I suppose not." With that, Shadow turned a away. "Well, you all have fun with that."

He started to walk away, but he only made it three steps before Sorun spoke up again. "You don't want a round with the arm? Y'sure?"

"I've better things to do than waste time messing around with your new arm."

"Oh, wow, Shads. Didn't know a spooky blue arm was all it took to scare you off." This comment had come from Sonic, who was standing off to the side with the rest of the small crowd. "Ah, but hey, it's a free world. Who am I to judge?"

Sorun saw that the darker hedgehog's body tensed up at the blue one's words, and he slowly exhaled before turning right around and stomping back towards the table. "I'm only doing this because I'm slightly curious as to the physical capabilities of those arms," he informed the human as he sat down and propped his elbow up on the table. "Hurry up so we can get this over with."

"Sure thing." Sorun's Bringer Claw propped its own elbow onto the table and grasped Shadow's hand. "Since you're so impatient, we'll go on go. Go."

And once more, he felt the pressure of something pushing against his Bringer Claw as Sorun calmly sat in his chair. It wasn't enough to overcome it, and like all the others Sorun began to slowly press Shadow's hand downwards. *"I guess even he's not as strong as Knuckles,"* he thought, *"but... yeah, I think he's doing better than everybody else besides him did. Wow. This guy's really strong."*

It was still hard to tell exactly how strong due to the fact Sorun got almost no sensory input from the Bringer Claw, but he could recognize the pressure pushing against it, and it was heavy. Not Knuckles heavy, but definitely up there. It was enough to make Sorun let out an interested hum, but that was about it.

For his part, Shadow was doing his best to not actually show he was exerting all his effort on the arm. His face was kept straight and his breathing was barely above normal, but even so he was still slowly losing. Even as Sorun finally pinned his hand and won, the most he did was let out a soft grunt. Sorun removed the blue claw, and Shadow regarded his own hand with slightly widened eyes. He looked up to the spectral hand after, and then sighed as he got up from the chair.

"They're certainly strong," he said. His tone seemed slightly clipped, but otherwise he maintained a level tone. "You know where I'll be if you ever want more practice."

"Uh, yeah. Sure." Sorun had barely even finished his sentence before the striped hedgehog had went back towards the steps leading out of the HQ. After he left, Sorun turned towards the other with a questioning look on his face. "What was all that about?"

Everybody present mostly had looks of confusion on their faces too, though it was Sonic who took the initiative to answer Sorun. "Eh, don't worry about it, Sorun. Shadow's just being Shadow."

"If you say so." He hoped that was all it was. Something about the way Shadow had been looking at his new arms made him uneasy. The questions he asked over them and the way he remarked over Sorun being so familiar with them.

Though, perhaps he was being paranoid. He'd been the same way about the Summoned Swords. Probably just curious since he was apparently into that Chaos stuff for whatever reason. But Sorun was still kicking himself for that "sort of" comment he'd accidentally let slip. If anything had set something off in Shadow, that had probably been it.

Ah, well. Worst came to worse if it ever came up he'd just lie and weasel out of it like always, but Sorun doubted it was anything that serious.

"Hm. Well, anyways, can I put the table back in the kitchen?" Sorun asked them. "I think I've gotten enough testing out of these things short of throwing boulders, so-"

"Er, actually, wait." There was a small shuffling in the crowd of Mobians as someone stepped forwards. Sorun had recognized the voice immediately, though the black fur and the shine of a red shell on his back was enough to confirm him as Mighty. "I wanted to try it, too," he requested.

"Oh, Mighty." He'd almost forgotten about the armadillo. He was somewhat surprised he hadn't come up sooner, too, but Sorun thought nothing of it as he gestured to the empty chair next to him. "Yeah, sure, come on. We'll get this last one in and I'll put the table back."

Almost eagerly, Mighty stepped towards the chair and planted himself in it. He'd practically slammed his elbow onto the table, though despite this he was giving Sorun a gentle smile as he flexed his fingers. "Hey, good luck, Sorun," he told the human.

"Um, thanks." The Bringer Claw got into position and grasped Mighty's hand. "You can start us off."

"Oh, okay." Mighty licked his lips and rapped his fingers across the blue hands claws before firmly gripping it. "Alright, let's go."

They both began pushing against each other. Immediately Sorun felt something different from Mighty, much to his surprise. The pressure being exerted on his Bringer Claw was more than even Knuckles' pressure. Much more. So much, in fact, that he had to immediately begin pushing back against Mighty with as much strength as the Bringer Claw had.

But then something peculiar began to happen. Unlike with Knuckles, or Shadow, or anybody else, Mighty's hand wasn't being pushed back. They weren't even deadlocked. No, instead it was *Sorun's* spectral hand that was slowly being pushed towards the table.

"... Wait." He narrowed his eyes in focus and tried willing the Bringer Claw to push more, but nothing was happening. He could see it from the slight trembles in the spectral arm's feathered forearm that it was already giving it its all. And yet, somehow, Mighty was still pushing it back. *"Wait, no, this is bullshit. He can't be- there's no way he's that strong!"*

He remembered Mighty describing to him he'd had abnormally high strength compared to even other Mobians, but at the time Sorun had

just compared it to strength on Knuckles' level. That was the kind of resistance he'd expected when they'd initiated the arm wrestle. He didn't expect strength that would equal the Bringer Claw's, and he sure didn't expect strength that would exceed it. But here Mighty was. Exceeding his Bringer Claw.

And everybody else was noticing, too.

"Yeah, Mighty!" This cheer came from Knuckles, who proceeded to pump one of his fists in the air. "Keep going, you're almost there!"

Along with him the rest of the Chaotix began cheering for their teammate, and everybody else began leaning forwards in great interest as Sorun continued to be pushed further towards the table. And as he looked at Mighty, he couldn't help but notice the severe lack of a look of effort on Mighty's face. It wasn't like with Shadow, who had been actively trying to conceal his exertion. Sorun could see just from the way the muscles in Mighty's face were halfway relaxed. There was effort being put it, but it wasn't all of it.

This wasn't even that difficult for him. It was right after Sorun realized this that Mighty pinned the Bringer Claw to the table.

There were victorious cheers all around the moment Sorun's spectral hand hit the table. All the Chaotix practically rushed him, Vector having rubbed the top of his head with the knuckles on his fist. Sorun just continued to stare silently at the Bringer Claw, which had yet to move from its spot laying on the table.

"... He beat my Bringer Claw," he thought. *"He's stronger than the Bringer Claws."*

And all of a sudden, that great feeling he'd had when he displayed the arms' strength by winning all those arm wrestles went away just like that. He'd felt so accomplished, too, especially after he beat Knuckles. But it had been taken away just like that, and now he was left with a somewhat empty feeling.

"Ha ha ha! Guys, come on," Mighty pleaded as he gently pushed his teammates away to give him some space. "Hey, Sorun!" the human looked up from the hand to Mighty. "Those arms of yours are really strong, Sorun! I'm really impressed! Thanks for the match!"

A forced half-smile found its way onto Sorun's face as he got up from his own chair. "Yeah. Anytime. Thanks for the help with testing the arms out."

Mighty gave him a nod, and then turned back to the rest of the Chaotix while everybody else began to scatter. Sorun didn't pay them any mind, and instead began using his Bringer Claws to bring the kitchen furniture back into the kitchen.

"Yeah, of course Mighty's gotta be so nice and humble about the win, too. Ugh... alright, maybe it's not the worst thing in the world," he tried reasoning with himself as he placed the table and chairs back. *"Yeah, Mighty beat them, but he's freakishly strong the same way Sonic is freakishly fast for some reason. And they beat Shadow and Knuckles, right? That's gotta count for something."*

That's what he told himself, at least, but going from thinking the arms were infallible in strength to knowing they could be beaten with raw strength was unsettling to Sorun. Mostly because the same thoughts he'd had with the Summoned Swords after that small spar with Shadow were popping up again. They were still good powers, but up to what point? How did Mighty compare to some of the serious threats out there?

Probably not as strong, he wanted to say, but it's not like he knew. And not knowing worried him.

"Nah, nah I'm overthinking this," Sorun thought as, after placing the furniture back, he walked towards the TV and game console to turn it on. *"It's still good enough to work. It's two extra arms that are way stronger than mine that can extend and fly and stuff. It's not nothing, but... ugh. Why'd Mighty have to go and beat me?"*

He wasn't sure what he thought of them now. What he did know was that he needed a confidence booster stat. Fortunately there was still one thing he was good at that only one other person in the whole of the Freedom Fighters could claim to be his equal in.

"Yo, anybody want a round of games with me?" Sorun asked as he sat down on the couch and waved a controller up in the air.

"I'll take ya on!" In a blink blue momentarily passed Sorun's vision before he felt the couch compress next to him. He looked to the side and saw Sonic sitting there with a controller.

"Your funeral," Sorun said with a shrug as he and Sonic bother turned towards the TV.

Suffice it to say he went home that day having completely defeated Sonic and everybody else that had felt like playing with him after the fact. But even still, all the victories couldn't take his mind off of the Bringer Claws as he walked all the way back to Sonic's house.

A/N- I'll assuage all your fears now: no, Sorun's not gonna get super eyeballs that give him a stupid amount of broken powers or an invincible punch ghost or anything world breaking like that. He's firmly locked into DMC stuff for reasons that will become more clear as the story goes on, if it isn't already. Assuming he gets more powers, of course. I know it's a bit spoiler-y saying this but I only say this because I put the little bit in about powers Sorun does want in, and then people begin worrying because it can be construed as a form of foreshadowing for future stuff. Which may or may not be something I do sometimes, but in this case I'm saying no, it wasn't.

Chapter 18

A/N- You guys remember way back when I said 2k-word chapters could be a thing? Yeah, me neither.

Recursion Error

Episode 18- Objective: Survive

"Okay, let's try it. The- AGH, DAMMIT!"

The stabbing pain running through Sorun's chest caused him to toss the notebook and pencil to the ground as he clutched at the area over his heart. After a few seconds he felt his heartbeat return, and then let out a sigh of relief as he sat back against the cobblestone wall of the HQ entrance.

"Well," Sorun glumly thought as he looked down at the dropped implements, *"that didn't work."*

With his life on the line, Sorun would be remiss to not at least try and find a way of preserving his own life through means other than the shaky plan he had currently, which was "just do what I can as I go and hope for the best", because so far that plan had netted him twenty-four years off his life with two Emeralds in him. He'd set goals for himself, but he neglected to make an actual plan for achieving those goals.

The problem, of course, was that there was very little which he could use to make a plan. Getting the Emeralds out of him? If such a thing was possible, nothing on Mobius had presented itself to Sorun yet, so as far as he was concerned that goal was on the back burner. Cut all his losses and run? Easy enough that he wasn't too worried about it at the moment. Find a way of telling the Freedom Fighters that the

Chaos Emeralds were slowly killing him? Not strictly necessary, but if he could convey this message to them, it'd make his life easier. And out of everything, maybe he could accomplish that last one right now.

But then he had the gag curse to worry about, and apparently Aurora had been serious when she meant "convey through any means". Sorun had found a notebook and pencil and had attempted writing a note about the affliction, but he'd felt his heart stop before the pencil even hit the page. Suffice to say she covered her bases. Great for her, not so great for Sorun.

"Geez, what, is raw intent enough to set this thing off?" Sorun wondered as he stroked at his chest. *"The hell else am I supposed to do if that's the case? Hook myself up to a heart monitor and just give myself a heart attack in front of everybody? Where would I even get a heart monitor? Probably at a hospital somewhere in Knothole, but I don't think they'll let me walk away with it. And even if I do manage to snag a heart monitor my own heart'll probably stop before I even hook it up if intent's really all it takes."*

So much for that charades idea he'd been entertaining. If something as meager as intent was really enough to set the gag curse off, then he didn't know if there actually was anything he could do to tell them about his ailment. Which, of course, meant that if and when they acquired more Emeralds they'd likely want him to power up more. Which would shorten his life even more. And even though it had been a few days since the incident around the second Emerald with his Bringer Claws he had yet to think of any justifiable excuse not to touch any more Emeralds.

"What am I supposed to say? 'Ah, I dunno, guys. That shit hurts real bad. But Summoned Swords and Bringer Claws are enough, right? I don't need any more power than that.' Pfft, I don't even buy that. And if I raise enough of a fit Sonic's gonna want to know what the deal is, and thanks to that promise I made he's not gonna let it go." He tilted his head up at the bright morning sky. *"I can't think of anything. I'm so cooked."*

He really should have thought further ahead with his "just weasel out of it plan" when he'd actively set things up in advance so that it was nearly impossible to weasel out of it next time around.

Whoops.

The door leading into the HQ swung open, though despite sitting next to it, Sorun hadn't bothered to looks towards it. He did notice out from the corner of his eye that the figure walking out of the doorway was Sally, though he hoped she had something important to do and would just ignore him so he could continue contemplating his bleak future.

"Sorun?" No such luck, as she'd noticed him immediately and turned towards him. "What are you doing here?"

The human teen took a deep breath, exhaled, and then rolled his head towards Sally. "So it all started when I went go buy orange juice," he began.

A wry grin spread across the princess's face. "No, I mean why are you sitting here?" She gestured to the notebook and pencil. "And what's with the writing stuff?"

"Oh, that." Sorun leaned forwards to pick the implements up. "I thought about maybe starting a journal or something to help me keep a grip on my sanity," he lied, "but, I dunno, when I actually tried writing I just didn't feel like doing it. It's hard to articulate my thoughts on paper when there's so much on my mind all the time." It was equally hard when attempting to write those thoughts stopped his heart.

Sally tilted her head. "I would think that having a lot on your mind would make for easy writing in something like a journal."

"Yeah, you'd think." With a soft groan Sorun stood up to his feet. "So what are you up to?"

"I was actually just about to go and get you," she answered him. "You feel up for another mission?"

Usually Sorun would have said no at this point, and oh, did he want to, but with all the worrying he'd done over Chaos Emeralds and trying and failing to find solutions to his problems he figured that some distraction was in order. And working a mission to get further into everybody's good graces never hurt. "Sure, I guess," he said with a nod. "What's going on?"

"Come with me to the hangar. I'll explain along the way."

She began walking off in the direction of the hangar, gesturing for Sorun to follow her. He shrugged, and then lightly jogged for a bit before slowing to a walk once he'd made it to her side.

Walking to and from the HQ to Knothole over time was beginning to become easier for Sorun at the very least. Perhaps that was just his body becoming accustomed to it all, but there was something oddly peaceful about the land encompassing Knothole. All the trees and greenery. The vibrancy of it all. The way the air always smelled so fresh and the occasional sound of some small non-Mobian bird or other animal.

Maybe it was because he didn't have anything to listen to since all his music had been lost with his phone, but after a while the infrequent noises and lush scenery was beginning to become somewhat calming to Sorun. A kind of natural, ambient white noise he could get lost in. He'd still always prefer huddling up in a room to play a video game, but walking through this scenery all the time was growing on him.

"You know, before coming here I'd never been in a forest before," Sorun told Sally as the pair walked down the path towards Knothole.

"Really?" Sally turned her head to acknowledge him. "Why is that?"

"I lived in a city. Detroit," he reminded her. "Most greenery I was ever around was this little park near my house, but otherwise I mostly just grew up around concrete. I never traveled, either."

"So what do you think of the forest?" she asked him.

He hummed in contemplation for a moment. "It's... nice," he decided. "I don't know, something about all the plants and nature is... it's weird. But in a nice way. The air's great, all the forest looks nice, the colors here are way sharper than on Earth, and I'm still trying to figure out what the deal with that is." He looked up towards the sky. "You can even see stars here at night. I'd barely ever seen stars before."

The first night he'd been here the sight of the night sky had mainly went over his head, both because of what had been going on *inside* his head and because of the broken state of the moon distracting him. Some days later, though, he'd ventured to take another look up and was completely taken back by the sheer amount of light in the night sky. The countless dots of white and the hues of purples and dark blues illuminating an otherwise inky black sky. It was the kind of sight he'd seen in pictures online and in video games, but he'd never expected to see such a thing in reality.

He liked the sky here.

"Why couldn't you see stars where you're from?" Sally asked.

"Eh, too much light pollution from the city lights. Or smog from the normal pollution," he answered. "Sometimes you saw some really bright ones, but it wasn't usually that many. And then you think you spot a really big one but it starts moving across the sky and you realize that it was a plane or a weather balloon or something." He sighed. "You have no idea how many times that happened to me." He glanced at Sally. "But here I can actually see the sky at night. It's real neat-looking."

"I think I can understand," Sally said. "There were a lot of times back in the day we would run recon missions at night in Robotropolis, which was... the former capital city of the Kingdom of Acorn, though back then it had a different name. Before the original Dr. Robotnik took it over at the beginning of all this. I remember looking up at the sky and wondering why it looked so dark and lifeless all the time there, but between all the lights and the pollution he created, I can see why. Even to this day some of Eggman's factories and refineries blot the nearby skies out." She sighed. "I don't want to imagine living your whole life under a sky like that."

"Nah, it's real easy. You just do what I did and cover all the windows in your room with curtains so you never have to look outside."

For a few seconds they continued walking in silence while Sally's head perked up as she registered the sentence Sorun said. Afterwards a small laugh left her, and with a shake of her head she gently shoved Sorun's shoulder. "I was being serious there," she laughed.

"Hey, so was I. Why do you think my skin's so pale? Barely ever got any sun." He casually tucked his hands into his pockets. "So, what's this mission about?"

The mirthful grin was still present on Sally's face, though an air of seriousness had taken over her features. "It's a medical relief effort," she explained. "Supply lines and trade routes are pretty much all annihilated thanks to the war with Eggman, and traveling these days is too dangerous. Most of the villages and settlements in the eastern portion of Northamer are self-sufficient in terms of foods and other supplies, but in terms of modern medicine they all lack the means of production." A soft sigh left her. "Nobody wanted to see all the Mobians out there so close to the kingdom suffer because of the war. It took some pressuring from me, but eventually my brother agreed to send out medical transports to them whenever we could."

Sorun nodded in understanding. "So you want me running meds?" he summarized. "Couldn't you just load Tails' plane up or something

and just fly them all out?"

Sally shook her head. "No, the Tornado's too small for all the cargo, and the Special's out on a different mission. That's why we're using the train."

"... Train?" Sorun repeated. "What train?"

"There's an old track back from when the Overlanders had a presence in Northamer." Sally held a hand up in the air and began tracing an invisible shape with her finger. "It runs a full circuit over the whole eastern portion of the upper continent. A long while back a bunch of engineers got the train that was attached to it up and running. Some people from the kingdom already loaded the supplies onto the train, and messengers were sent out to all the recipient settlements. The plan is for them to send their people out to certain stops along the track where you'll unload the medicine onto them before continuing on and then finally circling back."

That... didn't sound that bad at all, especially compared to all the other missions Sorun had done before. No sneaking into buildings? No fighting killer robots? Just cruise around the country in a train, see the sights along the way, and unload some boxes? Sounded like a vacation to Sorun's ears.

Yeah, he'd do that. It'd be a nice distraction from everything else happening to him. He needed the break.

"Gee, I dunno, Sally." A faux yawn left Sorun's mouth as he removed his hands from his pockets and stretched his arms over his head. "Kinda sounds like you just want the guy with the cool new arms to carry around a bunch of heavy boxes."

The light tone to his voice was enough to clue her in to his teasing, causing Sally to grin as she crossed her arms and rolled her eyes away from Sorun. "No, that's not it at all. But I'm sure all those poor Mobians will get by just fine without their medicine if you're really so against it."

"Well, it does sound pretty horrible when you say it like that." Sorun's arms flopped back down to his sides. "Alright, I'll go from being Sorun the Freedom Fighter to Sorun the Mailman for a bit. Sorun the Courier." He held his hands up in front of him and slowly started to spread them outwards. "Sorun the Great Deliverer. How does that sound?"

Light laughter from Sally. "Weirdly enough, it suits you," she said, before giving him a grateful smile. "Thanks for taking this on, Sorun. I wouldn't be asking you if it wasn't important."

"Yeah, sure thing." The teen's hands went back into his pockets. It wasn't like he was going to turn down such a nice-sounding change of pace. "So am I going on the train alone, or...?"

"No," Sally said with a shake of her head, "I'm sending two others to come along with you."

"Aw, come on, Sally. I know it's me we're talking about here, but I'm not that bad anymore." Sorun's walking speed slightly increased so that he was in front of the princess, at which point he turned to face her while walking backwards. "All I gotta do is ride around in a train and drop off the meds. You're seriously saddling me with two other Freedom Fighters for something as easy as that?"

The chipmunk sent him a challenging smirk. "Well, if you're saying you can operate a highly sophisticated train on your own and want to ride all around the upper continent on your lonesome..."

She had a point. "Hah, okay, I get it." Sorun blew a lock of black hair away from his face. "So who're you sending along with me?"

"Oh, Antoine and Bunnie."

After hearing the two names, Sorun's footsteps completely halted, with Sally walking past the human blissfully unaware of his frozen state.

"Bonjour, Sorun!"

"Ah, great. This chucklefuck..."

That was the one sole thought that went through Sorun's head as he saw the French coyote wave at him while quickly approaching. He quietly sighed at the sight Antoine, and then looked behind him at the sky to the biplane that was quickly disappearing towards the horizon. A small part of him wished Tails would fly back to take him back to Knothole.

It wasn't that Sorun had any personal animosity towards Antoine, aside, of course, from him being one of the ones that voted to use the coordinates on that wooden tablet to bring him here. If anything he was a fairly decent guy. Even forgave Sorun for blowing him up with that paint bomb. The French accent and broken English even stopped bothering Sorun after a while.

But there were still some things about him that bugged Sorun. Like how he couldn't take a damn hint. He was there right along Sally and Bunnie when Sorun flat-out stated he didn't want to become friends with anybody, and of course he was acting like Sorun had never even said it like everybody else was. But he was just as bad as Sonic in that he acted like they really were friends on those rare occasions they talked.

Maybe it was the language barrier not letting the message get through. Or Sorun barely doing anything to back up that statement he'd made. He kept neglecting to do that.

Other than that, it was the little things. Small, inconsequential things that added up. Little quirks in his personality. The way he'd exaggerate things about himself sometimes when telling stories, which others were quick to correct for Sorun's sake. That damn haircut of his.

... Sorun's jealousy over the fact he could so expertly handle that saber he carried around when Sorun's own swordsmanship skills

amounted to the equivalent of swinging a baseball bat.

All that aside, he was still a loyal person who was as bizarrely friendly as almost the rest of the Freedom Fighters. It was mostly just Sorun nitpicking on the smallest, most insignificant flaws, which the teen himself was aware he was doing. But he'd ignore all that for now in light of the fact they had a job to do.

"Hi, Antoine," Sorun greeted back as the human took a look around at the surroundings. He'd been dropped off in a small clearing that was largely unremarkable. Save, of course, for the train tracks a short distance behind Antoine and the train on top of it. A black, old-timey-looking train with six boxcars connected to the engine.

A train if Sorun ever saw one.

"Sorun, mon ami, you are just being on time! We were worried we would have to leaved without you!"

"Yeah, there was some turbulence on the way here." Right when Antoine reached out to pat him on the shoulder, Sorun reached his right leg out and did a large sidestep to avoid him. "So that's the train?" he asked as he began to walk towards the train.

"Er, oui, le train iz over zere," Antoine confirmed as he began following Sorun. "We are just getting ready to depart."

Sorun hummed, and crouched down next to the train. Curiously, he couldn't see any wheels under the train. It seemed more that the train itself was directly connected to the tracks. "No wheels, huh?" He craned his neck behind him at Antoine. "Is this like some kind of bullet train or something?"

The question seemed to cause great confusion to Antoine. "Non, Sorun, eet iz a train, not a bul-let." He shook his head in amusement. "I am having ze very hard time imagining ze train fitting inside of a gun."

"No man, I- ugh." Sorun palmed his face in irritation. "The rails, dude. There's no wheels on the train. Is it magnetic or what?"

"... Je vois, oui, ze train runs on ze magnet railz," Antoine said with a slightly embarrassed smile.

Humming in acknowledgment, the human teen looked towards the front engine of the train and saw a small step ladder on his left. He walked over to climb it, and quickly found the door leading into the engine compartment on the top. He reached out and casually opened and stepped through the door.

From his limited experience with trains due to only ever having seen them in movies and games, the actual train part of the train looked about what Sorun had expected of a train. In front of him was a small staircase that lead up to what he assumed was the control room, as from this position he could see a console chock full of knobs and diodes at the end of the small room.

Under the stairs was a different story. There was a large, mechanical something embedded into the wall. Tubes and other cables spread out from it towards the floor, and based on all the gauges and levers installed in it, Sorun had immediately assumed it was the generator that powered the train. What it ran on, though, was outside of his knowledge. He couldn't even see a port to open in order to insert whatever fuel it used. It looked rather strange to him the longer Sorun looked at it.

His ears perked up when he heard the door squeak open behind him, and he looked behind him to see Antoine entering the engine compartment behind Sorun. The teen felt compelled to ask him about the train out of sheer curiosity, so he turned around to address him.

"So you're the one driving this thing, right, Antoine?" he asked him.

"Oui, of course." He gave a nod. "Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering what this thing runs on." Sorun turned back towards the train's engine. "Is it coal, or oil... some mystical something or other...?"

"Non, ze train iz running on electric power," Antoine explained. "Ze engine right over zere uses Power Rings as a fuel source. We were fueled up when ze train was loaded, zo we should be good for ze delivery today."

"Right, those weird golden noodles..." He still had yet to ask what those golden rings he'd seen here and there were. The most he'd ever actually seen them used for was on Nicole's computer body so she could generate her lynx body, but from pieces of conversation he'd picked up here and there he reckoned that those rings served as a universal power source.

He still didn't know what the rings actually were. Or why one of the mains sources of energy in this world was rings. He'd probably get a straight answer if he asked somebody, but if it followed the same trend as every other answer he'd ever gotten for anything he asked, it would be something so convoluted that he'd regret asking in the first place. So until it became a relevant topic in a conversation he'd settle for rings powering everything. For some reason.

"... Wait, did Antoine just say a day?" Both eyebrows raising in confusion, Sorun turned back to the coyote. "Did you just say a day?" he asked. "We're doing this run in *day* ?"

Antoine slowly nodded, his own confusion taking over his features. "Why would we not be taking a day for ze deliverance of ze medical supplies?"

"I thought we were looping over the whole eastern portion of Northamer!" That was running a circle through the eastern half of what was once America and Canada combined. He didn't know exactly how long a trip like that was going to take, but he was expecting a lot more than just a single day considering a distance like that. "How fast does this thing go, anyways!?"

"Well, ze amount of time to make a full lap of ze track eez about... twenty-seven or twenty-eight hours, I believe," Antoine said, "and if we add in some hours to give out ze medicines, around... perhaps thirty hours? Zat sounds about right."

"Oh. Okay. Wow." So apparently the train was really, *really* fast, then. He understood how absurd trains on magnetic rails could get in terms of speed, but he didn't imagine speeds this ludicrous, especially for a train. Technology on Mobius really was something else.

And yet he still couldn't find a goddamned wireless game controller. He knew the technology existed, too. Everything else practically did.

The door leading to the engine compartment rattled again, drawing the pair's attention. Before the door even opened Sorun had seen a long pair of yellow rabbit ears through the door's window, and chose to lean back against the wall as the third occupant entered. As expected, he immediately heard a female Southern accent speak out.

"Antoine, Sugah, any idea when we're- oh, Sorun, yer here."

Tilting his head up, Sorun turned his head slightly to glance at the yellow rabbit from the corner of his eyes. He raised up two fingers and greeting, and then lowered his head back down.

"Tails dropped Sorun off just some minutes ago," Antoine explained. "I believe that is meaning we are good to go now?"

"Not waiting for anything else," Sorun agreed as he shuffled in his position leaning on the wall. "I'm good to go when you two are."

Bunnie nodded. "Same here," she said.

"Alright, zen." Antoine walked past Sorun and began ascending the steps towards the train's control room. "I will get us all moving along after-haste."

Sorun's eyes followed the coyote up the stairs, and he softly groaned when his words reached his ears. "It's post-haste!" he called up.

"Oui, merci, Sorun! Post-haste!" Antoine called back.

Rolling his eyes, Sorun suppressed the slight smirk that threatened to form as he crossed his arms. A deep, whirring sound was emitted from the train's generator, and almost immediately afterwards the train lurched forwards as it began moving. It began accelerating at an extremely rapid pace, too, as Sorun could see from a window that the forest next to the train tracks was already starting to quickly whiz past them.

"So how many stops are we making?" Sorun asked as he turned to address Bunnie.

"'Round five, if ah recall," she told him.

He hummed in acknowledgement. "That's kinda low, isn't it?"

Bunnie shook her head. "All the settlements nearby a stop send their people tah collect, so we're supplyin' multiple settlements at once each stop. But... you're right, it is a might bit low," she agreed in a quiet voice. "Ain't too many left out there 'cause a' Eggman. Ya know how it is."

"... Right," he mumbled out.

"Hey, hey, what iz it with ze frownie faces?" Both of their heads turned back to the stairs, where they saw Antoine descending back towards them. "This iz a time of happiness given le contexte to our mission, non?"

Sorun quirked an eyebrow at the coyote. "Antoine, shouldn't... shouldn't you be driving?"

"Aw, eet iz all automatic, Sorun. I just need to be zere to start and stop ze train," he explained, "and we have some hours yet until ze

first stop."

"Oh." Made complete sense when he said it like that. "So... what do you two wanna do in the meantime?"

"Any fours, Antoine?"

Playing cards hadn't exactly been what Sorun had in mind, but the two Mobians had been thoughtful enough to bring a set with them and there wasn't much else to do, so he wasn't complaining. So they decided to go ahead and play some cards. The name of the game? Go Fish. Because as it turned out between the three of them they all didn't know that many card games, and Sorun had always strayed away from the gambling side of games due to a lack of interest.

It beat Bunnie's suggestion of Texas Hold 'Em, a game that was apparently still alive and going strong in the post-apocalypse. Blackjack was one thing Sorun knew, but straight poker was a game outside of his purview. Antoine had denied it as well. Vehemently at that, with a wildly blushing face for whatever reason that was beyond Sorun, though Bunnie had been subtly teasing him about it.

Yeah, he didn't know what the deal there was.

So they'd all agreed on Go Fish and crammed themselves into one of the train's boxcars. It was vacant of furniture since it was mainly used to store boxes of medical supplies, but there was enough space in one of the ones further back that they could all comfortably sit around in a circle to play some cards.

"Non, Sorun, go fishing," Antoine mumbled from behind the deck of cards he was holding against his face.

Frowning, Sorun peeked up from his own deck and narrowed his eyes at the coyote sitting cross-legged in front of him. "You didn't have any tens, you didn't have any fives, you didn't have any threes, and now you're telling me you don't have any fours," he said. "We're

all drowning in cards here and there's barely any in the pile, Antoine, so unless you're telling me Bunnie's holding the rest of the fours or they just happen to be in the pile, I don't believe you. The math says you have the cards."

"Implying you are holding few of ze fours?" Antoine noted with a smirk from behind his cards.

"Uhhhhhh..." Sorun quickly held his deck closer to his blushing face. "Nah, man, don't know what you're talking about." He quickly swiped a card from the pile.

"Oui, I am zo sure." Antoine turned to Bunnie. "Twos?"

"Nope."

"Ah." He drew a card from the pile.

The rabbit turned to the slightly fuming teen. "Any eights, Sorun?"

"Yeah, I got eights. I got almost every number in the universe in my hand right now," he hissed as he handed her his three eights.

"Ah'm sure. Aces?"

Sorun shook his head, causing her to reach for a card in the pile. "I said almost." He turned to the coyote. "Antoine, six. Gimme."

"I have no sixes to give you, mon ami."

It took great mental effort to not strangle his cards as Sorun reached to draw one from the pile.

"Now then, Bunnie," Antoine began, "Would Sorun's earlier implication of you possessing many of ze fours be true?"

Grumbling, the rabbit removed two cards from her deck and quickly handed them off to a grinning Antoine. She shot Sorun a dirty glare afterwards. "Thanks a lot, pardner," she grumbled at him.

Sighing, Sorun dropped his deck into his lap. "Really wish I would have taken the time to learn more card games before getting sucked here," he complained. "Or brought an Uno deck."

"That a game where yer from?" Bunnie asked.

"Mm-hm. The friendship ender," Sorun said as he picked his cards back up. "It was a simple enough game, but there were a bunch of zany house rules you could do that would make some of those games go on for hours." He was pretty sure he remembered going on a five-hour stretch of the game playing the online version. How brutal of a session that had been. He barely even remembered the last hour of that game as Sorun had been foaming at the mouth in anger at that point.

Good times.

Antoine chuckled in amusement. "I fail to see how a simple card game could go on for zo long."

"You don't know, man. You just don't know. Maybe that's something I can do. Introduce this world to the most evil card game ever devised," Sorun mused. "Give me something to do in my off time other than play games with Nicole and hide from Sonic whenever he wants me to do more 'endurance training'."

"Mm." Humming in agreement, Antoine looked down at his deck. "Give me your four, Sorun."

With a harsh sigh, Sorun practically tore the card out from his deck and gave it to Antoine. He hummed happily, and put down the full set of fours next to him on the floor.

"Now that ze fours are out of ze way, Sorun, do you have any sevens?" he asked.

The human shook his head. "Nah, go fish."

Antoine pouted, and reached for the top card in the pile. He turned it around, and immediately his features lit up in glee. "Oh, tres bon, ze last seven!"

The deck of cards in Sorun's hand were promptly thrown against the nearest crate of medicine following a frustrated yell from the teen.

True to Antoine's word, they'd arrived at their first stop after a few hours after they'd departed from their starting point. There wasn't much special about the stop itself; there weren't any structures or anything of the like around, it was just that the clearing of forest the tracks ran through was significantly less dense with trees. But the giant crowd of Mobians waiting for them all was a pretty big indicator along with a map full of marks Antoine had in his possession.

They'd stopped in the middle of the crowd waiting around the tracks in short notice. While Antoine's job had been driving the train, Bunnie's had been to go outside to organize the crowd based on what settlements they were from so they could get by with the delivery as smoothly as possible. Soon enough at her direction everybody was lined up at one of the train's magnetically-propelled boxcars.

Sorun's job? The illustrious position of handing boxes off.

"Okay, we got anti-inflammatories, antibiotics, pain killers, isa... something-zonium... sulfate... this, this one. Man, I wish mom was here to pronounce some of this stuff for me." Bringer Claws had appeared and extended out from Sorun's form to gather up the boxes of medicine as he stood in front of the opened boxcar in front of the lines of waiting Mobians. Spectral armloads of boxes that would have been a challenge for four people proved easy with the Bringer Claws, which returned to Sorun's sides carrying an inordinate amount of boxes.

It was quite a large crowd in front of him, too. Mobians of all sizes, shapes, species, and colors all standing right there. Squirrels, deer,

various birds, wolves, foxes, and dozens of other species Sorun couldn't place. A large part of him had been somewhat afraid of them when the train had stopped, actually, and he had to take a few deep breaths before coming out of the train to open the boxcar up and hand off the medicine.

That incident way at the beginning of all this was still plaguing his mind, after all. That rock. That and the knowledge that humans, or Overlanders at the very least as there was a large distinction to be made there, were responsible for a lot of terrible wars. Eggman really wasn't helping with their image. And people in Knothole knew him at this point, sure, but these were complete strangers out in the sticks. And he'd been extremely paranoid over the fact that all these Mobians probably wouldn't appreciate his mere presence even with Antoine and Bunnie with him. He'd expected the worst: name calling, things being thrown, maybe even a mob rushing him. It was bad enough to the point that his shoulders had constantly been tensed while he waited for a confrontation.

None of that ever happened.

In fact, it was the dead-opposite of his expectations. Everybody was so... happy and overjoyed to see him. Cheerful. Him, some random human who'd come in on a train. Albeit to hand out life-saving medicine, so the gratefulness was to be expected, but he hadn't expected how friendly everybody was being with him. Friendly and thankful, some almost to the point of tears, which really put Sorun off. None of them were even batting an eye at the spectral, winged claws he had coming out of his shoulders. If anything, they were all treating it like normal.

All of this made Sorun confused and bewildered beyond his belief. So much so that, as he was handing off the boxes of medicine to these incredibly grateful Mobians, he couldn't so much as speak or emote properly. His features were mainly marred in confused, unsure creases mixed with rapid blinking, though like the Bringer Claws this, too, was ignored by everybody he was handing the medicine off to.

He didn't know what to think of any of this.

"Thank you thank you thank you so much!" He didn't even get a chance to hand anything off before a brown-furred rabbit Mobian had crashed into him while mumbling more thanks into his sleeveless hoodie. "Everybody at my village was so worried we didn't know what to do and-"

"Yeah, I get it, I get it," Sorun quickly muttered. Alarmed from the unwanted contact, he used his real arms to pry the rabbit girl off of him. "Just take this stuff back there, okay?"

She wiped away a tear- people actually crying for him, he couldn't believe it- as she took the boxes from his spectral arms that she didn't even flinch at before walking away with the rest of the Mobians that had already received their medicine.

Sorun stared after her and the rest, still incredibly perplexed by the events even as the Bringer Claws continued to rummage around in the boxcar behind him for more medicine. A beige colored Mobian- squirrel, mongoose, something, Sorun couldn't tell- approached him with just as wide a smile as everybody else had.

"Seriously, what the hell is going on?"

"Here," Sorun tonelessly said as the blue claws extended towards the Mobian with the boxes.

"Oh, man, this is such a huge relief," the Mobian sighed out as he took the boxes. "We ran out of this stuff at my village, and my sister's illness came back, seriously, you're a lifesaver!"

"Yeah, dude, just go."

Over and over and *over* again this would happen. With everybody. So much unexpected kindness that to Sorun, who hadn't expected or even ever experienced this treatment in his life, it was suffocating. Almost literally. It was just such an overwhelming amount of

happiness and smiles and thanks that he didn't know what to do with it, or how to respond to any of it. And it made him feel *something* , too. This strange, alien feeling in his chest that had been slowly growing throughout this whole process that welled up particularly whenever he handed off boxes.

He didn't know what it was, nor did he even understand this feeling. Or why everybody was acting like this. It frightened him.

"Fuckin' finally." He breathed out a large sigh of relief when he was finally allowed to close up the boxcar once everybody had received their medicine. *"Ugh, man, this is the exact opposite of what I expected to happen. What the hell... I don't get any of this."*

"All set, Sorun?" He nearly jumped out of his boots when he heard the voice addressing him. His neck snapped to his right, and he breathed out a sigh of relief when he saw it was just Bunnie. "You doin' alright?"

No, he was never doing alright, but at this particular moment he was doing worse than normal. "When's the train leaving?" he almost demanded in a ragged voice.

"Er... Antoine's up an' at the controls right now-"

"Great, can we go?" Sorun hadn't even waited for a response before he began climbing up the stairs to the train. "I wanna go. I wanna go now."

She looked confused at his statement, but not nearly as confused as he was. He was pretty sure that was impossible. "You don't wanna stick around for a bit-?"

"Nope, nope-nope-nope." Sorun rapidly shook his head. "We got four more stops, right? Can't leave all those people hanging. Clock's tickin'- ANTOINE, HURRY UP!" he yelled out towards the front of the train.

A window at the head engine car opened. "I am going, I am going! Start having some patience!" Antoine yelled back.

"I'm plenty patient," an impatient Sorun hissed out as he turned back to Bunnie. "Hurry up, we're going."

He'd made his way inside the train before she could get another response in. He walked in through the door of the engine car, slammed the door behind him, and then crashed his back against it while breathing out heavily. He heard a door to one of the boxcars open and close as Bunnie entered, and soon after Sorun felt the train lurch forwards again as they began moving back forwards.

That should have been the end to the anxiety right there, but Sorun had made the mistake of peeking his head towards the window to look outside. All the Mobians were still there, holding all the boxes he'd given them but all still smiling and doing their best to wave the train off with any free appendages they had. He saw that a majority of them were making eye contact with him, too, which caused Sorun to slink away from the window and slide down into a sitting position on the train floor.

He'd needed some time to himself after all that happened. He'd gotten it, fortunately, when he'd expressed a desire to stay in the control cabin for a bit when Antoine had made to leave. Antoine being Antoine hadn't even questioned it and left towards the back end of the train where Bunnie was.

Some time passed. Tens of minutes or maybe an hour- he wasn't so sure. He'd mainly spent it leaning against the train's wall in the control cabin while he stared out of a window and at the country rapidly passing by. Most of his focus was more on his own thoughts as opposed to looking out at the view, though.

"I just... they were all just so... nice. Not a single one so much as gave me a bad look. They didn't even question my Bringer Claws. That's just not normal. Maybe it's normal to them? Is the problem

me?" He looked down at his hand. *"Am I seriously so socially inept that I got a panic attack out of doing something like that? No, I... they're the weird ones. Goddammit, why can't anybody act normal?"*

There had never been a point in his entire life when he'd been showered with so much affection by total strangers like that. He knew Mobians were nice, but he just hadn't seen something like that coming. Especially to him. Some stranger. Some random-ass human they'd never seen before. A random-ass human with weird magic arms. He couldn't handle all that positive attention.

"Is that- is that just how they act? All the smiles, the hugging- ugh, the hugging. And that group of girls kept giggling at me. Fuck was up with that?" He sighed. *"I'm not a Mobian. So why would...? Maaaan, I don't know... "*

Sorun just didn't understand. Anything. Like usual. Eventually in a thoughtless movement he'd gone to open the window to get some fresh air in the room to maybe help his thoughts, but due to the speed of the train it'd nearly felt like he'd been punched in the face by the wind ripping past the fast-moving train. He quickly closed the window back up, panting heavily as he tried to smooth out the locks of black hair that had been completely blown back from the wind.

He'd idly noted the door to the train car opening and closing after he'd fixed his hair as best he could, though largely ignored the footsteps coming up. His eye briefly flicked to the window where he saw Bunnie's reflection, but then he looked back out the window without offering a greeting.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he suddenly heard the rabbit behind him ask.

"Pennies don't even exist anymore, so how do you- ugh, forget it." Sorun turned around and flopped his back onto the wall so that he was facing Bunnie. "Whaddya want?"

The rabbit girl reached up to adjust the brown had sitting on top of her head. "Just checkin' up on ya." Bunnie walked over to Sorun's wall and pressed her own back against it so that they were side-by-side, facing the windows on the wall opposite of them. "Ya looked pretty rattled back there," she began.

Somehow he knew she was going to ask about his behavior eventually. He found himself sighing and rolling his eyes. *"Whatever. She's here and I gotta get this stuff of my chest. Maybe get* some *answer over what all that was."*

Who knew? Maybe talking about this would help. Sonic sure kept vouching for its effectiveness, and this wasn't the kind of conversation that would give him a heart attack.

"The first day I came here, some kids threw a rock at me," Sorun started. "Called me a bunch of names. Kept wondering why until Sally gave me a history lesson the next day, and after that I figured, yeah, no wonder there's a prejudice against humans and Overlanders after all the war and Eggman and all that. So I assumed that anybody outside of the Freedom Fighters, so pretty much everybody, would be... adverse towards me." He paused. "I've mainly been avoiding Knothole and its population this whole time because I'm scared of them."

A long moment of contemplation passed before Bunnie addressed him again. "That why you've been holin' up in Freedom HQ all this time? Even when nobody's there?"

"... Pretty much, yeah," he truthfully admitted. "I mean, what do you want from me? I get shoved in an alien world and one of the first things I learn is that 'oh, my sort-of kind attempted to commit genocide against your kind. Multiple times. And there's a madman robot guy still doing it.' What was I supposed to think?"

Bunnie slowly nodded, and after a long sigh she brushed some of her blonde hair over her shoulder and turned her head to Sorun.

"Sugar, I get where you're comin' from, but ya need tah relax. Nobody's prejudiced against humans."

He didn't believe that for a second. "There would be a gash on my forehead that would disagree with you if it didn't heal over," he stated.

"Sorun, that was just a buncha idjit kids," she said. "Ya can't expect them to make the best a' choices given everythin' that's happened."

"I mean... I mean yeah, sure, but-"

"Let me ask you this," she interrupted, green eyes affixing to his blue. "Has anyone, anyone at all in Knothole besides those kids, ever give you any gruff 'bout what ya are?"

"... No?"

"Alright. Have *we* ?"

Sorun scoffed. "Oh, come on. You guys don't count."

"And why not?"

"Because... because..." Well, now that he thought about it, he didn't really have a good answer for her. They were all Mobians just like everybody else. He wanted to say that *maybe* it was the guilt for bringing him here, but nobody ever even brought such a thing up anymore. And they kept approaching him. Offering him hands of friendship that he kept turning down. Because he was what? One of them? A comrade? Somebody helping out that they thought was cool enough to try and befriend?

Was the fact he was even a human a factor in their eyes? Because the more he looked back on his memories with everybody, outside of his physical limits, nobody ever even brought attention to it.

"... Well, no, none of you ever treat me weirdly for being a human," Sorun finally admitted, "but people outside of the Freedom Fighters-"

"Honey," Bunnie challenged.

"She's crazy," Sorun snapped.

"Sally said you and her brother got along pretty well when you two met."

"Okay, that was... so we had a thing or two in common, so what? Guy's the king. Pretty sure he has to be all courteous and stuff."

Bunnie rolled her eyes. "You don't really know him too well, 'cause that ain't it. Sonic's parents?"

"You're going for the low blows now," Sorun muttered. "Fine, no, they treat me really nice. Even Sonic's dad now."

"Oooh, well, that's real interestin'. Sonic's dad, a war veteran from the Great War, who would have the most reason outta anybody to not like humans an' Overlanders, likes you." She sent him a flat look. "Ya know the war wounds he got that keep him from turnin' back to a normal Mobian came from Overlanders, right?"

"The implication was pretty strong, yeah..." The human teen sighed out and hung his head so that his hanging hair hid his face away from Bunnie's eyes. "So you're saying... that I've been wrong this whole time in assuming Mobians would be racially discriminate against me? And that when you and Sonic said the thing with the kids was a fluke it really was just a fluke and not you guys trying to make me feel better? You all really don't care about race?"

"Sugah, have you seen how many different species of Mobians live in Knothole alone? Darn near nobody would ever be able to get along if people actually cared about something like that. Now I can't speak for every single Mobian out there-" her eyes quickly flicked to her arm and back to Sorun, "- but for the most part? It really don't matter to Mobians." A small chuckle left her. "Ah mean, shoot, nobody freaked out when we all went tah Station Square for the first

time an' saw all them humans walkin' around. First time any of us evah even saw humans an' nobody raised a fuss."

"I wasn't there when you guys went to Station Square..." Sorun quietly reminded her.

She waved a hand. "Well, I'm jus' sayin'. I can tell ya that the only thing on my mind back then was wonderin' why they was all so tall." She paused. "Speakin' a' which, ain't it kinda strange yer around Mobian size when yer a-?"

A few specks of blue light briefly shined behind Sorun's back as the Bringer Claws threatened to manifest. "Change the subject," he demanded.

She blinked at his response, and then wryly grinned while rolling her eyes. "Anyways, if what happened back there with all them people you gave the medicine to don't say nothin', then I dunno what to tell ya."

Blowing a quiet breath past his lips, Sorun tilted his head up at the train's ceiling. *"Alright, so maybe I was wrong the whole time and Mobians are actually super progressive in terms of race."* Thinking about it in a purely objective manner, he realized he'd seen more evidence supporting this as opposed. And that other than the rock and the *slight* bias Jules had against him that he'd eventually dropped, there really was no evidence towards Mobians disliking him due to his humanity. And he wasn't even sure if he could count the rock, since it'd been by kids. And kids did stupid things all the time- he sure couldn't say he'd done any less stupid things as a kid.

So then, all the hiding around and avoiding Mobians was for nothing? Every single person in the Freedom Fighters had been supportive towards him, even Shadow in his own special way, but that would extend outside the group? Everybody would just treat him like a normal person? Sure, Honey had, but he didn't think that basket case was a good example. Except for the fact she'd openly

admitted caring about him as a friend. A fact he detested but had to acknowledge.

Perhaps in hindsight he shouldn't have made so many assumptions. Half of him argued that they were logical assumptions, but then the other half argued he never actually went out to Knothole to interact with the populace and confirm it. He'd always just hidden himself away in the HQ for being too afraid.

Maybe, he would admit to himself, that had been a mistake.

"Fine," he sighed out. "You... raise a lot of really good points, Bunnie."

She gave him a satisfied nod, which caused him to groan and turn his head away from her again. "I can tell ya for a fact, Sorun, that everyone in Knothole knows ya've been contributin' tah the Freedom Fighters an' that ya've helped out. If anythin', ya got nothin' but positives goin' for ya."

"Ugh, I get it..." he groaned out. "Fine, I'll... I'll try it out. Walk around town. See what happens," he said. "Later. When I got some free time and none of the other Freedom Fighters are around."

"That's all ah'm askin' for," Bunnie said. "Now why don't ya tell me why ya'll freaked out so bad back there with all them people."

"Oh, that." Sorun ran a hand across his face. "I don't know what to say, Bunnie. Because of my... apparent misconceptions we'll call it... of Mobian views on humans, I thought I was gonna have to end up throwing medicine at an angry mob." He quickly shot up into a straight posture while still leaning on the wall. "But man, oh man, they were all just... it was all too much."

Bunnie tilted her head, causing her ears to loll to the side. "What was too much?" she asked.

"All the friendliness, the affection, the-the... people have never acted that way towards me before," he told her, "and I didn't know how to feel or react to any of that. And what I did feel was just weird. So yeah, I freaked out."

The yellow rabbit just looked more confused at Sorun's explanation. "Er, yeah. People tend tah be nice like that."

"I'm not used to it," Sorun said with a shake of his head. "Nobody ever acted like that towards me before. My own mother and friends never acted that... cheery and happy. It was all just so weird."

Giving out a long hum, Bunnie scratched the underside of her cheek with her robotic hand for a few seconds. She perked up as a dawning realization hit her, and at the same time she pointed a robotic digit at the human. "Oh, I get it. Yer shy."

Sorun's knee-jerk reaction was to violently push himself off the the wall, turn back to a smirking Bunnie, and point a finger at her. "I am NOT," he hotly defended. "I just... lived a kind of closed-off life and never got that much social interaction outside of school."

"It's nothin' ya'll should be 'shamed of," she said. "I get it, yer not used to these kinds of things. A bit weird, fer sho', but ya jus' gotta learn tah ease into it."

"Ease into it," he repeated with a shake of his head. "It's not that easy, Bunnie. It just felt so weird." That overwhelming, suffocating feeling. That strange emotion that had welled up he couldn't place. All of it was too strange.

"Oh, brother," Bunnie muttered as she pushed herself off the wall. "Alright. Ah'll give ya some advice."

Sorun quirked an irritated eyebrow. "Advice?"

"Ah can't claim tah know exactly what's goin' on in yer noggin', but I can give ya a few pointers to help with yer... nervousness. Ah live

with Antoine. Ya pick up a few things livin' with someone as nervous as him." She walked in a half-circle around Sorun, who was slowly turning his body to follow her. "Just breath."

"... Breath." That wasn't exactly the sage wisdom he'd been hoping for. Sounded more like something he'd read on a self-help website back on Earth. "Are you joking? Seriously?"

"It helps more than ya think, Sugah," Bunnie claimed. "I really don't see how havin' a bunch of people happy tah see ya makes ya nervous, but Antoine has the same thing with crowds sometimes. And a lotta other things. Ya'd be amazed how much breathin' helps with the nerves." She stopped to hum. "An' maybe try actin' a bit friendly with them all yerself," she suggested. "Nothin' that huge. Maybe a just a smile or somethin'."

"A smile," Sorun deadpanned. "You think breathing and a smile will help with my problem."

Bunnie flashed him an affirmative grin. "Maybe if ya calm yerself down and try tah be as friendly tah them as they are tah ya it'll give ya a bit a' perspective. Maybe then ya'll will undahstand an' stop bein' so confused and worried ovah nothin'."

He couldn't give her a response to that. He couldn't because, as Sorun mulled over Bunnie's words, he realized that what the rabbit was saying might actually make sense. Try a different perspective in order to gain better understanding? It seemed practical enough to work. He didn't know about smiling, or trying to be as overly friendly as them because *he just couldn't do something like that* , but... it was certainly an idea. A good one, even. And one more idea than all the ones he had, which were zero.

"... Sure. I'll try it out. Can't promise you a smile but I'll try it out." He was starting to see Bunnie in a new light now, and gave her a very appreciative nod. He'd been so skeptical at first, but her suggestion was just... it was good. "Thanks a lot, Bunnie. You're really smart, you know that?"

She gave out a bashful chuckle in response. "Well, ah wouldn't go that far now. Ah just got a lotta experience." She turned towards the stairs leading out of the control room. "Well, ah'll get outta yer hair fer now." She made her way towards the stairs, but then paused halfway and turned her head back Sorun. "Also, Sorun, just wonderin', were ya gonna stay here much longer?"

"I guess?" Sorun shrugged. "Just wanted some time to myself to think while looking outside. Why?"

"Oh, no reason." She turned back to the stairs. "If it ain't too much to ask, ya mind doin' that for a while longer so me and Antoine could get some privacy tah ourselves?" She unconsciously began adjusting her hat for whatever reason. "Just askin'."

"Sure...?" His voice trailed off to match his confusion. "I, uh... I was actually just gonna stay here until the next stop."

Bunnie looked extremely relieved at that. "Oh, great! Ah mean, good. Yeah." She began descending the stairs while heading to the next train car, holding her bionic arm up to wave at Sorun. "Seeya in a bit, Sugah!"

"Er, yeah. 'Til then. The hell was that all about...?" he murmured to himself as soon as Bunnie had exited the car. He thought hard for a long moment, but after coming up with nothing but blank thoughts, he shrugged. "Eh, whatever." He turned back to the windows to watch the trees rushing past outside.

"Perspective, huh?"

The second stop was going about exactly the same as the first. Stop in a small clearing in front of a large crowd of Mobians, and have Bunnie organize the crowds into lines while Sorun handed off all the boxes.

There was one main difference, though, in that Sorun didn't look like he wanted to jump out of his skin and run away with each and every single Mobian that walked up to him. In fact, from her position near the front of the train, Bunnie could see a marked improvement in the human's mood at a distance compared to the last time. He wasn't shaking, for instance. She knew that had to be a good sign.

He was even speaking with a few of them, too. Actual small little conversations, and not the clipped little goodbyes he'd said previously. And while he didn't look completely at ease, it was still better.

It made her glad to know that at least some things she said got through to Sorun.

"Ze train is being ready to go soon, ma cherie." She smiled at the voice behind her, and turned around to greet the voice. She of course saw Antoine stepping up behind him. "And what would you be doing?" he asked.

"Mm, watchin' Sorun," she answered. "Feller was havin' some nervous issues, but ah think he's got a handle on it."

"Ah, I see. He was very much acting ze peculiar way before leaving ze last time if I recall," Antoine said with a nod. "Do you zink he has been becoming more, as Sonic would say, 'chilled'?"

Letting out a light chuckle, Bunnie shook her head. "It's 'chill', darlin', but... with him, hard tah say." She looked back towards Sorun. "Ah think he's gettin' tah be a bit more open, but ah don't know."

"Oui, it iz hard for me to see as well," Antoine admitted, "zo I am not remembering zat ze Sorun I knew from all zose weeks ago would be volunteering to be going out into ze country to handed out medicine like zis."

"Yeah. He's sho' changed since first comin' here," Bunnie said as she crossed her arms. "Still barely won't talk to no-one, though, but

ah'm thinkin' now he's just way more shy than we ever gave 'im credit for."

"Ah, in time, in time. He will open up when he iz ready, I am sure," Antoine assured her. "These zings just take ze gathering of the nerves before finally being prepared."

She smirked at the other Mobian. "You'd know all 'bout that, huh, hon?"

Antoine doing a double-take on her before sputtering and moving back to the train was all the confirmation she needed. She made another chuckle, and then began following him.

"Yeah, Honey, she's the tailor I go to for all my clothes." Sorun's Bringer Claws, carrying medical boxes, moved in front of him and deposited said boxes into the awaiting gray bird Mobian's hands. "Anyways, here ya go. And, uh..." He rose up his hand in an unsure manner, and went through about a dozen different hand gestures before finally settling on a thumbs-up. "Good, uh, good-good job. Y'know. Comin' out here and every- just, good on you. You're great."

"Haha, thanks! Bye now!" The avian Mobian turned around and walked off towards the rest of the Mobian settlers waiting for her. Sorun breathed out a sigh, and turned around to close up the train's boxcar.

So that hadn't turned into a complete internal disaster like last time. He'd taken Bunnie's advice and tried breathing, and though he just couldn't get any smiles out, he did try being moderately kinder to everybody walking up to him. The result of this effort mostly resulted in a softer tone of voice and a lot of "your welcomes", but he thought it got the point across.

He still didn't do hugs, though. He went to great lengths avoiding those as much as possible and tried to dodge them by shoving the boxes of medicine into the arms of anybody that tried. But otherwise

it had gone extremely well, and he didn't feel afraid of all these people this time around. More at ease than anything else. It was rather relieving.

"This was... nice. Nice?" He kept trying to pin down that warm feeling that bloomed in his chest every time he handed off those boxes to somebody and they gave them those warm smiles and heartfelt thanks, and while he still couldn't quite identify it, he found the warm feeling... pleasant. Slightly. He was still unsure, but he was pretty confident in saying he liked it. *"Yeah, this was... it was nice. Helping people. Huh."*

It wasn't like he'd ever done anything like this before. He'd never even so much as done volunteer or community work back home on Earth. It was either school or video games with the occasional friend, i.e. David, thrown in. Maybe lunch with somebody if he felt up to it. And personally he'd never understood why people would bother to go through the effort of volunteering free time to help others. Still didn't, actually, but on Mobius at least he could understand since the circumstances were different and they were all trying to save the world by doing as much as they could.

Well, all the Freedom Fighters were, at least. He was just along for the ride until he bailed.

He turned away from the boxcar and towards the front of the train. He saw a flustered Antoine heading in with a smirking Bunnie right behind him. Her eyes briefly met his, and he gave her a thankful smile. She smiled back before continuing to follow Antoine into the train.

The smile on his face quickly left as soon as she was out of sight. He turned his eyes towards the train, towards the crowd of Mobians holding the medical supplies he'd given them, and then down at his own hand. He frowned, and then turned around completely to board the train.

Passing time quickly was becoming a means of survival, as there wasn't much to do on such a small train like this one. There wasn't much they could do on this front: eating the small amount of rations Antoine brought didn't pass any time, cards grew old, and talking grew exhausting. So exhausting that Bunnie was choosing to spend her time until the next stop taking a nap in one of the train's boxcars.

And Sorun couldn't slow down on eating those rations to spend as much time as possible if he tried. For field rations it was some of the best food he'd ever eaten, and when he'd asked Antoine about them the coyote admitted to having homemade them just for the mission. The idea of the Frenchman being a good cook had made Sorun snort in amusement, but there was no denying that, yes, Antoine was a pretty phenomenal cook.

As a consequence, though, they still had a boatload of time to chew through.

Where did that leave Sorun and Antoine? In another boxcar, both of them sitting down and pressing their backs against a wooden crate as they stared aimlessly ahead at the dimly-lit wall of the boxcar with the quiet rumble of the train under their feet.

"... And I kid you not, Antoine. He turned himself into a pickle. Funniest sh- I mean funniest thing I've ever seen."

"Mon dieu," Antoine gasped out from besides him. "What happened next?"

Sorun shrugged. "I dunno. I didn't care enough to remember the rest." He ignored the disappointed huff from Antoine and looked up at the ceiling. "We ain't even halfway done and I'm already bored outta my mind."

"We can always have another round of Twenty Questions," Antoine proposed. "You are quite fond of zis game, non?"

"I was. Until I started playing with you," Sorun dryly stated as his head rolled to face Antoine. "Every single time we play you pick the most obvious things. What's it gonna be this time, man? 'Le tree', or 'le sword', or something else that probably took you about a microsecond of thought to think up?"

"You are no better at all!" Antoine claimed. "How in ze world was I supposed to guess 'ze second step from ze bottom of ze Freedom HQ's stairs'!?"

"Somebody's not asking specific enough questions," Sorun breathed out. "Alright, Antoine, level with me. What's going on between you and Bunnie?" he suddenly asked. "You both kind of give each other these *looks* and act differently around each other, so I'm just, y'know, just wonderin' what's going on there."

He may have had exactly zero romantic experience to fall back on, and while he may have been the equivalent of a social neanderthal, even he could see the signs. Likely not all of them- definitely not all of them, actually, but even he could see the real obvious stuff. The warm, almost melting smiles they sent each other. The way they got so happily lost in their eyes. The hand holding. The fact they lived together. The hugging. The kissing, that last one was probably a big hint.

Granted Sorun had only seen the kissing when he'd been spying on them when he was bored once, so they'd likely only done those things when they thought they were alone, but they still acted extremely affectionate of each other regardless.

Did he care if they were in a relationship or not? No, not really. But he was desperate to talk about anything to alleviate the boredom.

"Oh, Bunnie." A happy smile spread across Antoine's face. "Mon amour. Ze light of my life. My very dear-"

"Okay, dude, I get it," Sorun interrupted. "You two a thing or not?"

The interruption had ruined whatever moment Antoine was having that second, causing him to briefly frown at the human, but the smile came back soon after as he began speaking. "Oui, we are very much together. In fact, I am engaged to her."

"My man!" Sorun flashed two fingers guns at Antoine, who grew very confused at the gesture. "I'm-I'm genuinely shocked! How did you manage to land *that* !?" Because while he couldn't talk, Antoine didn't seem like a ladies man at all. Bunnie even implied that he was a bit socially awkward like Sorun was. So he managed to land a wife of all things with Bunnie of all people mystified him.

"I ask myself ze very same question often, mon ami," Antoine sighed out. "Eet was something zat bloomed over ze years of fighting Robotneek since we were ze le petite little children. She would save my life, I would save her life, we would grow closer as friends over time, and I strongly believe me nevair having even flinched away from her cybernetic parts spoke to her. One thing lead to ze other, and while zere were a few hiccups here and zere..." His face grew dark. "A hiccup lasting *half a year* in one case..." He brightened back up. "We grew very happy, and so I proposed after weeks and weeks of building ze mental preparedness."

"So love can bloom on the battlefield after all, huh?" Sorun said, smirking at himself for the inside joke.

The blonde-haired Mobian laughed a little at that. "Zat iz a very poetic way of saying it, oui." A look of contemplation briefly passed over him. "You know, zat... actually speaks to moi." He smiled. "Perhaps I may be using it for when it comes time to say vows, non? 'Love blooming on ze battlefield'. It sounds like something out of ze storybooks. I am thinking ma cherie would be finding ze charm in it."

Sorun snorted. "I don't know if you should be using a 'Metal Gear' quote for- actually, nobody knows what that is, huh?" he asked himself, ignoring the questioning look Antoine was giving him. "I take it back, go for it. She'll love it." He looked back to Antoine. "Hey, what was that half a year thing you muttered?"

Antoine's face soured again. "Zone trouble," he grumbled out.

"Ah." Sorun was a little surprised at how angry he looked at the answer. He didn't think he'd ever seen Antoine genuinely angry. Even when he'd paint bombed him he looked irritated at most. "Been there," he said.

"I... hah, I suppose you would, non?" Antoine said with a small smile. "Forgive my upsetedness, but to have been pulled away from zose you love for zo much time... er, no offense, Sorun, and have your relationships almost ruined by an impostor, to lose... certain zings. It was a very dark time, and I am very fortunate ma cherie stayed with moi through it all."

Sorun gave him an understanding nod. "Sounds heavy. But impostor? What was the deal with that?"

"From an alternate zone, eet iz a long story." Antoine waved a hand aside. "You would not be interested."

He was incredibly interested, but he could very well see that Antoine wasn't. In fact, the brown coyote looked very uncomfortable with the subject altogether, and his ears along with his eyelids were drooping down. Sorun, feeling a bit bad for bringing the mood down, tried changing the conversation topic.

"So, um, no rings?" The human had noticed upon looking at Antoine's hands that there was no ring, nor did he remember seeing one on Bunnie. And he knew marriage rings were a thing. He'd seen a set on Sonic's parents' fingers. "What's up with that?"

Sorun wasn't sure if Antoine looking from depressed to irritated was that good an improvement. "Ze rings are only supposed to be worn after ze wedding ceremony. We had plan-ned one, but shortly beforefoot Eggman had gotten hiz hands on ze seven Chaos Emeralds. We just nevair had time afterwards," he mumbled out. "My dear Bunnie was crushed for weeks over it."

The teen winced. "That sucks, man."

"I do not see what suction has to do with eet, but oui. Eet does indeed."

A few moments passed, and Sorun had pulled up one of his knees to his chest while mulling over another question. "So the fact that you're a coyote and she's a rabbit," he began, "that isn't- it isn't weird? One species of Mobian marrying another?"

"Huh? Non, non," Antoine denied with a shake of his head. "Anybody is free to be with whoever they love, no matter who or what zey are. I love Bunnie, cyber bip-bops and all. Why would her being a rabbit be important?"

"No reason." Wow, Bunnie hadn't been kidding. Mobians really didn't care about what species other people were. "So, uh... how, uh..." With his left hand he made a circle with his thumb and index finger, and with his other hand he slowly began moving his right index finger in and out the makeshift hole. "So how does... how does that work?"

Antoine tilted his head to the side. "I am not understanding, Sorun."

"Well I'm just askin' 'cause, 'cause you know, her... her whole lower half's robotic, so, like, how do you two...?" When he saw that Antoine wasn't catching on to his implications, he sighed and lowered his hands down. "Ah, forget it," he said with a huff.

"Alrighty." Antoine blinked his blue eyes and shifted his body so that his shoulder was leaning against the crate, with his front facing Sorun. "Why did you wonder about relationships between different species?"

Sorun shrugged. "I'm just a curious human from another world tryin' to kill time, man," he replied.

His answer caused some reaction in Antoine, who started to smirk at him much to Sorun's puzzlement. "Oh, I see. I see." A knowing laugh

escaped him. "So, Sorun, tell me, would it be zat you happened to be having your eye on somebody?"

"My eye on- oh, no." Sorun's disagreement over the question was so intense that he'd risen up to his feet, with Antoine's amused eyes following him up. "Nuh-uh, nope, not interested in anybody. No way. I don't even wanna have this conversation."

There were so many things wrong with something like that. He could barely even count them. Never mind the species gate, which alone was a good enough reason for him to never even consider the idea, but he barely even got along with anybody in the Freedom Fighters because of them having forced him onto this planet. That wasn't something that was ever going to go away, and he barely knew anybody outside the resistance group. Nor did he feel like meeting anybody new. And even if there were some he did get along with he was planning on leaving/abandoning them all at the best given opportunity.

He just plain *couldn't* like anybody that way.

"You do not seem zo sure of yourself," Antoine said in a teasing tone. "Zere iz no shame in admitting you have ze feelings for-"

"I super do not," Sorun denied as he spun towards Antoine while pointing a finger at him. "Antoine, I haven't even been here for a month. Or, wait, have- no, but it's close." He shook his head. "Ugh, not important. Look, barely anybody knows me past the superficial stuff, and I don't know anybody past all the Freedom Fighter stuff. I don't even wanna try to get to know people past that. And even if I did I got a bunch of reasons I can't, half of which I can't even tell you."

Antoine didn't look convinced at all, and kept up that same smirk on his face. "Oh? Name one."

"For the- urgh." Sorun pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Antoine, man, I'm not gonna be around forever. I gotta go home

back to my world eventually. That is a *serious* long-distance relationship I'm not willing to commit to." He shook his head and waved his hand. "It wouldn't work with anybody. And again, I'm not interested in anybody. Totally not."

"Zo you say, and yet I am not convinced at all." Though he was still wearing that smirk that was beginning to irritate Sorun, the coyote had tilted his head to the side in confusion. "But I thought zat you were stuck in zis zone forevair? Because ze Emeralds-"

"That's not a confirmed thing," Sorun mumbled out. The fact he'd said it in such an unsure tone was not lost on either of them.

Antoine blinked, and then awkwardly coughed into a closed fist. "Er, oui, right, of course," he agreed with a stiff nod, "but if we pretended that you did remain here on Mobius, would you still-?"

"Still wouldn't be interested in anybody, and I don't want to be interested in anybody," Sorun said.

"Not even with-?"

"Antoine, read my lips: *no* ." In a motion that the human teen hoped would signal his finality with the subject, he crossed his arms in front of his chest. "It's never gonna happen. Not like anybody'd ever be interested in me, anyways. Geez, would never have brought your thing with Bunnie up if I knew it was gonna lead to this..."

Finally giving Sorun some reprieve from the topic, Antoine gave off a small chuckle while moving so that his back was against the crate again. "Alright, I can take ze hint." He pulled his knees up and draped his arms over them. "I only bring it up because ze Sorun I see right now iz much more differen' and approachable than ze Sorun from a long bit ago."

That gave Sorun pause, and then caused him to turn away from Antoine while still looking at him from the corner of his eye. "Dunno what you're talking about."

"Oh, do not be ze coy type with moi. Ze way you acted with all ze people and other Freedom Fighters is saying enough. You are being the very friendly person for someone who said zey did not want to be friends with anybody. I believe Bunnie was right when she said you were ze shy type."

Sorun found himself groaning and rubbing his eyes. He already got enough of this from Sonic, and he didn't have the energy to argue the point with Antoine. "You're seein' things, Antoine. You're seein' things," he claimed as he walked towards the end of the boxcar, slightly bristling at the small chuckle he heard from behind him.

"Alright, so maybe I haven't been hammering the point home that well," Sorun began to think to himself, *"but why does everybody keep trying-?"*

Knock.

The pale teen's head picked right up when he heard it. A knock, right outside the boxcar door he was standing next to. Which should have been impossible considering they were on a very high-speed train right at this second. He thought he was hearing things for a second until he heard another knock come in from the other side of the door, causing him to flinch back.

"The hell?" Sorun looked back towards Antoine. It seemed that he had heard it, too, as he was looking towards the boxcar in great alarm and confusion. He shifted his gaze to Sorun, who could only give him a confused shrug. *"Uh... guess I'll open the door..."*

Slowly, he reached out and grasped the handle of the boxcar door. It took great effort due to the wind rushing past the train, but Sorun managed to open the door partly to look outside. And even with his dark hair whipping wildly around his face, he was able to clearly see what was right next to the train and knocking on the door.

He'd almost thought it was Sonic. The shape and color was there, and he was about the only other hedgehog he knew besides

Shadow that could keep up with a train going this fast. But it immediately stood out to Sorun that the figure's blue body had a metallic sheen as opposed to fur. And it wasn't running next to the train- it was flying. Flying with what looked like a torso made into a turbine.

Sorun didn't know what to think about what he was looking at until the robot turned its metallic, mouthless head towards him. Black, screen-like eyes with glowing red irises stared right back at the teen, and silvery, metal claws in place of fingers began to flex, but otherwise the Sonic-like machine simply stayed in pace of the train's opened door.

In a flash of blue, a Summoned Sword appeared at Sorun's side, and immediately afterwards it fired into the flying robot. For whatever reason the machine hadn't even made to move, and the sword had collided directly with it. To Sorun's dismay, he saw why it hadn't bothered moving: the Summoned Sword had completely shattered against its metallic chassis. There wasn't even a scratch left from where it impacted its face.

"... Well then." In an act of eerie calmness, Sorun ducked his head back inside the boxcar, gingerly took the handle to the door, and closed it back shut. He took a deep breath, and then slowly backed away before turning towards Antoine, who was staring at him expectantly. "Hey, so-"

The boxcar rattled. Roughly. Roughly enough that Sorun was sent sprawling to all fours while Antoine had been knocked flat on his front. The screeching sound of metal cutting across metal soon reached their ears from somewhere else on the train, and at the same time as the noise reached them the train began rattling even harder.

"Argh!" The boxcar had jostled so hard that Antoine had been thrown against the wall. "Sorun, what iz happening out zere!?" he yelled at the human.

"There was- agh!" The boxcar shook again, forcing Sorun to grab onto the door to steady himself. "There was some, some weird Sonic-looking robot or something, I don't know!"

"Sonic-looking...? Oh." Antoine's irises shrunk, seemingly in fear. "Mon dieu, non, not zat..."

"Antoine!?" The fear-ridden look on the coyote's face did not bode well to Sorun, who was struggling to stay on his feet. "Antoine, what's- whoa!"

Something blue- it was too fast for Sorun to perceive properly- smashed right through one side of the boxcar between Antoine and Sorun and punched right through the other end. It appeared again less than a second later, going right through the ceiling before smashing all the way through the front of the boxcar.

With the front of the boxcar having been completely destroyed by the blue robot, Sorun and Antoine were clearly able to see the train in front of them. And, much to their collective horror, the blue Sonic-like robot was buzzing around at dizzying speeds, going through different parts of the train over and over in what seemed like an effort to destroy it.

And then, too fast for the both of the to react, the blue robot smashed its way through the bottom of the front train. The resulting screeching sound was loud enough that the Mobian and human had to cover their ears while wincing, but more than that the train's alignment with the tracks began to become more and more loose as the train's engine and all the boxcars began to rattle.

Eventually, though, the front train had derailed completely from the tracks. Worse still, it began to dangerously tip to the side before rolling over entirely. This, combined with the fact the whole train was still carrying heavy forwards momentum, meant that all the boxcars in front of the pair were quickly derailing and rolling end over end as the train crashed. Antoine and Sorun's eyes met briefly, but holding

onto something and screaming was all they could accomplish as their own boxcar began to start rolling and crashing.

At the time, the train had been traveling through a rather desolate piece of land compared to most other places in eastern Northamer it had traveled to beforehand. Not a single tree was in sight, for all the way to the horizon was nothing but a continuous, flat stretch of dry, cracked land that lacked even so much as grass with the sun beating down heavily on it. The only break to this dry land was the train track that cut right through it, with the newest addition being the crashed train on top.

The damage sustained by the train due to the robot had, of course, caused it to derail. After separating from the tracks entirely the train and all its segments had kept crashing and rolling forwards for a large distance, but eventually their momentum had ended and all of the train settled. Almost miraculously, they had all stopped practically right on top of the tracks, though due to the state of the train it did it little good.

The train engine and all of its boxcars had become completely separated in the crash and were all scattered around the track and on their sides, though the train engine had sustained the most damage as it had been the focus of the robot's attack. It had been riddled and shredded by its body so much that, combined with the actual crash, it barely resembled a train anymore and more like a giant hunk of smoking metal laying on its sides. The boxcars scattered around had sustained significantly less damage, though their contents laid scattered around on the ground in the form of completely smashed crates and boxes.

Some distance away, on the right side of the crash, was Antoine, who had been thrown away from the boxcar he had been in from the crash. He slowly stood up with a groan, running a hand through his hair as he looked down at himself. His blue jacket was heavily scuffed and torn in some places, but otherwise he seemed to be without any serious injuries.

He would have sighed in relief if a blue object hadn't zoomed past him before landing on the ground in front of him and came sliding to a halt.

Terrified eyes looked up and met red, mechanical eyes staring coldly back at him. The robot resembling Sonic had slightly hunched itself over in its landing, but soon rose up to its full height as it kept its eyes locked onto Antoine.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Antoine reached down with a shaky hand towards the sword tied to his waist. His hand met empty air, though, and when he looked down he saw that his sword wasn't even attached to him anymore. The sound of an engine heating up drew his attention back up to the robot, and he didn't even have time to scream before the blue robot came rocketing towards him with its metal claws outstretched.

It never reached him, though. Because he'd been frozen stiff with fright, Antoine hadn't been able to close his eyes to avoid seeing his own demise, which was why he was clearly able to see the four blue swords that appeared in front of him, their blades crossing one another and shielding him. The robot ran right into the shield of swords, and bounced right off and skidded backwards.

Back at the site of the train crash, there was a raspy cough as one of the tipped boxcars rose up slightly. Underneath the boxcar was Sorun- pinned down from the boxcar's weight, but avoiding being crushed entirely from the two spectral arms holding up the boxcar. His head and right arm were free from the boxcar's weight, though, with his head spun towards the sight of Antoine and the robot with his right arm outstretched towards them.

"Sorun... c-comin' in with the clutch assist..." he gasped out, though with how far away they were he doubted they heard him. He groaned, and then turned his head up towards the boxcar pinning him down. There was a shadow covering half of his face, and he looked to the left towards it and realized that there was another

boxcar leaning on the one threatening to crush him, adding its weight. "Aw, that ain't good..."

With a grunt, he tried to will the Bringer Claws to lift the boxcar off of him. The weight proved too much, though, and even worse he felt his concentration slip multiple times which resulted in the Bringer Claws flickering and dimming sporadically. His head was still ringing and vision still swimming from how much he'd been tossed around during the crash, but fortunately he had enough mental strength to not pass out on the spot right there. Most of his mental fortitude was split between staying awake, the blue arms holding the boxcar off him and the four swords hovering in front of Antoine, though, and Sorun couldn't summon up any more strength to do more no matter how hard he tried.

Soon, though, he heard the sound of small jet engines, and looked up at the sound. He couldn't help the small laugh that left him when he saw Bunnie flying up in the sky, jets on the soles of her feet keeping her propelled in the air. The jets cut out and she landed with a small huff next to Sorun.

She didn't look as shaken as Sorun or Antoine did, at least. The most he could see were some slight scratches on her body along with the fact she was heavily breathing, but otherwise she seemed alright. She seemed incredibly worried, though, from the way her widened eyes were snapping from Antoine and the blue robot in front of him to Sorun.

"Hey, Bunnie...?" Sorun weakly called out. "Don't know if... if you got some way to get me out of here... but I can't do this forever." To accentuate his point, the Bringer Claws flickered and the boxcar lowered slightly. "I'd really appreciate it if you helped me out here..."

"S-Sorun, ah..." She tilted her face down at Sorun, and then looked back towards Antoine. "But... but Antoine's out there. He ain't even got his sword, he can't-!"

"I'm... not gonna let that thing touch him..." Right as Sorun said this, the four swords in front of Antoine disappeared. In their place flashed eight swords spinning around a bewildered Antoine, all pointing outwards. "We can both help him, but you gotta get me out first... I'll defend him with the swords until then."

With confliction clearly written on her face, Bunnie looked out towards Antoine one last time. Her eyes particularly lingered on the blue robot, though her features grew more resolved as she ran towards Sorun and crouched down by his side. "I'm trustin' you to keep him safe," she whispered as she began fiddling with her left arm.

A sardonic chuckle escaped Sorun. "A terrible choice, really..." His pupils shrunk when he saw the hand on Bunnie's artificial left arm morph and shift into a vaguely nozzle-based shape, out of which came a stream of blue flame. "H-hey, wait-"

"Gotta cut you out," Bunnie mumbled in response as she positioned the torch onto the boxcar pinning Sorun down. "Don't move too much. Ah don't wanna burn ya."

"Yeah, got it." Sorun turned his head back towards the distance. Antoine and the robot were still standing still and apart from one another, with the coyote having looked back towards Sorun and Bunnie. Sorun saw him eye the boxcar on top of Sorun and the torch Bunnie was using to cut him out, and as his eyes dipped down to the swords spinning around him a look of understanding flashed across his eyes.

The robot, for its part, was still silently standing its ground, though its red eye-like sensors were fixed down on the swords spinning around Antoine. A sight that made Sorun grow worried; he'd shot it with a Summoned Sword point-blank and it hadn't done anything. He didn't know how long he'd actually be able to defend Antoine with just Summoned Swords.

"What is that thing, anyways?" Sorun asked as he saw the Sonic-like robot hunch down in a ready stance. "Why does it look like Sonic?"

Bunnie continued to cut away at the steel trapping Sorun, though she did tear her attention away for a moment to look towards the robot. "It's Metal Sonic," she informed him with an incredible amount of disdain lacing her voice. "One a' Eggman's Badniks. It's a robot modeled after Sonic." She turned back to her work on the boxcar. "I got jostled around a bunch from the crash, but the communicator ah had on me managed tah survive," she said. "Ah managed to call fer help. Sally said the Special had just come back and they're roundin' up everyone, but-"

"But we need to wait, yeah," Sorun finished for her. "Alright, we can work with that. Just focus on getting me out." His eyes narrowed in concentration. "I'll worry about Antoine."

Obeying some invisible start, Metal blasted towards Antoine with its metal claws flared to the side. The coyote ducked out of the way, and while the Spiral Swords spinning around him managed to rake across the robot's body, they did no damage. Further still, its claws had shredded through and shattered three of the swords protecting Antoine, leaving a noticeable gap in the ring of swords spinning around him.

"The guy went and made a robot after Sonic? What the hell... and it's... it's fast, too. Too fast. My eyes can't keep up and he's tearing right through the Summoned Swords."

The five remaining swords spinning around Antoine stopped and closed in further towards him. He looked down in worry, and then flinched when the five swords shot straight forwards in the directions they'd been facing. One of the swords had sailed straight towards Metal Sonic, though the robot merely swiped one of its hands at it and shattered the sword. As it did this, though, twenty more swords appeared right above it pointed downwards, and as soon as it swiped at the sword the twenty above rained down on it.

The Heavy Rain Swords technique may as well have been that, though: rain. Because, while the swords were landing tip-first on the robot, its exterior shell was so sturdy that they were shattering on contact. Metal Sonic had stood completely still during the ordeal, almost tauntingly, but when the last sword struck it the engine making up its torso flared back up to life.

"What the fuck is this thing made of, anyways!?" Sorun's thoughts screamed as he saw the engine light up hotter and hotter. *"Alright, offense ain't working! Just focus on defending Antoine!"*

He had to will more swords crossed into shields to appear in the path Sorun predicted Metal would go in, and as dozens of sets of four crossed swords appeared between it and Antoine he was glad for making the decision, as the robot had taken off at nearly the same time. In a blurry, blue line that was all but imperceptible to Sorun's eyes due to its sheer speed, it smashed through shield after shield in its relentless pursuit of Antoine, who was trying his best to maintain his distance away from the thing. It seemed, much to Sorun's panic, that Metal had realized that actively striking the swords was more effective than bouncing off of them. Even attempting to just block with the swords was becoming more and more useless.

Thoughts wondering to what Antoine was thinking about all this briefly danced through Sorun's mind as he encircled the coyote with dozens and dozens of swords crossed into shields in a desperate effort to slow down Metal as much as possible. He had to at least somewhat realize what it was he and Bunnie was trying to do since he wasn't running towards them, and for that much Sorun was grateful. He looked worse for wear, though. His eyes were intensely focused, but there was no denying the fear-laden look embedded in his features. But despite that, he was keeping cool. Adapting to the Summoned Swords Sorun was placing around him and not moving around too much away from their protection.

Sorun had to wonder how much good that would do him, though, as Metal tore its way through dozens of swords in a matter of a few seconds.

Antoine tried backing up as Metal rapidly approached through the veritable wall of swords Sorun had made, but both he and Sorun knew it was in vain due to the robot's speed. Four swords, two at each side, appeared at Antoine's sides and repeatedly fired off swords at the approaching robot with more swords appearing to refill vacant positions, but not even these were so much as slowing the robot down. The wall, though, was. Not by much; a negligible amount, really, but it was slow enough that Sorun could actually perceive its movement. And that was enough for him to accurately place four Summoned Swords behind Metal, which all reared back and, in a movement where each sword mimicked the swings of the one in front, swept upwards and knocked the robot into the air.

The four swords at Antoine's sides turned to eight, and the Blistering Swords rapidly shot off in pairs at the robot flailing in the air. Surprisingly, all eight swords managed to hit the airborne robot. As expected, they all shattered and did no damage.

Curiously, however, each and every single sword that had struck the robot propelled it high enough that it made up from the amount it dropped down before the swords hit it. Even as the eight swords hit Metal, it was still the same place in the air as it had been before the swords hit it due to the small amount of lift afforded by being struck by the swords.

"... Huh?" Sorun scrunched his brows in confusion. *"The swords, they... the air. Air! Gotta..."* He winced as a sharp pain from the mental toll raced through his head. *"Keep it in the air. It's all I can do."*

He didn't understand how the swords were keeping it in the air, but Sorun didn't question it. Instead he focused more intensely as four spinning swords appeared around Metal. The Round Swords flew towards it, and over and over the spinning swords would pass by it in definitive hit before flying away, only to turn around and strike it again along with the other three swords. The Round Swords were doing no damage, but they *were* keeping Metal Sonic up in the air.

Up there and away from Antoine, who was still trying to back up away from in with that unreadable, panicked yet focused look.

The assumption that Metal was helpless in the air, however, proved false. To Sorun's dread it curled into itself and began spinning into a perfect, blue sphere. The Spin Dash proved too much for the Round Swords, all of which shattered upon contact with it. Fearing it would move too fast towards Antoine and that he wouldn't be able to defend him, Sorun willed four more swords to appear right in front of Metal. These four swords were arranged in a cross shape with their pommels all pressed together, and instantly began rapidly spinning against Metal's Spin Dash as a deadly, blue wheel. The Prop Shredder Swords technique, miraculously, did as Sorun had hoped for and knocked Metal out of the Spin Dash so that it was once again flailing in the air. Eight Summoned Swords appeared below Metal, all aimed diagonally up towards the robot. They fired off one after another, with another sword appearing to replace any sword fired, and under the combined rapid onslaught of the swords Metal was kept juggled in the air.

Snap!

Sorun had barely even heard the loud, metal snap of the boxcar above him before a section of cut metal fell down around him. The dust of the metal hitting the ground hadn't barely even risen before he felt a cold hand roughly grip his shoulder, and with a loud heave Bunnie threw him out from the underside of the boxcar before it collapsed entirely on the ground.

The human teen rolled on the ground a few times, and then came to a stop on his front. He quickly got up to his feet, and then looked up at Bunnie who gave him a quick nod. He nodded back, and then turned around towards Antoine and the blue robot still being juggled in the air by the Summoned Swords. He nearly began moving forwards, but as he moved he felt his foot hit something and cause it to rattle against the ground. He looked down, and felt his eyes widen when he saw a sword with a curved blade still nestled in its sheath lying on the ground in front of him. Antoine's sword.

"There you are," the teen huffed as he bent down to scoop the sword up. He looked up ahead at the mess of swords keeping Metal Sonic aloft in the air and Antoine, and then took a large breath as the Bringer Claws flared up behind him.

A final Summoned Sword shot up to keep Metal Sonic in the air, and afterwards it began to fall back down to the ground once the swords ceased. Antoine, who had kept his eyes glued to the robot, began to grit his teeth in worry as the robot began to approach the ground. He saw a blue glow approach from the corner of his eye, though, and turned his head just in time to see Sorun fly towards Metal, the Bringer Claws on his back flapping madly to propel him forwards. When he was close enough to Metal the wings ceased flapping, with the right Bringer Claw rearing back and scratching upwards. The five talons moved fast enough that blue lines of power were left in their wake, and they successfully managed to claw across Metal Sonic's face, sending it careening backwards.

Seeing Metal fly backwards from being clawed, Sorun flapped his Bringer Claws once to send him backwards. He dropped down right next to Antoine with a grunt, panting as the Bringer Claws folded onto his shoulders. He watched in extreme irritation as Metal backflipped in the air and landed perfectly on its feet, slowly bringing its head up to face Sorun and Antoine.

Being directly clawed in the face from Sorun's Bringer Claw had done absolutely no damage whatsoever. The blue paint hadn't even been scratched.

"Oh, come the fuck on," Sorun mentally sighed as he stood up straight. He looked to his left at Antoine, the coyote looking towards the human in great surprise. "You dropped this," Sorun said, and wasted no time in tossing the curved sword in his grasp to Antoine.

Deftly catching the saber out from the air, Antoine gave the human an appreciative nod. "Merci, Sorun," he mumbled out as the two turned towards Metal. "Although I fear one more sword will not be enough of a difference."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Sorun replied. "So listen. I'm pretty sure we don't have anything that can actually hurt this thing, and it's moving too fast for me to see." He glanced towards Bunnie, who was still near the crashed train but hovering slightly above the ground with the jets beneath her feet. "But Bunnie called for help," he continued, "so we don't gotta beat it. We just gotta survive for a bit."

"Oui, oui, I understand." A soft scraping sound reached Sorun's ears as Antoine slowly unsheathed his sword. "And what would be your plan for doing that?" he asked.

"... I was really hoping you had one."

The turbine on Metal Sonic flared to life and cut out the conversation between the two. It zoomed towards the pair, and then began circling around them so fast that it may as well have been a solid, blue ring going around them. Wordlessly, Antoine and Sorun pressed their backs together, though as much as Sorun tried his eyes just couldn't follow the blue form spinning around them.

"Sorun, zis iz not ze good time to be joking," Antoine said as he rose his sword up defensively.

"I'm tellin' ya I'm tapped," Sorun grunted in response, his eyes furrowing in concentration at the blue ring around them. "Actually, I got one idea..."

"Oui?" Antoine pressed, voice growing slightly higher as the circle began to slowly enclose on them.

Sorun didn't say anything further, and instead dipped his head down as thoughts rapidly began to run through his head. *"If I could just get a Bringer Claw on that thing then MAYBE I could do something, but it's going way too fast for me to catch it. If I stunned it for a second though... agh, but with what!? The Summoned Swords can't... but they can, can't they? That first time it ran into them when it was going for Antoine. They didn't break. What was different then?"* Sorun's head picked up in realization. *"It didn't attack the swords that*

time. It just ran into them while flying. Like the way it's flying around right now. So...!"

Eager to test the theory, Sorun willed a crossed set of four Summoned Swords to appear in Metal's path. To the teen's excitement, the robot's face had collided directly with it, though instead of it smashing through, Metal's body had just stopped and bounced back slightly. The small reprieve was all Sorun needed, though, and in the next instant one of his Bringer Claws stretched out and wrapped its claws around Metal's torso.

Wasting no time, Sorun used the Bringer Claw to raise Metal's body into the air and slam in back into the ground. This was done three consecutive times, with the third one making a noticeable crater in the ground, though like with everything else it appeared that Metal's body had sustained no damage at all. Widening his eyes in anger, Sorun willed the second Bringer Claw to reach out and grab onto Metal's left arm. It began pulling the metal limb back in an attempt to tear the arm off while the other Bringer Claw continued to hold Metal down, though the robot appeared to catch onto the plan when it turned its head towards the arms. Its engine-torso fired up again and, despite the spectral arms holding it down, it began to fly forwards towards the train wreck.

Sorun had endeavored to maintain the Bringer Claws' grip on Metal Sonic, but this had quickly proven to be a mistake. The teen's body we jerked forwards and dragged quickly across the ground as Metal pulled him away. He had the sense to let go amidst all the sputtering and grunting from behind dragged, though even after the Bringer Claws let go of Metal the momentum he'd gathered kept rolling him forwards until, eventually, his back had slammed right into one of the overturned boxcars.

His body jarred from the sudden stop, Sorun made a soft groan as he slowly slid down onto the ground. He just barely saw a blue shape whizzing around from his winced-shut eyes, and almost subconsciously his Bringer Claws slammed onto the ground and pushed Sorun far up into the air. The second he left the ground a

metal, blue sphere Spin Dashed a hole through the boxcar, and milliseconds later it smashed through the roof. A Summoned Sword appeared above Sorun and shot downwards, with the teen reaching out and grabbing the sword's hilt so that he would be pulled downwards with it. Metal's spinning form pierced the air where his body had been, missing Sorun's head by millimetres.

With another grunt Sorun crashed into the ground. He'd conveniently enough rolled onto his front at the very least, and with shaky legs he slowly started to stand back up. He coughed once, and then felt a wave of exhaustion mixed with pain briefly wash over him as the Bringer Claws on his shoulder flickered. He looked up, though almost regretted it when he saw a blue ball of death shooting down from the air towards him. He'd wanted to move his Bringer Claws to defend himself, but the blue object was moving too fast and he couldn't think in time-

A yellow form jumped up in front of Sorun and held its artificial arm out. He only needed a second's glance to tell that it was Bunnie. What he didn't recognize was the pink, circular shield made of raw, crackling energy that formed out of her bionic left arm, though he had no time to even mentally question it before Metal Sonic had crashed right into it. The shield, surprisingly, held firm, though Sorun had briefly noted a worrying creaking sound from Bunnie's arm before the force of Metal's attack pushed Bunnie back into Sorun. It was then the shield broke as the two of them rolled over each other repeatedly about ten feet back, ending as they slid to a stop with their bodies tangled together.

They had tried to undo themselves so they could get back up, but by the time the pair even attempted to move Metal Sonic was flying towards them with outstretched claws. Sorun had attempted to form a Summoned Sword to defend them, but after another wave of exhaustion hit him the sword shattered in the air before it could do anything. By the time Sorun had blinked in surprise, Metal was almost on top of them before he'd even fully opened his eyes from the blink.

Clang!

There was a flash of steel as something swung in front of Metal's path. The object, a curved sword, scraped across Metal's frame and carried enough force behind it that the robot was knocked backwards away from Sorun and Bunnie, who were quickly untangling themselves and standing up on the ground.

As soon as they had gotten themselves in order, the pair looked towards the sword and the person holding it. Of course it had been Antoine, who was heavily panting while standing his ground in front of the blue robot slowly rising up to its own feet. Sorun and Bunnie were quick to run to his side, though they were faring little better from the way their forms were hunched in exhaustion.

Drip.

The sound of something wet faintly hitting the dry ground below him was heard by Sorun's ears, causing his eyes to snap down to the ground. He saw a small dot of red on the cracked dirt beneath his feet, and he felt something warm and moist trailing down his nose. He touched a hand to the spot, and when he brought it back to examine he found spots of blood left on his hand. The growing worry in him furthered when he saw the Bringer Claws flicker again.

"Using all these powers... it's wearing me out," he somberly realized as he lowered his hand. *"Dunno if it was the train crash or if it's because I'm using powers that're killing me, but I can't do this for much longer."* He looked towards the two Mobians next to them. Antoine was still panting heavily, and Bunnie looked about as exhausted as he was. *"The're almost done, too."* He looked back ahead at Metal Sonic. *"What am I supposed... huh?"*

Another sound reached his ears. The distant, roaring sound of engine turbines that were very different from the sounds of Metal's engine. A sound familiar to Sorun. Antoine and Bunnie had heard it, too, and looked towards the sky at the source of the noise, and even Metal Sonic seemed to have picked it up as its head turned to look

as well. It only took a second's examination to confirm what was making that sound: a large, silvery ship that Sorun had become intimately familiar with in the short time he'd come to know it.

"About time... they finally got here..." Sorun's tired mind thought. Besides him, could see the two Mobians' shoulders slump in relief.

The Freedom Fighter Special ship had rapidly come into view and even more quickly flown over them, though it didn't lower itself or even move to stop. What it did do was open the hangar door on its back, and before it had even opened all the way two forms had jumped out. A black and red ball and a solid blue ball, both spinning aggressively and leaving a blurred line of speed in their wake as they rapidly dropped towards the ground.

Once again, Sorun heard the sound of Metal's turbine engine begin to fire up. He looked towards the robot, and then widened his eyes when he saw the machine turn away from them. The jet of flame coming out of its back was steadily increasing in size as it hunched down and pointed its body forwards at the empty horizone.

It was making to try and run away.

"No ya don't!" The left Bringer Claw shot forwards and grabbed Metal Sonic's torso right before it took off. It still began flying, and like before Sorun was dragged along with it, but this time he willed his right Bringer Claw to reach out and dig its talons into the ground behind them. Successfully anchored, Sorun's boots ground to a halt on the ground as he looked towards Metal, flying in place due to the Bringer Claw holding it. The two spinning forms of Sonic and Shadow had hit the ground and they were quickly speeding towards them.

Yet another painful wave of exhaustion hit Sorun, and the Bringer Claws began flickering. He looked towards the two approaching hedgehogs, and then back to Metal. *"Just a second. Just gimme a second or two here..."*

He began concentrating intensely on the spectral arms holding the ground and the robot. Their blue glow flared dramatically as the spectral arms re-solidified, though Sorun felt more blood spurt out of his nose right after, and the exhaustion that he felt almost made him collapse. Almost a second later, though, it happened: the two spinning balls had finally reached them, and then split up before they converged on Metal Sonic, held in place by the Bringer Claw. A loud, grinding sound was heard as the two spinning hedgehogs began grinding into either side of its neck, and in almost no time at all there was a loud, metallic *snap!* sound. The two hedgehogs passed each other right as they cut through, and as a result Metal Sonic's severed head hit the dirt below it. The red lights it had for eyes rapidly dimmed to a solid black, and the turbine in its torso cut out completely.

Sighing loudly, Sorun dismissed the Bringer Claws. They disappeared immediately, Metal's limp body falling to the ground as a result. With his own body waving on his feet, Sorun turned back around towards the two Mobians he'd been dragged away from. He saw Antoine and Bunnie standing back there and staring at him with shocked eyes, and nearby he saw that Sonic and Shadow had finally stopped to stand still near the pair. They were giving him similar looks.

He managed to muster the strength to give the four of them a thumbs-up, and then collapsed into unconsciousness.

Awakening wasn't the most pleasant experience for Sorun. Mostly due to the fact that his back felt so stiff, and after a second of groggily feeling his hands around, he understood why: he was in a sitting-up position. Against a metal wall.

Groaning lightly, he opened his eyes and blinked multiple times to clear the blurriness in his vision. The lighting wasn't the best, but he recognized enough of the surroundings to conclude that it was the hangar of the Freedom Fighter Special. From the small hum he heard outside and the subtle vibration of the ship, he figured that

they were still airborne and flying. He must not have been out long, then.

He looked to the right, towards the end of the hangar where the door was. He saw multiple shapes converged over there and talking, Shadow and Sonic's colors standing out the most in the crowd. He sighed at the sight, and tried to stand up, but found himself too exhausted and sat back down against the metal wall.

"H-hey, Sorun, Sorun don't move around too much." He heard the voice, and through great exertion he lifted his head up at the speaker. He lowered it back down when he saw it was just Sally. "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Just tired," he mumbled out as he watched Sally crouch down next to him. His eyes looked towards the group near the back. "Antoine and Bunnie, they're-?"

"They're fine, yes." She reached forwards to brush locks of hair out of Sorun's face. "They... told us what happened down there. What you did."

He didn't make any outward reaction, though the inside was a different matter. "Ah, *great. Just great."* Sorun huffed out a breath and tried moving his head away from Sally's hand. *"Now everybody's gonna like me for saving Antoine's life. I don't have any reinforcement for my 'let's not be friends anymore' claim. Why am I even bothering?"*

Time after time he continued to try and distance himself from them all, but not matter what he did nothing worked. Now he was going around saving lives. Maybe he could just ignore them and eventually it would die down and they'd go back to barely acknowledging him. No, that wouldn't work at all because everybody was already interacting with him. And they'd probably do it more now. All because he'd gone and saved the damn coyote's life.

He didn't regret doing it, but he did not like how this was going make him look in front of everybody. Ironic, considering it was going to make him look great.

"Are you sure you're al- quit moving," she snapped while holding his head still with her hand.

"Leggo of my face, I'm fine." He wanted her to go away, but he didn't even have the energy to push the hand away.

Sally made a "tsk" sound. "Your nose was bleeding a lot," she noted. "What was up with that?"

"Mf. Powers went... wonky," he said. "I got knocked around from that train crash and hit my head a bunch. And using all my powers so much on top of all that took a lot out of me." He tried raising his hand up, but it flopped down on the ground. "Seriously, I'm fine. I'm just wiped."

He still found it curious, though, the way his powers had acted. Even back during that spar with Shadow he hadn't felt anything like that- that painful exhaustion. Never did. He had to wonder if it really was just him getting knocked around by the train that did it, because even while under that boxcar he'd been fighting not to pass out due to all the hits to the head he took. More worryingly, there was also the fact that, according to Aurora and Athair, Chaos energy was basically poison to his body. And he had that stuff running through him all the time now.

So had that been it? Spamming his powers in an injured body weakened it further? Possibly. Made sense, but he didn't know for certain. What he did know was that, besides the exhaustion, he felt fine. Given that, he was a bit worried, but not too much so.

A dissatisfied hum left Sally. "Are you feeling any nausea? Distorted vision?" she questioned him.

Sorun groaned in annoyance, and this time he found the strength to successfully raise his hand up to brush her hand away. "I don't have a concussion, man." She finally relented and took her hand away, much to his relief. "Hey, so... the train..." he started.

Sally gave him a sad nod. "Yeah, it... it's gone." Her mouth lowered into a deep frown. "Right now our best guess is that Eggman knew we were using the train to deliver medical supplies and sent Metal Sonic to disrupt it. We're gonna send a team back later to salvage what we can, but... the crash looked really bad. A lot of the medicine looked like it was lost in the crash, and I don't know what we're gonna do about the train." She shook her head along with letting out a frustrated sigh. "We came as fast as we could when we got the call from Bunnie- Tails and Rotor practically melted the Special's engines- but it was gonna be too late no matter how fast we got there. I'm just glad you, Bunnie, and Antoine made it out."

"Yeah," Sorun quietly agreed. "So... the rest of those people waiting for the medicine...?" He looked back up at Sally, but when he saw the somber look she gave him, he immediately understood and lowered his head back down.

So they just weren't going to get it, then. Couldn't. Not when the delivery system was shot and all if not most of the medicine was destroyed. He didn't doubt Knothole would be fine, they wouldn't be donating those supplies if they couldn't spare them even at Sally's request, but the rest of the settlements they hadn't manage to deliver to simply couldn't get them now.

"All because one guy sent a robot... damn it all." He kept seeing them- the faces of all those Mobians they delivered that medicine to. All those smiles and gratefulness that they had all given Sorun that, he began to realize, had felt nice. They'd only made two out of the five deliveries. Not even half. So many more Mobians than the ones he'd seen that wouldn't be getting those medical supplies they'd been depending on. *"Damn Eggman... that guy really is screwed in the head. Messing up all those people's lives... for what? For his damn 'win'? Fuckin' maniac."*

The more he thought on it, the more he realized how bad he felt over all of it. It surprised him, but it did. It surprised him because he didn't think he'd ever feel so bad over them like this.

"... Well, anyways, I need to go." Sally rose up to her feet. "Please try not to strain yourself too much. You're getting checked out by a doctor when we get back to Knothole."

"Aw, what?" Sorun looked up at Sally in protest. "Come on, Sally, I don't-"

"Doctor. That's an order." She didn't even let him argue the point before turning around and walking off. Sorun huffed in outrage, but otherwise just sat back against the wall while closing his eyes.

He didn't even get thirty seconds of peace before he heard two sets of footsteps approach, with one set clanking against the metal flooring. He slowly opening his eyes, and look up to his right. It was Antoine and Bunnie, both looking down at him in concern.

"... I'm never going on a train with you two again," he said in a blank tone. They both tiredly grinned at that, with Antoine in particular chuckling a bit.

"Eet iz good seeing you well, mon ami," the coyote said to him. He saw Sorun try to get up on his feet, and he reached down to offer the human a hand. Sorun stared at it for a full five seconds before sighing and accepting it. "We were all being worried something was seriously hurted when you collapsed like zat," Antoine continued as he pulled the him up.

"Nah, I'm fine," Sorun assured them, steadying himself as he finally got up on his feet. "Just, you know, train crash and fighting the super killer robot. Really took it out of me. Heh." He looked into Antoine's eyes. "Are *you* fine?" he asked. "You had a bunch of close calls with the... the Sonic robot. Thing. You good?"

"Oui, I am fine, thank you for ze concern," Antoine assured him with a nod of his head. "It was quite ze showing, though, non? All of ze swords appearing left and right around me, I was practically in a daze from it all! And when I saw you trapped under ze train car and Bunnie cutting you out, I understood what it was you were doing, but I will admit zere were some moments you were having me worried!"

"Yeah, I know, I cut it close a lot," Sorun muttered. "I didn't mean to scare you. I was just trying to keep you in one piece." He glanced towards Bunnie and gave the tiniest of grins. "I mean, come on. You know how bad Bunnie would have messed me up if I let her fiance die out there? I was throwing those swords like a madman because I was more scared of her than the robot." A total lie, but he would rather they think that than know he legitimately didn't want Antoine to die.

Unfortunately, he was pretty sure that they saw through the lie. Because Bunnie was giving him a knowing smile, and Antoine was leaning in close. Dangerously close to physical contact level.

"Hey, man, come on, you don't- and he's doing it," Sorun whispered to himself when he felt Antoine wrap one of his arms over his shoulder in a one-armed hug. He tried squirming out of it, but he was too exhausted, so with a sigh he just gave into it.

"I must be thanking you from ze bottom of my heart, mon ami. I would not be being here if it were not for you," Antoine said in the most sincerest tone Sorun had ever heard from the coyote. It made Sorun turn his eyes away from him. "You are a true Freedom Fighter now, what with ze fighting of ze robots and ze saving of lives-"

"Yeah, cool, can you get off please?" Sorun asked in a clipped voice. Chuckling sheepishly, Antoine obliged him and stepped back.

"Ah, pardon moi," he apologized. "I am forgetting you are ze shy type. But we will be working on that, non?"

Sorun inhaled deeply to calm himself, but otherwise said nothing.

"But even zo," Antoine continued, "would it, perhaps, be too much in inviting you to le dinner with me and Bunnie tonight? I am thinking that after today-"

"Can't. Sally's making me see a doctor," he interrupted. Which alone probably wasn't a good reason, as he doubted a little doctor visit would lead all the way into the night, but he didn't want to reinforce the friendship perception that was slowly building up outside of Sorun's control. Which was really unfortunate seeing as how Antoine was probably the one making that dinner. So it would probably be amazing if those rations he'd had said anything.

Antoine's shoulders slumped in disappointment at that. "Ah, I see. It iz fine." He turned around. "Well, if you are changing your mind you are welcome to visit any time! I must be going back now- monsier Shadow was very interest in ze part of you being dragged around, and I was saying..."

The coyote trailed off as he continued walking away until Sorun could no longer hear his voice. He scoffed with a roll of his eyes, and then turned towards Bunnie. "Ah man, that guy's a handful. I don't know how in the world you-"

He was cut off when Bunnie rushed forwards and wrapped him in a bone-crushing hug, making Sorun go rigid immediately.

"Get off. Get off get off get- eh?" He was about ready to try and likely fail to push her off of him, but he stopped when he noticed her body was shaking. He understood why almost immediately, and stopped himself from getting ready to push her. *"Oh, for the... come on, why do I gotta deal with all this emotional junk...?"*

"Thank you." The weight behind the thanks carried more gratefulness than Sorun had ever heard out of anybody else, and it was spoken with more clarity than he'd ever heard Bunnie speak in, which made him pause in muted surprise. She slowly removed herself from him, and he felt even more awkward when he saw that her green eyes were slightly glistening with moistness. "Ah'm sorry,

it's just... Antoine was out there, and I couldn't get there in time, an' if you hadn't gone and defended him like that-"

"Yeah, I got it, it's fine," Sorun quickly said as he waved his hands down. "Please don't cry, man, your arm might rust."

He'd hope that terrible joke would be enough to lighten the mood, and to his immense relief it did, as it caused Bunnie to chuckle and rub the water away from her eyes. "It's all waterproof, but thanks for the concern," she said. "Just... thank you for savin' his life, Sorun. I don't know what I woulda done if he..."

"Y-yeah, look, don't worry about it, Bunnie. Really. I saved his life, you saved mine twice, he saved ours, we all saved each other." He started sounding desperate. "Can we please, *please* just call it good?"

Bunnie looked at him in surprise for a moment, but then she scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Oh, alright. Only since yer such a shy guy."

"I told you I'm not- man, whatever," Sorun sighed. "Seriously though, your arm fine? It took a hit back there."

He pointed towards the robotic appendage in question. It looked fine for the most part, though it appeared there was a metal plate or two slightly out of place. Bunnie rose it up to inspect it, though she didn't look all that concerned.

"Pshaw, this ain't nothin'," she assured Sorun. "Ah've dinged out more dents than this, but if it starts actin' up ah'll have Tails look at it. Don't you worry none."

"Worried? I wasn't worried. Just asking." He crossed his arms and turned his head away, but when he glanced back at Bunnie out of the corner of his eyes he could see that smirk she was sending him. "Don't you have a fiance to go console or something?" he bitterly asked.

She laughed, and then tipped her hat at him. "Right ya are. Seeya 'round, Sorun."

The human teen waved her off as she left to rejoin Antoine, and once she was out of eyesight he looked down towards the side. A Summoned Sword flashed to life besides him, and Sorun frowned as he scrutinized the blade.

"Why did the Summoned Swords juggle the Sonic robot like that?" he internally asked himself, eyes boring into the translucent, blue sword. *"That thing was way heavier than the swords, and they didn't have enough power to pierce it. They just kept breaking. So how-?"*

"Sorun? You holding up alright?"

"Not a single moment of peace..."

He couldn't help the groan that left him when he heard the question, and willed the sword to shatter as he turned to face the voice that addressed him. "It's the question of the hour, Sonic," he said to the blue hedgehog. "Physically, yes, I'm fine. It's not stopping Sally from sending me to a doctor even though *I'm fine* !" he yelled out in the direction towards where Sally had walked off. "Mentally," he continued, "well... I don't know. Still getting over the fact that we failed the mission."

In response, Sonic blinked and shook his head. "Failed the- Sorun, what are you talking about? You didn't fail anything."

An unbelieving chuckle rumbled out of Sorun. "The train got destroyed and probably all the medicine got lost before we could deliver it all," he said. "Sounds like critical mission failure to me considering we were supposed to deliver all that stuff."

"Maybe, yeah, but you saved Antoine's life," Sonic reminded him. "You can't call the mission a failure when you saved him. And we'll figure out something with the medicine. Don't worry."

Sorun regarded Sonic for a second, and then scoffed while turning his head to the side. "Shouldn't have had to save his life to begin with," Sorun grunted. "Shouldn't have let the train get destroyed. If I'd just managed to destroy that robot when I first saw it-"

"Hey, nobody's expecting you to be able to keep up with something like Metal Sonic," the hedgehog interrupted. "Eggman built that thing to keep up with *me* . Sally wouldn't have sent you three out there at all if she knew there was a chance of you running into it." He stepped closer to Sorun. "Don't beat yourself up. You all made it out alive, and you kept Bunnie and Antoine alive and held that thing down while me and Shadow finished it. You did more than enough."

The pale teen wasn't convinced at all by Sorun's words, and it showed on his face from the downcast look he had. "Right. Sonic, I need some time alone. Could you tell everybody else not to bug me for a bit?" He started to rub at his head. "I'm too tired to deal with any more people right now."

"Yeah, sure. Get all the rest you need." He turned to leave, but then stopped and spun his torso back to Sorun while pointing at him. "And listen to Sally about that doctor if you're not feeling well, okay?"

Sorun didn't say anything in response, though he did give Sonic a nod. That proved enough for the hedgehog, who turned back around and went to rejoin the rest of the group in the back of the hanger. Sorun, seeing him leave, had crumpled back against the ship's wall.

"I should be fine with this result? Shut the hell up, Sonic. I'm not fine with this at all." He looked down at his hands, frustration clear on his face. *"My powers couldn't even* touch *that thing. Summoned Swords couldn't hurt it. Bringer Claws couldn't hurt it. I was helpless out there..."*

And that's what frustrated him most. Frustration that he tried to bury down until Sonic had brought the mission up, and now it was all he could think about. For so long he'd kept wondering and worrying if his powers were strong enough or not, and after today his fears that

they weren't were finally confirmed. Fears that were already confirmed by Shadow that he'd desperately tried to ignore.

His powers weren't nearly enough if that fight with Metal Sonic said anything. He couldn't even kill it properly and had to wait for Sonic and Shadow to finish it. What was he supposed to do if Bunnie hadn't managed to call for help? What was he supposed to do if Bunnie and Antoine weren't even there to defend him? How many times did he almost die just because he couldn't do anything against it?

What would have happen to them if Sonic and Shadow hadn't been there? He wouldn't have been able to protect them at all if they'd taken even a second longer. Or even himself, for that matter.

Too many. Too many times he almost died. Too little power. Even now in a more calmed down state he couldn't think of a way he could have gotten out of that situation alive if he were just alone. He almost died because he had too little power. Antoine and Bunnie had almost died. People probably *would* die because he hadn't been strong enough to stop Metal from destroying the train and the medicine it had been carrying.

None of it was enough. He needed more.

"Power. I need more power." His eyes widened at his own thoughts, and Sorun roughly shook his head. *"No, no I don't! I don't need more powers when they'll just keep killing me more and more! B-but all those people, they... egh!"* He gripped his own hair in frustration and anger as images of all those happy Mobians flashed through his mind again. *"It's because I was so weak they... I don't care, this isn't my world! I don't... I don't need more..."* His other hand gripped his hair, and he began shaking. *"I don't want to see people hurt- no, shut up. Just shut up. I don't need more power. Antoine and Bunnie almost died because I didn't have enough- SHUT UP! I don't... I need more... I don't want more power... don't wanna die..."*

Sorun peered out between his locks of hair towards the back of the hangar, where he saw Antoine and Bunnie amidst the small group there. He felt happy over the fact that he saved their lives. He hated himself for feeling happy over them. The dread over his mounting situation and the curse that was keeping him silent frustrated him to no end and the longer it went on the more hopeless he felt. More conflicting thoughts continued to whirl through his mind, and he continued suffering through the ordeal until he grew tired enough to fall back asleep.

A/N- So there I was writing the first half of the chapter when I start getting reviews pointing out Sorun hasn't actually tried circumventing the gag curse yet. In fact it was literally hours after I write in the heart monitor bit I get a new review from Speedhunter talking about a heart monitor. And then I'm just looking from the review to my laptop screen going, "What the- how...?"

At that point I realized that I probably waited a bit too long to have Sorun try and cheat the curse so he could tell everybody everything. Mostly because I had other things I wanted to get out of the way, but then I look back and realize at this point he's had it for weeks almost and I start to see it looks a little weird he only tried now. Hindsight and all that.

Chapter 19

Recursion Error

Episode 19- A trip down cyber lane

So a day had passed since the incident with the train.

The first thing that had happened upon them landing back in Knothole, of course, was that Sorun had to go to the hospital. And he had to have been escorted there by Sonic, half because he didn't know where it was, and half because Sally had caught him trying to sneak away back to Sonic's house. It hadn't been that impressive on an affair; he hadn't even been checked out by the actual doctor that ran that hospital, just a nurse. The hospital itself had been impressive to Sorun. He'd went as far as to say it was more modern than hospitals back on Earth, mostly because he'd seen medical instruments there he'd never even seen before.

As for his injuries, like he'd said, they hadn't been anything to worry about. Just some scrapes and cuts, which itself was amazing considering everything that had happened. So a ton of bandages and an order to take it easy a few days it was.

Suited him just fine. He needed a rest after the small mental breakdown he had that hadn't gone away until he went to sleep last night.

But that was yesterday, and this was today. And today everybody was out salvaging the situation that was the mess that was yesterday. Organizing everything, saving what supplies they could, running and flying whatever they had to all the settlements that hadn't received the medicine- it was going to be a great effort from what Sorun had heard, and they were going to try and do as much as they could, so they'd needed everybody on board. There were

four exceptions, though: Bunnie and Antoine, who were also benched for light injuries and recovering in their own home, and Sorun, hanging out in the HQ for lack of anywhere better to chill.

As for the fourth, that was Nicole. The only Freedom Fighter who chose to stay behind besides those that were injured. She'd claimed it was due to her wanting to work on file compression for some of her personal projects, but now that Sorun was in the lab and actually watching her work, he was starting to have serious doubts.

"What the heck did Eggman make this thing out of, anyways?" Sorun asked as he tossed the heavy, metal head up and down in his hands. He was currently sitting on a metal table in the HQ's lab, legs freely dangling off the edge as he caught the blue head in his hands. He rolled it around to look at the face, and cringed back slightly when he saw the dark, lifeless black eyes of Metal Sonic staring back. "I threw a million swords at this thing and it didn't even flinch."

He didn't know what possessed the others to keep the thing, but they had. Probably hoping to find something out from the robot's body, and he knew Tails wanted to get a look at it eventually. He still felt uncomfortable around it, though, seeing as the day prior it had almost cut his head off. In fact the only reason he could even stand to toss its head around so casually was because Metal was the one that ended up being decapitated. He really liked how that worked out.

In front of him, the monitors on the lab's computer and the small, miniaturized computer connected to it began to flicker. Digital, cube-like textures began to manifest and swirl around until an outline began to form, the digital cubes gathering and coalescing to give the body substance until a familiar brown and black lynx appeared.

"A million swords? Really now?" Nicole looked down and made a showing of dusting off the purple cloth wrapping around her torso. "I was unaware you were capable of producing such an amount."

Sorun rolled his eyes. "Okay, it was more like one-or-two-hundred-ish swords, but I was too busy trying to keep us all alive to count."

She grinned. "Merely a jest, Sorun. In answer to your question, I believe Dr. Eggman outfitted that particular model with a tungsten-carbide alloy specifically designed by him, though I am unsure of the alloy's actual physical limits."

"Yeah, didn't stop Sonic and Shadow from cutting through it," Sorun bitterly muttered. He heard footsteps approach, and looked up as Nicole walked in front of him. "I seriously don't think this is a good idea, Nicole," he said. "Just throwin' that out there."

"I am well aware of your concerns, but I am confident in my own abilities. You have nothing to fear." She held her hands out. "May I please have the head?"

After a moment's consideration, he gently handed her Metal's head. He almost immediately regretted it. "It's just, y'know, it took a lot for us to bring that thing down," Sorun began as Nicole walked the head over to a smaller table near the computer. "And now you wanna plug the thing's head into the computer so you can go rooting around in its brain case. Hard drive. Whatever the robot equivalent of a brain is."

"It's not as if I am completely reactivating Metal Sonic entirely. I am simply supplying it with enough power to enable its basic functions and connecting it into the HQ's computer to give me direct access to its systems." She set the head down on the table. "I would have connected my own body to it, but it's safer to use the computer as a stopgap between me and Metal Sonic as opposed to directly plugging in."

"Wai-wait, safer? Implying there's danger?" Sorun hopped off the table and began approaching Nicole. "Nicole, you said this was gonna be safe!"

"It *is* safe," the lynx assured him as she began attaching cables from the computer into the head. "As I said, I am not supplying it with enough power for anything beyond basic functions. Even if by some chance its defensive software becomes active, I am more than capable of isolating any harmful elements so that I may work in peace." She stopped working on the cables and turned her head towards Sorun. "I am starting to think you do not trust that my own abilities are superior to that of some Badnik AI."

Sorun stopped walking and raised his palms up. "Hold on, I wasn't saying that," he said. "I just... did you even clear this with Sally? You said you were just going to work on file compression for your projects!"

"Yes, I did. And I finished. So now I am working on this." She turned back to the head and began fiddling with the cables. "You didn't raise any objections when I asked you to bring the head back to the lab for me."

Groaning, mostly in annoyance at himself, the teen began running his hand through his dark hair. "That was before I knew you were plugging into the thing, man. I- you- I just- what am I supposed to do if you get hurt or something?" It'd be doubly bad for him seeing as he was the one that had delivered the head to her. He severely wished he'd just said no.

Nicole stopped adjusting the cables momentarily, her green eyes briefly flicking to the teen before going back to the head. "I really do appreciate the concern," she began, "but as I've said, it will be fine."

With a huff, Sorun leaned his back on the wall next the table while crossing his arms. He still wasn't convinced, and made it evident by the way his eyes were widened the slightest amount as he looked at Nicole. "It this really so important?" he asked her. "Important enough to risk you being hurt? Or something happening to the computer?"

"I am just planning on examining its memory and data storage banks so that I may copy any files I find for later analysis," she explained.

"Metal Sonic is one of Dr. Eggman's more favored creations, so he kept him relatively close by at all times. It is not outside the realm of possibility that it may have overheard some of his plans, or even that it had missions files and objectives for any future attacks planned by the Doctor programmed in. Even if there isn't, I'm still curious as to what I will find inside." She glanced up at Sorun. "It is for the good of the Freedom Fighters. Sally won't mind."

"You say that now..." He still didn't agree with this at all. It just seemed so risky, plugging the murder robot in and giving it power. All to search around in its memory for information and data that *might* be there so they could gain intel on any future attacks that it *might* know about so they could all possibly prepare for an attack that *may* happen. He understood why Nicole would pursue something like that, but something about the way she was going about it was making his skin itch.

Then again, he wasn't the expert in these matters. Despite being a video game virtuoso, he wasn't exactly a technological guru. Building a PC, working around files and programs, and taking a single coding class in high school was about all the computer experience he had. And compared to Nicole, a literal AI genius, that difference may as well have been as wide as the distance from Mobius to the sun. So he supposed he had no choice but to trust her word when she said it was safe.

It didn't help the fact he was feeling extremely nervous over Nicole and the fact she was plugging into a murder bot's brain.

Sorun's head tilted back and softly hit the wall, and a long, drawn-out sigh left him. "Alright," he said, "I'll help."

His words caused Nicole to pause, and slowly she removed her hands from the head's electronic innards. "You will?" she asked, surprise lacing her voice.

The teen mumbled something unintelligible under his breath, and then sharply tilted his head downwards to obscure his face with his

hair. "I know, it's shocking me, too. But... I've come to realize that it feels... *nice* helping others," he quietly murmured. "I'm only doing this because it's you. If it was anybody else I wouldn't bother."

He didn't like how he saw that Nicole was remaining motionless from beyond the gaps in his hair. "And why would that be?" she asked him in a curious tone.

Biting his lower lip, Sorun dipped his head down even further. "'Cause... you're my gamer pal," he finally answered as he pushed off the wall. "I can't just leave my gamer pal hanging. That ain't cool. Common gamer etiquette says I gotta help my gamer pal out. It's the rules." He pointed at Nicole. "Speaking of which, you owe me so-oh-oh much time together with the game console for this. I'm talkin' hours here. Maybe all night if I can get enough of those Power Rings together."

Sorun brushed some of his hair out of his face to look at Nicole. Upon seeing the small, bright smile she was giving him, he softly groaned and brushed the hair back over his eyes and face.

"It would truly mean a lot to me if you helped with this," Nicole said, and Sorun had noted her tone took on a more happy note, "but would your injuries not-?"

"Injuries? Pffft, what injuries?" The human teen gestured down to his body. "It's all a bunch of surface stuff, nothin' serious. I'm fine, really."

"In that case, I suppose it would be-"

Nicole would have continued further, though she was cut off when her body began flickering before disappearing entirely mid-sentence.

Upon the lynx disappearing, Sorun sputtered an intelligible noise and took a step back. A second later one of the monitors on the computer flickered to a green screen. A small sprite of Nicole's face appeared in the lower left of the screen, causing the teen to tilt his head.

"My apologies, Sorun. There was not enough power for me to maintain that body." Her voice was coming in clearly through the computer's small speakers, though at the same time her words appeared as text on the computer monitor's green screen. "Could you be so kind as to finish the connections for me?"

The text on the green screen morphed into a white, wireframe diagram of Metal Sonic's head. A digital, 2-D layout of the cables connected to the computer that had yet to be attached to Metal followed this, and some small arrows indicating where the cables had to be plugged in appeared as well. Sorun studied the diagram for a few moments, and then gave a nod.

"Yeah, sure. Man, don't freak me out like that..." Sorun quietly muttered as he walked back to the table. "So what am I actually doing here to help you besides plugging a bunch of wires in?" he asked as he picked up the few cables left unconnected to the head, looking back at the diagram briefly before leaning in towards the head's opening. "You want me to just, like, sit at the computer and press a few buttons when you need me to or what?"

"I had assumed you were volunteering to venture into the digital world along with me," the computer behind him said.

The pale human hummed as he continued rummaging around inside of the robotic head. "Where's the stupid port... wait, what?" He stopped, and then turned his head around to look at the computer. "Digital world? What?"

"We possess a device capable of digitizing living beings so that they may be transported to and interact with the digital world," Nicole elaborated. "It was one of my side projects, actually. Tails helped me build it. I only need a few minutes to set up the proper calibrations and you can join me shortly."

"Uhhh..." The wires being held in Sorun's hand dropped when an overhead light near the back of the lab flipped on. Directly under that light was a large, rectangular server box that was almost as tall as

Sorun was. On top of the box was a small satellite dish pointed forwards. Looking down he could see cables running from the device to the computer, and as he continued to observe all of the diodes and displays began flickering as the machine started to hum to life.

Sorun still needed a minute to process the fact that Nicole was offering to digitize him.

"Wait wait wait, slow down. That's a thing?" He incredulously asked as he pointed at the dish on top of the server box. "You can just- I mean it's not the most crazy thing I've heard here, but really?"

"Of course," Nicole answered him. "You... sound hesitant. If you are uncomfortable with-"

"Nah, nah, it's... it's fine," Sorun hesitantly answered as he turned back to his work on the head. "Always wanted to be jacked into the Matrix. Or ported to Tron. Or some other analogue for going to a digital world." He snapped his fingers. "Oh yeah, Lyoko. That was a thing, too."

There was a pause from Nicole. "Sorun, I have no idea what any of these things you are referencing are."

"Ah, I'd rather not talk about it." With those words, the teen plugged the last wire into the severed head. "Okay, that's the last one. We good?"

"I believe so, yes." There was an electronic hum from the computer, and a second later a hand in a white glove appeared on a screen giving a thumbs-up. At the same time, the satellite dish on top of the server box swiveled towards Sorun. "I have prepared the proper calibrations. Please step in front of the dish so that I may transfer you."

So they were going through with it after all. The way she sounded so casual about performing such a miracle was stunning Sorun more

than the actual prospect of being digitized, but that was yet another thing that was a norm here, he supposed.

Another zany day on Mobius like any other. It's not what he woke up in the morning expecting, or ever expected really, but he was starting to get used to such surprises. Steadily, at least.

Swallowing nervously, Sorun nodded to himself and began to slowly approaching the dish. Getting beamed into the digital world- he'd always fantasized about such a thing growing up, but now that it was about to happen he felt a great amount of trepidation towards the process for fear of something going wrong. But it had to be safe if Nicole was being so casual with it.

He really hoped it was safe.

"So, uh... is this gonna hurt?" Sorun asked as he stopped in front of the dish, wincing slightly when he saw yellow lines of electricity begin converging on its center. "'Cause I really don't-"

Flash!

Flash!

"- think this is healthy for- oh, hey, I'm here."

That had been quicker than he'd anticipated. A lot quicker, actually. All he'd managed to perceive was a yellow flash going off mid-sentence, and immediately after the flash ended he was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere *really* different than anywhere else he'd seen.

He thought that he was outside. Maybe. He couldn't see any walls and the ceiling was so high that it looked like a greenish void leading on forever with no sun, stars, or moon to light it, so he supposed it was likely outside. The ground was even more bizarre: completely flat and glowing in a neon green color, with white lines running in a

checkered pattern throughout it all giving it a wireframe texture. There were large, box-like buildings all around too, some close by while others were far away, and all varying in size from a few stories to being so high they breached the dark green sky, and all with that same green, wireframe texture.

It certainly looked like what he assumed a virtual world would look like.

"Neato," Sorun murmured to himself as he looked around at the virtual landscape around him, a small amount of awe flowing through his mind. "Wow, this is really crazy. Going inside a virtual world. Heh heh. Man, the guys at home woulda flipped if- huh, what the- WHAT THE!?"

He saw his hand go past his vision, and then immediately brought his hand back to look at it as awe gave way to panic. It was definitely his hand. Probably. The color and shape was vaguely there, but his hand, and the rest of his body when he looked down, was formed at such a low resolution that his entire form looked like a blurry, misshapen mess. He wasn't even sure he could call the hand a hand when he looked at it a second time; it looked more like a sharpened appendage that had lines going through it to give the hand the appearance of having fingers.

"Why do I look like I came out of a video game from the nineties...?" He heard a small flash of light next to him, prompting Sorun to turn his pixelated head towards the source. He saw Nicole standing there with a perturbed expression on her face as she looked at Sorun. "Nicole, what is this?!" Sorun demanded as he waved his arms at her.

"I am unsure." She was still staring wide-eyed at him, though at the same time two blue rectangles with text flooding across their surfaces appeared in the air to either side of the lynx. "Please don't panic. I'm looking at the issue now."

"Don't panic? Nicole, my hand's a single polygon!"

"I am sure you are perfectly capable of moving with that hand regardless of your pixel count." A small hum left her as she focused her gaze down at the screens. "Ah, I see. The digitizer was calibrated towards a Mobian's physiology. It's a good thing you have a mammalian body and are relatively close to Mobian biology. I could have accidentally turned you inside-out."

Sorun made a small "eep" sound and backed up a step. "You couldn't have thought to check that beforehand?"

She stopped typing on the screens momentarily, and then looked up at Sorun. He didn't know what to think when he saw a small smirk appear on her face.

"It's just a little bit of humor, Sorun. I wouldn't have digitized you if there was a chance of something going horribly wrong like that." She continued typing. "Although that said, it does seem the digitizer needed to be recalibrated due to your biology. We had never digitized a human before, so I was unaware such an adjustment was needed. I'm making the proper changes now."

A winded breath left Sorun. "Kinda a morbid joke for you, isn't it?" he asked as rings of blue light began to surround him.

"Humor is still a new concept for me. Talking with you during our sessions has helped me further my knowledge of the concept." She frowned. "Did I not do it well?"

"N-nah, nah, it was fine. I just didn't see it coming." Sorun looked down as a pillar of blue light engulfed him, ending seconds later as the blue rings that had surrounded him vanished. "Oh, thanks," he said as he examined his hand. Just enough resolution to look like the real thing.

He didn't remember wearing something with sleeves, though.

Cocking his head to the side, Sorun looked down at himself. His clothes below the torso were the same as those in reality, though

above his waist was a different story: the blue shirt was still there, but the sleeveless blue hoodie Honey had made for him was absent. In its place was a thin, blue coat with a long coattail cut into three segments that reached all the way to his ankles. An opened, blue coat with light blue, almost white patterns going down each side of the coat's breasts, the left ending at the collar and the right going all the way to the waist. Patterns that resembled a double helix made from thorny vines with a third, straight line piercing directly down helixes' centers.

Sorun knew what the coat was immediately. He was intimately familiar with the coat and those patterns, having controlled the video game character who'd worn it for such an obscene amount of time. He just couldn't understand why he was wearing it.

"Vergil's coat? Huh?" He looked down at the coat for a few more moments, and then looked up to Nicole with a questioning look on his face. "What happened with my clothes?" he asked her.

Nicole lowered her hands from the floating screens, causing them to disappear. She stepped closer to Sorun afterwards while giving the coat a scrutinizing look. "Part of the process of digitization is your mind being reformatted to interpret the digital world in a way you can comprehend. From your perspective, this would mean that the appearance of some things could be... fluid, depending on your state of mind. Your personal appearance can very possibly be affected by your subconscious, though for what reason it formed that coat is beyond me."

"Mm. I'm not too worried about it, then." More shenanigans from his subconscious. He should have expected it, but as long as it was just a coat, he wouldn't think twice about it. "Okay," Sorun continued, "so where are we going?"

The AI nodded to him, and then turned to the side while pointing off in the distance. "Currently we are located in the digital representation of the HQ computer's mainframe. Our objective is the software located inside of the internals of the Badnik's head we connected to

the computer. We will have to make our way to those connections and traverse the cables in order to reach the head. It should be easy from there."

"Oookay..." It sounded simple enough to his ears. Get to the cables and ride through the cables to the head. "So where're the cables?"

"Where I'm pointing."

Sorun stopped glanced at Nicole, and then rolled his eyes as he peered out towards the green, digital horizon. He could vaguely make out large, black tunnels that he supposed *may* be giant cables. Or digital representations of cables, at the very least. But they looked miles and miles away.

"Ugh, man, those look super far away," Sorun complained as he looked back to Nicole. "We seriously gotta walk all the way over there?"

"That will not be necessary. I will be providing a vehicle for the both of us."

"Huh, what? Vehicle?" He turned back to Nicole, but she had already left his side. He turned around, and saw she had retreated a few steps and was holding her hand out towards the ground.

Some of the green, wireframe ground began to fragment into small, cubed pieces underneath Nicole's hand. They began to lift up and flow around, the sides of the cubes snapping and forming together into a vague, saucer-like shape. As soon as all of the cubes came together, the lines and seams of the connections began to fade while the sharp edges began to round out and morph along with the colors of the shape Nicole made.

Eventually, what had once been a conglomeration of green cubes turned into a small, floating metal saucer with two seats on its top. Nicole hopped up the saucer into the right seat, and then looked

down expectantly at Sorun. The human blinked up at the saucer, and then sighed as he climbed up towards the seat next to her.

"Okay, I get it. AIs get to do cool AI stuff in the digital world," Sorun thought as he climbed to the top of the saucer. "Cool ride," he commented as he sat down in the seat next to her, leaning back into the seat while interlacing his fingers behind his head. "So how far to the cables?" he asked.

Nicole regarded Sorun for a second, and then reached forwards to grasp at a small steering wheel in front of her seat. She turned it, and by extension, the entire floating saucer turned towards the direction where she had pointed to prior. "At the speed this vehicle goes, approximately ten minutes and forty-six seconds," she informed him as she pressed forwards on the wheel. The saucer began flying forwards, fast enough that Sorun felt his body press slightly into the chair. "The time it will take to traverse the cables is another matter entirely, though we will reach that point soon enough."

"If you say so." Feeling his fingers going numb from being forcibly pressed into the seat, Sorun removed his fingers and, with some effort, sat back forwards. He then turned to the side, where he soon rested his arms at the edge of the saucer while leaning forwards into them to gaze out into the passing landscape.

He wanted to say it was a nice view, but quite honestly with how fast they were going combined with everything having that same green, wireframe texture, it was all beginning to blur together for him. Enough to the point that all the green whizzing past him was starting to make Sorun feel unwell, so after a couple of minutes of staring out into the digital world he pushed his body back into the saucer and leaned back into his seat. Afterwards he glanced at Nicole, who seemed half-focused on driving. Even so, he could tell from the way her eyes were half-lidded that she seemed as bored as he was. Wasn't hard to see why considering she was driving them in a straight line.

"I guess I should start a conversation. But man, I don't know what to lead in with," Sorun absentmindedly gazed upwards at the empty, green sky in thought. *"Geez, what does she actually like? Every time we talk over video games it's always just over a bunch of random stuff on our minds. I don't actually know what she likes."* He glanced at her from the corner of his eyes, pursed his lips, and looked back forwards. *"Damn, does it even matter? It's just talking. Start with something, anything."* Impatiently, he began tapping at his knees. *"I got nothin'."*

"So," he heard the lynx from besides him begin, "what is your impression of the digital world?"

"Oh thank god, she started it," Sorun internally cheered before turning his head to give her his attention. "It's a lot more green than I thought it would be," he told her, and then immediately had to resist the urge to slap himself. *"'A lot more green than-' man, what the fuck kinda answer is that?"*

To his utter disbelief, the answer brought a small smile to Nicole's face. "I found myself saying the exact same thing when I first witnessed the real world with my own eyes," she said.

"Run with it, Sorun, run with it." Coughing lightly into his fist, the teen turned his whole body slightly to more face Nicole's. "What made you want to make that body, anyways?" he asked.

"You could say I had a... different perspective on things," she answered him. "I remember a time where all my experiences were nothing but raw data and information provided to me by the voices of everybody else, mainly Sally, who almost always carries my handheld body, as well as any digital data I had to sift through whenever I was plugged into something. Through my experiences with everybody, over time my computational matrix grew and learned and I evolved what you would perceive as a personality." The little smile she'd had on her face fell to a neutral expression. "But it... wasn't a full experience, as you would probably say. I never experienced what everybody else experienced in the real world. True

sights, sounds, colors... among other things. But that had ended when there was an incident where me and Sally briefly switched bodies."

Sorun continued to silently listen to Nicole, though he tilted his head at that last statement. "Eh? How'd that happen?"

"Rotor was running an experiment with Chaos energy with me and Sally stepped on a loose wire," she quickly answered. It elicited a disbelieving scoff from Sorun. "Walking around in her body proved to be a... enlightening experience for me. At the time it had seemed like I had stepped into a completely different world which, I suppose, wasn't entirely inaccurate. The sheer amount of sensations was almost overwhelming. The sights, the sounds, the feeling of touch, the wind blowing on my face... I'd even felt true emotions for the first time," she quietly added. "It did not last long; Sally and I were placed back into our proper bodies shortly afterwards, though some things remained with me. The emotions I had experienced were imprinted into my computational matrix, and as a result I was able to form my own emotions. Learning to feel as others felt was wonderful on its own, but simply put, I wanted more. I wanted to experience the real world again. So I began developing my own body." She sighed, and picked one of her hands up from the wheel to look at it.

"For the most part, my efforts were a success," Nicole continued, "though the power requirements needed to maintain this body of mine in the real world are impractical. There was a time where my handheld body only had enough power to support it for a few minutes on a weekly basis. A few weeks before you arrived on Mobius, actually, I had created the blueprints for the modification to my body to utilize Power Rings and had Tails build and install it for me, and while it has assuredly been a marked improvement, I can't help but long for something more." She put her hand back on the wheel, and then fully turned to Sorun while smiling again. "But otherwise, I have been incredibly grateful for the experiences afforded to me thus far. I must especially thank you, Sorun. Nobody else has endeavored to spend as much time with my physical form

as you, even if it is just to play games. I know gathering all of those Power Rings must be a hassle."

Sorun shook his head while giving a polite smile. "No, it's fine. To be honest you're the only fun one I can play games with. Not to demean everybody else, but they're all pretty terrible at games compared to us." He coughed into his hand again. "But yeah, don't worry about the rings. It's not a problem at all."

A total lie. Those rings were incredibly hard to come by, and sometimes when he asked Sally for some she outright refused because they didn't have any to spare. Apparently, though, Power Rings spawned out of a lake for some reason. He didn't know why, but after asking around he'd found the lake and managed to roughly nail down the times they rose up so he could snatch a ring if he was really hankering for a session with Nicole.

It was a pain in the ass getting those things, really, but it was more than worth it.

"Well, regardless, I appreciate all the time you have spent with me," Nicole finished.

Well. That had certainly been more than what he'd been expecting when he'd asked such a simple question. He'd meant something completely different when he asked, so she didn't really answer anything he asked, but that was still a lot of perspective she'd given him. And he found himself appreciating the story, oddly enough. Being moved by the simple fact she'd shared so much with him. It was oddly touching.

It still didn't answer his original question, though.

"Uh, Nicole..." Sorun began to nervously drum his fingers together. "When I asked what made you want to make that body, I meant, like... why you chose a lynx body," he elaborated.

"... Oh." Almost looking embarrassed, Nicole turned her head back forwards. "I apologize. I didn't mean to bore you with-"

"No no no! I wasn't bored at all!" Sorun denied, quickly leaning closer while shaking his head as panic shot through him. "Ah, jeez, that isn't what I meant at- look, I really enjoyed all that and I'm glad you shared it with- oh, man, please don't take what I said the wrong way."

Nicole looked back towards Sorun, and when she saw the incredibly flustered and desperate look he had on his face, she made an amused smile with a hint of relief mixed in. "Do not worry. I understand," she assured him. "It is alright."

"Ooooh, thank goodness." Sighing, Sorun collapsed back into his seat while covering his face with his hand. "So, lynx?" he asked again, voice muffled by his palm while he looked at the AI from between his fingers.

"I simply chose a form that was most pleasing to me," she answered. "Why do you ask? Do you find this form unappealing to look at?"

Crossing his arms, Sorun faced back forwards away from her. "I didn't say that," he said. "And I don't think that."

"Hm." Sorun's foot began to tap on the saucer's floor when she turned towards him more. "Do you know why your subconscious created that coat you are wearing?" she suddenly asked him.

Some of the tension released from Sorun's shoulders, and rather shyly he turned his head in the opposite direction of Nicole. "Don't laugh, but it's from a video game character I really like from back home," he answered.

She actually did laugh a single time at that, and when his head snapped back to shoot her a glare, she laughed a second time. "Forgive me. I did not realize it was such a sensitive subject for you," she said with a teasing smile while facing back forwards. "You must

really have liked this character if your subconscious is basing your mental attire off of theirs."

"It's basing a lot more than clothes off Vergil," Sorun thought with an audible sigh. "Yeah, I guess." He held up one of his arms and tugged on the coat's sleeve with the other. "Hey, think this'll come back into the real world along with the rest of me?"

To his great disappointment, Nicole shook her head. "It is simply a digital representation of your mental image of yourself. Your real clothes will be returned along with the rest of you when you go back to the real world."

"Aw, man." Sorun made a pout. "That's a shame. I really like this coat."

In response to this, Nicole turned her green eyes towards the coat. She only studied it and the designs on the coat for a single second, after which she turned back forwards and at the same time began pulling the wheel back. "We've arrived," she announced.

The saucer began slowing down rapidly, and then halted entirely. The pair immediately stood up and hopped out of the saucer afterwards, with the vehicle disassembling back into green cubes which fell down and dissolved back into the ground. Sorun watched a small spectacle for a few moments, and then turned around and began following closely behind Nicole.

They'd stopped in front of, in essence, a large, black, tubular tunnel that lead right into the ground. The inside was completely dark, though occasionally Sorun could see arcs of blue electricity spark off in the interior, and in those brief flashes of light he could see a myriad of wires lining the tunnel's walls.

"So we gotta take this to reach Metal Sonic's head?" Sorun asked as he traced a finger along the tunnel's edge. He looked forwards, and saw that a short distance into the dark tunnel it curved downwards into a straight drop. "So, uh... how does this work?"

Nicole stepped besides him. "We simply drop in," she explained. "We'll be funneled into Metal's systems and we'll be able to work in from there."

"... Drop in... right..." Slowly putting one foot in front of the other, Sorun slowly began entering the tunnel while keeping one hand running along the wall. "There isn't a less, I don't know, extreme way of going in?" he asked her as he neared the edge of the tunnel's drop. "We seriously gotta drop in?"

"The only thing connecting the head to the computer is the cables we inserted, but this specific cable is the only hardline we can use to reach the head's system." Right as Sorun stopped at the edge of the drop, Nicole halted right at his backside. "I assure you it is completely safe, Sorun."

Gulping, Sorun peered down into the hole. The completely black, seemingly bottomless hole that had every instinct in him screaming that he shouldn't jump down it and that it would mean death. He was so afraid of jumping down into the bottomless hole that Nicole's words were lost on him.

Shaking his head, Sorun took a step back. "Y-yeah, you know, I think I'm good." He'd inadvertently backed into Nicole, who stopped him by pressing both of her palms against his back. "I mean, you said it was safe anyways, right? I'll just wait here for you to come back and-"

"Sorun, it's not dangerous. You'll be fine," Nicole stated in a flat tone. "From your perspective the fall won't even take a second. We're already here, so just go in."

"I-I would, you know, seriously, but-but I really don't think-"

He'd heard a small sigh from behind him, and he could of sworn he felt Nicole roll her eyes at him. Then she'd pushed him.

He didn't even have time to register the betrayal before he fell in.

"Uuuugh..."

Well, Nicole had been right about one thing: the fall had taken less than a second. He'd fell in, and then he hit solid ground relatively pain-free. The problem was that, during that half-second, he'd felt his body being propelled at a speed so fast that, despite how short it had been, he felt like his eyeballs were spinning, his stomach had been wrung out, and his brain had been shaken. The nausea he was experiencing wasn't helping, either.

With another groan he rolled onto his back, looking up to see a tall, dark wall with the hole of the other end of the cable sticking out from it. Nicole's body dropped out of the hole right after, though she didn't look nearly as worse for wear as he did.

"Ugh, why'd you shove me...?" he moaned out as he sat upwards. "Agh, jeez I feel like I just got squeezed through a drinking straw..."

Nicole grimaced, and then looked to the side to avoid eye contact with Sorun. "You were being difficult, and Sally often says that helping others only requires a shove in the right direction. As for the nausea, your mind did just travel at sub-light speeds through the cable into the head's systems. It should pass momentarily."

He actually was starting to feel better now that she mentioned it, but it was still with some difficulty that Sorun rose up to his feet. "So there's these things called idioms," Sorun muttered to her as she reached down to help him up. "Dunno if you've ever heard of them, Nicole, but they're not meant to be taken literally."

"I'm perfectly aware of what an idiom... I see." Expression turning sheepish, Nicole placed her hands behind her back after helping Sorun up and stepped back. "I apologize. It was not my intention to cause stress to-"

"It's fine, don't worry about it." Truthfully he was a little upset, but it was rapidly starting to fade from his mind as he began to take a look

around at the surroundings. "More importantly, is this it?"

Nicole looked back at him, and then nodded. "Yes. This would be the digital representation of Metal Sonic's internal systems."

It was a lot more dreary than the inside of the HQ computer's mainframe, Sorun would say that much. The overall structure was the same- wireframe floors and structures everywhere, though the structures were much more shorter, numerous, and clumped together in some half-baked representation of a cityscape. And gray, too. The floors and structures were all a dark gray color while the sky was a deep, endless dark blue.

Even something as subtle as the general mood of the place felt different. Sorun hadn't felt anything inside the mainframe other than his own wonder at stepping into a virtual world, but here there was something else. A sinister undertone to the atmosphere that had Sorun on edge.

Such was the mind of a killer robot, he supposed.

"You're absolutely sure this place is safe?" Sorun asked once more as Nicole walked past him, prompting the human to fall closely behind. "I don't mean to second-guess you or anything, but something about this place..."

"It does seem rather off, doesn't it?" Nicole muttered in agreement as the two rounded the corner of a large, block-like structure. "I understand your concerns, but just as I said, there is nothing to fear. I'm not feeding enough power into Metal Sonic's head to even power its subroutines, never mind its primary drivers. It shouldn't even be conscious at the moment, so we don't need to fear any anti-software protection programs being activated." She pointed to the structure they'd just passed. "For example, the building back there is the primary driver for Metal's optical systems. They're currently inert due to lack of power."

Sorun looked behind him and at the building Nicole was gesturing to. It looked like just another wireframe, featureless block like everything else around. "I'll... take your word for it." He looked back to Nicole. "So we're just going after his memory centers, right?" he questioned. "Quick in and out?"

"It shouldn't take too long, yes." She looked back ahead. "Actually, I believe that is it over there."

The lynx's walking speed increased, forcing Sorun to speed up his own pace just to keep up with her. He looked ahead towards the structure in question, though there wasn't much he could say about it: a square, flat wireframe building pressed up against dozens of identical squares to form a rectangular, segmented building that was sitting in the open at the edge of a small plaza.

"Er... cool," Sorun commented as the pair slowed to a stop once approaching the structure. "So these are the memory banks?"

"Yes." Nicole rose her hands up to her sides, and the floating computer screens appeared once more. "All of the security countermeasures are offline as expected due to the low influx of power, though the files themselves seem to be locked behind a password," she mumbled as she began typing. "I imagine the files are encrypted, too, though I can get to work on that later. For now I just wish to make a copy of all the data I can and bring it back to the HQ for further analysis."

"Choice, choice." The human teen crossed his arms, nervously tapping his foot while looking around at the gray, maze-like structures surrounding them. The only sounds to break up the eerie environment was the tapping of his foot and the tapping sounds of Nicole typing, though even this was beginning to wear on him. "Is the password going to be a problem for-?"

"I've bypassed it."

The curt response caught Sorun off guard, who sputtered slightly and turned his back to Nicole fully to continue to observe the surrounding, bleak area. "Great," he said. "Don't wanna rush you or anything, Nicole, but I'm not gonna lie, this place is giving me the creeps."

"It should just be a few more moments... hm?" Nicole's typing paused as she focused in on the floating screen to her left. "What is... oh no-!"

The sky turned from blue to red.

Sorun, who was oblivious towards the reason for the change in color, gazed up at the sky with a simple, perturbed look on his face. Nicole looked much more panicked as she began to rapidly tap away at her screens, and when Sorun looked over to her direction, he began to grow more worried himself as a result of seeing Nicole's expression.

"Er, Nicole?" he called. "Everything ok-?"

"There was a trap in the files. A program that detects unauthorized- why would it only activate in conjunction with low power levels!?" The lynx's typing grew to furious speeds. "Don't tell me when Eggman programmed this thing he actually anticipated... he designed something that specific!?"

"Alright, everything's not okay, then." Sorun's worry began to increase tenfold when one of the blocky buildings on the other side of the plaza began to shift from a gray color to a blue color. "Hey, that building over there is lighting up." He backed up so that he was next to Nicole. "Nicole, what's the problem here?"

"There's a program that detects unauthorized access to Metal's memory banks, but it only triggers if it detects low levels of power within Metal Sonic's systems," Nicole rapidly explained as she continued typing. "It must be a failsafe countermeasure in the event we would try something like this, but I can't see what good that program will do unless-" Her fingers snapped to a halt for a quarter

of a second, after which Nicole's eyes widened dramatically as her fingers began typing again. "It's to activate a backup power supply," she realized.

The blue building across the way began shifting to red. "So that's bad?" Sorun guessed.

"He put a backup power supply unit in Metal's head just in case somebody tried accessing the files while it was disconnected from its main power supply located in its body." She didn't even look towards Sorun as she explained, as the AI's green eyes were completely affixed to her screens. "The program I tripped is attempting to activate it in response to my intrusion. I'm trying to head it off, but it's so hardwired into the system-!"

Zap!

Both the AI's and the human's head perked up at the crackling, zapping sound of electricity. They slowly turned towards the center of the plaza where the source of the noise originated, though both had varying reactions. Nicole's irises had shrunken a small amount, while Sorun's face went even paler than normal.

Metal Sonic was standing there. Or something that looked like it at least, as all of its body including the metal bits were glowing a bright, neon blue color. The only exception to the blue coloring was the two red irises, both glowing so brightly they were practically flaming. And to Sorun's rapidly increasing fright they were locked onto him.

The first thing that came to Sorun's mind was to shoot a sword at it, so naturally Sorun formed a Summoned Sword at his side. He noticed from the corner of his eye there was something amiss with the sword's shape, and he did a double-take when he saw that the blue sword had taken on a blocky, pixelized texture. He shook his head at the virtual Summoned Sword, uncaring of its appearance, and willed it to fire at Metal Sonic.

Somehow, he wasn't surprised that the sword never hit. Metal Sonic's claws had reached up to snatch the sword out of the air right before it impacted. Once it grabbed the sword, it squeezed down and caused the sword to shatter into a cloud of disappearing pixels.

"Why do I even bother?" Sorun growled under his breath as he took a step back. "What am I looking at here, Nicole?"

"It's Metal Sonic's anti-intrusion software program," she responded in a low voice. "The backup power supply activated by the program I tripped turned it on. Sorun, stand back."

He didn't have any issues complying with that order, and began to rapidly backpedal right behind Nicole. As he did this, green pixels began to swirl around the lynx's hands, who then clapped the two appendages together as the digital Metal Sonic shot forwards.

A great, green wall completely made of transparent, green cubes formed right in front of the virtual robot, which it slammed against. The wall expanded and grew into a dome that soon encapsulated the entire plaza, trapping the program within. Nicole lowered her hands afterwards, face slightly exerted as she took a step backwards.

"I partitioned him away behind that wall," she explained to Sorun. "I don't know how long it's going to hold it, but it should be long enough for us to go back and remove the connections from the head."

Blinking cautiously, Sorun kept near to Nicole as he continued to examine the Metal Sonic program and the green dome it was trapped behind. The program was banging its claw against the green wall in a seemingly angry manner, but from what he saw the wall of green cubes wasn't sustaining any damage. "How long do you need to extract the files?" he slowly asked.

"Just a bit longer," the lynx muttered back as she refocused on her screens. "Why?"

Worryingly, the Metal Sonic program began glowing a brighter blue color. Sorun noticed this immediately, and began pointing towards it. "'Cause it's doing that."

Nicole looked up from the screens just in time to see the program resembling Metal Sonic's form distort and warble, and then watched as its body split in two. The two halves distorted even more for a brief moment, and then began to reshape themselves and become more clear. Soon enough, there were two Metal Sonics standing behind that dome, staring at the pair with angry, red eyes. And right afterwards they began to split apart to divide themselves again.

With a hint of frustration in her eyes, Nicole closed the two screens floating next to her. "It's attempting circumvent the partition barrier I made by running a recursion protocol to-"

"It's making copies of itself to get past the green thing, got it!" His patience thoroughly thinned, he stomped forwards while gently but firmly shaking Nicole's shoulder. "Look, we gotta get outta here pretty quick."

"I'm aware of this. I just now finished copying the files I found." Nicole glanced back towards the dome. By now there were dozens of glowing Metal Sonics inside of the green dome, pounding away at the walls. And they were making progress, too, as small cracks were beginning to form along the dome's wall. "Come on. We'll depart the same way we came in."

Sorun's face fell slightly. "Aw man, we gotta go back through that- alright!" His face picked back up when Nicole shot him a glare. "Alright, let's go!"

The pair wasted no further time, the both of them turning around and taking off. Or Nicole had taken off, at least- evidently being an AI in the digital world came with more perks than just being able to build stuff out of nothing and manipulate the environment by typing stuff. She could fly, too. Just float a few inches off of the ground and fly away. Sorun hadn't even been able to say anything in response

before she grabbed his wrist and dragged him away along with her as she flew back towards the access cable they had used to travel into Metal's head.

At any other given time with anybody else Sorun would have raised a lot of objections to this, but with an army of killer robots at their back that he couldn't even touch, he couldn't find it in himself to raise any argument towards it. So he'd let Nicole take his wrist without any fuss so they could fly away.

But, right as they saw the cable-tunnel and began to approach it, something had stretched out in front of their path. A large, red, transparent wall made of cubes, not unlike the dome Nicole had used to trap the Metal Sonic programs. They touched down on the ground right in front of it, Nicole still tightly holding onto Sorun's wrist as she glared up at the red wall blocking their path.

The destructive sound of a wall shattering nearby behind them was not doing Sorun's nerves any favors.

"Metal Sonic's security systems input a firewall on our exit. It must have noticed the foreign intrusion." Nicole lifted up her free hand as a blue screen appeared in front of it. "I can get past it, but it will take some time."

Looking down at the digital pathway they had just flown down from, Sorun's eyes widened. "Nicole, we ain't got time."

"I just need-"

Crash!

The loud crashing sound had jarred Nicole's concentration, and forced her to look away from her screen towards the source of the noise. Her eyes widened when she saw a wall of digital Summoned Swords filling up the street behind them, with multiple clawed, robotic appendages reached out from the gaps between the swords and

handles towards them. Sorun, standing there with his free hand outstretched towards the wall, looked back towards Nicole.

"That's only gonna hold them for a few seconds," he said, "so we gotta go now."

"Sorun-" A portion of the wall disintegrated in a flash of blue cubes, and when the AI saw multiple Metal Sonics beginning to squeeze through, she sighed while closing the computer screen. "Very well..."

She waved her hand in front of them right as the wall of swords collapsed entirely. Her own makeshift wall, green and made of cubes just like the red one in front of them, manifested and spread out to separate the dozens of Metal Sonics from the pair. Already, though, the dozens of copies were pounding away at the wall, making it crack. Nicole's grip on Sorun's wrist tightened, and the teen felt his body be pulled away as Nicole took flight away from the programs once more.

It had taken tens of minutes- though to Sorun it had felt like hours- but they'd finally evaded the mob of Metal Sonics hunting them down. Minutes upon minutes of Nicole flying them all over the virtual, cityscape-like design of the virtual world inside of Metal Sonic's programming, diving and weaving through the maze-like structures as either Sorun or Nicole occasionally constructed a wall behind them to momentarily slow down the horde chasing them.

It had been highly stressful, but somehow, through some combination of using the walls and Nicole's navigation, they seemed to have gotten away. He'd attribute a large part of it to the fact that she could fly *fast* while in the virtual world, too. Faster than those Metal Sonics had been going. Sorun chalked it up to her AI nature, but he was less about questioning that and more about being thankful that all the sharp turns she'd made hadn't given him whiplash and snapped his neck at some point.

But they'd gotten away. For the moment, at least. It was likely the software security programs were still searching around, but for now the two of them were in the clear, having taken cover in a narrow, alley-like alcove between the blocky structures underneath the approximation of a large street. Sorun was standing just outside the alley, hunched over with his hands resting on his knees as he gulped in large breathes of air. Or whatever the virtual equivalent of air was in the virtual world.

He had to wonder if he even needed to breath here, but his mind was on too many other things to care to find out.

"Whew, ah man... that was a wild ride." He straightened his back up and looked back into the alley. "So, what's next for... uh, Nicole?"

The pale human wasn't surprised in the least that Nicole didn't look winded at all; he'd expected that much. He didn't expect to find her sitting in the alley with her back against the wall, knees pulled up and held to her chest with her head dipped downwards. She didn't even seem responsive towards him, and didn't do much as stir when he called her name a second time.

"... Ah, geez. Gimme a break." Sorun continued staring for a few more moments, and then sighed as a ran a hand along his face. *"Alright, let's figure out what's wrong."*

He stepped into the alley, pressed his back against the same wall Nicole was sitting against, and then slowly slid down until he was sitting right besides her. He picked his left knee up, slung his left elbow over it, and then looked to his right at Nicole. "Hey." He lifted his right hand up and gently nudged her shoulder. "Hey, say words."

"... I have made a myriad of mistakes..." Nicole quietly murmured.

"..." Sorun nudged her again. "Say more words."

"I only endeavored to try and breach Metal Sonic's memory archives because I thought it would be completely safe. I took every single

precaution necessary and made all the correct calculations, and even after all that I... I underestimated how meticulous Dr. Eggman was in his security programming," Nicole admitted. "Even if it was such a cleverly hidden failsafe, I failed to account for it. I failed to secure us a direct exit route because I did not account for how powerful Metal Sonic's defensive systems would be. I failed to bring this matter to Sally, who most likely would have denied such a mission knowing the risks." She glanced towards Sorun, her black hair brushing past her shoulders. "... I've failed to keep you safe after you volunteered to follow me here," she continued. "I likely will not be able to penetrate the firewall blocking our escape in time with all of those programs patrolling and searching around. I wouldn't doubt that the exit point is guarded, even. Being destroyed here would be the equivalent of being destroyed in reality, and I fear that... I'm worried," she finished as she faced back forwards into her knees.

"... Ah." Yeah, he could see why she'd be so down after all that. And he figured that a "die in the virtual world, die in reality" mechanic was in place, but hearing it out of Nicole's mouth was a bit more sobering to Sorun, and now he was really worried. But he was less focused on that and more on the sad lynx he was sitting right next to- mainly because he wanted to shake her out of this so they could put their heads together and figure out a solution so they could continue living. And a small part of him didn't like seeing her sad.

"Okay." The teen took a deep breath, and then slowly exhaled. *"I got nothing, so let's just wing it and say what's on my mind. That's more honest anyways, right? Ugh. Hope this works."*

"Well, yeah, you're not wrong." Sorun paused, and then looked up at the bottom of the street above them. "You know, all this diving into the virtual world and computer stuff... it's really cool. In my zone this kind of stuff is science-fiction. The kind of things they base video games and movies off of. Actually sorta reminds me of this one old show back where I'm from, Earth. I only watched a few episodes, never saw the full thing and I didn't care much for it, but I got the gist of it. It was about a space crew that road around in a spaceship

doing space things. They even had a AI crew member. Kinda like you." By now Nicole had decided to turn her entire head to give him her full attention. "I'm gonna impart something I heard from the show that I can tell you from personal experience is completely true." Sorun turned his head so that the pair's eyes would lock. "It's possible to do literally every single thing right, not make a single mistake, and still lose. That's not failure. That's life. It happens."

Nicole's ears, having practically been flattened against her head, picked up halfway but still appeared to be drooping. Her face didn't look all that convinced, either. "Sorun, that isn't... that doesn't make sense-"

"Nicole, this isn't math." Sorun stopped, and then took a quick look around. "Okay, in this instance this is kinda math, but even in math you don't get a perfect answer all the time. Life is just like that, but worse. Like, way worse. Things happen all the time because of all sorts of crazy variables. The important thing isn't that you failed, it's that you get up after failing and keep going." He was pulling all of the moral lessons he'd seen in a myriad of video games and comics at this point, but he felt himself going on a roll, so Sorun gestured to himself. "I mean, look at me," he said. "I've been a major screw-up since day one of being dragged on Mobius, and I'm still here. I was practically falling on my face and getting gut-punched by the universe every day in the beginning, and to be honest with you that's kinda still happening, but by some cosmic stroke of luck I've made it this far without having a mental shutdown. Did I want to stay down every time I got knocked down?" Sorun breathed out a listless laugh. "Yeah, I did. I really, really did. But self-preservation is a really amazing thing that's been keeping me going, along with..." he turned to the side and coughed, "along with a couple other things.

"Look, what... what I'm trying to say is that, yeah, we screwed up. You probably shouldn't have tried break into Metal Sonic's head, and I probably shouldn't have given you the head or at least tried talking you out of it. But people make mistakes, Nicole. And guess what, we're people."

Throughout the entire speech, Nicole's eyes had been steadily widening the more and more Sorun spoke. Her eyes fell near the end, though, and when it was her turn to speak she had a disbelieving tone in her voice. "People... you referred to both of us as people," she muttered. "You really see me as a person?"

Sorun just looked confuse at that. "Yeah, why wouldn't I? Doesn't everybody?"

"In the Freedom Fighters, yes," she confirmed with a nod, "but I've been resisting Eggman alongside them all for years. You've scarcely been here a month. I just... find it surprising that even after all the time we spent playing those games you-"

"You're really gonna make me go through with this?" Sorun interrupted with a roll of his eyes. "Of course you're a real person. Geez, you sound more real than some of the people I know on Earth. You look real, you talk real, you even emote like a real person. Lifeless machines don't sit down in alleys acting all sad like you're doing right now. You told me you learned how to have your own emotions. The fact you can even do that proves you're sapient," he said while lightly shoving Nicole.

It wasn't even him posturing to try and make her feel better at this point. It was how he genuinely felt, even if the excessive amount of games and movies he'd experienced whose plot dealt with this exact same issue was slightly biasing his way of thinking on the matter. And the amount of embarrassment flowing through him wanted to make him hide his face behind his dark hair again, but his gamer pal was being sad in an alley. He wasn't gonna have that, even at his own expense.

"That's... not incorrect," Nicole conceded as she looked down at her hands, "but I'm not sure the word 'real' is something I can-"

"Nicole, how much more real could you be? Literally, how much more real?" he asked her. "You're already a sapient being that can feel emotions. You went as far as to make a body for yourself to

interact with reality, so you've got a real body, even if you can't maintain it for long. Your mind's real, your body's real, seriously, you couldn't be *more* real." He leaned back into the wall, threw his hand up, and let it fall into his lap. "Okay, sure, you're an AI, but artificial intelligence is still intelligence. I mean if you really think about there isn't really much difference between your mind and mine. It's all electrical impulses and signals at the end of the day. I'm just made of a lot more carbon and have hormones and stuff, and you're made of... whatever the body you make is made of. That stuff. And yeah, you think a lot faster than me and you have, like, two or three-hundred IQ points over me, but that doesn't change anything." He waved his arm over himself. "You even went and digitized me so I could walk around the virtual, not real world. Pretty sure going from being real to not real goes both ways if you get what I'm saying."

With his piece said, Sorun stood up to his feet and walked towards the entrance to the alley, Nicole staring after his back. "But all that's just what I think," he finished. "At the end of the day you're your own person, so you decide what you are and aren't. But the Nicole I know never got all mopey even when I beat her in a video game. She got better and beat me the next time around. And then I'd pull a gamer trick outta my sleeve and beat her again. Then we'd keep doing that until the Power Ring ran out." He looked back at her. "I'm pulling at straws at this point, so please feel better."

He finished the speech with a small breath. His brain felt exhausted just from saying that speech, but it was everything he had that he could pull. He just hoped that enough of it got through to Nicole that she would begin to understand what he was trying to say.

To his immense relief, it looked like a lot of what he had said had gotten through to Nicole after all. Her ears were practically standing up straight, her eyes seemed widened to the max, and though her mouth was closed he was pretty sure her jaw was slack. For the longest time she wasn't moving, either. She just continued to sit there while staring up at him wide-eyed with that deep, unreadable

expression, and for a moment Sorun was worried he'd said something that broke her.

Eventually, though, her head lowered again, and any concern Sorun had washed away when he saw a small smile grow on her face. "I suppose you raise many valid points," she said at last. "And I also suppose that life as a real person would include all the bad in life as well as the good."

"Hey, look at that. I actually got through." Sorun walked over to her and held a hand out. She grasped it, and Sorun helped her up to her feet. "We tripped and fell down. So what? Everybody trips," he said. "Even genius AI people don't get to be exempt from falling over."

She smiled a little at that. "Yes, I see that now." She paused, and then looked down at the pale hand grasping hers. "But that's why we have friends to help us with all that falling, correct?" she asked as she looked back up at Sorun.

And then, for Sorun at least, the mood was instantly brought down a few notches.

"... Friends, huh?" In a move that caused Nicole some confusion, Sorun adopted a gloomy look on his face as he pulled his hand away from the lynx.

He turned his back to Nicole and bit his lower lip. He'd done it again. Accidentally closed in on people when he was supposed to be distancing himself away from all the people he was planning on abandoning. First it was saving lives, and now it was giving motivational speeches to sad AI. And she had to go and use the "friend" word. Is that what they were now? Friends? He so desperately wanted to deny it, but he also just didn't have the heart to do it. Because he actually did value all the time he spent with her, probably more than the others since those video game sessions with her was one of the only things keeping him together besides his desire to live.

What was even the point in trying anymore when things like this kept happening? He wasn't even bothering to fight it. He wasn't even sure fighting it would do any good for how far he'd gone for some people.

"... So we gotta find a way out of this mess," Sorun said, trying to get away from his own thoughts. "I got a theory I wanna test."

In a flash of blue, the Bringer Claws appeared hanging off of his shoulders. They had a digital texture to them like the Summoned Swords had, but the power itself seemed to remain the same. The right claw removed itself from Sorun's shoulder, curled into a fist, and punched forwards at the corner of one of the wireframe buildings they were standing next to. The small corner he'd punched crumbled apart from the Bringer Claw's fist, the pieces and pixels removed slowly disappearing into nothing. The hole made on the corner remained.

"Theory proven, I got an idea," Sorun announced as the Bringer Claw folded back onto his shoulder. "That one building that lit up before Metal appeared. What was that?" he asked as he turned back to Nicole.

Still regarding him with some confusion behind her eyes mixed with that wonder from earlier, Nicole held her hand out so that the blue computer screen appeared. "That building was a virtual representation of the coding to the core processing system to the anti-software security program inside Metal Sonic's coding," she answered. "It was activated in response to the backup supply unit I inadvertently triggered. Why do you ask?"

"Would the Metal Sonics go away if that building was destroyed?"

A thoughtful look crossed her face as she looked down at the blue screen. "As I said, that building is a virtual representation to a piece of Metal Sonic's programming. Destroying it would essentially be the same as deleting lines of code in his digital makeup, specifically the lines of code responsible for his security system. So... yes. It would."

The screen disappeared, and she looked up at Sorun. "What is your plan, Sorun?"

"The plan is a simple one, Nicole." The right Bringer Claw removed itself from Sorun's shoulder, and once again clenched into a fist. "These things are strong enough to damage the environment. So my plan is I'm gonna punch the building. Really hard."

A beat passed between the two. They both continued to stare at each other silently for the longest of moments, though it was broken when Nicole began to slowly shake her head.

"... I should have expected something so simple from you," Nicole said as a grin spread over her face. "I doubt such a thing will be so easy with all of those security programs out hunting for us, and as your swords demonstrated, you are physically no match for a single one."

"Eh, well, I've never been good at strategy. That's why I got you," Sorun said as the Bringer Claw folded back onto his shoulder. "If I can get back to that place and destroy the building, the Metal Sonics disappear and you'll have all the time in the world to get rid of that firewall so we can leave." He sighed. "But, yeah, the murder programs runnin' around gunning for us is a pretty big problem. I'm open to suggestions here."

Nicole crossed her arms, and only had to think for a second before looking into Sorun's eyes. "The method Metal Sonic used to split itself up into all those iterations of itself was a recursion protocol. While it's true there are numerous amounts of those Metal Sonics running around, a majority of the limited processing power being provided to its system is being dispersed among those copies to coordinate them. It won't weaken them in any way, but it seems to have slowed them down at least. I'm don't think that we would have been able to successfully evade them otherwise. And those programs will have to remain split in order to avoid me simply partitioning them off again."

"Okay... where are you going with this?"

"... Do you remember that 'kiting' strategy you showed me once?" she asked him. "When we were playing that one game? You used a method in which you gained the attention of the game's enemy AI and continued to run around them until they'd all grouped together and you defeated them all at once with that special power-up you'd saved."

"You mean kiting? 'Course I remember." Learning enemy draw distance to manipulate their positions to suit a gamer's purpose was a staple strategy. It helped that the character he'd been playing as had a slightly higher movement speed than the enemy AIs'. "Why, what are- ohhhh, you wanna lead them all, huh?"

Nicole smiled at Sorun's understanding. "I have a great deal of control here in the virtual world, even if it is inside of Metal Sonic's systems. I can outpace the security programs, as we've already seen. I will draw the attention of all of the programs hunting us, and while they are all distracted chasing me you will go and destroy the security system's core processor. If all goes according to plan we should succeed with a relatively low risk of injury."

Sorun turned his head away, holding a hand to his chin in deep contemplation. It was definitely a better plan than his "just punch it" plan. He was glad "punch it" was still part of the plan, though, because it gave him something to do without feeling inadequate. And if he couldn't punch Metal Sonic, he could at least get the satisfaction of punching a piece of its brain away. Him and Nicole escaping with their lives was just the cherry on top.

"Alright. Sounds like a plan to me." He turned his back to Nicole once again and stepped further out of the alley. "Let's say I give you about five minutes to go around and kite all the Metal Sonics together. I'll go and hit the building right after." He turned his head back to Nicole. "That work for you?"

He saw when he looked back that Nicole had been looking at him with that wide-eyed look again, particularly focusing on the digital wings hanging off his back. She looked up to his eyes and gave him a really quick nod when she caught him looking, though. "Yes, that is acceptable." She began floating off of the ground. "I will do my best to draw them all away from you. Good luck, Sorun."

Watching the brown and black lynx fly off, Sorun couldn't help the loud sigh that left him. *"This is what I get for playing 'NieR: Automata'. Making me sympathize with AI people. Ugh... but I really meant everything I said to her."* He looked down at his right hand. *"I still don't want to get along with anybody because of what they did to me. But it's... it's getting harder to do that. And now I want to make an exception for Nicole. She's really been a big help to me."* He lowered his hand back to his side with a defeated sigh. *"But how am I supposed to do that knowing I'm gonna abandon her along with everybody else just to save my own life?*

"... Whatever." He turned to the left and began to slowly walk down the digital streets. *"Let's just get through this first. I can deal with all that nonsense later."*

The plan created by the pair was quickly enacted, and as it stood, so far it was coming together perfectly. Nicole's part had been easy enough: she'd appeared in front of one of the patrolling Metal Sonic programs, and had flown away with the program giving her chase. More and more programs would join in the chase, with the lynx making sure to draw as many Metal Sonic programs as possible while not flying too fast as to not lose any of them.

And so, by a few minutes in virtually all of the Metal Sonic programs were following Nicole around the digital landscape, weaving past and through all of the blocky buildings. They never caught her, of course, nor did they never even get close to her. But due to Nicole's efforts they'd never lost her, either.

None of this went by in the sight of Sorun, of course, with Nicole having deliberately kited all the Metal Sonic programs towards the other end of the digital space. Because of this he'd walked all the way back to the plaza they'd fled from originally, the teen slowly sauntering towards the sole, red building at the end of the empty, circular space with the wings of his digital Bringer Claws freely waving behind him.

"Best plan ever, Nicole," Sorun said to himself as he came to a stop in front of the glowing, wireframe building that only towered above Sorun by about a two stories. "Alright, so... just punch it?" The two digital claws let go of his shoulder and curled into fists. "I like it. Short, simple, to the point, and cathartic to boot. Seriously, Nicole, awesome plan."

He had a lot of frustration to vent towards Metal Sonic, too. His frustration over what that robot had done to the train and all that medicine. Almost having killed him and his comrades. Being all but immune to all of his abilities he was dying for. Not to mention what he and Nicole were dealing with at the moment. And while he would have loved nothing more than to punch that damn robot right in the face and dent it into an unrecognizable mess, he'd settle for deleting pieces of its mind as a substitute.

So when one of the Bringer Claws shot forwards and impacted the side of the building, it was done with just a bit more speed and gusto than Sorun was accustomed to the Bringer Claws releasing. They'd did their job, though, as that one single punch had destroyed a fist-sized chunk of the blocky building. True damage for sure, but not an overwhelming amount considering it was just a single punch.

Factor in the fact that the two Bringer Claws were pistoning back and forth at rapid speeds as they delivered a relentless assault of punches to the building, though? The small amount of damage was more than enough considering the speed it was being delivered at. So much so that even only after around twenty seconds of nonstop punching a whole quarter of the building had been smashed away from the punches. Eventually the damage became so severe that the

red light of the structure began blinking on and off wildly, which only encouraged Sorun to will the Bringer Claws to punch the building even harder.

"Well, this is working fantastically." While the Bringer Claws continued to demolish the building, Sorun turned his body around to look out in the distance. "I hope Nicole's holding up okay."

It was when all the Metal Sonics suddenly froze that Nicole stopped flying away.

Without any warning whatsoever, all of the programs that had been chasing her had seized up. When she stopped flying and turned around to observe, she saw that all the Metal Sonic programs had gone from being frozen to convulsing and spasming wildly. Furthermore, their very forms were fluctuating between appearing transparent and solid, and one by one they all began to explode in a shower of blue pixels that quickly disappeared completely once the fragments dispersed.

A relieved smile grew across the lynx's face as she saw the programs in front of her be deleted one by one. Though the process itself was a bit more visceral than she'd anticipated, she wasn't at all surprised to see it happening. The coding responsible for maintaining the core processing unit of Metal Sonic's anti-intrusion software being deleted was the only thing that could cause a reaction, after all, and such a phenomenon was the goal of the plan she and Sorun had concocted.

And it seemed that the human had succeeded in his objective, as the very last Metal Sonic exploded right in front of Nicole. The mission complete, the very satisfied lynx began flying back towards her human companion.

With one last punch, the sole, single surviving piece of the blocky structure was crushed under the Bringer Claw's fist. The closed claw

lifted up to reveal nothing but the gray, wireframe ground beneath it, after which Sorun let out a satisfied sigh as the two digital claws dusted themselves off against each other.

"Thaaaat should do it." Right as he finished speaking, he heard the soft sound of feet touching down on the ground behind him. Sorun turned around, and then softly sighed in relief when he saw Nicole standing right behind him, smiling at Sorun. "You're a genius, Nicole," he told her as he began to approach the lynx, the Bringer Claws on his back disappearing. "It worked, right? All the Metal Sonic things are gone?"

She nodded. "Yes, that is correct. With the core coding to the anti-intrusion software destroyed, Metal Sonic should not be able to impede us any further. I imagine the firewall that had blocked are way disappeared as well, so we should be free to leave at our earliest convenience."

"Oh, huh." Well that sounded great. A little too great, actually, but despite that Sorun didn't have a deep feeling of foreboding at the back of his mind telling him something was wrong. The kind of feeling one would expect to get when things were running just a bit too smoothly. He just felt at ease, and a bit mystified that he felt such a way. "Wow, this was... this was really easy," he noted as he glanced behind him at the now non-existent blocky structure. "Is this what it's like when a plan actually works flawlessly? 'Cause this feels great. Like, just this whole plan. It worked out really great." He turned his head back to Nicole and gave her an appreciative smile. "I mentioned you're a genius for thinking this plan up, right?"

"Yes, you did." She shifted her head to the side, looking a bit bashful from the praise. "It really was not that difficult of a strategy to devise. Your presence made it all the more simpler, and-"

Nicole suddenly stopped, her ears going up straight. Sorun opened his mouth to ask what the matter was, but he stopped himself when one of Nicole's blue digital screens appeared right next to her. The

lynx looked down at the screen, reaching out to type a few buttons while frowning at the lines of code sprawled across the screen.

Sorun cleared his throat to gain her attention. "Something the matter?" he asked.

"Possibly." Nicole closed the window and looked back to Sorun. "It seems that by destroying the core processing system to Metal Sonic's security software, we inadvertently activated yet another failsafe within its systems. The power from the backup energy unit in its head is being rerouted to power another subroutine deep within its systems, though I am unsure to its function."

A concerned frown found its way onto the human teen's face. "Do we have to go find another piece of coding to smash?" he asked her.

She thought over the question for a single second, and then shook her head. "I would prefer it if we were to evacuate ourselves from Metal Sonic's systems as soon as possible now that the way is clear. Once we are back in the HQ computer's mainframe I will de-digitize you to send you back to the real world. We can figure out what to do once you've disconnected the head from the computer."

He couldn't fault that logic. He wanted the both of them to leave this head before they got stuck again. "Alright, go back and tear the cables out. Easy." He stepped forwards and held his hand out. "C'mon, let's go."

Nicole looked down at the hand being offered to her, blinking at the extended appendage. When Sorun shook the hand out of impatience, she immediately reached forwards and tightly wrapped her digits around his wrist. She took off right after, Sorun being dragged right behind her as the lynx flew the both of them towards the cable they'd used to enter Metal Sonic's head.

The trip to the cable, thankfully, had been short and uneventful. Nicole had wasted no time in flying directly into the cable once they'd finally arrived at it, Sorun only having had a few moments to prepare

himself for the inevitable nausea soon to follow from going through the cable again. But they'd flown through and came out the other end quickly enough, even if it had ended with Sorun stumbling towards the end of the tunnel while holding his stomach.

He didn't think he'd ever get used to that feeling.

"I'm initiating the de-digitization sequence now, Sorun," he heard Nicole say from behind him. "Remember that once you return to reality-"

"Yeah, cables, I know. Urgh." He winced and nearly doubled over from another wave of nausea. "So how-"

Flash!

Flash!

"- long... man, she works fast," Sorun mumbled to himself as he took a look at the new surroundings. Metal walls and floor, miscellaneous pieces of science equipment scattered haphazardly all over the place, computer with a bunch of monitors in the back... it was reality, all right. Freedom HQ's lab, just as messy as they'd left it. And as a bonus he didn't even feel that nauseous anymore.

The teen tilted his head down to breath out in relief, but froze midway and made a displeased expression when he saw the coat his virtual self had worn had reverted back into the sleeveless hoodie Honey had made for him. He'd really liked that coat. It had been just like Vergil's- the cables.

"Son of a- head, right," Sorun quickly grumbled as he whirled around towards the table near the computer, and saw the severed head and the wires connecting it to the computer. He ran over to it immediately, bundled all of the cables in his fist, and violently tore them all out from the head. He slowly breathed out, and then dropped the cables onto the ground.

"I realize the urgency of the situation... but we still use those cables, you know." Sorun turned around just in time to see Nicole body finish constructing itself right behind him. She was looking down at the discarded cables, an admonishing yet teasing smile on her face. "I would have to ask you to please be more gentle with them the next time around."

"I'll be sure to work on that." The teen turned back towards the head. "So are we good? Because the head's flashing."

He wasn't sure the fact that the red irises in its black eyes were flashing was a good sign that the crisis was over. He half expected something absurd like lasers to shoot out of the eyes at Sorun, but when he saw Nicole move next to him to bend down to examine the head he felt a bit at ease. It had to be fine if she wasn't worried, after all.

"It's still receiving power from the backup unit implanted in it, but for what function, I do not know," Nicole admitted as her eyes looked over the head. "I did take note of what seemed to be a broadcast signal being emitted from somewhere within its internals shortly before you disconnected the head."

"A broadcast signal?" Sorun quietly repeated as he leaned down alongside Nicole to scrutinize the head. The flashing of its eyes drew Sorun's attention the most, and when he leaned in closer he saw that those red eyes weren't eyes at all. They were red, flashing words in place of where the irises should have been.

Words that read out "Recovery Mode".

"'Recovery Mode'...?" The teen turned his head to Nicole, who looked just as confused as he was. "What does-?"

Crash!

The sound of a door being flung from its hinges caused the pair to shoot straight up. Separate sets of black hair flying wildly, they both

whipped their heads back towards the lab's door, which was now currently lying on the ground after having been pushed off its frame from the figure on the other side. The completely metallic, headless figure that had a turbine on its back firing up.

Without even thinking, A blue, spectral hand appeared over Sorun's shoulder before it reached out and pushed Nicole to the ground. He dived down right after her just as the headless Metal Sonic swooped in over their fallen bodies. Once reaching the table, its metallic claws fumbled forwards before the pointed digits finally landed on the head. It firmly grasped the pointed head once finding it, and then cradled said head to its chest before turning around. All Sorun and Nicole could do was watch as Metal Sonic's body sped off in a blur towards the HQ's stairs, and then it disappeared up them.

Moments passed, during which the two just stared blankly at the broken door and the quickly dissipating trail of smoke from Metal's back turbine. Eventually they both blinked in bewilderment, and Sorun made the first move by slowly getting up to his feet. He willed the summoned Bringer Claw to disappear, and then bent down to help Nicole up to her own feet.

"Well... that happened," Sorun breathed out, eyes still facing towards the opened entrance. "What in the world just happened?"

"A recovery beacon. The power unit was powering a recovery beacon inside of the head." The voice that reached Sorun's ears sounded unusually blank for Nicole, causing him to turn towards her. Her face was unusually still given what they had just endured, but there was no mistaking that defeated look he saw settle within her eyes. "It must have been a final failsafe Dr. Eggman installed in the event somebody tried to recover sensitive information inside its memory banks and managed to circumvent its security measures. That was what I detected before we left. A recovery beacon that would activate the reactor inside of its main body and allow it to automatically recover the head. It's probably making its way back to where its programming has dedicated a home base for repairs. Likely New Megaopolis." Her shoulders slumped. "To think he would

account for something so specific and plan around us trying to access its head alone... to think he'd install a beacon with a strong enough signal to reach all the way to Knothole..."

Sorun clicked his tongue in understanding and disappointment. "So it's gone?"

"Yes, Sorun. It's gone."

The teen slowly nodded, and then turned his head to face Nicole. "You think Sally's gonna be mad that we lost it?" When Nicole elected to remain silent, Sorun grit his teeth from the awkward air hanging over them and tried to lightly shake her shoulder to rouse some life into the lynx. "Hey, we still got those files, right? The whole reason we even went in there?" he tried in an encouraging voice. "Yeah, we lost the body, but the files were important thing, right?"

"... I suppose so, yes." Nicole's head picked up, her mouth turning up into a half-smile as she placed her hand over the pale one on her shoulder. "I am thankful you pushed me out of the way. I would have been fine regardless, but... it still hurts when this body receives damage."

"Sure, don't worry about it." Quickly, Sorun pulled his hand back and began walking towards the broken entrance. "Why don't you get to work on those files? I'm gonna go survey the damage."

The lynx gave him a small nod, prompting Sorun to exhale in relief and turn towards the doorway- relief for some time to think to himself and relief he'd gotten Nicole to do something to maybe help cheer her up.

"Man, what a day," he thought as he stepped around the fallen door. *"Mm, doesn't look that busted. Tails or Rotor can prolly fix it. Geez, how much stuff did it barrel through on its way here?"*

He stepped into the HQ's living room, slowly swiveling his head from left to right to survey the damage. Everything looked fine for the most

part. The couch was overturned, likely due to the headless Badnik having blindly rushed right towards the head being held in the lab, but otherwise he didn't see any damage.

"Oh, please don't tell me it broke the console... whew." Thankfully, when Sorun turned the couch right-side up with his Bringer Claws, he saw that the game console was untouched. *"Thank goodness the couch didn't fall on it. That woulda been a disaster."*

The teen stepped further towards the back of the HQ, near where the stairs were. A short trip up them and he made it all the way to the HQ's entrance, where the door was hanging off by a single hinge. He sighed at the sight.

"Geez, so what, that beacon in its head activated and its body picked the signal up and beelined it all the way here? Thought they were keeping its body in Sonic's uncle's workshop? But that thing is as fast as him, so... yeah, guess that wouldn't really matter then, huh?"

Well, other than some doors, it seemed like nothing important had been broken. All in all, he'd take a couple of broken doors over something much worse happening, and Sorun was more than willing to just leave it at that. And so, with his miniature inspection done, the teen began to slowly trek back towards the lab. He was starting to grow an urge to check on Nicole that he wanted to satisfy, and he was partly interested in seeing what was on those files he'd almost died over.

"Well, could have been worse," he silently reasoned with himself as he reached the bottom of the stairs and began walking back to the lab. *"Sally's probably gonna be pissed at us for going behind her back like this and losing the robot. Maybe I can shift most of the blame onto me so Nicole doesn't feel too down about it. Lie and say it was my idea."* He considered the idea for a second, and then shook his head. *"Nah, that'd never work. She wouldn't buy it and I don't think Nicole would wanna lie to her. Eh... I guess I'm not too worried about it. It'll be fine."*

Besides, from what he'd noticed Sally and Nicole were the best of friends. Had to be since Sally was the one carrying Nicole around all the time. There wasn't any way that she'd stay mad at Nicole for an unreasonable amount of time if she just explained. She'd be fine. Sorun wouldn't. He didn't wanna imagine how much he was gonna get yelled at by her, but if worse came to worse he'd just tune Sally out and ignore it while blindly nodding along.

Yeah, solid plan. Worked all the time with his own mother. And as long as most of the anger was directed at him and not Nicole he was fine with whatever happened. Didn't matter what happened to him since he was eventually leaving anyways.

"Hey, hey." Finally reaching the lab's entrance, Sorun leaned against the opened entrance and knocked on its side. "Good news, nothing but the doors got broke. How's the, uh... you doin' alright over there?"

Nicole had seated herself in a chair in front of the computer, likely working on those files she extracted. Though now she was just slumping forwards, elbows planted on the computer's keyboard with her face resting in her hands. The rather sullen atmosphere she was emitting caused Sorun, who blinked in puzzlement at the sight, to then begin approaching her.

"Uh, Nicole?" Sorun stopped right behind her, and then gently shook her shoulder. She didn't budge and kept her face pressed into her palms. "You doing okay? Something wrong with the files?"

"Look for yourself," came Nicole's muffled voice.

Seeing no reason not to, Sorun did so and leaned in towards the computer's main monitor. He really wished he hadn't.

The file that was pulled up on the monitor, quite bizarrely, was one of Eggman. And that was it. Just a picture of Eggman in some large, metal room smiling victoriously at the camera while pointing at it,

almost as if he was laughing hysterically at whoever was on the other side of the screen.

He couldn't recall the last time he wanted to punch a computer monitor so badly.

"This is what the encrypted files encompassed." Nicole's hands slid down from her face, eyes glumly looking forwards at the computer monitor and the round man on the other side that seemed to be laughing at her. "It was nothing but approximately five-thousand, four-hundred and thirty-seven gigabytes of self portraits of Dr. Eggman."

"... What...?" Sorun blinked several times in disbelief. "B-but... that's like five terabytes... you're seriously telling me he took five terabytes worth of selfies?" He couldn't even comprehend such an absurd number; his mind was having a hard time trying to calculate how many selfies five terabytes implied. "Jesus, these pics must have the highest quality in the world if they take up that much storage. Where does he find the time to... how many... how is that even...!?" He trailed off when he turned to Nicole for an explanation, his disbelief withering to quiet worry when he saw just how glum she looked. "Uh... Nicole...?"

"Metal Sonic's true memory files were layered under these encrypted... fakes," Nicole tonelessly mumbled, eyes turned downwards and away from the monitor. "I'd noticed there was a sub-layer of files hidden under the direct ones, but by the time I'd noticed the security system was active and those programs were breaking past my partition and... I was too worried for your safety, so I copied whatever I found first so we could leave as soon as possible." Her head lowered far enough that it almost touched the keyboard. "These were little more than dummy files used to obscure the true data. Dr. Eggman didn't even just fill it with nonsense junk data. He just used these pictures of himself laughing to mock whoever wasted their time collecting these files."

There was only one word Sorun's mind could come up with to accurately portray the general mood: bummer. He didn't dare say it aloud, though, for fear of what reaction Nicole would have over it. But it well and truly was a bummer. A bummer that Sorun had almost died for a bunch of worthless selfies of Eggman. Bummer this whole unofficial mission they'd gone on had been a huge waste of time and a robot.

The one who looked the most bummed out was Nicole, though. He didn't think he'd ever seen anybody sulk as hard as Nicole was right now. He didn't have to think hard to see why- Eggman's borderline obsessive amount of precautionary coding tricked her. Pure and simple, they'd both lost and had nothing to show for it. And Sorun didn't really know what was bugging her more: that they'd both been put in danger over nothing, or that she'd allowed them to be put in danger to begin with. Sorun didn't even blame her, but he wasn't gonna pretend to know what was going on in her mind.

"... At least it was just a recovery beacon and not a self-destruct bomb, right?" He'd greatly hoped that silver lining, possibly the thinnest one possible in all of existence, would brighten her mood at least a little. It didn't. Nicole had lifted her head up a bit and turned to address Sorun, but that same defeated look was still on her face. "Er... you doing alright?" he quietly asked.

"... It is difficult to classify the emotions I am feeling right now," she slowly admitted. "I believe this is... frustration? Or anger? Properly conveying what it is I am feeling is proving to be difficult as I cannot figure out what it is I am experiencing."

"We call that feeling really bad," Sorun told her. "Which is, you know... justifiable. Since all of that just happened. It could have been worse, though. We're still alive at least."

That didn't improve Nicole's mood in the slightest. Her face didn't even twitch. "Our lives were put in peril for nothing but a joke. You were put in peril because you decided to come with me to help. And because I was fooled by all those elaborate tricks-"

"Nicole, listen, I ain't got another speech in me," Sorun interrupted, "but just listen. We're *fine* . Okay? We worked together and we got through it." By some miracle, and admittedly she had done most of the heavy lifting since all he'd done was punch a building and make a wall of swords, but this was left unsaid by Sorun. "We failed, yeah, but failure isn't the same as losing. Failing is just falling down, learning from the experience, and getting back up so that it doesn't happen again. Some old guy with a big hat or something probably said that back where I'm from, I dunno, but-"

"I know. People... make mistakes, no matter how hard we try to avoid them. And we're people. It's just another part of life. That's what you said, right?" Nicole's head and ears perked up just a slight amount, and a soft smile formed on her face. "I am still upset, but... this helps. I appreciate you sticking with me through this."

If it wouldn't have been overly embarrassing to do so, Sorun would have sighed so hard he'd double over from the pressure of a sad Nicole being lifted of his shoulders. He had standards, though, so he remained completely rigid while staring the lynx in the eyes. He couldn't hold back the small grin that made its way onto his face, though, much to his consternation.

"Alright. Glad to hear you're alright." Sorun turned towards the broken-down door to the lab, and rather sheepishly began rubbing the back of his head. "Seriously though, how mad is Sally gonna be? Just so I can mentally prepare myself for what's to come."

"Hard to say. I doubt she will have many pleasant things to say," Nicole informed him. "But seeing as we both managed to survive unscathed, I do not think she will be overly furious at us. And I may know what to say to her to get her to calm down so she isn't too harsh on us."

Sorun turned his head back to Nicole in surprise. She was wearing a grin to match his own now, with his own slowly stretching wider at the AI's words. "Well, hey. That works for me," he said. "So now that the crisis is over and there's nothing else to do- get this off the

screen, it's creepin' me out." He reached down to the computer's mouse and clicked the selfie of Eggman away so that the monitor was blank. "Now that we got nothing else to do... wanna play some video games?"

The grin that had worked itself onto Nicole's face turned into a bemused smile. "Is that really the only thing on your mind after everything we've endured?"

"You know it." He began nudging her shoulder. "Hey. Hey, come on. I wanna play video games with you. Come on. We both need the break." It was more for her sake than his just so he could try taking her mind off of this catastrophe, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't want to unwind with video games after this experience as well. And the console was literally in the next room.

"Sorun, I don't-" Nicole's body flickered. "I don't have enough power to sustain this form for much longer."

"Nah, it's fine it's fine it's fine. I know Rotor keeps a stash of Power Rings around here somewhere for his experiments." Sorun stepped away from the computer and began walking towards one of the shelves hanging off the lab's ceiling. "That guy ain't slick, I know where he keeps them. I'll just borrow one. Or two. Some, I'll borrow some." Whether he would replace them later on depended if he remembered to bother doing so. Chances were he wouldn't.

Nicole continued to watch Sorun rifle through the shelves for a minute. She looked down briefly, pensive look on her face, and soon after looked back towards Sorun as he felt his hand around inside of a shelf. "Sorun?"

"Yeah?" he acknowledged as he began pulling something from the shelf.

"Thank you for today," he heard her say. "For helping get us through that situation. For teaching me a bit about what it means to be alive. I've learned a lot today thanks to everything you said." The teen

briefly flicked his eyes over to the lynx, his stare becoming blank when he saw the smile she was giving him. "I just wanted you to know how grateful I am for everything you do for me. It feels nice to have a friend like you."

"... Mh-hm, sure." With a tired sigh, Sorun finally pulled a handful of golden rings out from the cabinet, and with a forced smile he held them up to Nicole. "So what game are we playing?"

"I just had a very interesting chat with Nicole." With an aggravated sigh, Sally began rubbing the sides of her head with her hands while the human in front of her leaned back onto the couch behind him. "Let me just get this straight. You both, without my permission, attempted to hack into Metal Sonic, one of Eggman's most dangerous and versatile Badniks, almost get *killed* when its security protocols activate, and in the process you both somehow managed to activate some kind of distress signal that put its body on autopilot so it could escape with its head. So in addition to you both recklessly putting your lives in danger you lost an important asset. And if I'm hearing Nicole right, you accomplished all of this... with nothing to show for it."

Yeah, she was mad. The kind of mad where it wasn't showing on her face, but the scalding anger could still be heard in her voice. Nicole had done Sorun the favor of taking Sally aside to talk with her once she'd entered the HQ at the end of the day from the mission she'd went on with the others, and based on the look on her face when she'd come back from the lab, she wasn't pleased in the slightest.

Well, it was to be expected, so Sorun had paused the game he and Nicole had been playing and chose to stand up and lean on the couch while bracing for the inevitable verbal lashing. His nerves had calmed down enough by now that he could take it, but even relaxing to hours of playing games with Nicole wasn't making this any easier.

And while Sorun couldn't blame her at all, he felt the need to correct her on one detail.

"No, it wasn't for nothing," he corrected her. "We got a lifetime supply of Eggman selfies out of it."

If looks could kill, the glare she sent him probably would have disintegrated him on the spot. Fortunately the only thing Sorun felt burning was his mental fortitude under her gaze, causing him to nervously laugh a bit.

"Just, uh... trying to inject some humor into the issue..." he muttered, though this only caused Sally's glare to intensify. Sorun sighed as a result, and then hung his shoulders while giving the chipmunk a serious look. "Okay, fine. Yeah, we screwed up big time. And lost the robot. And all that other stuff you said." His eyes drifted to the side to avoid eye contact with the princess. "Some other stuff happened too, but yeah, that's the gist of it. So, uh... yeah. Sorry. Won't happen again."

Maybe she deserved much more than the half-assed apology he'd just served her, but Sorun just didn't have the mental energy needed to think up anything better than that. It seemed Sally noticed the mental fatigue, too, as her stern features softened and, with a groan, she began rubbing the space between her eyes.

"I talked it over with Nicole. I'm not happy with what you two did, but... I'm glad you both are alright," she finally admitted. "And while it's admirable that you both tried to take a bit of initiative for the cause, just please, *please* do me the favor of asking me next time you decide to pull a stunt like this. Okay?"

"That's more than fair," Sorun readily agreed with a nod of his head. "So am I free to go, or-"

"Not at all, mister," she denied with a shake of her head. "You're helping Rotor fix all the doors Metal Sonic broke down tomorrow."

He saw that coming a mile away. "I will," he promised her. She seemed satisfied at that, and then turned around towards the exit stair to the HQ. "Hey, Sally. Wait up a moment," he called. She

stopped mid-step, and turned her head to address Sorun. "Getting the meds to the rest of those settlements. It went okay, right?" he asked her.

Sally blinked at the question, though Sorun felt he already got his answer when her eyes turned downcast. "We salvaged what we could, but... I'm not sure what we managed to get out there will be enough for them all," she answered honestly.

"... I see. Okay." It wasn't the answer he'd wanted, but he'd expected it nonetheless. It didn't make him feel any better.

"Hey, it'll be alright, Sorun. It always get worse before it gets better." Sally turned around and continued walking towards the exit. "I just hope it starts getting better sooner rather than later..."

"... Right," Sorun muttered in response. He sighed out once she left his sight, after which he turned his eyes towards the opened lab. He saw Nicole standing there in the lab, smiling sheepishly at him while giving him an encouraging thumbs-up. Instead of giving a similar gesture, Sorun reached behind him on the couch cushion and held up the corded controller, waving it up in the air.

She got the message easily enough, and began walking out of the lab and towards the couch. "I told you that she wouldn't be as bad as you were thinking," she told him after stopping right in front of him. "Though I did have to talk her down a bit before she came to you. You're welcome."

Rolling his eyes, Sorun turned around and practically collapsed into a sitting position on the couch. "Yeah, yeah. Thank you, Nicole. You're a genius. You see fit to remind me every five minutes."

"I wouldn't go that far." Settling on the spot next to Sorun, Nicole picked up her own controller before facing the screen. "Are you ready to continue?"

"Sure am," Sorun confirmed as he unpaused the game. "So as I was saying, hyper armor is super important. I know it doesn't look smart at first to be eating hits while the character's attack animation winds up, but the hyper armor means they won't get knocked out of the move and the damage trade-off is more than worth it. You gotta watch out for command grabs, though, they'll get through that armor like no tomorrow. So essentially it's a real high risk, high reward play, but you can mitigate that risk by abusing hyper armor in the middle of the opponent's combo like so..."

They'd spent nearly the rest of the night playing video games after that point. Sorun was fairly sure he could see the sun peaking up over the horizon by the time he made it back to Sonic's home.

More than worth it.

Chapter 20

Recursion Error

Episode 20- Strike three

One month.

As of today, that was the amount of time Sorun had spent on Mobius. One whole month exactly. He remembered a time all the way back at the beginning of this mess when he'd hoped that this whole twisted adventure of his would only take a month, two tops. But, as things were, it didn't even look close to being finished. One whole month here and what did he have to show for it in terms of finding a way back? Two out of seven magical jewels of infinite power needed to go home, which was awful enough seeing as it wasn't even close to half, but it was even worse since he hadn't found a way to actually extract them. If anything he'd made negative progress in all this time.

It didn't help that he actually was counting the days, and when he woke up on day thirty and realized it had been a whole month he'd been sent into a depressive mood. He hadn't even felt like having breakfast that morning. He didn't feel like going all the way to Freedom HQ to do whatever there was to do there. He didn't feel like talking with anybody, he didn't feel like doing a mission, he didn't feel like training, and he plain just didn't feel like doing anything.

So he took a walk.

After a whole month, he finally decided to just walk around Knothole. Not to duck around the corners of houses to avoid people or try to skirt around the edges of the city proper. Just... walk the streets and get some thinking done. And he'd made that promise to Bunnie

anyways to eventually maybe try spreading out a bit, so as he saw it this was just killing two birds with one stone.

And as it turned out, Bunnie had been right. He didn't get so much as a single off, sideways glance from any of the random Mobians he passed. He did get some hellos and waves here and there from some of the citizens with some polite smiles mixed in, but for the most part he was pretty much just ignored. Not for being human, but for being just another random bystander walking around minding his own business. And if it was any other time Sorun actually would have felt relieved over it, but today was the one month anniversary of his life taking a turn for the worst, so he couldn't be bothered to notice.

"Maybe I should just start planning to run away now. Should I?" Eventually in his aimless wanderings Sorun had happened upon a bench near a crossing intersection, so he'd elected to just sit down and watch the bustling citizens of Knothole move on with their days as he thought. *"It's been a whole month and I'm no closer to getting home than I was on day one. Jeez, I'm more closer to dying than going home because of these Emeralds. But I still need them, don't I? Do I?"* He leaned forwards on the bench and looked down at the ground. *"I don't even know anymore. I just... fuck am I supposed to do? It seems like no matter what I do, eventually I'll wind down into the grave if I stay on Mobius. If these friggin' Chaos Emeralds don't kill me it's gonna be one of Eggman's robots. Unless that fat bastard decides to go ahead and hit the 'carpet bomb Knothole' button sitting next to him, 'cause that's still hanging over my head. But my one ticket home are the Emeralds, and for all I know I already fucked myself over on that front by absorbing two."* He lifted his head up to look at the morning sky. *"I just wanna go home..."*

But oh, he just didn't know if he was gonna make it home. He didn't know if there was a way, and if there was he didn't know if he was going to live long enough to get there. And he was just so *tired* of it all. All the nonsensical events and adventures that kept flinging themselves at Sorun. The training, the fighting, risking his life. Waking up in fear every morning that he was gonna get blown up

because a fleet of ships dropped an arsenal's worth of bombs on Knothole. He legitimately didn't know how much more of this he could take.

"Ugh... my life sucks. Everything sucks." He heard footsteps crunch on the ground nearby to him, and out of the corner of his eyes he could see the shape of somebody stop right next to the bench. Sorun debated just ignoring them so he could continue wallowing in self pity, but after around thirty seconds of this heated internal debate the figure had yet to move. So Sorun let out a small exhale and turned his head towards them.

"Oh, awesome. It's this guy." The curious figure in question was Tails. It was easy enough to tell him apart- the two tails slowly swishing behind him was a dead giveaway. Why he was standing next to the bench Sorun was sitting at and staring at him, though, the human had no idea. Nor did he particularly feel compelled to ask. But he would, if only because there was a small chance it would lead into Tails going away and leaving him alone. Because as it was, he just didn't feel like spending any time with the person responsible for dragging him into this world on the worst anniversary of his life. If it were any day, he'd gladly do so. Tails was more than a nice enough person who could hold an interesting conversation. But not today.

"What do you want, Tails?" Sorun grumbled, slinging one of his legs over the other as he gave the fox a flat look.

The harsh tone in his voice had caused Tails's tails to freeze in surprise, though he quickly regained his composure and cleared his throat before speaking. "Oh, I was just... walking around and saw you kind of just sitting here so I... came over to see how you were doing..." He shrank backwards when Sorun continued to give him an unflinching glare with his eyes. "Are you doing okay, Sorun?"

"I'm never doing okay, Tails." Sighing, the human teen shifted his gaze from the fox to the sky. "Any idea what day it is today?"

"Er... Saturday?"

The answer elicited a single, short laugh out of Sorun. "Sure, man. Saturday." He wasn't going to tell Tails why today of all days was dragging him so far down, of course. That was the gateway to all sorts of uncomfortable conversations about his feelings that he really wasn't in the mood for. "I was just doing some thinking is all." He focused back on Tails. "So if that's all-"

"Actually, Sorun, there was one more thing," Tails said before Sorun could finish. "I was gonna wait until later, but you're already here, so..." He suddenly grew uncomfortable, looked around, and then looked back to Sorun. "Actually, do you wanna head back to the HQ with me?" he asked him. "This... might be better said over there."

Sorun rose an eyebrow. "Or you could just say it now. Since we're already here. Talking."

Growl...!

That had been Sorun's stomach. Loud enough for both of them to hear, causing them both to look towards the human's abdomen. Afterwards Tails rose a questioning eye up to Sorun, who shrugged. "Skipped breakfast," he explained.

Tails groaned. "Sorun, you can't just go and skip breakfast like that. It's the most important meal of the day."

"You know, I have yet to see any definitive proof towards that being an accurate statement." He crossed his arms in a huff. "I don't feel like eating, anyways."

"Are you sure?" Tails asked him. "I remember seeing some cereal over in the HQ's kitchen."

"... Damn you, Tails." It'd be just like him to exploit one of his many weaknesses: some good cereal. He knew what box Tails was referring to, as well, and Sorun actually rather liked that brand. Ring-O's, he believed they were called. They were pretty much a one-to-one recreation of Cheerios, more evidence to Sorun's theory that a

lot of the food brands of this world had their formulas pilfered from surviving recipes of the old world's foods, but he couldn't care less as long as it tasted good. And now that Tails mentioned it, he could go for some cereal.

Well, he might as well. Especially since Tails had something important to say. Being all depressed on a bench was getting boring, anyways.

"Sure, fine. Let's go." In a flash of blue Sorun's Bringer Claws appeared. "We're flying back, though. I don't feel like walking all the way."

In response, the two tails behind the fox began to rotate. Even as his body began to be lifted off the ground from the spinning tails, the fox was giving Sorun an inquisitive look. "You finally got the hang of flying with those things?" he asked him.

Sorun looked to the side at his right Bringer Claw, and then shrugged. "Been practicing," he said. "I'm decent enough with them now." The feathered, spectral arms began to slowly extend outwards. "C'mon. Let's go already."

It was always such a satisfying sound, pouring cereal into a bowl. Sorun had no idea what about that sound was so appealing. That continuous stream of soft plinks and plonks as all the circular pieces of whatever Ring-O's were made of landed in the bowl. Whole grain and sugar or something, Sorun had glazed over the nutritional information when he skimmed everything on the box. The only thing he cared about was that it tasted good and filled him up.

That was true for any food that he ate, now that he thought about it.

After placing the box back into the cabinet and closing it, Sorun turned to the HQ kitchen's table, where he saw Tails patiently waiting for him. The teen pulled up a chair, and promptly sat down while placing the filled bowl and a spoon in front of him.

"You're not gonna put milk in it?" Tails idly asked from across the table.

Sorun shook his head. "Nah, I don't do milk with cereal. The sogginess kills that crunch I really like. Also I don't like milk." He scooped up a spoonful of dry cereal. "So what's the dealio, Tails my dude? What's so urgent that you dragged me all the way here?"

"Well," Tails began as Sorun crunched down on his cereal, "it's about... it's about the Chaos Emeralds you've been taking into your body."

The crunching ceased almost immediately as Sorun affixed Tails with a stare. The young fox fidgeted nervously under the glare, looking down towards the table as his gloved fingers nervously tapped on the table's surface.

He should have figured it was something like this. Tails was a busy guy as of late. Always kept busy with maintenance stuff or doing missions or something productive. Sorun rarely ever had any training sessions with him due to the human having all but given up on piloting and never showing much an interest in the mechanical side of things. Tails just hadn't had that much to show Sorun in those cases compared to what everybody else offered. So other than a few passing conversations here and there whenever the pair happened to run into each other, they'd never had much reason to meet up like this.

Except if it involved Chaos Emeralds. Sorun had been made known that Tails was pursuing some research into the gems already transmuted inside of his body, and with no other alternatives in sight, Sorun had mainly just been waiting on any results Tails would turn up. But the way the young Mobian was acting was making Sorun almost as nervous as he was. The way he was rapidly breathing and actively trying to avoid meeting Sorun's eyes.

Absolutely none of these were positive signs.

"It's not good news, is it, Tails?" The spoon had been dropped into the bowl of cereal, which was practically forgotten by now as Sorun pushed the bowl aside. "Just give it to me straight, man," he softly requested.

Tails nodded, and then took a deep breath before explaining. "I ran every single possible test I could, Sorun. Rotor helped me out with some of the tests and Nicole even crunched some of the numbers for me, but Chaos energy is... it's always been unpredictable. But after the results I got from some of my final experiments last night... well, I'm gonna have to call it at some point, Sorun." Slowly, the fox began to shake his head. "I'm... I'm really sorry, Sorun. They can't come out. There's just no way."

"... Oh." He felt something just give out inside of him, and the human's form went slack in his chair. "... You don't know that for certain."

Tails winced, as if he'd been expecting that reaction but also had been dreading it. "Sorun, I am sure. Those Emeralds are completely fused to your body's systems, and they can't be extracted since they're existing in an immaterial energy state while fused to you."

"I don't want to accept that." Sorun had to lean forwards on the table just to keep himself steady. "This is the same world that has things like digitizers and robots and people with powers that defy physics. You can't tell me that all that exists but there isn't a way to remove the Emeralds."

"Sorun, I really don't know. Maybe there is, but I just... if there is, I don't know. And I really doubt it."

The teen looked at Tails again, and the fox began actively fidgeting in his seat under that gaze. It was more than just those sunken, dark blue eyes staring into Tails' eyes. There was the deep frown set on his face, and the way his form was slumped over. He looked positively miserable. Miserable to the point that Tails almost felt all

the negativity radiating off the human, and, growing worried, began reaching a hand out to him.

"Sorun? S-Sorun, I know this sounds bad, but-"

"Quit talking." From the corner of his eyes he saw blue light flash on his right side, and Tails had sat right back down in his seat as a result. Sorun had barely even registered any of this, though, as Tails' words were sinking so far into his head that he couldn't recognize much of anything at the moment.

He didn't want to believe it. Not a single word. Not from him, not from those sky echidna, not from anybody. Going home was the goal. Had been from word go. The only reason he even went along with being a Freedom Fighter and risking his life for everybody was just to secure a way home. He didn't have a reason to fight outside of that, and he absolutely refused to acknowledge the fact that going home was impossible.

But then there was that small part of his brain trying to tell him the reality of the situation. The logical part of his brain that kept reminding him of all the evidence that said going back was impossible. The part he'd been shutting out ever since that night with the first Chaos Emerald. The voice that was practically screaming at him right now to listen to what Tails was trying to say to him.

And Tails.

Tails. Tails, who'd built that machine. Tails, who'd dragged him here. Tails, who was telling him he couldn't go back. Every single thing that had gone wrong and Tails was all a part of it, and the more he thought on it the more furious he grew at the fox, and...!

And... that fox was currently pressing his body into his chair, practically shaking as he stared wide-eyed at Sorun's right shoulder. The confusion briefly reprieved the teen from his roiling outrage, and slowly he turned his head towards the shoulder. He saw immediately why Tails looked so frightened- his right Bringer Claw had

manifested. It wasn't resting on Sorun's shoulder, either. The feathered arm was hovering at his side, the clawed, spectral hand practically shaking in a way that matched the silent rage coursing through Sorun. He couldn't help but note the way the claws were pointed in Tails' direction.

Sorun stared at the arm for the longest moment, and then forced himself to take a calming breath. The arm slowly dissipated in a shower of blue particles, and once it was gone he turned back to Tails, who was already beginning to calm down. But seeing Tails act like a scared child for a moment had reminded Sorun just who he was: a child.

A child genius fighting in a hopeless war he had no place in.

A child who just wanted all the fighting to end so he and his friends and family could just live in peace and have a future.

A child who was so understandably desperate he'd listened to a prophecy inscribed on a wooden tablet along with everybody else in the hope that it would lead to *something* that could help because *nothing else was working* .

A child who was fully aware of what'd he'd done to Sorun, and was trying his best to make it up to him and apologize. Who'd brought him orange juice that one time and kept Sorun company. Who talked with him and tried helping him like everybody else, because he along with the rest of the Freedom Fighters knew Sorun's situation was unfair and wrong. The same child who was aware of the mistake he'd made and was trying his best to fix it.

He'd almost clawed that child.

"... I'm sorry about that," Sorun apologized, regret filling him. "It... slipped."

Tails' body relaxed, and he released a light breath as he leaned a bit forwards into the table. "I-I didn't mean to make you so mad... Sorun,

I'm sorry, I just-"

He was interrupted by the short, humorless laugh that left Sorun. Here he was, almost ready to claw the fox apart with his powers. And he was the one saying he was sorry. Because Tails probably knew just how much Sorun was struggling with this.

Tails really was too nice. Mobians were too nice. Sorun didn't feel like he deserved an apology after what he'd almost done.

"I thought I already told you I didn't like people using 'sorry' so carelessly," he muttered, the smallest smirk on Sorun's face. "And I already told you I forgive you. You... did nothing wrong. And I... appreciate... that you went through so much trouble with all the research you did. Thank you, Tails." The smirk fell, and Sorun looked to the side. "But I just don't want to accept there's no way back home."

"... Yeah." Tails sat back in his seat, looking down as his ears drooped down. "I understand. I don't think I blame you."

At least they'd reached that much of an understanding. That was the air between him and Tails cleared up, at the very least. But everything going on inside of Sorun's mind was a different story. That inner turmoil that was one half in heavy denial over everything Tails had said and one half trying to accept it.

A knock roused both the human and Mobian from their thoughts, and they looked towards the kitchen entrance. Sorun instantly recognized the red form leaning against the open frame as Knuckles, who was looking between the both of them with a neutral look to his violet eyes. "Am I interrupting something?" he asked.

Both Tails and Sorun looked towards each other, the latter shaking his head as they looked back to the echidna. "No, you're not interrupting anything," Sorun quietly told the echidna. "What's up?"

Knuckles, noting how unusually quiet Sorun was, gave the human a sideways glance, but soon brushed it off as he walked into the kitchen. "I actually came in here for Tails," he explained. "The... detectors you guys set up. They picked up another Chaos Emerald signature, and I'm the only one available to go get it. I was just hoping you could fly me there in the plane, Tails."

Sorun's spine went rigid at that. Another Emerald. More potential power. More potential years off his life. More potential problems.

"Actually," Knuckles continued, "are you busy doing anything, Sorun? I could use the help if you're willing."

The pale teen sighed out a large breath through clenched teeth, hanging his head low enough so that his locks of straight, black hair obscured a majority of his face. "Must we?" he asked Knuckles. "Is getting another Chaos Emerald really that important?"

"Er... yeah? It's a Chaos Emerald. Of course it's important." Knuckles leaned in closer to Sorun. "You doin' okay? You're looking kind of down."

"Just fine. Don't worry." Sorun picked himself up, and then brushed the excess hair out from his pale face as he fixed his eyes onto Knuckles. "On second thought... seeing as you're going after it anyways, I may as well tag along. More the merrier, right?"

And it would take his mind off of literally everything that had happened since entering this kitchen today. Off of today in general and the anniversary of his abduction. If ever he needed a distraction, it was now. Even if this distraction was going to end today with a Chaos Emerald. And he could already see problems arising from that.

He'd just deal with it later.

Knuckles grinned, showing off his pointed teeth. "Yeah, that's the spirit!" He turned to Tails, who was still looking towards Sorun with a

worried expression. "Well, Tails? You're in, right?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah!" The fox turned towards Knuckles and gave him an enthusiastic nod. "Yeah, of course! I'll go warm up the plane right now!"

"Alright! Sounds like a plan!"

Sorun watched the interaction between the two in mild amusement, and then rose up out of his chair. "I'll go with you, Tails," he said as he pushed the chair in. "I don't have anywhere else to go right now."

"Uh, sure. Okay." Tails pointed towards the bowl of cereal still on the table. "Don't you at least want to finish your breakfast, though?"

Blue eyes flicked over in the direction of the bowl. Sorun's expression twitched into a grimace for a single moment, and then he turned back to Tails. "It's alright," he said. "I lost my appetite."

The plane ride? More awkward than it needed to be. At least that's how it was for Sorun. Tails was giving off the impression that he'd already put the earlier incident behind him and was acting more like his positive self. Sorun was glad for that much, at least. That his misery wasn't bringing somebody else down into this depression along with him.

Sorun himself managed to take his mind off of things on the plane ride over, getting lost in looking down at the passing landscape while they had been flying high in the sky. The issues of going home to Earth were still nibbling at the back of his mind, but for now distracting himself was working. It was a brief reprieve that felt like a breath of fresh air.

If Knuckles had noticed anything amidst, which Sorun was certain he had, he wasn't saying anything about it. He was somewhat grateful for that. The less they delved on sensitive subjects like that, the better.

The trio had to reach their destination eventually, though, as shown when Tails had landed the plane in a small clearing of trees. Sorun didn't know exactly where they were going- he'd been too preoccupied with his own thoughts to bother to ask Knuckles, who had been directing Tails as he piloted the plane-, but he had a pretty solid idea it had something to do with the small mountain Tails had parked the plane near. The mountain the three were currently walking towards.

A short two-minute walk later, and the three had pushed their way past some forest brush into another clearing, this one pressed right up against the side of the mountain. Sorun knew something was off immediately when he saw vehicles parked all around the clearing. Red and black machines with Eggman's logo pasted on all of them. Large transport ships and other, wheeled vehicles with attachments such as giant drills and shovel-like claws. And conveniently enough, they were all parked next to a cave opening on the side of the mountain.

"Let me take a wild guess," Sorun began as he eyed the dark opening of the cave. "The Chaos Emerald is somewhere inside of that mountain."

"Yeah. The signal was strong enough that we got a general location, but it was too faint to pick up anything exact. Rotor told me that likely meant the Chaos Emerald was deep in the ground somewhere." Knuckles gestured towards the mountain. "Or in this case a mountain, I guess. But it looks like Eggman beat us to it. He's already got robots here trying to dig it out."

"Feels like he always knows where these things are right before we do," Sorun commented as he began scratching the back of his neck. "Don't you guys think that's kinda weird?"

Tails shrugged. "Not really. He probably has sensors of his own placed everywhere that detect Chaos energy signatures, and they're probably loads more advanced than the ones we have placed. If anything, we're lucky to be finding them as fast as we are."

"Mm, guess that makes sense," Sorun conceded. "So what's the plan? Go in the cave, bust the robots, take the Emerald? Seems kinda simple."

"That's 'cause it is simple. They don't know we're here, and we're more than enough for a bunch or robots. It should be fine." The echidna turned towards Tails. "But uh, hey, just in case you think you could stay by the plane, Tails? You know, keep guard and warm it up in case something happens?"

The fox gave him a simple nod, and then proceeded to spin his tails up and fly back towards the plane. The remaining pair looked towards the other, gave each other a nod, and then turned towards the cave before proceeding to walk towards it.

Well, on the downside it seemed like there was going to be some inevitable conflict if there were already robots in that mountain digging for the Emerald. It wasn't an ideal situation in Sorun's eyes, but compared to how he was a month ago it was far from hopeless. He at least knew for a fact that his powers were effective against the weakest of Eggman's robots, so assuming that's all that was in there he wouldn't be helpless. And Knuckles was there, too, if worse came to worse. So he wasn't all that worried. He just hoped nothing horrible like a cave-in or something occurred.

"Hey, Sorun, everything okay between you and Tails?" Knuckles had suddenly asked as the pair continued walking towards the cave entrance, drawing Sorun's attention towards Knuckles. "You're just kind of acting a bit weird is all," he informed him.

"Tails gave me some bad news I'm trying to ignore," Sorun answered. "That's all. There's nothing weird going on."

"Bad news, huh? What kind of bad news?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Alright...?" On that note, the two had reached the mouth of the cave entrance. "Well, you ready to head in?"

Sorun squinted his eyes and peered into the cave. It didn't look natural, that much was for certain. The cave itself looked more like a tunnel that a cave, and the walls and entrance were much too smooth and circular. It was lit, too. Poorly, but there were lines of cables running on either side of the cave's wall with rows of dim lights hanging off those wires.

"I feel I should confess something to you, Knuckles," Sorun said as he turned from the cave to the echidna. "I was never much of a spelunker." He blinked. "That still a word people use? Spelunking? I don't know how many colloquialisms are still around."

"Yeah, that's still a word," Knuckles confirmed with a slow nod. "But don't worry about it. Searching underground for treasure is one of my things. Just stick close to me and you should be fine."

"Is that so?" Sorun airily replied as he watched the echidna walk into the cave. He shrugged, and followed the echidna in while staying close to his back. "So is digging around for stuff a hobby of yours or what?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, it is. Or was, I guess, before everything started happening." The light from the mouth of the cave soon began to fade behind the two teens as they slowly progressed further into the tunnel. "I made it a point to explore as much of Angel Island as I could as a kid. I am the Guardian of the place, after all." He paused, and his face fell slightly. "Kind of been doing a pretty poor job of it lately, though."

Sorun chose not to press the issue. He didn't know a lot about Angel Island, nor what the deal with the whole Guardian bit was. Just that it was a island that floated all around the world and that it was where a majority of the echidna lived. But for whatever reason that island was a sore topic for Knuckles, and he always strayed away from it. Sorun could be sympathetic enough to respect that, considering his own

situation, so he always chose to refrain from asking questions about it.

After all, he didn't need a Knuckles with hurt feelings on the mission. So Sorun supposed he'd try changing topics a bit to take his mind off of it. Maybe go back to the treasure hunting topic from earlier.

"So were you a top-tier treasure hunter back up on that island?" Sorun asked in a bland tone, fingers interlaced behind his head as he stepped up to besides Knuckles. "Famous adventurer all the cool kids wanna grow up to be?"

That brought a small smile to Knuckles' face, followed by a chuckle as he scratched at his abashed face. "I wouldn't go that far," he said. "I just explored a bunch. Between that and solving any problems on the island, there wasn't much else to do. But everybody on the island knew me since I was the Guardian, so yeah. I guess I was pretty famous back then."

"Wow, you were a regular Indiana Jones, huh? That's, uh, a famous treasure hunter back where I'm from. Well, archaeologist, but same difference," he explained when Knuckles sent him a confused glance. Sorun chose to omit the fact he was fictional as well. "All you're missin' is that stylish brown hat and you'd have the whole look down."

"... A hat, huh?" Knuckles looked up and patted the top of his red head. "I dunno. You really think I could pull off wearing a hat?"

Sorun blinked, not having expected Knuckles to take the suggestion seriously, but then shrugged. "Um, sure, why not? It's your head, man. Wear what you want."

"You know... I just might..." Knuckles trailed off, and then began to slow down while pointing his gloved hand ahead. "Looks like we got some trouble. Check that out."

Stopping alongside him, the pale teen lowered his hands back to his sides and stared forwards. There was a circular, metal door blocking the way forwards. A door that, much to Sorun's disgust, was styled to look exactly like Eggman's head, grinning maniacally at any trespassers who would step up to the door.

"How conceited does the guy have to be to make almost everything look like his face?" Sorun grumbled under his breath as he began approaching the door. "Seriously, look at this. His stupid logo and robots wasn't enough? He's makin' doors that resemble him now, too? He's gonna carve his face into a mountain at this rate."

He would't put it past that madman, either. He'd only seen his actual face once, but even that one time was enough to cement the fact that Sorun really, really hated his face, and if he ever had the opportunity he would punch it right off his head with a Bringer Claw. And every single time he saw something that even closely related to the man's face, it set something off in Sorun. Something violent.

Kind of like the feeling of him wanting to punch the door that he was experiencing right now.

"Don't give him any ideas," Knuckles drawled out as he approached the door. "Looks like his Badniks put this here to block anybody off who wandered in from the cave entrance." He ran one of his spiked fists over the door's exterior. "I'm not seeing anything like a switch or lever, though. Not even a slot to put a key of some kind in."

Sorun hummed, and then stepped next to Knuckles once more to examine the door. Other than it being perfectly circular and shaped like Eggman, it seemed like an ordinary door. A door, however, that had no visible means of opening. In fact Sorun had almost given up entirely and called it a wall and not a door, but very faintly he could see an almost invisible seam run down the center of the circular door. So it definitely opened. It just wasn't clear how.

"Think we can just dig around it?" the human suggested. "I feel like it'd be way easier to dig through all this rock than solid metal."

Knuckled paused to contemplate the suggestion for a moment, but then shook his head. "No, I don't think that's a good idea. We're pretty deep in, and I'm worried about causing a cave-in. Plus there's no telling how much damage to the mountain's structure the Badniks have already done with their excavating. Too risky."

"Yeah, I guess you got a point," Sorun murmured in agreement. He looked to just below the center of the door, and then saw something that caused his eyes to widen. "Hey, doesn't the mouth part of his logo usually only have six teeth?"

"Yeah? Why- wait, I see what you're looking at." Both teens leaned in closer to the door, Knuckles in particular giving a small nod. "Yeah, this looks like something, alright."

Sorun had seen that logo enough times to recall every detail. He'd had so many life and death experiences involving it that it was practically burned into his memory at this point, so it was impossible not to notice a detail such as this. That logo of his, styled after his face, usually had six rectangles vertically aligned next to each other over where the mouth was, representing, the teen assumed, the man's sadistic, toothy grin. It was the kind of thing that was as cartoonish as it was nightmarish.

This door, however, had twenty rectangles all lined up next to each other. Otherwise the door was virtually identical to the logo design-wise, but those teeth were a glaring exception. Even more damning was the fact that, unlike the rest of the door, the teeth were made of some type of clear material. And Sorun felt compelled to reach out and touch one of the teeth.

His hand only made it halfway before Knuckles' hand snapped up and grabbed it.

"What're you doing?" Knuckles asked in a hushed whisper.

Sorun looked at the echidna, and then nodded his head at the door. "I was gonna touch a tooth to see what happened," he said.

"Seemed like the next step."

"You're seriously just gonna go and touch it when you don't even know what it does!?"

"... That's usually how these things work in video games," Sorun weakly defended. "Dude, it's a door and we're in the middle of a cave. What's the worst that could happen?"

"I don't know! It could be a trap or something! You touch something wrong and a bunch of holes open up in the wall to shoot us with tranq darts or an electric cage drops on us to capture us or something! That's what he does!"

The human teen gave the echidna a flat look. "Knuckles, you see any other way forwards?"

Knuckles hesitated, still nervously glancing at the door. "Well... no..."

"You wanna give up on the Emerald and head back?"

He shook his head. "No way!"

"Cool. I'm touching the tooth then."

After what was surely some heavy internal debate, Knuckles let go of Sorun and took a step back. The human turned back to the door, exhaling slowly as his finger hovered closer to one of the center teeth.

The finger stopped just short of touching it, and remained hovering on the spot.

A couple of seconds passed where Sorun continued to simply point at the tooth. Knuckles stared at the display in confusion for a couple of seconds, and then cleared his throat. "Uh, Sorun? Any day now. You gonna press it?"

"... You got me paranoid with all that talk about traps," Sorun mumbled as he pulled his finger back. "I don't wanna press it anymore."

A loud slap was heard as Knuckles palmed his own face. "Sorun-!"

"You're the one that brought it up!" It seemed outlandish to the pale teen when he first heard it, nothing but Knuckles being overly paranoid, but then he realized this was Eggman they were talking about who, yes, probably was crazy enough to trap a cave. It wouldn't even be that unusual compared to some of the other things he'd done. The five terabytes of selfies was still fresh in Sorun's memory. "Uh-uh-uh- you touch it."

"Me!?" Knuckles shouted in outrage. "Why me?!"

"'Cause it's your fault this is happening right now," Sorun argued, "so you get to press it!"

"Fine! I will!" Taking a deep breath, Knuckles lightly shoved Sorun aside and prepared to press down on one of the buttons. Like Sorun, however, he'd stopped centimetres away from the button, deflated, and stepped back. "Yeah, I don't wanna, either," he said.

Sorun groaned, and then ran a hand along his face. "Oh, for the love of- Bringer Claw, go."

In a flash of blue, the right Bringer Claw appeared over Sorun's shoulder. The spectral hand closed all but its index claw inwards, the extended appendage pointing right at the the left centermost tooth. The pointing claw slowly moved forwards. Both Sorun and Knuckles held their breath, their hearts beating faster the closer the claw got, and both couldn't help but cringe away when it softly touched the tooth.

The rectangular tooth lit up blue. That was all that happened. Sorun and Knuckles continued staring at the lit-up tooth in utter silence for

a solid thirty seconds before the Bringer Claw disappeared, with Sorun wiping a bead of sweat off his forehead.

"Well, that was overly dramatic," the human teen sighed out as he leaned towards the door's mouth. "So I guess we just... light up all the teeth and the door will open. Or something like that."

"Sounds about right," Knuckles agreed with a nod. "Which tooth should we press next?"

"Gee, I dunno. All these identical rectangles look so appealing, I just can't decide," Sorun remarked in a low drone. "How about we go for the one right next to it?"

He pressed the tooth just to the right of the one he'd activated like the first one. This one lit up blue, too. What also happened was that the previous one turned back off into its unlit state, and curiously the tooth all the way on the left lit up.

Knuckles face fell into confusion immediately at the sight. Sorun stared blankly at the mouth for all of five seconds, and then slowly started to adopt a look of horror as he pressed both of his hands against his face.

"Oh no. Oh god it's one of *these* puzzles..." Sorun pitifully groaned out, voice muffled from his palms. "Dude, we ain't getting past this door. There's no way."

"Huh?" Knuckles looked to Sorun, and then back to the door. "Why not? What happened?"

"It's... a puzzle," Sorun ruefully groaned out as his hands limply fell back to his sides. "Turning one tooth on turns on or off other teeth. We have to activate the teeth in an order that lights them all up, which is gonna be really hard since they all interact with each other. So we're gonna have to keep track of all that while figuring out a pattern we can use." He deeply sighed. "I always hated these

puzzles in games. I never manage to beat them without looking a guide up."

"Is that all it is?" The look of puzzlement on Knuckles' features morphed into a relieved one. "Then we're all set! All we gotta do is solve the puzzle and open the door."

"'Solve the puzzle' he says," Sorun muttered with a roll of his eyes. "Knuckles, I don't think the gravity of how hard this puzzle is has hit you yet."

"It's just a puzzle," Knuckles reasoned, "and there's two of us. I'm sure we can get through it just fine if we put our heads together and think it through."

Sorun wasn't nearly as optimistic as he was. These puzzles were the bane of his existence during his life as a gamer. All puzzles had been, really, but this one reigned as the king of puzzles in terms of difficulty for him. And as daunting a task as it was, they did actually need to solve it in order to move forwards. So it didn't seem like they had a choice.

But maybe Knuckles was right. Maybe with two brains they could do it. He honestly doubted it, but it was worth a shot at least.

"Okay, let's go for it," Sorun sighed out as he moved to the leftmost tooth. "First thing first is we gotta figure out which tooth is connected to which, so we'll press 'em all to get the sequences down. We can puzzle out what order to press them in right after."

"There, see?" Knuckles grinned at him and gave him a thumbs-up. "We're already getting through it and you didn't even need my help!"

"Save that for when we actually solve this thing. If we can."

---

5 minutes

"Okay, so the third tooth is connected to the fifth and eighth teeth, and the fourth... fourth..." Knuckles trailed off, and then shook his head. "I forget. Can we go through them again?"

"We've gone through it three times, Knuckles," an irate Sorun groaned out as he ran a hand through his hair. "It's the exact same sequence as the last three times we went through it, so it's not gonna change on the fourth!"

The echidna sent him a challenging glare. "Then tell me what teeth are connected to tooth four, then."

Sorun opened his mouth to answer, but when his mind turned up blank, he sighed and trudged his way towards the fourth tooth to press it.

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10 minutes

"Hey, look at that. It didn't work," Sorun flatly stated as he looked at a line of twenty teeth, a random half of which were lit up. "Knuckles, man, we screwed it up."

"Yeah, I know," Knuckles sighed out. "Okay, reset them all so they're all off and we'll try it again."

The human teen began rubbing his temples with his fingers. "Yeah, see, that's the thing. I don't know how to reset it. All the lights are mixed up and if we try turning them all off it's just gonna light up the other half. I don't even know how we got to this point."

"Look, it's easy. All we gotta do is... is..." Knuckles stopped, a worryingly low hum escaping him as he looked over the door's mouth. "Actually, yeah, you're right. How... wait, which ones were connected to which again?"

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15 minutes

Sorun was seriously considering if risking death by a cave-in was preferable to enduring this hell.

"How!?" Knuckles growled out in frustration. "We went through the order! We both agreed with it! It should have worked!" He slammed his fist into the door, causing it to rattle and make small amounts of dirt fall off the cave's roof as it shook. "Why can't we get them all to light up!?"

"I don't know, man, I don't know..." Sorun mumbled in despair as he held his head in his hands. "Who makes the key to a door a puzzle, anyways?"

"Eggman," Knuckles bitterly ground out, "that's who. This is just like him."

"Of course it is." The pale teen shook his head and approached the door's mouth. "Okay, I got an idea. Let's try this."

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25 minutes

They weren't getting through the door.

It just couldn't be done. Despite pooling their brainpower together, the pair just couldn't suss out how to open that infernal door. They'd gotten close once, when they'd managed to light all but one of the teeth up, but trying to light up that last one had resulted in the entire thing turning off. Right back to square one. Suffice to say the two gave up after that last attempt.

And now they were sitting on opposite sides of the cave, staring forlornly at the door. To Sorun it almost looked like it was laughing at them. Mocking them in their attempt at solving such an advanced-level puzzle. It was maddening enough that the both of them had even tried punching down the door to no avail.

A defeated sigh rattled out of Sorun's throat. "Are we just idiots?" He asked aloud, more to himself than to Knuckles. "I mean we're both functional teenagers, right? We should be able to solve a puzzle."

"Yeah, but Eggman's a genius, and he designed this puzzle," Knuckles said as he weakly gestured towards the door. "Makes sense that it'd be so hard you'd need to be a genius to solve it if you really think about it."

Slowly blinking, Sorun rolled his head in Knuckles' direction. "Knuckles, there are children back on Earth who could solve this puzzle," he deadpanned.

"..." The echidna let the words sink in, and after a moment huffed out a defeated breath as he began to roll the cuff of his left glove back. "I'm calling Tails," he grumbled out.

The pale human sat straight up. "Hey, come on, no!" he loudly protested. "I don't want Tails comin' in here knowing we couldn't solve a puzzle!" He had some pride left over, damn it. It wasn't much but he was trying his best to preserve what little there was left. And he didn't know if he could handle looking so lame in front of Tails. Or if he could handle the story getting out to the others.

Knuckles shot Sorun a heated glare. "You wanna keep butting our heads against it?" he ground out with narrowed eyes.

"Look, let's just give it a few more tries-"

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30 minutes

"Call Tails."

Knuckles rolled his eyes, and then fully rolled up the cuff of his left glove. Sorun noted a wristwatch-like device clamped to the echidna's wrist, with a small speaker and set of knobs on its face in place of a clock. Knuckles fiddled with the knobs a few times before speaking

into the device. "Hey, Tails? Yeah, it's me. Can you come into the cave? We ran into a problem. No, yeah, just keep going straight. Yeah. Alright, thanks." He rolled his glove back over the device, and then looked up to Sorun. "He's on his way."

"Fantastic," the human drawled out, leaning his head back so it banged against the rock wall of the cave. "I don't care what you said about structural integrity. We're digging around the door if he can't figure this thing out."

"He'll figure it out," Knuckles assured him. "Surprised you couldn't solve it with all your talk of gamer knowledge this and gamer knowledge that."

Sorun made a "tsk" noise. "Forgive me, Knuckles, but I left all my hint coins in my other pair of pants back in my home zone. And you can't talk; you couldn't figure it out either."

He didn't have a remark for that one, and the two left the argument at that as they stared at the ground in complete silence. Some minutes later the sound of whizzing tails reached their ears, causing the pair of teens to pick their heads up and look towards the source of the noise.

As expected, Tails' short form came flying in from the end of the cave. He touched down on the ground once his tails ceased spinning, and then began to look back and forth between Sorun and Knuckles with a questioning look on his face.

"It's been around half an hour since you guys walked in here," he said. "What happened?"

Loudly exhaling, Sorun pointed his thumb in the direction of the door that had given him and Knuckles so much grief. "Door's locked behind a puzzle," he mumbled. "We couldn't solve the puzzle."

"..." Tails silently stared at Sorun, and then slowly turned towards the door. He blinked in surprise, and then looked back towards Sorun

with disbelief written on his face. "Seriously...?"

Sorun grit his teeth in indignation. "Tails, either help us out and solve the puzzle or get out."

The fox rolled his eyes, but still stepped towards the puzzle. Sorun looked after him for a few seconds, and then tore his gaze back to Knuckles. "So is there a reason I don't get a cool wrist communicator thing, 'cause I'm feeling pretty under equipped here."

Knuckles rose an eye ride at the human. "Would you wear it if we gave you one?"

Sorun looked down at his bare left wrist, regarded it for a second, and then shook his head. "Nah, watches don't really mesh with my style," he said.

"Oh, because you suddenly have a style." Knuckles slung one leg over the other while resting his hands behind his head. "Right."

"Hey, Honey says I do. Which, actually, come to think of it, she probably wouldn't even let me wear one." Would she? She'd probably make an exception if he said a wrist communicator was mission-imperative gear, but... well, knowing her, he didn't know if that was nearly a good enough excuse. Probably not, really.

"Why exactly did you do that weird sponsorship deal with her again?" Knuckles asked him. "It seems like it's giving you more trouble than it's worth."

"A desperate man will do a lot of things for free clothes and discounts, Knuckles," Sorun answered. "I happened to be a very desperate man at the time. Still am, actually."

The echidna stared at Sorun with a completely unconvinced face. "I'm a guy and I wouldn't have done it."

Sorun scoffed. "Yeah, well, you don't have to wear full-body clothing like I do since you're a Mobian. And I'm broke."

The stare remained unblinking. "Dunno if you ever figured this out, but gloves and shoes wear out too, and I'm not exactly rolling around in cash, either."

"You know what, man, I-"

"Guys, I solved it."

"WHAT!? I DON'T BELIEVE IT!" The outburst had come from Sorun, though both him and Knuckles had shot up to their feet in utter shock as they spun towards the door. Tails was right in front of it, giving the both of them an unimpressed look, and at the same time they could see the door behind him slowly begin to slide open. And all twenty of the teeth were lit up. "But... but we couldn't... I don't... b-but..." Sorun stuttered, completely in disbelief at the sight.

Tails merely shrugged. "It was a simple puzzle. I don't have any idea why you guys were so stuck on it."

This was why he hadn't wanted Tails to do it. Because then Sorun would get *this* feeling. This feeling of being inadequate and ashamed at the same time for not being able to solve something that took an eleven-year-old, what, a minute, two minutes? Granted he was a genius, but... but still.

On the upside, Sorun wasn't alone in his suffering. Knuckles seemed to be doing his best to try and avoid eye contact with Tails, and at the very least, Tails wasn't acting smug about it. He actually just looked more annoyed than anything else. It didn't exactly make Sorun feel better, but it helped buffer against the negative feelings.

The door had been opened, though. So there was that.

"... Tails, how about you just come with us," Sorun muttered as he started walking past the fox and towards the open door. "Y'know, in

case there's more puzzles or something."

"Yeah, I think I'll do that." Tails looked up to Knuckles, who simply shrugged at the fox. Tails reciprocated the shrug and the two Mobians began following the human deeper into the cave.

"How deep does this cave go, anyways?"

The mountain wasn't even that big from the outside. Not small either by any stretch of the word, but for how long the trio had been walking in a straight line through this single, tunnel-like cave, Sorun felt like they should have come out through the other side at this point. It wasn't even going up or down, either. Just straight. And yet there was nothing but even more poorly-lit tunnel up ahead up them even though they'd been walking for twenty minutes straight.

It was utterly baffling. Like everything else in this universe.

"You guys think this is one of those tunnels that goes slightly down? Like so slightly that it looks straight but isn't so we're still technically heading underground?" Sorun asked his two companions, choosing to keep his head straight ahead. "Because I feel like we should have hit either something important or the other side of the mountain by now."

"Hm. That's possible," Tails said. "It's honestly hard to believe that Eggman's robots would dig so far into the mountain, but if it's for a Chaos Emerald, I guess there aren't many places they wouldn't go."

Sorun huffed and blew a lock of hair from his face. "And yet if he gets it he's probably just gonna put it on a stand to ogle like the last one." Said a lot about Eggman that he was willing to divert so many of his forces to dig under a mountain for an Chaos Emerald he wasn't even going to use. On one hand it was one of the most wasteful uses of resources Sorun could conceive. On the other hand, the human teen wasn't even sure Eggman needed any of it considering how close he was to completely conquering the world.

He'd openly admitted to Sorun's face he was dragging things out just to milk as much fun out of the conflict as possible.

But these were things Sorun didn't like thinking about. Because thinking about the man and his reasoning for doing all this insanity left a bad taste in his mouth, and it kept reminding him he could blow up all of Knothole when he finally grew bored of it all.

"How'd this thing even end up at the bottom of a mountain, anyways?" Knuckles grumbled under his breath. "I get they scattered all over the world after we used them, but come on. Did it just shoot right down into the rock or something?"

"Who knows, man? I stopped questioning Chaos Emeralds a while ago," Sorun commented. "Is is just me, or is the cave getting a bit wider up ahead?"

"Hey, yeah, it is!" Tails realized with widened eyes. "Come on, let's check it out!"

The trio rapidly sped up, and soon enough the cave tunnel around them did indeed begin to widen. Eventually they reached another cave mouth, the three quickly moving through it before abruptly stopping.

That cave opening had lead to a small rock platform with various pieces of machinery scattered around. In front of them was a chasm: a chasm so wide that they couldn't see the ending of it when looking left and right, though this was in part due to the low amount of lighting from the few lights scattered around on power cables lining the wall and some large, portable lamps that had been placed nearby. When Sorun had approached the edge of the cliff they now stood on and looked down, all he saw was darkness.

Across the chasm, slightly above their elevation, was another cliff, and at the end of that cliff they could see a door. Another puzzle door from the looks of it, much to Sorun's and Knuckles' chagrin, though Tails didn't seem too concerned about it. Unfortunately, though, there

was nothing connecting the cliff they were standing on to the cliff on the other side of the chasm where the door was.

"What the- where's the bridge!?" Sorun exclaimed, spreading his arms out to the chasm ahead of the trio. "Why is there a door all the way over there with no bridge!?"

He felt something tug on his hoodie, and looked to the side to see Tails pulling on him to gain his attention. "I think that's it over there." He pointed towards a pile of disassembled bridge parts laying in a haphazard pile near them. "It looks like they got all the mining robots and equipment across the gap, so they disassembled the bridge behind them."

"... Why!?" Sorun held his right palm up to his forehead. "What, are they just gonna build a new bridge when they get the Emerald!?"

"Eh, Eggman's always been a weirdly paranoid guy," Knuckles supplied with a shrug of his shoulders. "Why leave a bridge lying around when you have enough resources to just build a second one on the way out?"

The human teen groaned. "I'm losin' brain cells every time I learn something new about Eggman." His hand slid off his forehead, and he turned pleading eyes to Tails. "Can you fly over there and check the door out?"

At his behest the young fox spun his tails up and flew past the vast chasm and towards the door. Oddly, he came back less than a minute later, and from what Sorun and Knuckles saw he'd barely interacted with the door. Even more worryingly was he had a concerned look on his face.

"Bad news, guys," he announced as his feet dropped onto the ground. "There's no power to the door."

"No power?" Knuckles repeated. "Why not?"

"It doesn't look like the door's hooked up to the makeshift power grid the Badniks here set up while tunneling through the mountain," Tails explained as he turned in the direction of the chasm while pointing towards the door. "I did notice that there were some cables connecting the door to some weird panel with a square indent, though."

Sorun hummed at that. *"Square indent in a panel, huh? Where have I heard that before?"* He took a look around at some of the equipment scattered around there, and eventually stopped when something pressed against the wall on the left side of the cliff caught his eye. A large, enclosed metal cabinet with blue light leaking out of small, oval viewing ports on its front.

As the two Mobians continued discussing the matter behind him, Sorun approached the cabinet with hands tucked in his pockets. He stopped right in front of the strange cabinet, squinting his eyes as he peered in through the viewing port. Inside were about five rectangular metal boxes with strips of blue light lining their frames. What drew his eye most, however, was the large, blue lightning bolt insignia stamped on the side of the boxes.

"... Alright, I played 'Dead Space'. I know how this game works. Just plug the battery into the thing. Why the hell Eggy designed it like this I got no clue, but I'm not gonna pretend to know what goes through a crazy guy's head." He looked to the right and saw that there was a red lever connected to what he assumed was a dispenser unit. He reached over and pulled the lever, and while the dispenser rattled slightly, nothing dropped out from the large slot at the bottom of the machine. *"Ugh, come on."* He pulled the lever again. Nothing. *"Fuck it."*

His right Bringer Claw manifested, curled into a fist, and punched the dispenser unit. The loud sound of crumpling metal caused the two Mobians to flinch and look towards Sorun, though the pale teen ignored this and punched the machine again. It rattled, and this time one of a large batteries did fall through the slot.

Letting out a satisfied hum, Sorun picked up the battery with the Bringer Claw, and then turned to the other two while waving it at them. "Hey, is this important?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh, wait! That looks like a battery!" Tails exclaimed as he and Knuckles approached Sorun. "I guess it would make sense Eggman would use a bunch of portable power sources to power up his operations here instead of trying to build a power plant. His robots are only here to dig the Emerald out. He must have a lot of these things all around the mine powering the lights and doors."

"That almost sounds practical. And here I was thinking Eggman didn't know the definition of the word," Sorun quipped, tossing the battery up and down as he looked at the door across the chasm. "So we just gotta slam this into the slot connected to the door and open it, right?"

"That should do it. Can you fly the battery over, Sorun?"

Sorun nodded, setting the battery down on the ground to pick it up while removing his normal hands from his pockets. He bent down and grabbed both sides of the battery with his hands, and then attempted to lift up.

The battery remained on the ground.

"... Hm." With a small grunt of effort, Sorun tried lifting again. The battery didn't budge. "Yeah, it's too heavy for me," he explained as he let go of the battery and stood up. "I need both Bringer Claws to fly, so I can't carry it over."

"Here, let me try." Tails stepped up to the battery and bent down to try and pick it up. Unfortunately, just like with Sorun, the battery did not budge off the ground. "Eeegh! Ah, yeah. That's heavy alright," Tails sighed out as he let it go, and then began scratching his head in confusion. "What is this thing even made out of that's making it so heavy?"

"No clue. Here, let me try." Knuckles flexed his gloved hands, and then bent down to grasp the battery. Unlike when Sorun and Tails tried, the battery was lifted almost easily off the ground by the echidna, who looked at the battery in his grasp in surprise before looking back at the other two. "I don't know what you guys are complaining about. This thing isn't heavy at all."

Sorun and Tails glanced at each other, rolled their eyes, and then looked at the door across the chasm. "Alright, here's the next problem," Sorun began. "Knuckles can't fly, and we can't carry him and fly at the same time with the battery weighing him down." He glanced back at Knuckles and the battery. "Think I could just throw it across?"

Tails winced at the suggestion, and then roughly shook his head. "I... would strongly recommend against doing that. Eggman isn't really known for making his technology using stable elements."

"What, you think the battery will explode if... actually, yeah, that does kinda sound like something that would happen." Sorun clicked his tongue in irritation, and then looked towards the chasm. "I could make a bridge with Summoned Swords... kinda worried about the weight of the battery breaking 'em, though... well, they *should* hold up, but I dunno... hm?"

Looking around at the chasm separating the two cliffs, Sorun's eyes happened upon a metal structure towards the right side. A large, metal box was bolted to the chasm's wall with an even larger metal arm made of metal struts attached to it, with a large, metal claw at the end of that. A crane.

Sorun hummed in thought, and then looked from the crane towards the rightmost end of the cliff. There was a large, rectangular container sitting on the ground. Empty, but the metal container was long enough to stretch out to half of the chasm's length.

An idea was forming.

"Any chance they left the keys in that crane over there?" Sorun asked, pointing over to the crane bolted to the wall. "'Cause I can probably do something if they did."

"I don't think there'd be a key for a portable crane like that. Too much of a hassle to bother with," Tails informed him. "If there's still power in it, there should just be an activation button."

"Ah, cool." The Bringer Claws manifested on Sorun's back. "Alright, I'm gonna go try something. You two sit tight."

It was no sooner did the human announce he had an idea than he flew away with those strange, spectral appendages he could create out of his back. Tails sighed at the retreating form, his ears slightly drooping while his tails began drooping towards the ground.

"Hey, so uh, since he's gone for a second... you mind telling me what's up with you and him?" Tails' head picked up, and then turned towards his back where he saw Knuckles looking at him with questioning eyes. "He said you gave him some bad news, but he wouldn't talk about it. I'm just wondering what the deal is since he seems kinda... off. You know, more than usual."

"He called it bad news, huh?" That was an understatement if Tails had ever heard of one, but he wouldn't put it past somebody like Sorun to phrase it like that. The human always seemed to have some way of underscoring the severity of some things. His humor was weird like that. "I... Knuckles, what would you do if I told you that for some reason you could never, ever return to Angel Island again? Where all your people and family are? How do you think you would react?"

Knuckles' eye ridges rose in surprise at the question, though they lowered a few moments later as understanding crossed the echidna's face. "Oh. It's that bad, huh?"

With slumped shoulders, Tails gave a confirming nod. "I told him that extracting those Emeralds are all but impossible, and he's..." Biting his lower lip, Tails turned back towards the crane on the wall and saw Sorun climbing inside of it. "I think he's in denial about it," he finally said while turning back to Knuckles. "He doesn't want to believe it, and I don't blame him since... since it's his home, you know? And we took that from him, and I just... how are we supposed to make up for something like taking his home and everything he knew away from him?"

The question hung in the air for a while between the two. Knuckles looked to the side in thought, looking extremely uncomfortable with the question, and then turned his gaze towards the crane as it slowly began rotating. "We can't, really," he said. "The best we could do is try giving him a new home. I don't know, maybe you guys could settle him somewhere in Knothole? Get him his own place once all the fighting dies down a bit?"

It wasn't a perfect solution, but it was definitely better than nothing. "Yeah, we might have to," Tails agreed, "but... I know he said he doesn't hold what we did against us, he understands why we did it, but at the same time he... Sorun just seems so upset."

He still kept flashing back to when they were in the HQ kitchen, back when Tails had told him the news. The way his irises had shrunken down to pinpricks while his eyes began shaking in their sockets despite the human teen himself being practically as still as a stone. How strained and quiet his voice had sounded when he spoke. He'd looked more melancholic than Tails had ever seen anybody ever, and he couldn't help but feel sad in place of the human.

And then there had been that hand. That blue, spectral claw that had Tails frozen on the spot, because there was something just plain threatening about that thing. Tails would readily admit that he was afraid of it when it appeared, but he was quickly surprised when Sorun had acted like he hadn't even known it was there, and then quickly made it disappear before apologizing to Tails. It made the fox feel relief that he had no conscious intention of lashing out, but he

definitely must have felt like it. He wasn't so sure that claw would have appeared otherwise.

But the fact that Sorun was even suffering through all these emotions in the first place made Tails feel awful. He didn't deserve to go through this. Nobody did, but it felt worse in Sorun's case because he had slowly become one of them. He didn't like showing it for some reason that was beyond Tails, but he really was a nice person. He'd helped them. Even started saving lives! And it tore at something inside of Tails knowing he was doing all this for them even though he quite possibly just lost everything.

"I just feel really sorry for him. And I want to help him, but he... just doesn't open up to people." The crane arm began moving towards the metal container, though this was mainly ignored by Tails as he once again turned to Knuckles. "What do you think?"

Knuckles idly watched as Sorun attempted to use the crane's claw to grab at the container, and then looked down at Tails. "Yeah, it's rough," he agreed, "but he's been managing fine with it so far. I think he'll be okay with enough time." He looked to the side and began awkwardly rubbing the back of his head. "I mean, Sorun, he's... he's a solid guy."

"Yeah," Tails agreed. "It'd be easier if he just talked about his problems with us, but-"

"- But he never likes talking about that stuff," Knuckles finished with a sigh. "I don't know, maybe he's still sorting through his feelings over everything or something. Just give him some time. He'll pull through."

The fox Mobian blinked hopeful eyes at Knuckles. "You really think so?"

"Yeah, sure. It won't be easy since, you know... he lost everything. I don't really know how you recover from something like that. But

Sorun's cool. And if worst comes to worst he's not alone. He's got us and everybody else. He'll be fine."

"... I think you're right." A small smile tugged at the corner of the fox's lips as the two turned back towards the crane. The claw was failing to grip onto the metal container, and very faintly they could hear unintelligible, angry shouting coming from the inside of the crane's cabin. "Did you hear that brain cell joke Sorun made about Eggman?" Tails idly asked while keeping his eyes on the crane.

"Yeah," Knuckles confirmed with a nod. "I didn't really get it. You?"

"I... think it means Eggman's actions make Sorun confused? Or maybe... I dunno, he says a lot of weird jokes." Maybe it was a zone thing- the way Sorun was so sarcastically dry half of the time. And maybe a lot of the jokes he said were lost on them because they required context that was commonplace in his home but completely absent for everybody on Mobius. That was Tails' theory at least, but he truly didn't know for certain. Sorun really was odd, after all.

A spectral blue fist punching the door to the crane's cabin away shook Tails from his thoughts.

The door fell all the way to the bottom of the chasm, and a disgruntled Sorun emerged from the cabin, blue spectral wings slowly flapping as his feathered arms flew him back towards the two Mobians. He dropped down in a huff, blue arms disappearing as he continued to angrily grumble to himself.

"- Rigged, thing's rigged, couldn't pick up a box..." he heatedly grumbled, turning around to them. "Okay, so I was gonna use that box as a platform to carry Knuckles and the battery across the chasm, but that *stupid claw* couldn't *pick up the stupid box* , so that plan's out. So I'm going with Plan A."

Tails nodded in understanding. "Oh, that's too bad. But what's Plan A?"

"This." Sorun snapped his fingers. "This is Plan A."

Bring!

In a flash of blue light and particles, a tightrope bridge made completely out of Summoned Swords appeared to connect the two cliffs together. A tightrope bridge that, to Tails' mind, looked incredibly structurally unsound with it being made of *magic swords* . Knuckles looked hesitant as well, backing up a single step as he warily eyed the bridge.

"Don't tell me you expect me to walk on that while holding the battery," the echidna said as he looked from the bridge to Sorun.

"Yeah, Sorun, that..." Tails turned to Sorun, and gulped from the glare the human was giving him. "I'm not sure that bridge will, well... hold up."

"I've done this before. It holds up fine," he assured them with a hand wave. "Just don't, you know, trip or something and you should be fine."

"You sure?" Knuckles had bent down to pick the battery up, but he still had an unsure look about his face as he eyed the bridge. "I don't wanna doubt you, but..."

Sorun, with a roll of his eyes, groaned. "Look, it held me and Sally up back when I first tried it, so if it can support the weight of two people, it can support you and a battery."

"... This thing is a bit heavier than a person-" Knuckles cut himself off when Sorun's glare shifted to him. He sighed, and then began walking towards the bridge. "I'm totally blaming you if this thing breaks on me..."

Amazingly, to Tails at least, the bridge held up as the echidna slowly walked across it. Sorun didn't look nearly as impressed, and instead

just crossed his arms in a huff as he watched Knuckles slowly carry the battery across the bridge.

"Told you it'd hold up, ye of little faith," Sorun snarked from besides Tails. "Helps that the swords float."

"Oh, that's why it's not collapsing." He'd been meaning to ask. The bridge really shouldn't have been holding together like that from the way it was constructed. That and the fact that it was solely made of pointed, rigid objects. "Heh. Nice going, Sorun."

"Sorun the bridge builder aims to please."

Tails laughed once more, and then looked up to Sorun's face. The frustration from earlier had faded from the human's eyes, and for the most part his expression seemed normal. He still felt there was something off with him, though, and although Tails couldn't tell what it was, he could hazard a guess as to what was on the older male's mind. And there was something Sorun had said earlier today that was bugging Tails. So he endeavored to ask him about it.

"Hey, Sorun?" The human turned to look at Tails when he began speaking. "Earlier today when I asked if you were doing okay, you... you said you never were. That was just one of your weird jokes, right?"

Sorun continued to stare blankly at Tails for what seemed like a full minute. It was long enough that the young fox was beginning to worry, but eventually Sorun broke the stillness by tilting his head slightly while giving a practically microscopic smile.

"Yeah, it was a joke. Sarcasm. I'm doing... I'm doing okay, Tails. Don't worry about me." He turned towards the chasm as his spectral arm-wings appeared. "Let's just get this Chaos Emerald and go hom- back to the HQ, alright?"

He flew off right after saying that. Tails stared after his back and, unsure about whether or not he believed him, began spinning his

tails up to fly right behind him.

Well, of course he'd lied, but telling Tails about his perpetual depression wasn't exactly going to do him any favors. And besides, he was already lying to a lot of people about a lot of things. What was one more small lie to a child? He didn't see the problem.

"God, I feel awful."

Other than the increase in emotional stress it piled on him.

Rather fortunately, Knuckles had successfully passed the bridge with the battery. They'd plugged it into the wall, the door lit up, and Tails had solved the door puzzle even faster than the first one, much to the other two's disgruntlement. And right after that- to nobody's surprise- was even more walking down a giant artificial tunnel deeper into the mountain.

And more walking.

And more walking.

"How. Deep. Does. This. Go?" The Emerald couldn't have possibly gotten this deep inside of the mountain. According to everybody they'd just shot up into the sky and shot off in all different directions to be deposited in random places around Mobius. Sorun found himself agreeing with Knuckles in that he failed to see how one of them could have randomly shot so far down into a mountain.

But then again, these were the same Emeralds that were conduits for a source of unlimited energy that were giving him powers from a video game, so going inside of a mountain was pretty tame compared to all that. But why did it have to be so deep?

"Is there any chance somebody made a mistake?" Sorun asked as the trio continued to progress down the tunnel. "I won't even be mad

if it turns out it isn't down here. I just wanna know if it's worth going any further."

That was a lie. He be furious. He didn't know what he'd do with all that anger, though. Probably kick a rock.

"Sorun, I highly doubt that the Badniks would have dug this far down if their equipment didn't assure them the Chaos Emerald was here somewhere," Tails said to him. "And our own equipment pointed to this area, too. It's here. Just... really far down, apparently."

"Ugh, yeah, 'apparently'," Sorun echoed while making finger quotes. "I swear if we have to keep going for five more minutes- oh, what is this?"

The three Freedom Fighters had rounded a corner, and upon coming around that bend they saw that the tunnel diverged. A lot. In fact, it seemed that the tunnel split off into dozens of different tunnels branching off from the main one they were walking down. And they all looked like the exact same tunnel.

"Oh..." Tails mumbled out in a dejected tone. "That's... that's a lot of tunnels."

"You don't say, Tails, you don't say." Barely containing a frustrated sigh, Sorun gestured out wildly to all the tunnels in front of them. "What's up with this? Up until this point it was a straight line."

"If I had to guess... Chaos Emeralds give off a high amount of energy that can disrupt sensitive equipment. It's completely possible the equipment they were using went haywire when they got close, so they couldn't get an accurate reading. So they probably started digging all over." The fox's features brightened up. "But hey, that just means we're getting close!"

Sorun didn't share Tails' optimism, and instead slumped his form forwards in exhaustion. "Yeah, awesome. That's just super. Now all

we gotta do is figure out which tunnel is the right one." He looked to his left. "Any ideas, Knu- Knuckles? Huh?"

The echidna was no longer at his side. He blinked in confusion, and then looked forwards. He instantly saw the red Mobian near the center of the end of the tunnel, where all the divergence points were. He was kneeling down on the ground, feeling the ground with his left hand while holding his right one out. Both Sorun and Tails glanced at each other, gave each other unsure looks, and then looked back to Knuckles.

"Uh... whatcha doin' over there, dude?" Sorun asked as the both of them began approaching Knuckles. "Kinda weirding us out here."

"I'm feeling out the Emerald, now be quiet," Knuckles answered them, not even bothering to glance back.

"... Ah-huh." Sorun nudged Tails with his elbow. "I don't think the ventilation down here is too good. It's getting to Knuckles."

A soft growl emanated from Knuckles' kneeling body. "I heard that."

"Mm, I'm sure. With those big ears of yours." Sorun paused, and then squinted his eyes at Knuckles' head. "Wait, I just noticed... you even have ears?" All he saw was a head with dreadlock-like flesh appendages lining the edges. He didn't see anything that even resembled ears the closer he looked.

Knuckles actually twitched at that remark, and then turned his head to glance at Sorun from the corner of his eye. "What the- of course I have ears!" he barked at the human. "How else am I supposed to hear!?"

"... If you say so, man." Sorun didn't see it, but if he said they were there, he guessed they were there. "So what do you mean you're 'feeling out the Emerald'?"

The echidna regarded the human for a few more seconds, and then faced his head back forwards. "I've always had a strong connection with the Chaos Force," he explained. The explanation and the mention of Chaos Force made Sorun unconsciously stiffen his body. "Why's not important, but it gives me abilities outside the norm. One of them is being sensitive to things that give off a lot of Chaos energy. I can kind of... sense them, if they're really close by and I focus real hard." He softly hummed. "Actually, I think I can sense you back there, Sorun. You got a ton of Chaos energy radiating around you. Must be all those Chaos Emeralds you're eating for breakfast."

"Yeah, must be," Sorun dryly replied with a roll of his eyes. "So any idea which way is the right way?"

"Hmm... I'm... feelin' something down thataway..." Knuckles rose up to his feet, and then walked towards the right. He stopped in front of three of the tunnels, humming again as he lowered his head and closed his eyes, "Yeah, I'm feeling something really strong down here alright," he said, opening his eyes back up, "but it's too faint for me to tell exactly... hey, wait a second."

He stepped closer to the centermost tunnel, eyes narrowing as he looked down towards the edge of the tunnel. He looked at the edges of the other tunnels, and then began running his gloved hand against the edge he was scrutinizing.

"Okay, I'm certain of it." He nodded his head, and then turned around to Sorun and Tails, who were both staring at him with wide, bewildered eyes. "The edges of this tunnel look fresher than the edges on the other ones, and I'm feeling the Emerald down this way." He pointed at the mouth of the tunnel. "We need to go this way."

"Uh... huh." Sorun tilted his head forwards towards the edges of the tunnel. As far as he could see, it was nothing but rock. Rock that looked about the same as the rest of the rock around them. "If, uh... if you say so, Mr. Treasure Hunter Man."

"Hey, come on," Tails tersely whispered at him. "Knuckles knows a lot about this stuff, so just give him a chance."

"Alright, alright." Sorun rose his hand and gestured to the tunnel Knuckles was standing in front of. "Lead on."

The trust Sorun had placed in Knuckles was steadily being waned.

He knew that Tails was right when he insisted Sorun entrust in Knuckles' abilities here in these tunnels. Sorun could see the logic in that. Everybody had strengths in some areas and flaws in others. That was the point of teams: they complimented each others' weaknesses with strengths. He understood that. It was why the Freedom Fighters left the technical things to Tails and Rotor, or strategic things to Sally, or to trust Sorun to fill up a spot somewhere on a team when nobody else could do it since he didn't really specialize in anything.

Unlike Sorun, Knuckles had real strengths outside of his actual strength. Such as this treasure hunting thing, and his apparent Chaos energy sensing ability. So that was why Sorun had listened to Tails and trusted Knuckles to lead them. Because this was his area of expertise. Because he knew better than the both of them.

But after twenty minutes of them winding through various tunnels with Knuckles leading them with absolutely no rhyme or reason to each new tunnel they traveled down out of the dozens of others, Sorun had to start questioning how wise of a decision this had been.

Oh, Knuckles would assure them they weren't lost. Sorun had asked as much, but according to Knuckles they were right on track. Sorun wasn't seeing it. Tails wasn't seeing it, either, and even he was becoming antsy over how long this was taking. Not to mention the stale air down here was starting to bother all three of them.

"Are we there yet, Knuckles?" Sorun asked past a tired yawn, hands loosely tucked inside of his pockets as he elbows swung back and

forth freely. "Just wondering if we're there yet."

If there was anybody that didn't look concerned, it was Knuckles. He had the same focused look on his face that he'd adopted since he began leading the other two, though Sorun's question did cause it to waver a bit in frustration. "It's not gonna get any closer the more you ask, you know," he grumbled out.

"Yeah, I know, but this is taking forever," Sorun complained. "... Seriously, though, are we there yet?"

"It's just. A little. Further," Knuckles informed the human through grit teeth. "And so help me, if you ask one more time...!"

"Okay, calm down. Message received," Sorun assured him. Knuckles continued to stare at him silently for a few seconds, and then slowly turned his head back forwards. The silence lasted for about twenty seconds before Sorun spoke up again, saying, "Hey, what's-?"

Knuckles' head whirled around with a snarl on his face. "Sorun, I-!"

"Hey, wait!" Tails exclaimed, running between the two while waving his arms. "Sorun's right, there's something over there!"

The snarl dropped off of Knuckles' face entirely, and he turned towards where Tails and Sorun were looking, towards the end of the tunnel. And, oddly enough, there was something there: a great source of light shining in from the end of the tunnel as opposed to the near-darkness of the barely-lit tunnels they'd been traversing thus far. All three of them continued to blankly stare down at the light, and then automatically began to jog towards it.

They'd reached the end of the tunnel soon enough. Surprisingly, it lead to a drop, with the floor around five meters below the edge of the tunnel. This was largely ignored by the trio, though, as their main focus was on the room the tunnel lead off into. It was a massive cavern spanning larger than even the large aircraft hangar they all

used to store the aircraft back in Knothole. It was well-lit, too, with enough light fixtures and portable lamps placed everywhere that it may as well have been daytime in there.

There were robots, too. Egg Pawns by the dozens, most of which that were, rather strangely, painted yellow with orange stripes and with yellow hardhats on top of their heads. Some were pushing carts of excavated rock away while others were meandering about with various mining tools such as drills, shovels, or pickaxes. Sorun, with much disdain, noticed a few of the red-painted ones with their lances were scattered about, too, and he felt his hands unconsciously clench at the sight of them.

But right at the end of the room was something that had drawn the human's attention away from the lance-carrying Badniks. All the way at the back of the cavern, towards a wall of brown rock where the cavern ended. There was a gathering of the mining Badniks and regular Badniks huddled around a small, metal pedestal with a glass case above it. And inside of that case was a shining, red object that gave off a bright glow. A red object that was shaped just like a Chaos Emerald.

"Ooh... great..." It was an odd feeling for Sorun. Feeling so much dread at something so shiny and inviting. Not because it was surrounded by about fifty killer robots, but because of everything that Emerald represented. And the problems he could already see arising once they brought that thing back to Freedom HQ.

"Yeah," Knuckles agreed as he crouched down next to Sorun, having missed the apprehension in Sorun's tone. "Looks like there really was an Emerald all the way down here." A savage smirk grew on his face. "And look at that. They already went and dug it up for us."

"Mm. So no, uh, no chance of just leaving it there and going home?" Sorun asked with a hopeful edge to his voice. When the two Mobians besides him gave the teen odd looks, he coughed into his closed fist. "Er, rhetorical question, hah hah."

In response, Tails quirked his head to the side. "Sorun, I don't want to be mean, but I really don't think these sarcastic jokes of yours land that well," he said.

"Uh-huh, jokes, yeah." Sorun sucked in a large breath through his teeth, and then gave a stiff nod. "Duly noted," he said in a strained voice. "So what's the plan here? We just gonna go down and-" Sorun made a snatching gesture with his hand, "- take it?"

Tails hummed, his twin appendages swishing the air behind him as he rubbed at his chin. "There isn't really a good way of sneaking down there undetected. Looks like we'll have to fight." He turned his head to Sorun with a reassuring smile. "It's just fifty of them against the three of us, though. That's not many at all. We can do it."

"Yeah, JUST fifty..." Sorun echoed with an exasperated breath.

"Aw, what's the matter?" Knuckles clapped the human on the shoulder, the force making him stumble and almost fall down into the cavern. "Don't tell me a buncha Egg Pawns got ya runnin' scared? You got all those fancy powers now, and we'll be right there with you. It'll be a cinch."

"I'm not scared," Sorun defended, his eyes still locked onto the red Emerald at the back of the cavern. "I just... eh, doesn't matter." In a flash of blue, the Bringer Claws appeared, and four Summoned Swords manifested at Sorun's sides. "Alright, let's..." He stopped mid-sentence to let out a yawn. "Awww, man, all that walkin'... 'kay, let's go." He glanced at the other two, who were both giving him unimpressed looks. "What?"

They both continued to stare at him, followed by both sighing while shaking their heads and holding their foreheads, with Knuckles saying, "That's your big 'to battle!' line? Come on..."

"I'm not feelin' very energetic." And with that, Sorun's Bringer Claws flapped their wings and he took off out of the tunnel.

He didn't really have a specific target. As far as Sorun could see, the only weapons all of the Badniks were carrying were of the melee variety from the lances to the mining equipment a majority of them were holding. Considering that, the circular shape of the cavern, and the fact they were all pretty evenly spread out aside from the gathering near the Emerald, he didn't see any advantage to starting in one area over another. So he chose to lock onto a Badnik in the center of the cavern.

As such, he'd touched down in a crouch right next to said Badnik. It hadn't even registered him before his left Bringer Claw slammed its open fist onto the robot, driving it right into the ground.

A small gathering of Egg Pawn miners noticed the scuffle, though by then the Bringer Claw that had slammed onto the Egg Pawn next to Sorun had wrapped its claws around its sparking form and lifted it up into the air. The spectral claw squeezed down, compressing its metallic body and causing it to spark more, and with narrowed eyes Sorun willed the feathered arm to throw the wrecked Badnik at the crowd. The body slammed into one Badnik, causing both to tumble away, and while the other four looked after them a multitude of Summoned Swords shot forth and embedded themselves into their bodies. Amidst all the sparks their lights went dead, and they collapsed.

Sorun stared down at the fallen robots, and then snapped his head in the other direction when he heard heavy footsteps approach him. One of the red-painted Egg Pawns was running right towards him, lance in hand with the tip aimed right at his body. Before it even got close the left Bringer Claw grasped forwards, gripping the shaft of the lance and stopping the Egg Pawn in its place.

With eyes slightly widened in anger, the teen willed the Bringer Claw to rip the lance right out of the Badnik's grasp, after which it flipped the spear around. The Egg Pawn, seeing the large, spectral claw pointing a lance at it, began to slowly back up as Sorun continued to stare at it in complete contempt. "Not so funny being at this end, is it?" he darkly muttered at the robot.

Before the Egg Pawn could even turn to run, the Bringer Claw savagely threw the lance at it. The lance impaled itself through the Badnik's whole torso, the force of the hit knocking the robot onto its back as the half of the lance protruding from its back anchored into the ground. Its lights died shortly after.

Huffing, Sorun turned his head towards the other side of the cavern. He saw Knuckles there, beating apart robot after robot without so much as a sweat. It almost looked like a breeze for the echidna, as one solid punch was all he needed for his spiked fists to completely tear through one of the robots. Nearby Tails was faring about just as well, his yellow form zipping all around the Badniks faster than they could keep up before the young fox would spin his body and smash them apart with his tails. Between the two of them half of the Badnik forces had already been decimated.

"They're fine," Sorun decided as he turned towards the pedestal with the Emerald and the concentrated group of robots near it. *"Guess I'll deal with them."*

He started walking forwards, noticing handfuls of Egg Pawn begin to charge at him with mining tools and lances. In response, eights Summoned Swords appeared around Sorun in a circle and began spinning. To the teen's surprise, and mild amusement, the Egg Pawns had run right into the Spiral Swords, only to be cut apart from the spinning ring of swords going around the teen. It was enough that all Sorun had to do was calmly walk forwards as any Egg Pawns that neared him were cut in half completely from the swords.

The large gathering of Egg Pawns near the Chaos Emerald saw Sorun approaching, and began readying their weapons. Sorun's reaction was to loudly snap his fingers, causing twenty Summoned Swords to appear in the air above the group with their blades pointed downwards. The Egg Pawns hadn't even noticed the Heavy Rain Swords hanging above their heads, and as such hadn't even attempted to dodge when the cloud of swords rained down upon all of them. With swords sticking out of their bodies, the Egg Pawns

dropped their weapons one by one before going offline and falling over.

Right after, the Spiral Swords spinning around Sorun stopped and closed in on the teen's body. Two more Badniks were running towards him, but right as they got close the eight swords surrounding the teen shot forwards. Six missed while two embedded themselves right into the Egg Pawns' faces, causing them to lifelessly fall forwards.

With that done, Sorun let out a slow breath. Nearby behind him he could hear the last of the Badniks hit the ground, and with a confirmatory glance he saw both Knuckles and Tails finishing off the last of the robots. He looked back forwards, and then began walking towards the pedestal.

Some movement caught his eyes as he neared the pedestal, causing him to look downwards. He saw one of the Badniks he'd skewered with the Heavy Rain Swords, filled with gaping puncture marks from the swords that had already disappeared, but still moving slightly with its lights flickering. A heavy scowl formed on Sorun's face as he stared down at the struggling robot.

"You trash..." The right Bringer Claw reached out and slammed its palm down on the Egg Pawn's head. Sorun watched as it lifted the struggling robot up, only for the spectral claw to then slam the Egg Pawn down on the ground three times face-first. Its metallic head cracked completely open upon its third impact with the ground, prompting a scowling Sorun to toss its body off to the side.

As the Bringer Claw folded itself back onto Sorun's shoulder, he heard footsteps approach him from the back. He turned his head just enough to glance behind him, and saw Knuckles slowly approach him while looking around at the cut-up robots strewn about.

"You finished over here already? Nice work." The echidna glanced down at a Egg Pawn cut completely in half at his feet, and then let

out a whistle while giving Sorun an approving look. "Wow, you really don't like these things, do you?"

An understatement if ever there was one. He absolutely hated Egg Pawns. "Well... I did almost lose my head to one," Sorun muttered in an unusually low tone. He glanced around at some of the robotic corpses all around them, and his face brightened up slightly. "I feel a bit better now, though."

"Yeah, I bet. You're doing way better now with-" The ground beneath their feet began to rumble, making the two lose their footing while also cutting Knuckles off mid-sentence. "H-hey! What gives!?"

The ground shook again, making Sorun stumble and nearly fall down. He noticed a few small rocks drop on the ground near him, causing the teen to lock upwards. His eyes widened when he saw an unusually large chunk of rock break off from the cavern's ceiling, and when he looked down at the rock's trail, he saw it heading directly towards Knuckles.

Reacting out of alarm, Sorun willed a Bringer Claw forwards to grab the closest part of Knuckles Sorun could see which, unfortunately for the red Mobian, was his small, zig-zag-like tail. The spectral claw clamped down on the appendage, and then wrenched the echidna backwards just as the large boulder fell on the ground he'd been standing on.

As the Bringer Claw pulled back towards Sorun, Knuckles let out a low groan as he rubbed at his backside where his tail had been pulled. He turned his head to glance at the human teen right after, a peeved look on his face. "Warn a guy the next time you do that, will you?"

"'Warn a guy the next time you do that,' yeah, warn a guy the next time you toss a Chaos Emerald in his hands," Sorun bitterly thought, though after taking a calming breath he chose to refrain from saying it aloud. "Aw, you're welcome, Knuckles. You okay?"

"Yeah, fine," he grunted, removing his hand from his back while looking up. "I think we got a bigger problem than a few rocks, though..."

Sorun followed Knuckles' gaze upwards, blue eyes narrowing when he saw a segment of the ceiling began to shake around as more rocks fell from the spot. Eventually, something metallic began to poke through the rock. A small piece of metal that, after revealing itself, exploded through the rest of the rock to reveal a giant, conical drill spinning through the rock.

Nearby across the cavern, a flying Tails had gone up to investigate the vibrations, but had flown away right as the giant drill had burst out from the ceiling. The drill continued spinning until it along with the machine it was attached to, an eight-wheeled box, fell down through the ceiling before crashing down on the ground. The crash had kicked up a large amount of dust, forcing Sorun and Knuckles to cover their eyes from the resulting cloud.

As Sorun continued holding his forearm against his face, he heard a concerning sound. The sound of an engine revving along with the loud whirring sound of the conical drill reached his ears, and he realized too late what was happening as he heard the drill-mounted vehicle drive right towards him and Knuckles. By the time he'd lowered his arm to see, most of the vehicle and the drill mounted to it had already taken up most of his vision, and it was too close and moving too fast for either him or Knuckles to react.

Despite its speed, the drilling machine had missed skewering the pair by a small margin. As it happened, Tails had flown in just in the nick of time, grabbing each of their right arms with one of his own and then pulling them up towards the ceiling with him just as the drilling machine drove through. Both the teenage human and teenage echidna spit any residual dust out of their mouth, and then looked down towards the drilling machine as Tails kept them aloft.

"Oh man, check that out," Tails whispered out in shocked awe as he stared down at the machine. "That must be one of the machines they

used to dig out all those tunnels. It's a giant drill!"

Sorun wasn't feeling nearly as enthusiastic in the drill as Tails was. He felt livid, in fact, as he would have been drilled to death seconds prior if not for Tails saving him. He felt incredibly irked for both of these reasons- for almost dying *again* and having to have been saved by Tails. The anger and adrenaline from the near-death experience alone was drowning out the fearful beat in his heart.

He wanted to kill it.

"I'm gonna tear that drill right off of it..." Sorun growled under his breath as he looked closer to examine the drilling machine. He saw a small driver's cabin on the vehicle portion behind the drill, and inside that cabin he could see an Egg Pawn at the drill's controls. "There's a robot driving the thing," he called out to the two.

"Yeah, I see it," Knuckles called back. "I got an idea how to take care of it, but I don't know how we're gonna stop the drill."

"Oh, don't you worry about the drill. I got it covered." The Bringer Claws manifested on the human's back. "Just take care of the driver and I'll stop the thing."

Knuckles nodded. "Alright, sounds good. Tails, launch me!"

"Got it!"

On the fox's word, he'd released Sorun fist, who flew right above the drilling vehicle with the use of his Bringer Claw's wings. Right afterwards, Tails gripped onto Knuckles' arm with both hands and, using his tails to rotate his whole body, made one complete spin and threw Knuckles towards the machine.

The force of the throw had been so great that Knuckles shot towards the vehicle like a bullet, his spiked fists outstretched towards the driver's cabin. When he finally made contact, he didn't merely hit the cabin. His fists shredded right through the cabin like it was little more

than paper, with the Egg Pawn that had been driving it being no exception. The echidna rolled onto the ground, stopping in a kneeling position just as pieces of the destroyed Badnik flew past him.

Though the driver and controls were completely destroyed, the drill was still active and, without any steering, had began driving in random directions. This didn't last long, however, as Sorun dropped right next to the haywire machine with his Bringer Claws hovering over his shoulders. The right feathered arm shot forwards, wrapping its claws around the drill. The vehicle as well as the drill itself was stopped right in its tracks, the sound of whirring motors being heard as the drill worked to try and spin despite the spectral hand holding it in place. Eventually multiple metal snapping sounds were heard, and rather comically the vehicle itself began spinning as opposed to the drill. The left Bringer Claw reached out and grabbed onto the vehicle, stopping it in its place as well as the drill.

Finally, with brows furrowed in anger Sorun willed the Bringer Claws to pull apart. This had the effect of the right Bringer Claw pulling the drill right off the vehicle in a shower of sparks and metal bits, with the vehicle part of the machine losing all turning momentum against the claw holding it. This done, the left claw slammed the vehicle right onto the ground, holding it down as the right claw positioned the removed drill right above it. Without even pausing, the claw holding the drill slammed the cone down point-first right through the vehicle's top and all the way through it until a quarter of its full length pierced through its bottom and into the ground. Not finished yet, both spectral claws let go, hovered above the skewered vehicles, and clasped together before finally hammering down on the head of the broken-off drill. The vehicle was smashed completely following that, with over half of the drill pushed into the ground from all the force that had been applied to it. The freshly-crushed vehicle stopped sputtering and whirring and went completely silent soon after.

Once the violence and dust had settled, the Bringer Claws disappeared completely as Sorun heaved out a large sigh. He was

soon flanked by both Knuckles and Tails, who both also had exhausted but relieved looks on their faces as all three stared at the destroyed drilling machine.

"Welp, we did it, lads. Nothin' to it," Sorun congratulated as he weakly held up both hands to give them thumbs-up. He saw Knuckles roll his eyes from the corner of his vision, though he did see the echidna to give him a friendly jab in the side with his elbow. The force alone was more than he expected, causing the pale teen to wince and stumble a single step. He heard Tails giggle right after, and that along with the small smirk Knuckles was wearing caused the teen to make a loudly exaggerated sigh as he turned around.

"Aw, come on, Sorun. Don't be like that," Knuckles said, grin still on his face as he grabbed the human's shoulder and shook it. "You had fun, admit it."

"Yeah, no, almost getting drilled isn't my idea of fun," Sorun retorted, not even bothering to remove the hand on his shoulder. "But... it did feel pretty good pulling that drill off," he admitted, "so, you know, thanks for having my back." He glanced towards Tails. "And, uh... thanks for savin' us back there, Tails."

"Mm-hm! No problem!" The young fox beamed a smile up at Sorun as his twin tails swished happily in the air behind him. "What are teammates for, right? And that was really cool what you did back there with your arms!"

"Er, uh, yeah, well, you know... yeah," Sorun stammered as he turned his abashed face away from Tails, brushing a few bangs of hair in front of his face to hide his embarrassment. When was the last time somebody had called him cool? He couldn't even remember. "Oh hey, guys, look at that! The Chaos Emerald!"

The attempt at diverting the Mobians' attention fortunately worked, leading to all three looking back towards the pedestal holding the Emerald. They approached it immediately, Sorun doing the honor of

punching the glass away with a momentarily-formed Bringer Claw to reveal the red gem behind it.

"Hm..." Sorun hummed, warily looked down at the Emerald that glowed such an intense red color. The happy mood from earlier almost instantly washed off of him as he laid his eyes down on it, though he could see from the corner of his eyes the victorious smiles still present on the other two. He couldn't help but be slightly jealous of that, though that jealousy was soon overshadowed with concern over the Emerald. "Hey, Knuckles, why don't you hold onto it?"

"Huh?" Blinking in confusion, Knuckles turned towards Sorun. "Don't you want to-?"

"Here of all places? Seriously? That can wait until we get back," Sorun quickly rebutted as he took a step away from the pedestal. "Besides, red gem, red fur, it was practically made for you to hold it," he continued as he gestured to Knuckles' body.

Knuckles' response was to scoff, but to Sorun's relief he reached over and grabbed the Emerald off the pedestal. To his even further relief nothing else happened. No rumbling as a result of a trap being sprung, no more robots coming out in an ambush, nothing. They'd successfully gotten it. And yet despite that Sorun still felt nothing but anxiety over the gem Knuckles was holding.

"How the hell am I supposed to spin this...?" he thought, unconsciously biting his lower lip as he stared at the Emerald. "So... time to go back now?" he voiced, eyes still on the Emerald.

From his side, Tails nodded. "Yep. Doesn't look like there's any alternative exit in here, though. We'll have to go back the way we came."

At that, Knuckles groaned out loudly. "Are you kidding me!? We gotta walk all the way back through all those tunnels!?"

Normally Sorun would have been just as annoyed, but in this instance he felt the opposite as his head perked up. Time. He had all the time it took them to walk all the way here, and the time it took to fly here from the plane. He had time to think of *some* excuse not to absorb the Emerald by the time they made it back to Freedom HQ. Plenty of time.

He could make this work.

"Oh, really?" Yawning, Sorun stretched his arms over his head as he turned back towards the tunnel they had emerged from prior to the attack. "Ah, well, nothing to do about it I guess. Come on, guys, let's go."

"Aw, man..." Knuckles sighed, but relented as he began trudging onward right behind Sorun. Tails flew in right besides the echidna, offering him a helpful smile.

"Don't worry, guys. Since we're just heading straight back we'll be home in no time!" he cheerily supplied, causing Sorun to flinch.

"Ah, that's... that's great," the pale teen said, craning his head back to give the pair a forced grin. "That's... real great..."

He was wrong. He hadn't been able to think of anything.

Try as he might, no matter how much Sorun wracked his brain, he just couldn't find a good excuse to not absorb the Chaos Emerald for more power without telling the truth, which obviously wasn't an option for him. By the time the trio had finally exited the mountain he'd begun to grow worried by his inability to think of something. By the time the Tornado had approached Knothole he'd begun nervously fidgeting. And now they were walking into Freedom HQ and Sorun was in full-on panic mode, doing his best to suppress it while his eyes darted nervously from looking forwards to Knuckles and the Emerald.

"Damn it. I got nothing. This isn't good..." They'd already descended the stairs into the main living room. Interestingly, Sorun saw the only two other people currently there were Rouge and Bunnie, all the way towards the back and talking. *"There aren't many people here,"* he realized with slightly raised eyes. *"Okay, maybe I can weasel out and just leave. That'll buy me all the way until tomorrow, maybe, and after that..."* He exhaled and began to nervously scratch at his neck. *"Fuck, am I gonna have to bail already?"*

It was too soon. He hadn't prepared himself yet physically or mentally. He had no idea what the lay of the land was and he didn't know where he was supposed to go if he did run. But if it was between that or losing twelve more years of his life, the choice was obvious. He'd run. But he just couldn't decide on what to do.

"If I stall until tomorrow and leave tonight... wait, but Sonic might catch me, we sleep in the same room. And no way in hell am I gonna outfly a guy that can run faster than sound." He took another look around the room, and then back towards Bunnie and Rouge, who had finally noticed the trio enter. *"... Sonic's not here right now."* He glanced at the Emerald Knuckles was holding. *"... No, it's too soon. Is it? I can't- I'm not touching that thing. I can't. Stall. I just gotta stall for more time."*

"Hey, boys. You just get back from that Emerald run you got sent on?" This was voiced by Rouge, who along with Bunnie stopped right in front of the trio. "It certainly looks like it was a success," she added when she saw the gleaming red Emerald in Knuckles' grasp.

"Heh, yeah, it went down fine," Sorun confirmed, eyes slowly scanning around the HQ. "Hey, Sonic's not here, is he?" he asked.

"No, he's still on his own mission with a few of the others." Rouge rose up one of her eye ridges in question. "Why do you ask?"

Sorun shrugged. "Just curious. No other reason."

Off to the side, one of the doors to one of the HQ's bedroom began rattling. Sorun's eyes flicked over to it right as it opened, and he felt his own teeth clack together in concern when he saw a striped hedgehog poke his head out from the door.

"Dammit. He's here," Sorun thought as he watched the door open further as Shadow looked towards them. *"He's fast, too. Up there with Sonic 'cause of those shoes of his. I can't fly faster than he can run, either."*

"I thought I felt a familiar presence enter the base," Shadow remarked as he approached the group, eyes locked onto the Emerald. "You managed to acquire another one, it seems."

"... Yup," Sorun silently murmured as he back up near the couch. "Fought a drill and everything."

"Yeah, it was really crazy," Tails excitedly said, bouncing towards Bunnie with wide eyes. "You should have seen it! There were all these tunnels and this crazy drill machine but Sorun fought it off with his Chaos arms and- oh, wait, but before that...!"

The more Tails spoke, the more enraptured with the story the rabbit he was talking to became. In fact, everybody began paying rapt attention to Tails as he continued to recount their adventure under that mountain. Even Knuckles became distracted by the story, though it seemed to be more out of amusement for listening to Tails speak of them from the small grin on his face.

To Sorun, however, it was an opportunity. An opportunity to get the hell out before anybody brought up the Emerald.

"Okay. Okay, if there was ever a time, it's now." He eyed the group of five in front of him, and then slowly looked towards the HQ stairs. *"Alright... just slip out while they're all talking, go home, and wait for all this to blow over. Dunno what the hell I'll do tomorrow, though."*

Didn't matter. More time was more time, which increased his odds of thinking up something. And with that thought squarely planted in his mind, he turned his back towards the group and began to slowly but calmly walk his way towards the stair.

"Sorun."

He'd only made it halfway before he heard his name be spoken. He silently cursed, and then slowly turned around with as straight a face as he could manage. Shadow was standing right behind him. The red Chaos Emerald was in his right hand.

"Yes?" Sorun asked, the smallest bit of shakiness layered in his otherwise even voice.

"I think you're forgetting something," Shadow said, crossing his arms while staring the human right in his eyes.

Sorun looked down at the Emerald, swallowed nervously, and then looked back to Shadow. "No, I don't think I am," he said.

"The Chaos Emerald." The dark hedgehog took a single step forwards. Sorun took a single step back. "You gain powers from them, do you not?"

"... You know what, man, it's been a long day." His greatest hope now was that he could just play off being tired. Wanting to wait until tomorrow. That had to work. "We had a long mission, tons of robots, lots of walking-"

"It's still daylight outside," Shadow argued.

Feigning exhaustion hadn't worked at all, and it was with slumped shoulders that Sorun instantly realized this. "Look, can this just wait until tomorrow?" he asked. "I'll get up bright and early and come here first thing first to absorb it, but I just want to take the rest of the day off, alright?"

Shadow's eyes narrowed. "Is absorbing the Chaos Emerald physically strenuous for you?"

"No," Sorun said with a small shake of his head.

"Is there any justifiable reason for you wanting to hold off on this until tomorrow?"

Yes, but he couldn't say. "... No," the human admitted, "but-"

"Then I see no reason why you should delay." Shadow took another step forwards and uncrossed his arms, the Emerald glinting almost dangerously in his hand. "I'm aware that you have some *aversion* towards the Chaos Emeralds for whatever reason, but this isn't a time to let petty emotions get in the way."

"'Petty emotions'...?" Sorun repeated in his head, hands twitching at his sides.

"Like it or not, you're a member of this team, and this team is quite literally the only thing left standing between Dr. Eggman and total world domination," Shadow continued. "You get stronger with every single Emerald you absorb. We need all of our members as strong as possible if we are to even stand a ghost of a chance, and the longer you delay the more chances arise for something to happen to the Emerald because *you* decided to stall." He would have went further, but the hedgehog stopped himself when he saw the way Sorun's eyes were nervously looking at the Emerald, eyes slightly shaking. He sighed, and then tried again. "Sorun, listen," Shadow said in a slightly softer voice, "I know that this life isn't one you asked for, and that you would rather be anywhere else, but this is the reality we're in right now." He held the Emerald out towards Sorun. "As much as we both wish it wasn't so, it is, so please just take-"

There was a flash of blue. In a single movement the Chaos Emerald was slapped right out of Shadow's hand by a Bringer Claw, both spectral appendages hovering over Sorun's shoulders. The four Mobians in the back who had been watching the exchange silently

widened their eyes in shock at the action. Even Shadow seemed surprised, having flexed his now-free hand with raised eye ridges before looking back up at Sorun.

"I'm not touching that *thing* ," Sorun hissed out. His entire body was shaking slightly at this point, but he stood rooted to the spot as he tried his best to stare Shadow down. "I'm never going to touch it, so quit asking."

Behind Shadow, Tails pushed towards the front of the small group, his expression concerned. "H-hey, Sorun, come on-"

The red-striped Mobian held a hand out, stopping the fox's advance. At the same time, his eyes began to shift from being sympathetic towards irritated. "And why not, Sorun?" he asked, an angered edge to his voice. "Is there any particular reason you are refusing more power? Power that is sorely needed in a war we're on the losing end of?"

Oh, how he wanted to say everything. To spill it all to them and pray that they would understand that he just couldn't and let the matter be. But he couldn't. He couldn't and the same things he'd been worrying about happening was happening. And he just couldn't think of what to say to get him out of this.

"I... I just don't want to," he mumbled, turning his head to avoid Shadow's scathing gaze. "It... really hurts, touching those things..." A pathetic excuse he would have never willingly used, but it was *all he had* . And unfortunately it didn't seem like it was enough, because if anything that answer only seemed to anger Shadow even further.

"Is this a joke?" Shadow harshly demanded. "We have people going out there in the field every single day, putting their lives on the line and getting wounded time and time again, but you're not going to absorb that Chaos Emerald because it *hurts* ?"

Sorun was fully aware of how shameful and pathetic the excuse was. Enough that Sorun felt angry at himself for even insinuating such a

thing, so when Shadow rounded on him with such a harsh tone, he snapped his head back towards the hedgehog with angered eyes. "It's more than that, alright!? I can't because-!"

Thump-thump.

Gritting his teeth, Sorun lowered his head to the ground as the stabbing pain of his heart stopping spiked through his chest. But even so, desperation still coursed through him, so fighting through the pain he slowly lifted his head up and tried speaking again. "I-I can't-"

Thump-thump.

This time he had to grip his chest as he stumbled back. The pain went away quickly, though, causing Sorun to let out a breath of relief. Too quickly for any of the Mobians to notice anything, apparently, as Shadow was still harshly staring him down while the crowd in the back just stared owlishly at Sorun.

Shadow shook his head in disbelief. "That's a lie." The hedgehog began stomping towards the human, the metal jets underneath his shoes threatening to leave indents into the ground. "Even you are not that pathetic as to let something as trivial as pain stop you. So what is it? Why won't you take it?"

"... I can't say," Sorun answered, straightening back to his full height. Shadow didn't seem to like his answer, though, and was practically snarling as he stopped mere inches from the human.

"If you can't answer, than you don't have an excuse!" he shouted at him. "You are honestly going to tell me you're going jeopardize the fate of the world because of some nonsense, personal reason you refuse to even speak of-!?"

"What does it matter to you, anyways!?" It was here that it was all starting to boil over. The frustration at not being able to speak the truth. Sorun's life being threatened from damn near everything on

this planet. Shadow shouting at him and trying to force the Emerald on him. It was all beginning to become too much, and Sorun felt all the anger rapidly accumulating in him begin to leak out. "You're not the one touching these things for powers! It's me! It's my choice, and you don't get to tell me what I have to do with that Emerald! I don't have to do anything!"

Shadow's red eyes were practically blazing in anger at this point. "You're a Freedom Fighter! You made an obligation to help this planet regardless of personal cost-!"

"I never wanted to be a Freedom Fighter!" Sorun shouted back. "I never wanted to go out there and risk my life! I never wanted to train to be the poor excuse of a resistance soldier I am right now! I did it because it was best chance of going home, but guess what!? I probably can never go home! So what's the point of being a Freedom Fighter if I can't even get that!?"

"SO RUN, THEN!"

The only sound heard after the final shout was the heavy breathing of both Sorun and Shadow, the two winded from the shouting match. The other four chose to remain completely silent, though all four were still staring at Sorun with increasingly concerned expressions. Shadow still looked beyond angry at Sorun. Sorun's anger, however, was slowly being replaced by an unreadable expression.

"... What?" the human asked, blinking in surprise at Shadow. "What did you just say?"

"If you don't want to be here, then run away," Shadow reiterated with a disgusted sneer. "You're right; we don't have any say in what you do. And as far as I'm concerned, we don't need to be wasting time on a coward like you who doesn't want to fight with us. So if you really don't want to fight, if you really want to abandon everybody who have done nothing but try and help you, then go. Leave. I won't follow."

... Was he serious?

He had to be. Sorun knew Shadow's personality relatively well. Well enough to know that he wouldn't lie about something as serious as that. It was a legitimate dare. A dare for Sorun to throw away everything the Freedom Fighters had done for him and run away. To leave it all behind.

And Sorun would take that dare. Because as far as he was concerned, that was his golden ticket out of here. So this was it, then.

Time to bail.

"... Okay." Sorun's answer, spoken barely above a whisper, caused mixed reactions. Shadow's body had stiffened, his eyes widening slightly in surprise as if he hadn't expected that answer. Rouge had a similar reaction, if a bit more exaggerated. Tails, Knuckles, and Bunnie had all three widened their eyes to the absolute max in shock at the humans words as a loud gasp left them. "I'm done. I'm leaving and never coming back."

And without another word, Sorun turned around and stormed up the stairs, the blue wings of his Bringer Claws trailing behind him.

"He... actually left...?"

No sooner had the human ascended the flight of stairs than two forms bolted past Shadow to give chase to the human. He vaguely noted them as being the fox and rabbit, though he was still too busy mentally processing what had just happened to pay too much attention. Behind him, Knuckles was frozen to the spot in a similar stupefied state.

"- adow? Shadow!?" He blinked, and then turned towards the voice calling him. He saw the voice's owner as Rouge, who looked, for lack of a better term, distressed. "Are you serious? What were you

thinking!?" she yelled at him while wildly gesturing towards the stairs. "Why'd you go and say that to him!?"

"I didn't think he'd actually leave," he said back, unusually calm. He really hadn't, either. Sorun was full of negative traits, but cowardice to this degree? Abandoning them all and running away? And for *what* ? So he didn't have to touch the Emeralds? So he didn't have to fight anymore because he didn't want to?

No, he hadn't expected that at all. His intention had just been for the human to see sense and to finally just take responsibility and take the Emerald. He hadn't expected him to seriously entertain Shadow's dare and actually leave.

"Well guess what, genius? He left!" Rouge shouted at him, almost voicing his own thoughts. "He left because you had to go and goad him into leaving like that! Why'd you push the Emerald on him so hard!?"

"You know why," he muttered back, looking towards where the Emerald had fallen and going towards it. "We need every edge we can get in a hopeless war like this, even if that edge comes in the form of somebody like Sorun. If he won't fight, though, then he has no use. Nothing I said was untrue." He bent down to pick the Emerald up, brushing off the small amount of dust it accumulated. "Besides. He'll come back."

There was a disbelieving scoff from Rouge behind him. "Oh, really? And how do you figure that, huh?"

"What was he saying about his home?" With a impatient sigh, Shadow turned back towards the bat. "Where else is he going to go, Rouge?" he asked her. "Knothole is the only location on the entire planet he is familiar with. This is nothing but a childish tantrum he's throwing for reasons only known to him. He'll come back."

"Sure, fine, he comes back. And then what?"

That, he had no answer to. Even so, Shadow severely hoped he was right in assuming the human would come back and that he hadn't just scared him off of the resistance. The one thing keeping him from breaking his word and chasing after the human to drag him back was in his own logic telling him Sorun *had* to eventually return.

He hoped so much he was right and hadn't just made a terrible mistake.

"S-Sorun, wait!"

He'd only made it a few steps outside before he heard Tails' voice call out to him. It went ignored, though, as the Bringer Claws beat down on the ground and lifted the pale teen up into the air. He didn't get very far in the air, though. Tails had flown in right in front of him, a desperate look in his eyes.

"Get outta the way," Sorun said, stopping in the air as the Bringer Claws slowly flapped to keep him aloft. "I'm serious. I'm leaving."

"Sorun, just hold on a second now!" That was a new voice. Bunnie's. He turned his head around to see the rabbit floating in the air just behind him, body held up from the jets firing out from the bottom of her bionic feet. "I don't know what's got ya'll in a twist, but runnin' away ain't gonna solve yer problems! Come down so we can talk!"

There was something heart wrenching in how worried she and Tails sounded. The fact there were people that even bothered to worry about him, and that he was doing this to them, was heart wrenching. It was all twisting a terrible knot inside of his chest, and he wanted nothing more than to go down to the ground and explain everything.

But he couldn't. And his life was more important than some hopeless cause that was just waiting to be bombed to oblivion by a madman. He was leaving, and they weren't going to stop him.

"This isn't something we can talk out. I'm not staying here just to die." Sorun's spectral wings pushed him past Tails, though he only made it a few feet before Tails flew in front of his path again.

"Sorun, just please wait!" Tails begged him. "Y-you're overreacting! I know being a Freedom Fighter can be dangerous, but we wouldn't let you die-!"

Sorun's teeth grit in anger. He didn't understand. Nobody did. Nobody *could* because of this *damned curse* . "Get out of my way, Tails."

Tails shook his head. "I'm not doing that. I know... I know you're scared, Sorun," he said, and the teen's ire began to grow exponentially at each word, "I know you're upset about your home, but this isn't-!"

The right Bringer Claw shot out and grabbed Tails. The fox let out a startled yelp and attempted to struggle against it, but he was completely trapped with all five spectral claws tightly wrapped around his entire body.

"Buzz off, Tails!" Sorun screamed as the Bringer Claw reared backwards. It flung forwards, letting go and throwing a screaming Tails at Bunnie, who could only stare in shock as he crashed into her body. The hit caused her to lose her balance, and with the young fox held in her arms Sorun watched as both Bunnie and Tails crashed towards the ground.

Right before they'd hit the ground, Bunnie had twisted her body back upwards and managed to stabilize their descent as the jets under her feet flared brighter. They stopped just inches above the ground, with both her and Tails looking up at Sorun. The human stared down back at them, meeting their pleading eyes with his own anguished eyes.

And then, he turned around. His Bringer Claws began flapping, and he took off towards the sky. By the time both Tails and Bunnie had

flown back to their previous altitude, the pale teen had already flown out of sight.

Just like that, he was gone.

A/N- It's probably obvious by now, but in addition to the Latin thing from chapter 16 Sorun's name comes from the phrase "So Run", which in itself is a direct allusion to the fact that Sorun just wants to run away from danger. It's also a reference to the relationship Sorun and Sonic share, along with their names sounding similar and the blue color scheme both of them have. Sonic's purpose in the story is essentially to serve as a foil to Sorun's character, as from an ideological perspective they hold completely different beliefs. Sonic runs towards danger of his own volition, whereas Sorun wishes to run away from danger but cannot due to his circumstances. Despite that, though, they both still share a desire to protect others, but differ in that Sonic protects through completely altruistic reasons while Sorun protects through personal and pragmatic reasons, though his sense of self-preservation and just wanting to leave everybody behind to save himself overrides this along with everything else going on with him.

That's my interpretation of it, at least. Characters and their ideals are always subject to change through progression, though, for better or worse. Can't just have them be flat and static throughout the whole story. That'd be boring.

But anyways, yeah, Sorun's out boys and girls. He's out.

Chapter 21

Recursion Error

Episode 21- So I ran

So he'd done it. He'd ran away.

Bailed.

Gotten the fuck outta dodge.

It had to happen eventually, though if he could have he would have done it in a more quiet fashion. Gone out when nobody was looking, maybe leave behind a note so they didn't wonder why he just up and disappeared on them. He would have been nice enough to have left them with *some* closure.

Instead that happened. Him and Shadow blowing up at each other. Telling those five he was leaving. The actual act of leaving and throwing Tails in the process. He found it a miracle he'd managed to get away at all without being chased, but he'd gone so high into the clouds that he was practically invisible. He also decided never to fly that high that fast ever again, because his head absolutely did not agree with the rapid change in pressure.

But he'd successfully gotten away, and that's all that mattered. So where did that leave Sorun? Well, that was the thing. He didn't rightly know.

When he'd flown up into the sky, he didn't come down for a while. A long while. He hadn't even paid attention to which direction he decided to go in. He just picked a random direction and kept flying forwards, sheer adrenaline and panic from making his big move motivating him forwards. It all wore off eventually, though, which was

when he dropped down through the clouds, headed for ground, and finally landed before he started walking.

The problem was that the whole eastern half of Northamer was nothing but forests and plains; any discernible landmarks of the old world were washed away by time and gene bombs, so he had no idea where he was. All he saw were trees. Trees and more trees all around, without even so much as a path to follow. So as far as he could tell, geographically speaking, he was somewhere between the most southern point of what was once America and the most northern point of what was once America. On the eastern half.

So he was lost then. Fantastic.

"Well, Sorun, what'd you think was gonna happen when you decided to bail on everything and run away? You didn't exactly plan on *where* you would bail to," The human teen mumbled to himself as he walked through the forest. "Ugh. Could be worse, at least. This forest isn't the worst place in the world to walk through."

Honestly, aside from areas around any of Eggman's structures, the environment around Mobius was always nice. Great temperature, great air, clear skies when there wasn't a storm. Even the forest itself was accommodating. The trees were high and numerous, but they weren't so overly dense that he had trouble navigating through them. There was actually plenty of room between all the trees for him to hike around.

Still lost, though, but at least he was lost in the nice part of the world.

"Alright, so where am I going?" Sorun asked himself as he kept walking forwards. "I gotta get out of Northamer, that much is certain. Kingdom of Acorn is situated here, so there's too big a chance of somebody finding me, even if it is small. Down to Soumerca? Nah, nothing but jungle down there from what I heard. Except Station Square is near where Brazil once... except it's occupied by Eggman like the rest of the world, damn," the teen cursed with a snap of his fingers.

"Okay, east, then? Towards where the human and Overlander territory is? What was that one place called, Spagonia? That or one of the other UF cities. Maybe go back to life among humans." That'd be nice. Maybe get some sense of normalcy back to his life by surrounding himself with faces similar to his. It wouldn't be Earth, not by a long shot, but it would be close. "No, wait, all the UF cities got occupied by Eggman along with G.U.N., too, didn't they? And he knows my face. Probably on a wanted list or something like that."

So... that left out any and all human and Overlander territory, then. And anywhere else Eggman had taken over, which was practically almost the whole world. Unfortunate, but nothing that he could do about it.

"Where does that leave me? Downunda?" He made a disgusted face and stuck his tongue out. "Oh, hell no. Not a chance. Yurashia? Go oriental? Eh... maybe, I dunno. Efrika? Not really a fan of the heat, and that's where Africa used to be. But then again maybe all the climate fuckery done by the gene bombs made it cooler. It sure feels nice here." He softly groaned and began to rub at his eyes. "Maybe I should have actually planned an actual exit strategy. I thought I had more time, though. Ugh..." His hands flopped down to his side. "What are you thinking, Sorun? All those places are on the other side of the world. I mean, *maybe* I could make it to Mercia, but that's still all the way past former Canada. And there's no way I can make a trip like that. I never packed any food."

A really shortsighted decision on his part, really. In fact the only food he was running on was a spoonful of cereal from this morning. He hadn't eaten anything else all day, and that was after having fought a bunch of robots after spelunking through a mountain and running for his life.

He was actually kind of hungry now that he thought about it.

"Shoulda at least prepared a bug-out bag or something," he scolded himself. "Damn. Alright, maybe I'm stuck in Northamer because my dumb ass didn't actually prepare to make a long trip of any kind."

Given more time and preparation, he might have been able to pull something together. With a bit more foresight he may have actually been able to prepare in advance. Hindsight was twenty-twenty, he supposed. Too bad he was probably gonna starve at the cost of learning that lesson. He couldn't even go back to Knothole if he wanted to since he was lost.

"Maybe I'll run into a village or something," he reasoned with himself as he ducked under a low-hanging branch. "They'd give me some food, right? Mobians are nice. I could just pretend to be a weird nomad guy or whatever, they set me up with some supplies, and then... then...

"... What the hell is my actual plan here...?"

After all this time, he only now just realized that he'd spent so much time thinking about leaving that he hadn't thought about what he was going to do once he left. The only thing on his mind had been getting away from Knothole. To get away from the Emeralds and fighting so he could survive. Well, that part was done with, now, so now what? Find a way home?

Except what was he going to do on that front? Find a way to extract the Emeralds? Using what? Gather the rest of the Emeralds? He didn't know how he'd do that, and even if by some miracle he did the final Emerald, and Tails, who was the only one who could use the machine to send him back, were all back in Knothole. Which meant that, if he really did go down that route, he'd inevitably come into contact with all the Freedom Fighters again, and that was *not* an ideal prospect for him. So what was he actually supposed to do now that he was gone?

"... Let's just focus on finding a village and work from there," Sorun murmured to himself, sighing as he looked towards a tree. He hummed, and looked down to its base, where he saw a patch of green moss growing. "Hm. 'Moss always points to civilization.' Heh heh... man, I miss Earth." He turned his head towards the direction the moss was growing in. "Is that thing about moss always pointing

north actually true, though? If I just head in one direction I gotta hit something eventually. Or maybe I can use the sun? It goes from east to west, right?" He looked up towards the forest's canopy. "Or, wait, was it west to east? No, it was east to west. I think. Maybe. Wait, but what if it's different on this world? Shit." He looked down at the moss again, sighed, and pointed towards the direction the moss was growing in. "Screw it, I'll just trust in the moss. Maybe find a rock to drive like the pioneers of old." He started walking, a joyless chuckle leaving him. "Man, I *really* miss Earth."

Was deciding to travel in a direction for no other reason than because of moss the wisest decision for him to make? In all honesty, probably not. He didn't know. But it was better than wandering aimlessly until he possibly starved to death because he ended up going in circles due to being directionally challenged. And he had to run into some form of civilization if he just kept going in one direction, right? It made perfect logical sense.

Some thirty minutes later and he was still hiking through forest, occasionally looking towards a tree to check on the moss to ensure he was heading in the right direction. Still no sign of civilization, but it was progress forwards. At least that's what he was telling himself, and that singular belief was about the only thing keeping him going. He did, after continually walking forwards, hear something aside from the quiet sounds of the forest, which immediately drew the teen's attention. The sound of running water, like from a waterfall or a river. So, without any other locations to go towards, Sorun wandered towards the sound of water.

Following the sounds lead him past a barrier of bushes and right into, from appearances, a large grove. It was relatively clear of trees with an exception of a couple scattered around, the entire perimeter surrounded by more forest. The source of the sound of rushing water was revealed to be a small rock plateau nearby streaming water into a pond in the middle of the grove.

It would have been beautiful if it weren't for the fact the place was completely wrecked.

The few trees that were in the grove were cut down and burned. The grass carpeting the entire grove that Sorun was sure was once a luscious green was completely scorched. And littered around the destroyed groves were Eggman's robots. A dozen or so Egg Pawns that were completely destroyed, their parts strewn about the grove. Unfortunately it seemed that the oil from the inside of the machines had leaked into the ground and stream, coloring what was likely once a crystal-clear pond into a pond full of murky, dark water.

"... Jeez, the hell happened here...?" Sorun muttered to himself as he slowly walked into the destroyed grove. "Looks like somebody went to town here. What were a bunch of Badniks doing in some random-ass grove, though?" He glanced around at the line of forest trees surrounding the grove's perimeter. "The rest of the forest doesn't even look like it was touched," he continued to himself, "so what was the deal with this place?"

He glanced down at one of the destroyed Egg Pawns. Like the rest, it was cut completely to pieces. Cut... oddly cleanly, too. So cleanly and precisely that he had to wonder just what was able to cut apart a titanium-plated robot so perfectly. "What in the world managed to slice these robots up so neatly?"

Squish!

Sorun froze, and looked down at his foot. He lifted his boot, and then grimaced when he saw a bloodied... appendage of some sort that he'd accidentally stepped on. He wasn't really sure what it was. It had the appearance of a stubby, light blue arm with no hand or fingers with a yellow tip. The other end was was torn and bloodied red, likely having been torn off whatever was attached to it. It was small, too- just barely larger than his longest finger, and at least twice as thick. It was small enough at least that he wasn't surprised he hadn't seen it before stepping on it.

The more he looked around after seeing the strange limb, the more he realized there were more pieces of whatever this creature was scattered around. Lots of them, too, as there were dozens of mauled

severed limbs and bodies scattered all about the burned grove, all lying amidst the destroyed Egg Pawns.

"Ooh, that's... man..." So that's what happened. For whatever reason these Egg Pawns had come here to wipe out... whatever these small creatures living in this grove were. He didn't know if they either fought back or something or someone else came around to destroy them, but it seemed like they succeeded nonetheless. And now Sorun couldn't help but acknowledge the bad feeling growing in his stomach when he looked around at all the carnage. "Fuckin' Eggman..."

"C-chao..."

Sorun's ears perked up upon hearing the high-pitched call of whatever made that noise, and he turned his head to follow the sound. Towards the source of the noise was fallen tree, burned into a black husk with its top half completely missing. When Sorun looked closer, his found his eyes widening when he saw a small something trapped underneath the burned tree and wiggling around in an effort to try and free itself.

A sad frown frown formed on the teen's face, and his right Bringer Claw manifested over his shoulder. It slowly reached out, grabbed the fallen tree, and gently lifted it off of the struggling creature before setting it back on the burned ground far away. The singular Bringer Claw returned and folded onto Sorun's shoulder afterwards as he stepped forwards to get a good look at the thing that had been pinned under the tree.

It... was small. That was the first thing he noticed. Around the size of a large plush doll. Its main body was roundish, with its two arms and legs lacking feet or hands much like the limb he stepped on earlier. Weirdly its head was a teardrop-shaped thing that lacked any features aside from a mouth and two wide, iris-less eyes with large dark blue pupils, with its entire body being blue with the exception for yellow tips on its arms, legs, the top of its head, and a strange yellow dot floating above the point of its head.

"... What even is this thing?" Sorun thought to himself as he watched the blue creature slowly stumble up to its feet. *"It's like a... blue marshmallow... monster thingy."*

The creature managed to rise up to its feet fully, and then blinked its owlish eyes up at Sorun, who stepped back in surprise when he saw the yellow dot floating above its head shift into the shape of a yellow question mark. It took a single step towards him, and then elicited a high-pitched yelp as it fell forwards onto its face.

Blinking, Sorun leaned forwards towards the fallen thing to look at its back. The only two things of note he saw were the blue, ball-like tail on its backside and a pink, heart-shaped, insect-like wing appendage on the left side of its back. He assumed there was supposed to be a wing on the right side, too, but in its place was an empty spot and a bloody gash on its back where the wing was likely supposed to be attached.

The blue creature managed to eventually stand up on its tiny, stubby legs, looking around for a little bit until its round eyes stopped on one of the few standing trees near the edge of the grove. Its surviving left wing began buzzing in an attempt to fly, and though it managed to lift on the ground and flew forwards a few inches, it crashed back onto the ground shortly after, Sorun wincing at the sight. It picked itself back up right after and began waddling towards the tree.

"This is just sad to watch," Sorun morosely thought as he watched the blue thing stop at the trunk of the tree. It looked up and reached out towards the branches, Sorun looking up along with it to see a bunch of red apples hanging off of the tree's branches. He looked back down to the blue thing, wincing again when he saw it try to fly towards the apples, not even making it halfway up the tree before falling down again. *"It can't even get food anymore 'cause its wing-gah, I can't watch this."*

Watching the little creature struggle just to try and feed itself caused something to wrench inside of Sorun's chest, so he endeavored to try and do something about it. He once more looked back up towards

the apples, and willed the Bringer Claw resting on his shoulder to reach up towards the branches they were connected to. The spectral claw shot up, and then very gingerly plucked one of the apples off a branch with its talon. The blue thing watched the spectacle, its head slowing turning back to Sorun as the Bringer Claw brought the apple back to his right hand before disappearing.

"... Here," Sorun said, lightly tossing the apple so that it rolled onto the ground near the blue thing. It chirped happily, and then bounded towards the apple. It wrapped its small arms around the fruit once reaching it, and then began to ravenously chomp down on it as it ate the apple.

"Well, there's my good deed for the day." Satisfied, Sorun looked back up at the burned grove. "... I've had enough of this place," he said to himself, and then turned around to walk towards the nearest exit point.

"Chao?"

The pale teen stopped in his tracks, and then swiveled his head around behind him. The blue thing had already finished the apple, as it was now nothing but a apple core sitting on the ground. The creature itself was standing upright in front of the easten apple, staring straight up at Sorun. The yellow ball floating above its head had turned back into a question mark.

"..." Sorun stared back at it for a few seconds, and then turned back around to walk forwards again. He walked five steps, and then abruptly stopped and turned his head back to the thing.

It was the exact same distance away from him as it was before he started moving. Like it was following him.

"..." Still looking at the creature, Sorun took a single step forwards to confirm his suspicion. And just as he thought, it took a step forwards as well. "Oh, come on, no," he groaned in exasperation as he fully

turned to face the creature. "Look, you can't come with me. Go home."

The question mark turned back into a dot as the creature's head turned around towards the grove, as if gesturing towards it. Sorun followed its gaze, his stern expression softening when he saw the devastated landscape it was looking at.

"Oh, I... guess this was your home, huh? And all those bodies and parts were your... pals, I guess..." Come to think of it, there weren't any other living ones around that he saw. Just the one-winged one. All the rest were just dead ones scattered around. "Don't tell you're the last one here left," he mumbled as Sorun and the creature faced back towards each other. It looked up to him with a saddened expression, the dot on top of its head forming into a swirling pattern.

"... Okay, listen, I get that... your whole community here just got obliterated," Sorun said, feeling awful at himself as the words came out of his mouth, "and you probably can't stay here since the whole grove looks wasted, but I can't take a pet along with me. Go somewhere else."

The saddened expression on the blue creature's face didn't leave. In fact, it looked pleading now.

"Hey, don't give me that face." Growing increasingly uncomfortable under its gaze, Sorun was forced to turn his head to the side as a low breath escaped him. "Dude, come on..." He squeezed his eyes shut in thought, and after a few seconds his shoulders slumped as a defeated sigh left him. "Ugh, for the love of..."

"Chao-chao!"

"Shut up."

Alright, so he'd decided to take it with him. It's not like he could have just left it in the wasteland that was once its home, amidst the body

of all its former friends and family with a polluted pond. It couldn't even reach up towards trees for food anymore with its missing wing, so it would probably starve to death eventually if he left it alone.

It wasn't like he wanted to bring it along. He just felt responsible for it now since he saved it from that tree that trapped it and already fed it. So leaving it alone to die would just be irresponsible of Sorun, and that would leave a bad taste in his mouth. So the thing was his now, he guessed. On the upside he didn't feel so lonely anymore.

On the downside, they were still lost. He'd taken a bunch of apples from that tree and stuffed his pockets with them, so that was the food situation taken care of for the time being, but they were still technically lost. And his faith in moss had been all but lost by this point, so it was back to aimlessly wandering in a single direction they went.

"Chao!"

"Ugh..." Sorun's head fell, and then picked back up to look at his left shoulder. The blue thing couldn't fly anymore, and with those stubby legs there was no way it could keep up with his walking speed. So it elected to cling onto his left shoulder, its head and arms resting over the shoulder's top with the creature's face turned towards Sorun.

He didn't really mind, since the small weight on his shoulder was somewhat of a comforting reminder he had a companion now, but the thing would not stop making those happy noises and it was beginning to grow on his nerves.

"Would you just be quiet for five minutes, you little...!" Sorun stopped himself. What was he supposed to call this thing? "... Alright, look, if you're gonna be taggin' along with me, you're gonna need a name." He reached his right hand towards it, the little creature offering no resistance as he plucked it off his shoulder. The blue thing safely fit in the palm of his hand, with its body being just small enough to comfortably rest there as it stared back up at the human. "Okay, so what am I supposed to call you...?"

There had to be some name for its species, though he didn't have a clue as to what it was. So just calling it by that was out. A proper name, then. But what was he supposed to go with? The teen never had to name a pet before in his life, and he didn't know what other people based their pet names off of.

"Jeez, uh... name it after somebody I know? Don't really know if I want a little blue thing called "David" or "Dave" followin' me around. That just sounds lame. Mom's name? Nah, that's even lamer, and I'm pretty sure this thing is a guy. I think?" As far as he could see he couldn't see any identifying traits on it to tell if it was male or female. Maybe its species was monogendered. He didn't know. *"I'll just go with it being a guy. Getting a guy vibe from it,"* he thought. *"Uhhh... screw it, this world's already making me steal stuff from 'Devil May Cry', and that series had some pretty rocking names in it. Let's just take some names, too, while we're at it.*

"But what to go with? Well... since he's kinda my pet now, uh... Nero?" He blinked in contemplation, and then tilted his head to the side. "How do you feel about Nero?" Sorun asked him. "You like that name? Nero?"

The blue thing tilted his head along to the side with him, blinking up at him with a blank expression.

"I don't think he likes it. Plus 'Nero' doesn't really go along with his color scheme," Sorun thought as he turned his head to the side. *"Hm... Why not just go with Vergil? Cool name, but... nah, I'm not gonna disrespect Vergil by naming this thing after him. It really is a cool name, though, so maybe... I could do something similar? As a homage or something?"* He hummed in thought. *"Didn't he anagram his name in that one side book? Gilver? Nah. Sounds too much like Gilbert. Maybe... oh. Oh! What about that!?"*

"How about Virgil?" Sorun asked as he turned his head back to the thing. "It's like Vergil, but spelled with an 'i' instead of an 'e'. Huh? Huh? Whatcha think?"

The creature's head straightened up, and the yellow dot shifted back into a question mark.

"Well, Virgil with an 'i' is the Latin spelling of Vergil," Sorun explained, "and since mom isn't here I gotta keep the tradition of naming things in Latin going, y'know?" He reached over with his free hand and poked the thing on the side of his face. "C'mon, Virgil's a cool name. It's named after one of my favorite people in all of fiction, and that guy was really cool. You wanna be cool, don't you?"

The reaction he got from the blue thing seemed to be positive, as his face lit up in a large smile. "Chao-chao! Chao-chao!" He began clapping his small arms together, and the yellow dot floating above his head shifted into a heart shape.

"I... guess that means you like it," Sorun decided. "Alright, then, Virgil," he said as he placed Virgil back on his shoulder, "let's go. And keep all the chaoing down, huh?"

"Chao." He would assume that was a confirmatory noise.

And with his new companion given a new name, they continued walking deeper into the forest. A small smile grew on the teen's face as a warm feeling grew through his chest, and absentmindedly he reached over to scratch the top of Virgil's head with a finger. *"Well, so far this has gone pretty horribly,"* the teen thought, *"but at least I made a new friend and got some food. That's gotta count for something, right?"*

A/N- Finally managed a short chapter for once.

Originally I was gonna name the Chao Gilver, but Gilver sounded so close to Silver I decided against it and went with Virgil. It's more appropriate anyways.

And speaking of Chao, jeez. I wanted to give Sorun a little Chao companion but I knew next to nothing about them, so while

looking up Chao for research purposes I came across this website called "Chao Island". I went in it and my brain was assaulted by a world's worth of Chao lore because apparently the two Sonic Adventure games went hella deep with the Chao mechanics. Felt like I needed a PhD just to understand half of it. I'm not gonna go anywhere near as deep into the Chao stuff as the games did, and I don't think the comics did, either, but there's still a little wiggle room there to do some cool stuff. So there's that.

Chapter 22

Recursion Error

Episode 22- That one jackal

By now the sky was beginning to slowly transition into an orange color as the sun slowly approached dusk. Not much had transpired in the amount of time that Sorun had found Virgil and now. Sorun had gone through a single apple and Virgil had thankfully remained silent, though whenever Sorun snuck a quick glance at him to make sure he was okay he saw that the thing still had a happy smile on his face. That wound on his back was still bothering Sorun, though. It stopped bleeding, at least, but that was still a large open wound on the creature's back. He was worried about infection, and he didn't have anything to clean and wrap the wound with.

Maybe it would be fine. Maybe Virgil's species was magic or something and didn't get infections. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on Sorun's part as he hoped that the blue thing wouldn't just drop dead on him due to infection.

He didn't think he could handle something like that happening, especially after he already went and named him.

If there was a bright side, it was that the forest was beginning to thin out. There were still trees everywhere, but the forest wasn't even half as dense as it had been prior. Unfortunately, that did not mean that there was much more room for the human and his small companion to navigate around. Because everywhere they looked, for as far as the eye could see was, for lack of a better term, junk.

Robot junk.

Metal corpses and parts were strewn all around and bunched together into large piles. It wasn't just Egg Pawns, either, though he could see plenty of parts that belonged to that variety of Badnik randomly mixed in with all the other piles of junks. There were various makes and models of so many different robots he'd never seen before that he couldn't make one part out from another, and because everything was in pieces and wrecked he couldn't really identify anything, either. It was all just a chaotic mish-mash of electronics and metal parts.

"What, did we wander into a junkyard or something...?" Sorun wondered aloud as he stepped around a large pile of discarded robot parts. "What's with all this robot stuff?"

"Chao." Virgil gave as good a shrug as he could since he was still clinging to Sorun's shoulder.

"No idea either, huh?" Sorun commented as he weaved past another junk pile. "Yeah, well, at least this probably means we're makin' progress towards something."

The juxtaposition between the junk piles of robots all around and the serene scene of a forest mixed in was an odd one to Sorun, but the human teen tried to not let it distract him as he made his way through the junk-covered land. He did take some time to observe some of the piles of junk, as there were some neat-looking robots here and there that caught his eyes. Large humanoid ones, animal-shaped ones, whole aircraft that looked like things straight out of sci-fi comics... practically almost everything was here.

There was one other thing that didn't make Sorun nearly as interested, though, and that was Eggman's logo. He saw it frequently on a lot of the pieces of robots in a lot of the piles he came across, which lead him to suspect that a majority, if not flat-out all of these, were Eggman's robots. That'd explain why there was a junkyard full of dismantled robots, at least.

"I'll give Eggman credit for one thing: the man never runs out of ideas for new robots." He came across a large, deep groove cut into the ground, and nearby was the upper remains of a giant machine nearly the size of a small building. One of its arms was resting across the groove in the ground, and Sorun treated the robotic limb as a bridge as he slowly walked across it with his arms held out to his sides for balance. "Are these all old models of his or something? Is this some kind of dumping site for his robots?" He came to the other side of the arm and hopped down. "This world just keeps gettin' stranger all the time."

It all looked neat, at least. Something about all the different-looking robots tickled something inside of Sorun, that small bit of nerd in him that always liked looking at cool robot designs back on Earth when playing video games, but the Eggman logo he kept seeing brought him back down real fast.

The entire place was huge, though. Ten minutes of walking straight and traversing past small obstacles made from all the discarded robots and he saw no end to the junkyard. What he *heard* eventually, however, was a different story entirely. It was faint at first, but as Sorun approached the noise it became clearer: grunting. Grunting and sounds of frustration and disgruntlement, coming from, by the tone of it, an aged male.

"Alright... that's something." And something was better than nothing as far as Sorun was concerned. Hopefully it was a person he could talk to, and with luck they could tell him where the nearest village was. Or even better take him back to theirs if they were from one. At the very least it was somebody to talk to to relieve the monotony of being lost and hiking through a forest and junkyard full of robot corpses.

Slowly, Sorun made his way towards the sound of the grunting until he caught sight of the source, prompting him to take cover by a nearby pile of broken robots as he observed the sight before him. The grunting was coming from, by the looks of it, a cat Mobian with completely black fur. No clothing aside from shoes and gloves.

Currently he was kneeling in front of a metal wagon, which was completely full of miscellaneous parts and pieces of machinery. The back left wheel of the wagon, Sorun noted, was dislodged completely, and seemed to be the source of the old Mobian's ire as he seemed to be grumbling loudly directly onto the broken wheel.

"What is he doing all the way out here with a wagon full of junk? He a scavenger or something?" Sorun thought to himself. *"Well, scavver or not it's somebody, which is just what I need. Alright, Sorun, play it cool and confident. It's just a single Mobian and you need the help. I'm sure it'll turn out fine."*

Meeting new people always made him nervous, and on Mobius this fear was amplified due to the world's unpredictable nature, but he didn't have many other options. So the teen jumped up to the top of the pile, sat down on the wrecked Egg Pawn, and waved towards the cat Mobian while shouting out, "Yo!"

The Mobian jumped right up to his feet and whirled around towards Sorun. By Mobian standards, his features were pretty average. The only notable features Sorun saw were that the tufts of fur on his cheeks had gray coloring near the edges and that his eyes were green, but otherwise he didn't seem all that different from any other cat Mobians he'd seen.

"O-oh! What in the...? Oh! Hello there!" The aged-sounding Mobian waved his hand towards Sorun, who became flooded with relief at the friendly gesture. "I didn't notice you there, ha ha! Not very surprising, I guess. My hearing ain't what it used to be."

Sorun slid off of the metal pile and began to slowly approach the black-furred Mobian. "Sorry if I spooked ya."

"Nah, don't worry about it." The cat waved a hand to the side, and then leaned his head closer towards Sorun as he stopped right in front of him. "A human, eh?" he mumbled. "Don't really see your kind around these parts, sonny. What on Mobius are you doing on this side of the world?"

"That... is a really long and complicated story," Sorun answered with an exasperated breath. "Long story short, I'm lost and wandered in here by mistake. How about you?"

"Ah, just doin' a bit a scavenging, though the goll-durned wheel on my wagon here decided to go and fall off on me." The cat Mobian glanced at the broken wagon, and then looked back to Sorun with a light laugh. "But it ain't no problem. Anyways, I'm Sam. Nice to meetcha."

"... Wow, okay." He'd met Mobians like Sally and Sonic's family that had relatively normal-sounding names, but compared to all the other ones it felt like people with names he was familiar with were in a minority. It still threw him for a loop whenever he met a Mobian like Sam with a name that would be commonplace on Earth. Sorun quickly regained his composure and introduced himself, saying, "My name's Sorun."

"Sorun, huh?" Sam nodded, and then turned back to his wagon. "Well, sonny, I dunno why you chose to get lost here of all places, but there's worse places to be wanderin' in, I suppose," he said as he walked over to and crouched down next to the wagon. "Place is a robot graveyard. Usually nothin' comes 'round here, 'cept me when I'm scavengin' parts."

Slowly approaching the cat and his wagon, Sorun took a single sweeping glance over the entire area. "I got that this place was a robot junkyard, but where'd all this stuff come from, anyways?" he asked.

"Eh, you know how it is. This world's been embroiled in a war for over a decade against a mad tyrant usin' robots to try and take everythin' over. Sure there's resistance fighters bustin' them up all the live-long day, but all those robots gotta go somewhere, and that crackpot Dr. Robotnik ain't too keen on recyclin', apparently," Sam gruffly stated as he inspected his wagon's wheel. "This ain't the only dumping site on the continent where people toss trashed robots, but it's one of the bigger ones. Keeps the rest of the place clean."

The human teen nodded in understanding, silently watching as the black-furred Mobian continued to examine the broken wagon. He felt a small tap on his left shoulder, prompting him to look towards Virgil. The little creature was pointing one of his arms towards Sam and the wagon while staring at Sorun with his round eyes.

"What, what is it?" he whispered in response. Virgil gestured towards the cart and Sam again, causing Sorun to look towards the two and then back to the creature. "You want me to help him?"

"Chao."

Rolling his eyes, Sorun shook his head in disagreement. "Virgil, come on, we got better things to do than help some old guy with his wagon."

"Chao?" Virgil tilted his head and gave Sorun a questioning look.

"... Okay, fine, we don't really have anything better to do," he admitted, "and... maybe he can give us some directions if we help out. Ugh, fine." With a sigh, he turned back towards the cat Mobian and his wagon, breathed in deeply, and stepped right next to the Mobian. "You need any help with the wagon, man?" he asked.

Sam stood upright in surprise and looked towards Sorun. "Er, I wouldn't really be one to turn down a helpin' hand," he said, "but do you know how to fix somethin' like this?"

Sorun hummed, and looked down towards the wagon. It seemed a simple enough construction: a simple wagon with four wheels all connected to a central axle under the actual wagon with a pull bar attached to the front. It seemed like an easy fix for somebody who had at least a small amount of technical knowledge.

Too bad Sorun's skills as a mechanic were absolute trash.

"Nah, not really," he said as he turned back to Sam. "I could, uh... carry it for you, though. If you want."

"Carry?" A unsure expression crossed the cat's features as he scratched the back of his head. "I appreciate the offer, sonny, but my home's a few miles back and I got the thing completely loaded down with parts. I don't think-"

Sam was interrupted when, in a flash of blue, Sorun's right Bringer Claw appeared resting on his shoulder. The cat stepped back in complete shock as the spectral claw unfolded itself, positioned its hand under the wagon, and lifted it up completely into the air with no effort whatsoever.

"It's not a problem," Sorun assured the cat as he turned towards the bewildered Mobian, not an ounce of strain to be seen on his face. "It's, uh, don't... don't think about it too hard."

He mentally prepared himself for any reaction, ranging from wide-eyed wonder to Sam screaming and running away in fear from the blue, spectral arm holding the wagon up. Instead what happened was that the cat's expression fell blank as he shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, okay. Neat."

"... Mobians, I swear..." Was he surprised that Sam was so flippant towards the reveal of the Bringer Claw? No, not really. That's how practically all Mobians acted around his powers. It still floored him each time. "So are we heading out, or what?"

"Er, yeah. 'Course. This way." Sam turned around and began walking away, and Sorun walked by his side with the wagon full of parts being suspended above them by the Bringer Claw. "Like I said, my home village is a few miles down the way."

"Ugh, miles?" He'd missed that part the first time he said it. His feet were already getting tired from all the hiking he'd done today. But he had to remind himself that he'd already promised Sam he'd carry the wagon, and back to a village, at that. That was everything he needed right there. Maybe he could get some directions afterwards. Or at least some medical attention for Virgil's wound. "I mean, uh, yeah.

Miles. No sweat," Sorun laughed off. "So this village of yours. What's it like?"

"Well, it's a nice enough little place," Sam began as he tiredly stretched his arms over his head. "We keep to ourselves, mostly. Kinda have to these days what with everything going on in the world. We get a few travelers that come through from time to time that have been to a bunch of other settlements saying that a lotta folk out there have fallen on hard times, but fortunately for us we happen to live right next to one of the biggest junkyards in the world." The cat spread his arm out to the piles of dismantled robots they passed as they continued walking. "We sustain ourselves for the most part by scavenging anything we need from here." He paused to hum. "Actually, about near everythin' in our village is made of stuff scavenged from this junkyard now that I think about it. Homes, water purifiers, that hydroponics buildin' some of the others set up... yeah, that entire village was made up of parts taken from this place. The whole reason we set up the village there in the first place was because of all the free parts just sitting around that nobody was usin'. One thing lead to another and here we are just a few years later!"

Sorun nodded along to the history lesson, giving a small hum of acknowledgement. It made enough sense. He remembered being told that all the trade routes were all nonexistent at this point because of how far Eggman's conquest had progressed, so he could easily see that any villages that couldn't self-sustain were pretty much doomed without some alternative means of keeping themselves alive. That was the whole reason he'd been on that botched medicine mission.

From the way Sam was saying it, though, the people of his village found a pretty elegant workaround to this by using the discarded remains of Eggman's robots to sustain themselves. There was a bit of irony in there that gave Sorun enough amusement to huff a single breath of air out of his nose. Knowing Eggman's efforts were inadvertently letting at least one settlement out here thrive. It wasn't

anything significant, not even enough to muster a bit of spite against him. Eggman could probably roll over them like it was nothing if he ever felt like it, but that was true for pretty much everywhere that hadn't been touched by him yet. Which as far as Sorun knew, wasn't a lot of places.

As far as villages went, this one was sounding like probably one of his best bets out here. They had to be somewhat advanced if they made a self-sustaining home out of advanced junk like this. Had to be at least one person there that could help out with Virgil's wound.

Speaking of which...

"Hey, Sam." Sorun reached over to his left shoulder, plucked Virgil off, and let the thing sit in his hand as he brought him into the older male's view. "You have any idea what this thing is?" If anybody would know, it would be a local. Maybe Sam could shine some light on this mysterious thing.

"Hm?" Sam turned his head towards Sorun, his eyes lighting up when he saw the creature sitting in his hand and staring at him. "Oh! That's a Chao you have there!"

"... They're called Chao? Seriously?" He looked down and gave Virgil a flat look. "Why does that sound so famili- wait, wasn't there a soda or something named like that...?"

"Heh heh! You really must not be from around here if you don't know what a Chao is," Sam commented, his features slowly turning inquisitive. "Usually you only find Chao in Chao Gardens. They always make little communities in groves and such and never really move on from there. What're you doing bringing along a Chao with you?"

Sorun made a light grimace, and turned his eyes from the Chao to Sam. "I think I ran into its Chao Garden," he explained. "Place was completely destroyed. Lot of Eggman's robots were there. They were destroyed- something cut them up, dunno what-, but the whole grove

was completely trashed." He paused, and stroked Virgil's back with his thumb. "And... Virgil here was the only surviving Chao I found," he explained, causing both his and Sam's expression to turn dour. "He lost one of his wings, too, so I decided to take him with me so he wouldn't starve to death. But, to be honest with you, I don't really know what I'm doing with the little guy."

"Oh, I see... that's too bad. Chao are a bit rare these days, so hearin' that one of their Gardens just up and went like that... darn shame." The cat looked down towards the ground, sighed deeply, and looked back to Sorun and Virgil. "Well, the truth is I ain't too knowledgeable 'bout Chao myself. They're friendly enough creatures, real empathetic towards others and all that. Usually just survive off of fruits and nuts from what I heard, but other than that, I don't know much. You'd be better off talkin' to an expert on the critters, but I don't know where you'd find someone like that."

"Ah." Letting out a disappointed hum, Sorun placed Virgil back on his left shoulder. "How smart are they?" he asked. "I feel like he understands me, but all he does is say 'chao' all the time."

"Eh, sure they're smart. 'Bout as smart or you and I, really. They just ain't got the ability to speak words, that's all."

Well, that answered the question of if Virgil actually managed to understand Sorun or not. He suspected it to be true considering how responsive it was to his words, but he had to wonder seeing as it only ever said one word.

"Still," Sam continued, a smile taking over his features, "it was very generous of you, takin' in a wounded Chao like that. You must have a mighty kind heart to go out of your way to do somethin' like that, Sorun."

"... I wouldn't go that far," the teen mumbled out, eyes turning to the side to look away from Sam. Partly in abashment at the comment, and partly in guilt as his mind wandered back to Knothole. "Is there somebody back at your village that could look at Virgil?" he asked.

"I'm worried about the giant gash on his back from where the wing was."

"Yeah, we got a doctor. Don't you worry none," Sam assured him. "I really gotta thank you for helpin' out with the wagon, though. I was worried I'd have to leave it and come back with some of the others later, but at the rate we're going we should hit home before nightfall."

"What is all this stuff I'm carrying, anyways?" Sorun questioned him.

Sam waved a hand. "Oh, nothin' important. Just some spare parts for if anything ever breaks down, stuff like that. We like to keep a large reserve just in case, you understand."

"Makes sense, I guess." The pale teen faced back forwards, a weary sigh escaping him. "I really hope you're right and we do get there before nightfall, 'cause my feet are killin' me here..."

In the end Sam had kept his promise, if barely. The sun was just beginning to touch the horizon, but after cresting a small hill Sorun had seen it. Nestled in an extremely large clearing, on top of a large hill, was a village. Sam had mentioned on the way there that their population was in the range of around two hundred, and from what Sorun saw he could believe it. Buildings and houses of all shapes and sizes were located in the giant compound, all of them seemingly cobbled together from sheet metal and other mechanical bits.

The most eye-catching thing that drew Sorun's attention, however, was the hundred-foot windmill slowly spinning in the center of the village. Like everything else, it looked like it was made completely out of scrap metal, which made Sorun hope it was built as sturdy as it looked.

"Well, here we are!" Sam announced as the settlement came into view. "Scrap City! Well, more of a village, really, but 'Scrap City' rolls off the tongue better."

"Ah-huh." Sorun's eyes had become half-lidded from exhaustion at this point, but he still had enough energy to maintain enough speed to keep alongside the cat Mobian as his Bringer Claw continued to carry the wagon above them. *"About damned time we got here,"* he internally groused. *"I was getting sick of walking around."*

"Chao!" Virgil seemed more excited about the village than Sorun was, but he wasn't the one that had to walk around all day. At least it was a good sign that the wound wasn't bugging him too much, which gave Sorun some small relief.

"Gotta say, Sorun, you really saved me a lotta trouble helpin' me with the wagon. Plus these trips to and back from the junkyard get a bit lonesome some days," Sam continued as he turned towards the tired human. "I'll be upfront and say I've never actually seen a human before in my life outside of pictures, but I didn't know you people could have big feathery arms come outta your back like that."

Sorun sighed. "We can't. I just get to be 'special' is all."

"Hm? Special how?"

"Special in that the universe loves to punch me in the throat," Sorun replied in a dry tone. "I messed around with some stuff I shouldn't have messed around with and got weird powers out of it, alright? I told you not to think about them."

Sam rose his palms up. "Alright, alright. Didn't mean nothin' by it. Just curious is all."

The pale teen glanced to the side at Sam, and then faced back forwards. "I just don't like talking about them. They brought me a whole lot more trouble than they're worth."

"Hm. They sure are good for carrying wagons though, huh?"

He almost punched Sam right there for daring to say that, but when Sorun glanced back at the cat with slightly narrowed eyes he saw

that his expression was genuinely teasing. Sorun's own expression softened, a long breath leaving him as he slowly nodded. "I guess, Sam, I guess."

"Chao?"

Sorun's ears perked up, and he glanced down at the Chao on his shoulder. He was looking up at the teen with curious and concerned eyes, causing Sorun to sigh and scratch the top of Virgil's head with a finger. *"Empathetic. Right. I'm really gonna have to watch my mood around the little guy, aren't I?"*

Maybe that would be a good thing. Help Sorun learn a little stress control. He really doubted it would, but if Chao really could pick up on emotions like Sam said, Sorun at least had to try. He didn't want any of his negative emotions to accidentally bleed into the Chao he was carrying around. The last thing he wanted was to leave bad impressions on Virgil.

The three of them eventually reached the entrance to the village, which wasn't so much as gated off. And now that he had a better look around, Sorun noticed there wasn't even a wall around the village, either. He was starting to suspect Mobian architects never discovered the concept of enclosure.

But inside the village itself, everything was relatively calm. Even with the day ending there were quite a few Mobians wandering about, either in the streets or near their buildings and homes. Some had stopped to smile and wave towards Sam. Others were staring at Sorun and his Bringer Claw, but they were also waving at the human, too. Sorun, feeling shy under all the looks, turned his head towards Sam so he didn't have to acknowledge them.

"You're, uh, pretty popular around here, huh, Sam?" Sorun mumbled to the cat. "Gettin' a lot of stares here."

"Actually, Sorun, I think they're all starin' at you. We don't really ever get any humans through here. Or people with weird glowing arms

comin' outta their back." He somehow missed the deadpan stare Sorun shot his way. "But I'm not really surprised they're all excited to see me. Stuff's always breakin' down around town, and I'm the only one goin' out there for replacement pats these days."

Sorun nodded in understanding, and then did a double-take on the old cat. "Wait, you're the only guy here goin' out there poking around in that junkyard?"

Sam shrugged. "Everybody else is busy doin' this or that around here, and it's work that can be handled by a single person now that everything's up and running. The long walks can grow weary on the old bones, but I don't mind that none since everybody depends on me."

"That's... admirable."

"I suppose so. Anyways, my home's up here. You can put the wagon down in the garage."

After walking a bit more, they came upon a small field of similar-looking houses which were, like everything else, constructed from scrap metal. The one they stopped in front of, the house itself practically identical to the rest around it, had a small garage attached to its side. Sam walked over to the garage's door and opened it up towards the ceiling, and then gestured his hand towards the inside. In response, Sorun's Bringer Claw gently placed the wagon inside the garage, and then disappeared.

They wandered into the garage right after, Sam crouching down towards the wagon while Sorun idly inspected the garage's wall. He didn't see anything out of the ordinary: just some tools and parts hung up, a workbench to the side cluttered with pieces of metal, and a shelf nearby that held more tools and parts.

"Guy's a real gearhead. Wonder what Tails would say if he saw this place?" Frowning, Sorun ran a hand along the workbench's edge. *"Wonder how they're all doing with me leaving and everything? I*

hope they don't come looking for me. Doubt they'd actually find me, but I dunno, they're real resourceful."

His greatest fear was that he would be minding his own business and all of a sudden a blue, blurry shape would stop in front of him. He could easily picture Sonic's stern face just staring at him, arms crossed as he rapidly tapped his foot on the ground. And if that happened, Sorun was just *done* . He couldn't even dream of getting away from a guy like that. Not with that speed. Or Shadow. Or the ship if they went as far as to bring that.

Come to think of it, he was done regardless of what they did as long as they found him. But he doubted they would. The chance was there, certainly, but it was low. He never gave hints that he wanted to run away. He didn't leave clues. He was in the clear. And yet the paranoia of them finding a way to find him regardless was still there.

"Nah, I'm overthinking it. They ain't gonna find me," Sorun dismissed with a shake of his head. *"They're too busy dealing with Eggman to come and look for me. I'm in the clear. I can see it now. Sonic jumping at the ready to come and find me, Sally shooting him down with a regretful and remorseful face because she knows they can't spare the manpower. Sonic getting all sad 'cause he knows she's right, then he'd probably get all sulky for a bit. Then Sally'd get all sad, and Nicole would probably be there, too, so she'd get sad. Oh man, Nicole. I really hope she isn't taking me leaving too hard..."* Sorun shook his head. *"Don't worry about it, man, don't worry about it. You did what you had to do. They'll all move on."*

"Welp, the damage don't look too bad." Sam's voice had roused Sorun from his thoughts, causing him to turn from staring at the wall to the black cat right behind him. "It's that same rusty bolt that's been givin' me trouble for a while now. I'll get it fixed up first thing tomorrow." With a light groan, Sam stood up and faced Sorun. "Don't mean to sound like a broken record here, sonny, but thanks for the help."

"Yeah, don't worry about it." Something outside the garage, in the street just outside the house, caught Sorun's eyes after he said this. A small, dark form that was rushing towards the garage, seemingly right towards Sam. "Uh, Sam? You got incoming."

"Huh?" Sam turned in the direction Sorun was looking towards, his shoulders immediately going slack at the sight. "Oh, bother."

The cat Mobian was instantly tackled by the small, dark form immediately after saying this. Sorun had reared his head back in surprise at the sight, but upon looking closer he calmed down when he saw it was just another Mobian. A child from the size of it, and another cat with black fur to boot. Even had the same clothes.

"Grandpa! Grandpa!" Sorun let out a silent "ah" of understanding after hearing this, stepping back away from the pair as he quietly observed them. "What took you so long!? You were supposed to be back an hour ago but you never came home and everybody got really worried and-!"

"Calm down, sport, calm down! I'm fine!" Sam smiled down at the child and ruffled the top of his head, making the child look up at him with a matching pair of green eyes. "I just ran into a bit of trouble with the wagon is all."

Sorun watched the small exchange for a bit, and then turned away from it as a spike of envy shot through him. *"Must be nice, having people that like you enough that they just run up to you like that. Good for you, Sammy."* The way Mobians could be so affectionate towards each other still amazed him every time he saw it. Being exposed to it by some of the other back with the Freedom Fighters had been a different experience, though. Feeling the borderline alien experience of all that friendship by some of those people had been... oddly nice, even if he was never able to reciprocate it. And seeing it for himself right in front of him made him realize how much he'd enjoyed all that friendly attention without even realizing it.

He felt something rustle on his shoulder, and automatically started to reassuringly rub the top of Virgil's head with his finger when he caught the Chao giving him a concerned look. He calmed down right after, thankfully, and the fact he showed concern for him in the first place made Sorun feel a bit better, but it didn't help that hollow feeling growing in him.

"What do you mean you lost your ball on top of the windmill again!?" The sudden yell tore Sorun out from his own thoughts, causing him to focus back on the pair of cat Mobians near him. Sam had risen to his full height with his hands held on his hips, while the child cat was looking up at him with a sheepish grin.

"It wasn't *just* me, grandpa! Me and all my friends were playing and somebody kicked the ball all the way up there."

"Consound it, Gary, again?" Groaning, Sam rubbed at the top of his head. "What am I gonna do with you...?"

Sorun watched the two for a bit longer, and then glanced towards Virgil. The Chao blinked up at Sorun, and then pointed his hand-less appendage at the cat duo. Releasing a consigned sigh, Sorun nodded at him and stepped towards the two.

"What's this about a ball?" he asked, turning his head to the side while rubbing the back of his head.

Both of the cats turned towards the human, the younger one's eyes brightening up considerably at the sight of Sorun. Sam's reaction was much more subdued as he opened his mouth to address the teen. "Oh, Gary, this is the one I was telling you about that helped me carry the wagon all the way back home!"

"Ohhh! So this is what a human looks like!" The smaller cat, Gary, bounded towards Sorun and stopped right in front of him. He flashed the teen with a grateful smile. "Thank you for helping my grandpa, mister!"

Feeling his cheeks begin to burn in embarrassment, the Sorun brushed some of his dark hair over his face to hide it. "It wasn't that big a deal," he mumbled out. "You didn't answer the question about the ball."

Sam's triangular ears rose up in surprise, and then lowered slightly as he shook his head in exhaustion. "My goofball grandson and his group of friends went and got their sports ball stuck up on the windmill again. I tell you, they do this all the time, and after the trip we had I don't think I'm in any condition to go and get it for them."

"Sounds like a real problem, alright." Giving a contemplative hum, Sorun turned his gaze from them to the Chao on his shoulder. He didn't have to- he really didn't- but it seemed Virgil obviously wanted him to, but more than that Sorun didn't feel right leaving a group of children's ball to its fate up on a windmill. Especially considering he had wings and could probably get it in around five seconds. And he still felt he owed Sam a bit for showing him to the village. "Tell you what, Sam," he said as he removed Virgil from his shoulder. "You get Virgil to that doctor you were talking about to look at the wing wound, and I'll go get that ball."

"Huh?" Gingerly taking the offered Chao in his hands, Sam looked to Sorun with surprise in his eyes. "Are you sure? After everything you-"

"Sam, it's just a ball and I got, you know, *those* arms. Don't worry about it."

"Well, I'd... I'd be mighty appreciative of you if ya did that for my grandson," he said at last, and then gave Sorun a nod and a smile. "Alright, Sorun, ya got yourself a deal my friend."

There it was again. The "friend" word that seemed to cause Sorun so much distress. Now it just made his chest ache for some reason.

"Okay, then." Sorun turned towards Gary. "I think I saw the windmill you were talking about on the way into town, but could you show me the way there?"

"Mm-hm!" Gary enthusiastically nodded at him and turned towards the garage door. "It's this way! Come on!"

Sorun made the move to follow him, but when he heard something call out to him, saying, "Chao! Chao!", he stopped and turned back around. Virgil, held in Sam's hands, was reaching out towards Sorun, the dot above his head shifting into a question mark.

"I'm just going away for a bit, Virgil," Sorun explained to the Chao. "Sam's gonna take you somewhere to get you looked at in the meantime. I'll come get you later, okay?"

The Chao continued to reach out to him for a bit, but then he nodded his teardrop-shaped head as the question mark turned back into a dot. Sam had laughed at the sight, and then slowly began stroking the side of Virgil's face with his finger.

"Don't worry none about your Chao, Sorun, I'm sure he'll be fine. Our doctor is top-notch," he assured the human.

"Hm. I'm gonna hold you to that." With that, Sorun turned his back to the old Mobian and made his way out of the garage and towards the younger Mobian. "Alright, so where's this windmill at?"

"It's this way, mister! C'mon!" Gary had turned towards the left side of the street, and began running down it. Sorun stared after his back, briefly turned back towards the garage to glance at Sam and Virgil, sighed, and then began following the cat child.

Following Gary through the moderately-sized village, Sorun got a good enough look around to get an impression of the place. He wasn't so sure of the place at first glance, mostly due to everything being made of scrap metal, but after going inside of that garage it seemed that everything was built relatively well enough. They all had to, he supposed, seeing as people lived here. And the few Mobians still out at this time of day all seemed happy enough as Sorun and Gary passed them.

If anything, the place had a fairly peaceful air about it. The same kind of peaceful air Knothole had. A nice open place in the woods full of nice people living a peaceful life. It gave him an odd sense of nostalgia, which was really strange as he never felt at ease in Knothole. Even so, he couldn't deny it was a place that was practically built to have people live at ease in it. A home for a community of people.

"This place ain't so bad," Sorun thought to himself as he continued following the Mobian child, hands tucked inside of his pockets. "How do you like living here?" he asked, eyes wandering left and right as he looked around at the metal village.

By now Gary had slowed down to a brisk walk as the two continued going forwards, though he did crane his head back to address Sorun. "Huh? It's nice, I guess. Grandpa takes care of me and all the other kids always play with me. All the other people are really nice, too!"

"Sounds great." About the answer he expected. Aside from the war going on in the outside he didn't really see what-

"Well, except... nah, it's nothing."

And now Sorun was interested. "Huh? Except what?"

Gary's features scrunched in discomfort, and he turned his head back forwards and away from Sorun. "Oh, it's nothing." He pointed ahead of them. "That's the windmill up there."

Sorun's eyes followed the pointed finger, and then traveled upwards. The four, gigantic spinning blades held aloft by the hundred-foot tower seemed even more large and imposing up close than it had seeing it at a distance. "So what's this giant windmill for again?" Sorun questioned aloud.

"Uh, I think it gives power to the village and stuff," Gary innocently answered, blinking up at the windmill's blades before going back

down. "Oh, there they are! Guys, hey!"

Up ahead was a small gathering of a couple dozen or so Mobian children. They were all wildly varying species, like most other gatherings of Mobians Sorun saw. Mostly mammal-types, a few avians mixed in. Forest-type animals, mostly, with even more that he was sure were common animals but couldn't rightly place.

It was something that was a pretty ordinary sight at this point.

"Hey! Gary!" One of the children in the group- a bear, or badger, or some other third thing that looked like the first two- ran up to greet the cat Mobian, a few more children trailing behind that one. "What took you so long? And who's this? I thought you were bringing your grandpa?" The new child looked up at Sorun and tilted his head to the side. "Also, um... what species is he?"

"Yeah, he looks weird. Where's all his fur?" a second new child asked.

"And what's why is he wearing so much clothes?" asked a third.

"Is skin supposed to look so light like that?"

"You know, I almost forgot how unintentionally mean kids could be," Sorun thought to himself with a sour look on his face. *"Calm it down, Sorun, calm it down. It's just a bunch of ignorant kids."* He slowly exhaled. *"At least these ones ain't throwing rocks at you."*

"Grandpa couldn't make it, but this is his new friend Sorun! He said he'd go up and get the ball!" Gary gestured a hand out to Sorun. "Also he's a human."

There was a collective "ooohhh" among the crowd of children that had gathered around, along with a few comments like "so that's what they look like" and "I thought they were taller than that" mixed in. Sorun tried his best to ignore them, particularly the ones about his height, and began stomping towards the tower.

"I'm still taller than all you munchkins," he bitterly thought as he looked up towards windmill. "How'd you guys even kick it up that high?" he asked to the crowd behind him. Just barely, near the top of the windmill, he could see it. A red rubber ball that, at this distance, was practically a dot. It was wedged in between a support strut holding up the top part of the windmill the blades were attached to.

He looked back towards the crowd expecting an answer. What he got was a group of Mobian children looking down to the ground, avoiding his gaze and kicking guiltily at their feet. None of them spoke up at first. Soon, though, Gary was the one that stepped forwards. "It was my fault," he said. "I-"

"Hey, wait, it was me!" interrupted a rabbit boy who ran up besides Gary. "Gary didn't do anything wrong, so if you're gonna be mad at anybody-!"

"No, it was me!" cried out a third. "I-!"

"Alright, stop. I get it." Sorun softly groaned and rubbed at his forehead. *"They must be really tight with each other, throwing themselves under the bus for their friends like this. Pretty sure all my friends on Earth woulda just sold me out for giggles. Eh, to be fair I woulda done the same thing probably if it was funny enough."* He lowered his hand from his head and looked to the crowd of children. "I'm not mad at anybody, but please just promise me that you guys won't kick the ball all the way up there again. I'm pretty sure people around here have enough problems."

The sight of all the children snapping to attention and briskly nodding at Sorun was almost funny enough to make him laugh out loud. It did make him smirk, though, which he quickly hid by turning his head around and up towards the windmill. "Alright. Be back in a sec."

It was hard for him not to hear the various "oohs" and "ahhs" of wonder from the children when his two Bringer Claws manifested onto his back. They were probably even more shocked when he flew up into the sky, stopping right where the ball was within a few

seconds. Hovering in the air next to the ball, he reached out and grabbed it with his hands before beginning to pull.

"G-geez, how hard did they kick this?" With a small grunt of exertion, Sorun finally managed to free the object from its wedged confines after a few hard tugs. He stared at the ball in his hand, and then gave himself a small nod of satisfaction before dropping back down to the ground. He landed with a small grunt, Bringer Claws disappearing off his back as he straightened up his posture while holding the ball up. He had to turn his head to hide his smile with his hair when he heard cheers of happiness from the children, and proceeded to lightly toss the ball at them.

The sudden pressure he felt on his legs rapidly made him startled, however, and he immediately turned his head downwards. Some of the children, to his growing embarrassment, had clung onto his legs in the form of a hug while the rest were beaming wide smiles at him. His anxiety was steadily rising and he greatly desired to shake the children off of him to satiate his nerves, but the knowledge that kicking kids off of him likely wouldn't do well for his image stayed Sorun from committing the act. He prayed none of the adults in the village were watching.

No, some of them were. He confirmed it by glancing towards the village. And they were all smiling, too. Goddammit.

"Well, if I had any masculine pride... it's gone now." Releasing a lamenting sigh, Sorun reached down and patted one of the kids on the top of their head. "Uh, yeah, yeah, you're all welcome. Let me go." Thankfully they did so, letting Sorun breath a sigh of relief at the new freedom. "Alright, kids, there's your ball back. I gotta go now. Have fun." He began briskly walking away. "And don't stay out too long, it's almost night!"

"Bye!"

"Thanks, mister!"

"Goodbye!"

"Come play with us sometime!"

"Tell grandpa I'll be back in a bit!"

Sorun recognized that last voice as Gary's, and gave the cat and the rest of a children a small two-fingered salute behind his back as he continued walking.

"Gah, man, if I don't get some sleep soon I'm gonna collapse right in the street." He decided to head back to Sam's place soon after the adventure with the windmill and the ball. He didn't go back immediately; he wanted to give as much time to visit the doctor as possible for Virgil's sake, and the teen wanted to explore the village a bit more. But he was tired, his feet were tired, and the sun was almost completely set past the horizon. He needed to find a place to rest. That and his worry for Virgil was steadily beginning to grow over time. Either way, he needed to go see Sam again. And if he wasn't home yet he'd just wait in the garage for the cat to return.

That is if Sorun didn't just up and fall asleep while waiting for him if he wasn't there yet.

"I guess... this place is actually pretty nice," Sorun internally admitted as he walked through the increasingly darkening streets. *"It's no Knothole, but the people here are friendly enough. It's peaceful. There's no way I can stay here, but maybe I can spend a few days to chill out and plan out my next move. Whatever that is."* He was still completely blank on what he was doing on the front of "what to do next", but he was confident he'd get there. Eventually. Maybe after a night of sleep his head would be cleared up and he'd get some better thinking in.

He was fairly sure that was what the issue was. Sleep deprivation and exhaustion. He'd be right as rain tomorrow morning, and then he could figure out what to do.

"Oh, hey, he's already there." The door to the house's garage was open, and Sorun could see light from a bulb shining onto the street. *"That was fast. 'Least I don't gotta wait."*

The pale human maneuvered past the garage's opening and entered the small structure. His eyes were immediately drawn towards the center, where he saw Sam crouching down next to his wagon again. Sitting on the wagon's rim was Virgil, who Sorun noticed now had gauze wrapping going all the way around his shoulder and body and a bandage over where he'd lost his wing. The teen allowed himself a small exhale at that. He seemed fine.

Sam must have heard Sorun's breath, as the cat rose his head up to the teen and stood up on his feet. "Oh, Sorun, there you are. Was wonderin' when you'd show up again."

Virgil seemed leagues more excited than Sam was, as he'd jumped up onto the wagon's rim while holding his arms out towards Sorun, calling out, "Chao! Chao!"

"Yeah, missed you too, buddy," Sorun mumbled quietly as he picked the Chao up and then turned him around in his hands. "So the doctor said he was alright?" he questioned as he inspected the bandage and gauze wrapped around Virgil.

The black-furred Mobian nodded at Sorun. "Yep, your little's pal's all good. He'll, uh, never really fly again on account of, y'know, the wing, but the doctor said that the damage should heal up nicely. Chao are real resilient."

"... Sure they are." He didn't really believe that after what he saw in the Chao Garden, but as long as Virgil was fine, that's all he cared about in the matter. "So," Sorun continued as he placed Virgil at his spot on his shoulder, "you all good, or...?"

Sam waved a hand. "Yeah, I'm alright. Don't you worry none about me, you've done plenty. How about Gary and his friends? You get their ball back?"

"Yeah. One of them's got a really good leg, man, 'cause they kicked that thing all the way to the top of the windmill."

A bark of laughter burst out of Sam. "Yep! That'd be Gary, alright. Little sport always did have a leg on him. Parents would be proud."

"Ah." Sorun didn't feel comfortable with the undertones of that statement. He awkwardly looked towards the garage's wall, where the house was attached to it, and clicked his tongue. "So, uh... kid's parents aren't in the house?"

When he turned back to Sam, the cat's features had grown a bit more somber. He practically felt Virgil wither a bit on his shoulder, too, meaning he likely felt something sad radiate out of Sam. It was enough to make Sorun fear he'd done something wrong by bringing this subject up.

"Don't gimme that look, sonny, I ain't mad," Sam assured him. It made Sorun breath out in relief, but he still stared expectantly at the Mobian for him to continue. "It ain't something too uncommon. Boy's family used to live in the big city before Robotnik took it over 'bout ten years ago. Parents were roboticized and everything. I heard that everybody on Mobius mysteriously got turned back to normal, but, well... not everybody made it back, you know? Usually the people that got broken down and destroyed while enslaved to that man before they got turned back." He sighed and leaned back on the wagon. "Dunno if that's what happened, but it's the likeliest story, as much as I hate to admit it."

"No chance that they just couldn't find the village?" Sorun asked in a quiet voice.

Sam shook his head. "No. They wouldn't have known about this place since it came into existence after the fact, but we had folks comin' in here looking for relatives back when all the roboticized Mobians turned back. If they managed to find this place, then they would have, especially for their son. They loved him like nothin' else

in the world, lemme tell ya. So seein' as all them other people found us and they didn't..."

"It doesn't paint a good picture, yeah," Sorun finished with a slight grimace. "There's not a robot problem or anything like that around here, is there? No Eggman robots harassing the place or anything?"

"We wouldn't rightly still be here if that were the case," Sam said in a huff. "No, Eggman hasn't found us, yet. Or if he has he just doesn't seem to think we're important enough to attack, but that don't mean the prospect isn't hangin' over everybody's heads. Though I suppose the same could be said for every Mobian settlement around, even Knothole."

"Man, you got no idea," Sorun thought with a shudder. "So everything's okay here, then?"

Sam's face grew hesitant. "Relatively speaking, aside from... one problem. But you don't need to concern yourself with that." The cat's features turned back to being cheery as he pushed off the wagon he was leaning against. "So what's your plan now, Sorun?"

"Honestly? Still trying to figure that out," the teen admitted. "I was thinking of finding a place to sleep and then... I dunno. I'm sort of just figuring this out as I go."

"Hah! I can relate," Sam said with a laugh. "Well, I got a spare cot in the corner over there. You and your Chao are welcome to take it if you want."

Sorun glanced over to the back end of the garage, where there was indeed a cot set up in the corner. "You sleep in the garage?" Sorun asked with an incredulous glance back at the cat.

Sam shook his head with a shrug. "Nah, I get sleepy workin' on some projects sometimes and just rest here," he explained. "I feel kinda bad just offerin' you that, though, considering everything you've done. If you want-"

"Nah, nah it's fine. Don't worry about it," Sorun assured him. "I'll take the cot, man. Thanks."

"Ah, don't mention it," Sam said with a wave of his hand. "I'm gonna be fixin' dinner for me an' Gary pretty soon here. You're welcome to a place at the table if you feel like it."

"I'd love to, Sam," Sorun said, "but I'll be real with you. I'm so tired I don't think I'd make it to the table." With a soft groan, he went over to and sat down on the cot while leaned his head to the side to let Virgil hop down from him. "I'm just gonna go to sleep and figure out what to do after." He snapped his fingers and pointed towards Sam. "I'll take breakfast later on, though, if you're really offering."

"Hah hah! Sure thing, Sorun." With that, Sam walked over the garage door, leaning a hand out towards the room's light switch. "Well, I'll leave ya be for now. Good night, Sorun."

"Night, Sam." The lights flicked off, and the garage door closed behind Sam as he left Sorun in the garage. The pale human stared through the darkness at the closed door, and then let out a tired yawn as he settled onto the cot and rested his head on the pillow.

Not even ten second later he felt a small weight press itself onto his chest. He cracked an eye open, and through the darkness just barely made out Virgil sitting on his chest as the Chao rubbed a limb over a tired eye. The Chao yawned, and then leaned back until he was flat on his back on Sorun's abdomen.

"Musta been as tired as I was. Not very surprising, I guess. Little guy just lost everything." Sorun turned his eye up to a blackened ceiling, and then settled further into the cot as he slowly closed his eye again. *"Guess it's fine if he sleeps there. Too tired to care.*

"Ahhh, man... fadin' away, here. I should really thank Sam again tomorrow morning. He's a nice guy for a geezer. Everybody here's so kind." He felt his face settle into a slight frown as he felt his mind

begin to drift off. *"I'm sure everyone in Knothole's doin'... alright. I just... I'll figure out what to do in the morning..."*

Too tired for any further thought, Sorun finally joined his Chao in sleep.

The next morning came when Sorun and Virgil were awoken to a peculiar sound. With the kind of setting he'd found himself in, Sorun had expected to wake up to a lot of things. Birds, laughing children nearby, Sam and Gary talking somewhere nearby and waking Sorun up with their voices. The sounds of living in a tightly-knit village in general. The kind of sounds that one would be glad to wake up to because it meant everything was peaceful and okay. A great way to wake up.

He didn't get that. He got terrified screaming instead.

"... It hasn't even been a full day." Groaning in irritation, Sorun slowly sat up in the cot Sam had lent him while rubbing at his groggy eyes. *"Of course I can't catch a fucking break for a full twenty-four hours before something crazy happens again. Why the hell would I?"*

Maybe it was too good to be true after all. Knothole was one thing- it had a full entourage of guardsmen and the Freedom Fighters living in it for defense. This was just some random village out in the sticks. But there were a lot of those around, and it seemed peaceful enough here that Sorun had assumed that, after everything that happened, he'd get at least one single goddamned day of peace and quiet before having to go back out into the fray. Everybody certainly acted like that was the case.

Nope. Couldn't have that, because this world always found some new crazy thing to throw at him.

"Sonofa- what is it, huh? Robots? Is it robots? Did the fucking windmill turn into a Transformer or something and I gotta go put it

down?" He wouldn't even be surprised at this point. It'd be tame compared to some of the other stuff he'd seen so far.

Down to his side, he saw Virgil standing on the ground. He was way more awake than Sorun was, and looked frightened and worried as he looked towards the garage door towards where all the sounds were coming from outside.

"Don't worry, Virgil, it's gonna be alright," Sorun mumbled to the Chao as he scooped him up and placed him on his shoulder. "It's not gonna alright for whoever decided to start my morning off like this, but everything's gonna be fine. Don't worry."

With an irritable groan, Sorun shot up to his feet and stomped his way over to the garage's entrance. He reached down and practically wrenched the door open towards the ceiling as he stepped out into the street, widened and angry eyes sweeping left and right to try and identify the disturbance.

The screaming noises were a lot more apparent now that he was in the open, and the sight of panicked townsfolk running around with panicked expressions on their faces confirmed to Sorun that, yes, something was seriously wrong here. He heard something else that was much more peculiar, though- engines. Loud engines, like the kind Sorun had heard on dune buggies and bikes back on Earth. When he looked towards the source of the noise, in the distance past a lot of houses, he saw something that might have been the source: a buggy. A regular, four-wheeled dune buggy that was definitely being driven by Mobians, though from this distance he couldn't make them out. What was strange was that they were circling some of the townsfolk he recognized from last night.

"... Okay, wait, what's actually going on?" It wasn't robots, then. It was a bunch of... drivers disturbing the peace? Other Mobians? He didn't know; he only saw the one vehicle. *"This... doesn't seem like an Eggman attack. I think? I don't- I need some answers."*

He saw a small, dark form dart past him, and Sorun immediately recognized it as Gary. Sorun, eager to end his confusion, bolted forwards and grabbed onto the child's arm to slow him down. He yelped out in surprise at first and whipped his head towards Sorun with panicked eyes, though he calmed down just slightly when he saw it was just the human holding him.

"Gary, what's going on?" Sorun asked him. More panicked Mobians were running past, some holding or guiding children and going one way while others were going another way. "Everybody's going crazy, what happened?"

"O-oh, Sorun." The Mobian child blinked up at him, and then worriedly turned his head towards the edge of the village. "They-they're back. The bandits."

"Bandits? There's bandits now? Seriously?" Shaking his head in surprise, Sorun knelt down to Gary's eye level. "Okay, Gary? Slow down and explain."

"I-I-I don't know," Gary stammered, pulling his arm out from Sorun's grasp. "They come here once already and I'm supposed to go to the shelter and grandpa and a bunch of the older adults went to go see them and-"

"Alright, that's enough." The child was starting to hyperventilate at this point, and Sorun didn't want a kid passing out on him on top of everything else. "A bunch of people went to go see bandits. And there's bandits apparently," he muttered to himself as he looked back up towards the edge of the village. "Ugh, man... okay, Gary." He turned back to the child. "You say there's a shelter?"

"Mm-hm." Gary nodded his head, green eyes wide and glossy and his body shaking. "W-we're supposed to go there if-"

"Great, go there with everybody else." Sorun stood up to his feet and patted Gary on the back. "Go, go now."

"Huh? But what about y-?" Gary snapped his mouth shut when Sorun cast a glare down at him. "I-I'll go," he squeaked, turning around and running in the direction a majority of the other Mobians were going in.

Sorun watched the child run off for a couple of seconds, and then began walking towards the end of the village he'd seen that buggy. *"So there's bandits now. Fan-flipping-tastic. Sam and Gary kept mentioning something, but goddamn. Bandits?"* He supposed it wasn't completely out of the norm. He recalled that one city that Sally and Knuckles had mentioned back when he'd gone over that map, Sandblast. They'd alluded to the place being filled with Mobians that didn't have the best of intentions. Mobians may have been nice, but Sorun wasn't nearly naive enough to believe that it was a universal rule despite all the Mobians he encountered. The prospect of them having fought in wars all but snuffed that idea out.

But bandits? Was the war with Eggman really making people this desperate? It was possible, but Sorun didn't know. He didn't even know this was a problem until a few minutes ago. He didn't know that thing Sam mentioned but refused to elaborate on was this. Bandits harassing the town for... something. Something he didn't know about, and wasn't too inclined to find out. Something he'd rather just ignore and go away from just so he didn't have to get caught in the crossfire.

And yet his feet were carrying him forwards.

"Agh, this is stupid. What am I... I'm just gonna look," Sorun assured himself as he continued pressing forwards towards the village's edge. *"Maybe it's not as bad as it looks. I'll just take a quick peak and if it looks too bad I'll get out."*

Because dealing with bandits? Not in his purview. He ran away from the Freedom Fighters *specifically* to avoid danger such as this. And everybody seemed happy enough last night despite the fact this was apparently an ongoing problem. He'd just... go take a look. Make

sure everything wasn't out of hand, and then he'd quietly make his exit.

Soon enough, he made it to the village'd edge, and hid behind a nearby house while peeking his head around a corner. At his end was a gathering of some of the townsfolk, all standing back with worried and grim looks on their faces as they looked ahead.

And in front of them, past the village's perimeter with light forest right behind them, were who he assumed were the bandits. Around twenty of them in total, with various motorcycles and buggies parked behind them. From here he could see that they were all Mobians, though he noted they all seemed to be the same species. What that species was he couldn't pin down exactly, but they seemed canine-ish from the wild hair and doglike ears and teeth they had, though they seemed like oddly sharp features for dogs or wolves. All had similarly colored fur, too, in various blacks and grays, and were holding different kinds of swords and knives as they all stared at and sneered at the crowd of townsfolk in front of them.

"Alright, it's a bunch of... canine Mobians. All the weapons they're holding is makin' me nervous, but nobody seems hurt yet. So far it's not looking catastrophic." His eyes trailed to the center of the bandit group, near the front, and he felt his body freeze up. *"Oh, what the hell is he doing there!?"*

If there was a sight Sorun really did not want to see, it was Sam right in front of the bandit group. He was on his knees and facing the crowd of villagers with his head down, but thankfully, he looked unharmed. It didn't change the fact that the position he was in did *not* look very good from his point of view.

"Oh man, that's... maybe it's nothing bad. And even if it is, I... should I just go right now?" he wondered to himself, grimacing slightly. *"All the bandits seem to be right there and distracted by the villagers. None of them have guns. I could just fly away right now and not look back. That's what I* should *be doing right now. This doesn't have anything to do with me."*

He wanted to fly away. Really, he did. But the sight of the faces the villagers had and seeing Sam on his knees over there was rooting Sorun to the spot for whatever reason, and he couldn't help but continue to observe. He flinched, however, when he heard one of the buggy's doors slam shut.

Focusing towards the source of the noise, he saw another one of the Mobian bandits strut towards the front of the group. The rest of the bandits, who had been jeering at the crowd, quieted down immediately and almost cowered back away from the new one. And when Sorun got a good look at him he had to blink multiple times just to make sure he was seeing right.

Black boots and black gloves only for clothing. Mobian standard. Body covered in black fur, with the exception of a long, black tail behind him with a whitened, wild tip, three white lines on either side of his chest where his ribs were, white muzzle, and a head full of wavy, tangled white hair flowing behind his head. He was heterochromatic, too: his right eye was blue and the left one yellow. And his overall disposition and the way he was glaring at the crowd of villagers with utter contempt made Sorun cringe back along with the Mobian's appearance.

"I didn't think being goth was a genetic predisposition in this world, but it looks like I was wrong. The hell is up with this guy?" His eyes narrowed at the blue-handled, curved sword the strange-looking Mobian was casually swinging in his right hand. A curved sword with a completely red blade that looked to be made of crystal. *"Jesus, even his sword is edgy as hell."*

"It was a simple arrangement," the Mobian spoke, the sound of his voice making Sorun's ears perk up. "It was my assumption that creating such a simple arrangement would be sufficient for you imbeciles' comprehension, but it appears that I was mistaken." The morning sunlight glinted off the red blade as he spun it around in his hand. "How very unfortunate for you."

"Holy hell, he looks ridiculous but his voice is smooth. How does that even work?" It was a tone lower than normal, but it came out completely clear and articulate. An authoritative tone undercut by a dulcet edge. *"But what's he doing with Sam over there?"*

"It is completely mystifying, too," the Mobian continued, "as when me and my associates first came across this hovel you showed an acute sense of recognizing your position in relation to us. You'd all kowtowed under us without so much as a single spark of resistance, and I truly thought after seeing such subservient behavior that you all knew better. And yet... here we are, with obligations unfulfilled despite my sincerest efforts of making the process as smooth and succinct as physically possible. I'm beginning to think your initial reaction towards us was nothing more than the instinctual throes of vacuous villagers eking out a meager existence, and it seems that, over a very shot amount of time, you've all forgotten your place." He looked down towards Sam, baring his teeth while tightening the grip on his sword. "That was a mistake."

It was honestly amazing how every single sentence spoken by that Mobian was making Sorun ill, but he did his best to ignore the feeling as he looked towards Sam. *"This isn't looking good. He wouldn't... he's gonna hurt Sam,"* he realized. *"I should help, shouldn't I? But I don't... I'd probably have to fight them, then."* He grit his teeth, and the looked back towards the sky. *"I don't want to get involved. I just wanna leave, but... but Sam and these people."* He looked back towards the Mobians. *"Goddammit, I don't wanna see him get hurt."*

He felt that same urge beginning to rise in him. The same urge he'd felt when Shadow had held that Chaos Emerald in his hand. That he felt one his first few days on Mobius. The desire to flee away from the violence. But he couldn't ignore the fact that he felt genuinely worried over Sam's safety, either, especially after everything he'd done for Sorun. It was bad enough that the teen felt conflicted on what to do, though he did feel his feet begin to turn away in preparation for bolting away from the crowd.

But then that red sword in the Mobian bandit's hand was risen in the air, right above Sam's head. And in that moment, any thoughts of running away were completely dissolved from Sorun's mind as he sprung forwards, Bringer Claws flashing into existence as they flew him forwards.

The red sword was swung down. It never reached Sam's neck even though it was aimed at it. A blue, spectral sword had appeared right in its path, its blade held above Sam's neck and stopping the red sword in its place. The Mobian holding the sword looking down at the blue sword struggling against him with a perplexed expression, though he quickly jumped back when a spectral claw reached forwards, grabbed Sam, and pulled him back.

"Damn it all..." As the old cat Mobian was set aside next to Sorun, he couldn't help but mentally curse at himself. *"This wasn't part of the plan. I just... Should've left. Why did this have to happen now?"*

Despite the vast amount of frustration and self-anger filling Sorun, he managed to reach up and gently pluck Virgil off of his shoulder before nearly thrusting it into a confused Sam's grasp. "Take him. Go back with the others. Don't interfere," he said in a low voice.

"Wha...?" Wide-eyed, Sam looked down at the Chao in his hand, who looked just as confused if not worried as him, and then back to Sorun. "Wait, Sorun, you can't-!"

"You either step back or I throw you back." The glare Sorun had sent at the cat caused him to flinch, and he hesitantly nodded before backing up towards the crowd of villagers, who also moved back to give space. Virgil was reaching a limb out towards Sorun while calling out "chao! Chao!", but Sam held him back.

Sighing, Sorun turned his head down. He felt angry at himself for what he just did, but it paled in comparison to the absolute rage he was feeling towards the Mobians behind him. The one with the red sword in particular was drawing a majority of his ire, but he felt anger at all of them. For almost cutting down Sam like that, who Sorun

liked. Possibly robbing Gary of his only family left. For harassing this nice little village. For making him feel these feelings and making him get involved.

He wasn't supposed to be getting involved in these things anymore, dammit. He ran away just to save his life, not put it in danger again. But even though he tried, he didn't want to ignore this.

Breathing out again, Sorun rose his head. *"Oh fuckin' boy, here we go,"* he angrily thought as he slowly turned towards the bandit Mobians, Bringer Claws tightly squeezing his shoulders. *"Well, too late to back down now."*

Time to save the villagers from the bandits, then. He could berate himself for being an idiot and figure out why he'd done and made such a stupid choice later.

The villagers had gone far enough back that they'd taken cover behind some of the houses. The bandits in front of him were all staring wide-eyed at Sorun, particularly at the Bringer Claws, though some were almost eagerly running their claw-tipped fingers over their blades. The one with the red sword and blue and yellow eyes looked oddly calm, his expression going neutral as he and Sorun locked eyes.

"And here I thought all Mobians were nice. So much for that fantasy, huh?" Sorun was the first to speak, gesturing towards the group of armed Mobians with a single hand and a deep frown on his face. "Isn't it a bit stereotypical for a pack of wolves to prey on a helpless village like this?"

Some of the Mobian bandits snarled at him, and the one with the red sword seemed particularly affronted. "We are *jackals* ," he hissed out, composure briefly wavering.

"Swing and a miss, what are you gonna do?" Sorun said with a shrug, not a care in his voice. "Honestly I'm not seeing it, but if you're jackals, you're jackals."

The odd-eyed jackal who Sorun assumed to be the leader regarded Sorun with narrowed eyes, and then scoffed as he rested the sword's blunt side on his shoulder. "I didn't expect to encounter a human anywhere in the continent," he said. "I'll admit that I've never even encountered a member of your kind before. I've heard the stories, though. We all have." The jackal leader began slowly pacing from left to right. "A weak, cowardice race who resorted to underhanded tactics and ranged weapons to kill from afar, and still lost in the Great War. A completely pathetic species, really. Nothing but weaklings in the face of Mobians."

The jab caused a bit of irritation to flow through the teen. "Yeah, you're not wrong. Our physical abilities are pretty pathetic compared to a Mobian's. Weak, though? I don't think so," Sorun said, voice as even as he could make it. "But pardon my mistake from earlier. What's a bunch of *jackals* doin' terrorizing a village and putting old folk to the sword?"

The jackal's eyes had widened just the slightest amount, as if he hadn't expected such a response. He'd tilted his head to the side in an interested manner, and then shifted his gaze to the villagers in the back. "The people who live here have a knack for fashioning working pieces of technology from scavenged junk for a living," he explained. "Water purifiers, transistors, conductors, and so on. Technological pieces such as those are a scarcity in these times due to the war with Dr. Eggman, and there are many who would be willing to pay a great price for such commodities." He gestured to the jackals at his sides. "We're simply a traveling pack of mercenaries attempting to forge a living in these trying times, human. But the villagers here decided they had the nerve to try and deny us our right to take what's ours."

Sorun gave the jackal a flat, unimpressed look. "You know there's a whole junkyard down the way full of that shit, right?" he asked as he stuck his thumb out behind him. "You seriously gotta raid a village instead of scavenging it yourself?"

If the harsh language bothered the jackal at all, he didn't show it. One of his eyelids did twitch, however. "Such work is completely beneath us," he claimed. "It's not as if this village would be completely helpless. They can simply create more of whatever we take from them. Such is their place."

"Their 'place', huh?" Sorun repeated. "So, what, you just roll into town with your boys and a buncha swords and you suddenly own the place?"

The jackal shook his head. "I wouldn't go that far," he denied. "It's simply the order of things." He pointed the tip of his sword past Sorun and at the townsfolk behind him. "The weak will always be inferior to the strong. That's simply the way of the world. Those who cannot resist the current of the strong have no choice but to submit or be crushed."

A weary breath left the teen. "Oh, brother, you're one of these guys," Sorun groaned as he pinched at the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, yeah, I've heard the spiel a million times before. Weak live to be crushed, strong can do whatever they want, blah blah blah, the fuck is your point?" He gestured back to the townsfolk. "You showed up with a bunch of guys with swords and demanded shit from them. Of course they went along with your demands at first. That's not weakness. That's trying to not get their loved ones stabbed to death by you idiots. The hell do you expect them to do?"

"To fight back, perhaps?" the jackal suggested. "Even if half their population is children and feeble oldfolk, they had more than enough to outnumber us and ample time to prepare. I went as far as to prepare for resistance, and with their numbers and technical know-how I half-expected I'd need to cut my losses and call this trashpit a loss. But what did they do instead?" He shook his head, glancing at the townsfolk with almost disgust lacing his features. "They denied us when we came to collect, but nothing else. No resistance. Nothing. They simply told us 'no' and hoped we would move on. Such weakness... it's despicable," he spat.

Sorun glanced back at the Mobians, and then back to the jackals and their leader. "They're Mobians," he said. "Unlike you guys, I don't think they like fighting. But I wouldn't really know; I'm kinda new here. But I've been around Mobians long enough that I can see that they really don't like violence. You're really gonna fault them for trying to take the peaceful, nonviolent route with you? If anything you should be grateful they tried just telling you off."

The jackal's response was to scoff. "You cannot possibly be that blind. In this world ravaged by the likes of Dr. Eggman, such weakness is fatal. They're fated for death, those weaklings, one way or another. We are simply trying to exploit that weakness to survive. The right to survive where others would perish is a right solely reserved for the strong. If scavenging off the efforts of the doomed weak is what it takes for us to remain strong, then so be it."

Sorun sighed, and hung his shoulders. "You know what you are?" he asked as he pointed at the jackal leader. "You're that one kid in the back of the class that learned one single philosophy lesson and suddenly thinks they're on the same level as somebody like Nietzsche because their smooth-ass brain managed to absorb that one nugget of knowledge. You're not Nietzsche. You can use as many pretty words as ya like, but you're nothin' but a bunch of opportunistic douchebags. Nothin' more, nothin' less."

The odd-eyed jackal quirked an eye ridge in confusion, perhaps at the mention of Nietzsche's name, but he quickly brushed it off. "And you are little more than a lowly human uselessly preaching morality on a subject you yourself believes in." The point of the sword shifted to Sorun. "You're little more than a fool begging for death by trying to defend those weaklings. Those such as you that would willingly jump into the jaws of death are worse than weak. I absolutely despise wastes of skin like you that would throw their pitiful lives away for nothing."

He lowered his sword back to his side after that. A few seconds passed as a gust of wind blew a handful of leaves between the two, after which they both began to laugh. Low, humorless laughs full of

nothing but contempt for one another, their eyes still locked onto each other despite their shaking shoulders. The laughter ended as quickly as it began, though, with Sorun speaking first.

"Yeah, you're absolute scum," he decided. "I'm Sorun, by the way."

A rueful chuckle left the jackal. "You are certainly more than what I expected out of my first meeting with a human. I am Infinite."

Sorun made a "tsk" noise. "God, even your name is the most pretentious thing in the world," he muttered.

One of the ears on top of Infinite's head flicked, and he gave the human an irritated glare. "And just what is that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"It means every single word you say makes me wanna punch your teeth in, and you know what, it just might come to that. But I guess I wouldn't really be doing my point justice if I didn't at least try the diplomatic route." He also really didn't want to fight, despite how he felt about the jackals. He doubted his words would be able to get to them, though, but he would at least try resolving this peacefully. If only because it meant there was a minute chance he didn't have to fight. "Alright, Infinite, here's what's gonna happen. You're gonna leave. You're gonna take your little jackal posse there, and you're never gonna come back to Scrap City ever again."

"And if I don't?" Infinite challenged.

"Then I'm gonna break all your arms and legs."

A beat passed between Sorun and the jackals. Infinite gave the human a critical glare, and then looked to the side at two of his comrades. "Take him," he ordered.

There was absolutely no hesitation in the jackals, and with swords bared they ran straight at Sorun with their eyes completely locked onto his body. The human, for his part, gave them a completely

blank stare, and then proceeded to stand absolutely still as his two Bringer Claws shot forwards.

The first Bringer Claw had curled into a fist and punched the first jackal right in the face. The force was sufficient enough that the jackal was sent flying all the way back to his group before slamming into a buggy's door and falling down unconscious. The second jackal watched the display with a gaping mouth, and then yelped out in surprise when his leg was grabbed by the second Bringer Claw. He was lifted up into the air, slammed down into the ground, lifted up, slammed a second time, and then his knocked-out body was tossed at Infinite's feet.

The heterochromatic jackal watched the other jackal's form roll to his feet, and then glanced over at the other jackal that had been slammed into the buggy. His face still impassive, if not slightly irritated, he turned back towards Sorun as the Bringer Claws folded back onto his shoulders. "So. You are strong, then," he said. "Why ever are you endeavoring to defend these village simpletons with those abilities of yours?"

"You see, that's the problem with the 'strong always trample over the weak' philosophy. You morons never seem to realize that nice people, or as I like to call them, people with common fucking sense, can be strong, too, and usually don't appreciate people like you pushing the 'weaklings' around. Man, too bad common sense is such a precious commodity these days," Sorun answered with a shake of his head.

Infinite's face scrunched in dismissal at the claim. "I fail to see the logic in such a thing."

"Oh my g- fine, you want some cold, hard pragmatism? You want facts? I'll give you some fucking facts," Sorun ground out in frustration. "I know this may be a foreign concept to someone like you, but wouldn't you know it, if you're nice to people they're nice back. You may start to like each other, and you keep helping each other. You spread this to more people. You know what you get with

that formula? A fucking community working together to survive!" Sorun screamed out as he gestured to the village behind him. "I mean, Jesus, the Kingdom of Acorn was founded on the idea of a whole bunch of different Mobian species coming together to form one gigantic community through, egh, can't believe I'm saying this, friendship and love and all that other surprisingly effective stuff. And you know what? It works! Because somehow they all managed to beat the Overlanders in the Great War! I don't know how, they fucking shouldn't have because *guns* , but they did! The Mobians figured out the system, Infinite! They cracked the code! Turns out love for your fellow man, a willingness to cooperate with people, and a desire to help and defend others is all you need to make it in life!" He took in a deep breath, and then exhaled as his shoulders relaxed. "Look, Infinite. Going it alone? Sure, some can do it. Some have the raw ability or the opportunity. The people that say everybody's born equal? They're liars trying to make themselves feel better. Some people are just born better than others. But everybody, even them, even the people born into royalty or born with super speed powers, need help sometimes. That's not weakness. That's trusting in the strength of others so that they can rely on your strength. What you're doing? You're just isolating yourself off from others and denying forming bonds with people just to try and keep yourselves alive in this world. It's not a sustainable economy. It's just not."

Throughout the entire speech, Infinite had only stared wide-eyed at Sorun, remaining silent as to let the human speak. When he finished, though, the jackal's features hardened as he shook his head. "What rubbish," he said. "You truly believe that tripe?"

Letting out a breathy chuckle, Sorun shrugged his shoulders. "To be fair, I'm ripping most of this off of 'Death Stranding'. Thing was a slog to get through, but the messages are relevant." He held a finger up, ignoring Infinite's confused look. "But I meant what I said about humans," he said. "Physically, yeah, we're weak. Everything else, though? Humans can accomplish anything they put their minds to. It's that same infinite willpower that made the modern age out of sticks and rocks. It's that same ability to go as low as possible if it

means winning that let them create nukes that could level whole cities. It's the same infinite compassion needed to build communities and the same infinite cruelty tempered by mercy that wins wars. Humans are amazing, Infinite, and Overlanders are just humans evolved by the gene bombs. So if the Mobians managed to beat back the infinite willpower of humanity in the Great War?" He shook his head in a breathless chuckle. "There's gotta be *some* truth to that friendship trash."

He figured after all that, after that whole rousing speech that was one word away from making Sorun throw up for how cheesy it was, he'd get some positive reaction out of the jackal. But the reaction that Infinite gave as a response to Sorun was not one the human had expected at all. The jackal slowly closed his eyes as a smile formed, and he held two fingers up to Sorun.

"You're wrong on two points," he said, "and as it happens, they all revolve around the same man." He opened his eyes and looked up to Sorun. "You must have skipped a few history lessons, human. You're right about one thing: the Overlanders were ruthless in their campaign during the Great War. The Mobians were losing ground rapidly and were set to lose the war at a moment's notice. Do you know what changed?"

Infinite's words sparked some thought in his mind, and as he thought on them it hit him. Like a bolt of lightning going through his head, he realized he'd forgotten one crucial piece of information, and as a result his shoulders sagged. An important fact Sonic himself had told Sorun long ago. "Right," he mumbled. "Eggman was the Mobian war chief back then. I forgot about that part."

"I believe back then he was referred to as Julian Kintobor," Infinite supplied. "Were it not for his tactical advice, the Kingdom of Acorn would have fallen in the Great War. The Mobians only won because they followed his tactics. Tactics that were even more underhanded than the Overlanders'. How can you say that strength through Mobian bonds of friendship are enough to overcome 'humanity's infinite willpower', as you call it, if they needed the assistance of the

absolute worst Overlander this planet has ever produced?" He sniffed harshly and looked to the side, towards the sky. "And secondly," he added, "if the strength of those bonds were truly enough, then the world wouldn't be at the cusp of being completely lost and conquered Dr. Eggman. Mobians such as us wouldn't be fighting and raiding just to survive if the Freedom Fighters were enough to beat him." He turned back to Sorun, his face in a harsh sneer. "The bonds of friendship are a fleeting thing against true strength, Sorun. The Freedom Fighters failing to defeat Eggman only prove it. It's not enough."

"Well, technically speaking they did beat him. A worse Eggman just came and took his place."

"I hardly think that is a valid point considering the current state of the world."

"Yeah..." Sorun's form had become much more relaxed. "You know, you sound pretty admiring of humans and Overlanders for a guy claiming that they're so weak."

Infinite scoffed. "Don't mistake respect for acknowledgement of strength. Without all their tricks, they'll never be stronger than Mobians. The same can be said for Eggman. He's nothing but an Overlander who used clever tricks and machines to cheat his way to victory."

"Well, yeah," Sorun admitted. "The Freedom Fighters still beat Eggman once, though. The first one, at least. That's proof enough for me it works." He paused, and then sighed. "You're not wrong, though. This current Eggman they're all dealing with? I just don't think they can beat him. Not with how everything is. It's just like you said, Infinite: if there's one thing humans excel at above everything else, it's their ability to cheat their way to victory. And this Eggman cheated like crazy with those seven Chaos Emeralds. The guy's insane enough not to steamroll everybody all at once just for the sport of it, but he's not at all afraid of playing dirty." He looked down at his right hand. "Friendship and trusting in others. It's important, but

against him, I just don't think it's enough. So I don't know. Maybe if they had somebody on their side that could cheat just as hard as Eggman could by getting bullshit powers out of Chaos Emeralds they could pull a win out." A sad, conflicted smile formed on his face as the hand dropped. "Maybe if they had a friend just as bad as Eggman, they'd finally have a shot at winning."

Infinite tilted his head to the side, confusion lacing his features. "What are you getting at...?"

The smile dropped off of Sorun's face, set back into a neutral expression. "Eh, don't worry about it. Just thinking aloud over here. All this mushy talk about friends... I blame Mobians. They're starting to rub off on me I think. But you know, after living life among Mobians for a bit... I dunno. I think I like their method. Having friends like that felt... nice."

"Hmf." Infinite huffed, but a small smile soon overtook his features. "I don't get you, but you're an interesting human regardless, Sorun," he said. "A shame you'll die here. Nobody else has ever engaged me as thoroughly as you. It's... refreshing."

The teen felt his shoulders slump at that claim. He'd hoped after all that Infinite would at least think about reconsidering what he was doing here. But based on his wording, he seemed set on finishing what he started with the village. And he didn't mind mowing through Sorun to do it, it seemed.

Well, that was fine. He still felt like breaking his legs for almost killing Sam.

"I'm flattered. Really," Sorun sarcastically remarked. "None of this changes the fact you almost cut Sam's head off."

"Indeed it doesn't." Some of jackals at Infinite's sides rose up with their swords, but in a move that surprised both them and Sorun, he waved his hand down. "It's obvious your ability far outshines my

compatriots here," he said as he brandished his red sword. "So why don't we fight? You and me. With just that sword of yours."

"... Just swords, huh?" In response, a single Summoned Sword manifested in Sorun's right hand. "Well, we could have a sick sword fight, Infinite. For sure we could. I could also just end it all right now and bust you up with the Bringer Claws, which sounds way easier to me."

Phenomenally easier, really. That wasn't even factoring in Sorun being vastly weaker than a Mobian like Infinite and having absolutely skill absolutely swinging a sword though. Punching and grabbing with the arms, though? He had that down pat. And he felt very confident in being able to beat the jackal into submission with those alone, but then he started chuckling.

"Alright, then how about this?" Infinite offered. "We fight, the both of us, with just swords. If you win then we'll leave, just like that. When I win, though, hmm..." He brought his red sword up and ran a finger along the edge. "Well, as thanks for giving me such thought-provoking entertainment, I'll at least make your death quick and painless."

Sorun sucked in air between his teeth. "Gee, I dunno. I wanna trust that smooth-as-butter voice of yours, but wouldn't you know it I just don't." He held his Summoned Sword up to peer through the barely-translucent, blue blade. "Then again, by the time I'm done with you you're never gonna wanna come back here anyways." He lowered the sword, and the blue wings hanging off of Sorun's shoulders disappeared. "Fine, whatever. Get over here so I can cripple you."

Were Sorun an outside observer, he would have called himself stupid for agreeing to do this. But, as it happened, he had a plan. It was in no way a clean or very "good" plan in that he doubted almost nobody in the Freedom Fighters would ever agree with the plan, but they weren't here and he wasn't a Freedom Fighter at the moment. But what the plan lacked for being clean it made up for being practical and easy.

The plan was he was going to cheat by using a bunch of Summoned Swords and then threaten Infinite's life once Sorun won. It wasn't very pretty at all, but it'd get results. And he doubted Infinite or his band of jackals would ever dare to come back here again seeing as he wasn't planning on letting Infinite leave in a walking state.

By now, Infinite had began slowly stepping towards Sorun, red, curved sword held to his far side as his eyes bored straight into Sorun's. The pale teen just stood there, Summoned Sword lazily held in his hand as he calmly waited for Infinite to make a move. It was when the human blinked that the jackal silently pushed forwards, raising his sword up without a sound in an effort to bring it down on Sorun.

He scoffed. *"What a chump."*

A blue flash of light stopped the red sword in its path right before it impacted Sorun. Infinite , gripping the sword tightly with one hand, had widened his eyes when he saw the dozen Summoned Swords hovering in front of Sorun and blocking the red sword with their own blades.

"You never said anything about how many swords I could use," Sorun said, "or how I could use them."

The red sword pressed against the blue ones began to slightly vibrate as Infinite struggled against them. "You cheating coward...!"

"Yeah, guess what, cowards win."

The blue swords locked against Infinite's sword pushed outwards. The jackal was sent backwards, feet skidding against the ground before he came to a full stop. "Tch!" He bent his legs slightly and jumped. Jumped high, Sorun noted, as the jackal's body had sprung all the way up to the top of the nearest tree, and then jumped right off that one to another treetop.

"Wow. Guy can jump," Sorun thought, eyes struggling to keep up with Infinite's form as he jumped from tree to tree while getting closer to Sorun. *"Not gonna help you, though."*

Right in Infinite's jump path spawned four Summoned Swords, their blades crossed into a shield. The jackal slammed right into them, and let out a soft grunt as he fell onto the ground. No sooner had he made contact with the ground did four more swords spawn near him, all four spinning in tandem with their tips converged at one point as they corkscrewed over to his body. Infinite, surprisingly, had managed to raise his red blade up just in time for its flat side to catch the Stinger Swords. Even more surprisingly managed to hold his ground against the four swords drilling into his own, sparks and red fragments of sword flying outwards.

Shatter!

Unfortunately for the jackal, the onslaught of the four blades proved to be too much, and the four swords managed to break right through his red sword. He gasped in shock as the blue hilt and red shards flew out of his hand, and then quickly backflipped backwards when the four swords swung upwards at him. The blades of the blue swords just barely missed grazing the jackal's chin mid-backflip, and he landed back into a crouch after having successfully dodged the blades.

He looked up just in time for a fifth Summoned Sword fired from Sorun's side to fly by and slash him across the face.

A spray of red flowed out from Infinite's face as he fell onto his back. Slowly, he pushed himself up into a sitting position, panting heavily as he held his wound with his hand. He removed his hand to look down on the blood that had leaked onto his glove, revealing a large, diagonal cut running right through his right eye. He opened it right after, the newly-made cut having untouched the blue eye underneath, though he still growled softly at the wound as he looked up to Sorun. He only became further enraged when he saw the human's passive expression.

"You lost your sword, dude," Sorun said, his hands tucked into his pocket as he glared down at Infinite. "Give it up, Infinite. You can't beat me. Not in a million years."

"Human..." Giving Sorun an indignant glare, Infinite slowly stood up to his feet. "I'm not conceding to somebody like you...!"

Sorun's response was to roll his eyes. "Pfft. Get real." His Bringer Claws manifested and quickly reached out towards Infinite.

To his credit, the jackal did try to dodge them, but the arms proved to be just too quick for him. The left claw reached his face first, wrapping its talons around his head and slamming him into the ground. The right claw grabbed onto his left arm.

"I'll make it real clear," Sorun began, blue eyes glaring furiously at the struggling jackal's body as he thrashed against the arms holding him down. "You're done. You lost. So here's what you're gonna do."

The Bringer Claw holding Infinite's arm squeezed down hard enough that an audible *crack!* was heard as the arm's humerus shattered. Infinite had done his best to stifle the resulting grunt of pain, though he still thrashed more violently as the limb was broken.

"You're gonna take yourself and your gang of losers out of here." The two spectral claws released the jackal, only to move lower and grab onto his legs. They lifted Infinite up into the air and slammed him down onto the ground hard enough so that when they released their grip, his legs were bent at odd angles. "You're never going to come back to this village again."

Infinite continued to softly growl in rage and pain as he attempted to lift himself up with his remaining, unbroken limb. Sorun's left Bringer Claw quickly slammed down onto his right arm, however, wrapping it in a tight grip and pulling upwards to lift the jackal into the air. The Bringer Claw then moved closer to Sorun, and Infinite, too exhausted and wounded to move, had no choice but to limply hang by the spectral arm holding him up.

The Bringer Claw eventually had moved Infinite right in front of Sorun's passive yet angry face. Infinite's eyes were practically searing into the human's, blood from the gash on his right eyelid seeping into an eye that was seething in rage at the sight of the human that had so thoroughly beaten and humiliated him in front of the pack of jackals fearfully watching from the back. Uncaring for the deathly stare being sent his way, Sorun willed the Bringer Claw to lightly shake Infinite before he spoke again.

"Listen, Infinite, here's the thing. I don't really wanna kill you and the rest of the jackals in front of those villagers. They don't need to see that," Sorun said, voice soft and tinged in anger. "Beyond that, though, you actually bothered to sit through that little debate of ours, so I legitimately think there's a bit of hope for you. I truly want to believe you're just an unfortunate byproduct of the messed up world created in the war against Eggman, and I really hope that some of what I said will get through to you in time so you can change for the better. So I'm letting you go. But if I hear you came back here and pulled this shit again after all this? If you go out of your way just to prove me wrong?" He rose his right hand out of his pocket and snapped his finger. A Summoned Sword appeared over Infinite's head, pointing down at him. The jackals in the back all yelped when more Summoned Swords appeared over them, each and every single one aimed at a jackal. Sorun had turned Infinite's head just enough so that he could see all the swords aimed at his squadron. "I'll kill you all myself. Don't waste your second chance, Infinite. Now take your weak ass and get out of my sight."

Once he was done talking, the Bringer Claw holding Infinite up squeezed down and broke his remaining humerus. The cry of pain elicited from the jackal was a bit more audible than the others, though Sorun ignored it as best as he could as he tossed the Mobian's broken body at the pack of jackals staring wide-eyed at him. Infinite's body rolled to a halt, and as soon as all the Summoned Swords above them shattered, they moved. Infinite's body, as well as the bodies of the other two jackals Sorun had knocked out, were quickly loaded up into the bandits' buggies as they mounted them

and the motorcycles. Their engines revved up, just barely drowning out the fearful yelping of the jackals, and soon enough they were all peeling out and driving away at max speed away from the village.

"Well... that's that. I really hope he takes that warning to heart. Don't think I could ever find those guys again if I tried." He hadn't been bluffing, of course, but at the same time he had his own problems to worry about. Defending a village past the point of him coincidentally being there at the time was low on his list of priorities, but he was partly confident that he'd managed to scare them away from Scrap City for good. The villagers were saved.

The same villagers he had to address now that the threat had passed. One in particular, at least.

With a sigh, Sorun turned around. The small amount of villagers that had been hiding behind the houses far in the back were slowly poking their bodies out from their hiding spots as the jackals drove further and further away. Some were giving the retreating jackals looks of disbelief, though most eyes were on Sorun. Widened, grateful yet unreadable expressions Sorun couldn't place that immediately made him nervous.

"Gah, I hope they didn't hear me talking with Infinite. I said some explicit and embarrassing shit back there," Sorun thought to himself as his Bringer Claws lifted up into the air, only to bring him back down in front of the crowd of startled villagers. He only needed a quick glance to find who he was looking for.

Sam was amongst the villagers quietly staring at Sorun, and the cat Mobian's own eyes were equally as wide as he looked at the teen. The Chao he held in his hands seemed just as baffled as the rest of them, something Sorun had taken quick note of before addressing the Mobian holding him.

"Hey, Sam," Sorun greeted in a tired voice. "You okay? Nothing hurt?"

"Er... er, yeah. I'm fine. Thanks." The cat Mobian gave him a stiff nod. "Sorun-"

"Can you do me a quick favor?" Sorun quickly interrupted. "Hold on to Virgil for a little bit longer. I'll come back for him soon, but I..." He sighed, and looked up at the center of the village, towards where the windmill was. "There's something I gotta go do. Just a little bit, alright?"

"Okay-?" Sorun hadn't given Sam the time to finish his sentence. His Bringer Claws beat off the ground and lifted him up into the air the moment he heard the confirmation from the cat.

"The village should be fine now. Jackals are gone, and it doesn't look like they did any damage," he thought as he looked down at Scrap City. *"They'll be fine. Me, though..."*

Things had been said during that argument with Infinite. The jackal had raised valid points, and even more importantly Sorun himself had said some things that gave him pause. Pause that made him realize some uncomfortable truths about himself, and had lead him to question some of the things he was doing. More than that, though, he definitely didn't want to stick around this village after what had just happened. He didn't want the attention, and he had to move on anyways.

But where to move on to? That, he could not make up his mind on. So he needed to plan what he was going to do next. He needed to sort out his own thoughts and settle the doubts he was beginning to have because of that conversation with Infinite.

He needed some time alone to think.

A/N- Oh hey, it's that one villain everybody loves.

Alright, so here's what happened. Sonic Forces was the last Sonic thing I researched during my Sonic research binge prior

to writing this story during the planning phase, since, well, it was the last game made. And I remember seeing all the low reviews saying the game was horrible, and as I was getting into it my thoughts were, "There's no way it's as bad as- *ohhhh* , yeah it's bad..."

That said I just watched a playthrough of the game, but from what I saw the story was bad, pacing was off, music was hit and miss for me. Overall just... bad. But I'm not here to review a game I never even played, we're here to talk about why I decided to put Infinite in the story.

I saw the guy, and my first impression of him was just, "Man, yeah, this guy's kind of a loser with a lot of power." And, you know what, during the planning phase when I was making Sorun I was also thinking, "You know, Sorun's kind of just a loser with power, too. Maybe I can do something with that."

So I do a deep dive into the character to get a feel for him, and what I get is really not encouraging to that idea. The guy, Infinite, he's just... he's just bad. Like, character-wise he's just awful. A one-dimensional, shallow character that revels in death and destruction and all that edgy goodness. And I mean, it's Sonic, I wasn't expecting the deepest character in the Sonic lore, but even by Sonic standards this guy had nothing going for him. He was edgy for the sake of being edgy. No depth at all past the weakness hangup. An evil psycho that was a evil psycho "just 'cause", basically. And the problem here is we kind of already have someone like that in the story, we have Eggman, but Eggman has a certain charm going for him that's likable and fun to play around with whereas Infinite is so out there with his brand of cartoonish evil that he really doesn't even feel like a Sonic character. Even his color scheme is off; he's just this weird, monochrome character standing next to all these other colorful characters in this colorful world.

I don't like him. I like what he *could* be, though.

So obviously the Infinite in this story isn't a 1:1 recreation of the game's version. My thoughts along those lines are, "Well, it's a fanfic and Archie is a separate universe from the games anyways so he doesn't have to be the exact same guy, so there's a ton of liberties I can take here." It's an attempt to give him *some* depth where there is none, but even then there's not a lot of room to work with without completely remaking him. But I know even after all that people still don't like him, so I'm not making him the final end-all-be-all villain or anything like that, or even a character that'll appear prominently in the story. This is more just to establish he's here in the world.

So yeah. There's that. Moving onto Sorun.

Sorun's a good boi who helps out and respects moms but is also a social neophyte allergic to friendly touching because he's a touch-starved gamer nerd. But despite that, he's still someone that knows right from wrong. That being said, almost every time he's said something deep it's come from a video game or movie. He's a guy that paid a lot of attention to those stories, and in that way he's kind of a walking, bastardized encyclopedia of story morals and life lessons absorbed through gaming walking around in a world where that kind of entertainment media doesn't really exist on that level anymore.

Chapter 23

Recursion Error

Episode 23- For what it's worth

Flying to the top of the windmill and staring aimlessly out into the blue sky wasn't exactly on Sorun's docket for the day, but after the event with the jackals, he just needed to get away. Get some time to himself to think.

Some things had been said between him and Infinite, and because of those things, Sorun had started to question things about himself. About what he was doing and what his plan was going forwards. What his actual goals were. Sorun needed to take a minute to sit down and think about everything that had happened and what he was going to do, what he could do, and he needed a quiet place to contemplate this all. So he chose the windmill in order to think in peace.

He had thoughts he needed to sort through.

He needed to face some hard truths.

He needed to reflect on his actions.

He needed to reevaluate his fucking priorities.

"I'm never going to see Earth again." That was the first thing he came to terms with as he sat on top of the windmill, knees pressed up to his chest as he looked up at a passing cloud. *"The Emeralds don't come out. Athair said it. Tails said it. There's no getting around it. I'm stuck on Mobius forever. And I sure as shit ain't gonna find a miracle to my problem just wandering blindly around the world, assuming there even is a miracle. Which there probably isn't."*

It wasn't him giving up; it was him realizing that, no, there was no going back. Ever. He didn't want to believe he'd never see the things he loved so dearly ever again. His mother. His friends. The life he'd lived. All those video games and pieces of entertainment media. The memories. His *home* . Just thinking about it now made silent tears stream down his otherwise calm face, but it was the truth, no matter how much he wished it wasn't so. He hadn't wanted to accept it, part of why he ran was because he *refused* to accept it, but now that he was taking the time to think? He didn't have any choice but to acknowledge the facts.

Here were the facts: he couldn't return to Earth. Ever. He was here to stay on Mobius.

So where did that leave him?

"I could always just go back," Sorun internally mused. *"Back to the Freedom Fighters. I was only gone a day. They'd understand. They'd forgive me. And then it'd be, what, back to the daily grind? More training, more missions against Eggman, more years lost to Chaos Emeralds in exchange for power? More fun times with all those great guys?"* His head tilted down to Scrap City. *"I don't have to do that, though. I could just... stay here. Make a life. If not here, somewhere else. I'll never be able to live a full life because of the two Emeralds already in me, but I could make* something *with the time I have left. Because if I go back to the Freedom Fighters... I'm just gonna die. Either from a robot or the Emeralds."* He sighed deeply. *"Would abandoning them all for a new life even be worth it, though?"*

He'd meant what he said to Infinite: he didn't believe the Freedom Fighters could win against Eggman. Hell, even Sonic had expressed doubts. The whole reason he was even brought here was because everybody had doubts. Aurora and Athair with their limited insight into the future said it to his face. And what happened when Eggman won? World domination. Enslavement and death of everybody. Likely very horrible and humiliating deaths that Sorun didn't want to think about. Skies perpetually covered in smog and metal for as far

as the eye could see. A death to Mobius. A peaceful world turned into a tortuous landscape void of hope.

That was what awaited Mobius if Eggman won. Sorun didn't want to live in that world. Nobody did.

With Sorun, though, and his powers, there was a chance. A chance to win against Eggman, once and for all. In a month's time with two Emeralds he'd grown in strength exponentially. He only now realized it, but he'd accomplished feats he'd never even dreamed of achieving ever in his life. Defeated robots. Became strong enough to beat a Mobian like Infinite with the use of his powers. How further could he be carried with even more Emeralds? Enough, just enough, that he could be the one to turn the tide and help the Freedom Fighters beat Eggman once and for all. Aurora and Athair hinted as much.

But that path meant death for Sorun. Because those Emeralds would end up killing him. And he didn't want to die.

So what was he to do? Live for himself? Die for others? From where he sat, those were his only two choices. A hellish choice he just couldn't make his mind up on, because either way he sliced it, he didn't like either outcome. His life was ruined pretty much either way. It was already ruined since he couldn't return to Earth. So what was he to do with what he had left? He truly didn't know, and the path to gaining that wisdom was one he didn't have.

There was somebody else that had that wisdom, though. A fictional character from one of his favorite video game series. The brother of the one whose powers and son's powers the Emeralds had gifted Sorun. Someone wise enough to see the true power of humanity and never turn his back on it. Somebody who knew the significance of loving someone or something. Someone Sorun deeply respected despite him being a little more than highly-detailed pixels voiced over by an actor.

It was time get some advice from Dante from the 'Devil May Cry' series. And in turning to Dante, Sorun couldn't help but remember one particular quote that continued to stick out at him.

"Strength is a choice. Fighting like hell to protect what's important."

So what was important to Sorun? Earth, obviously, but that was lost to him forever. So what else was there? His life? That was hanging precariously over the edge, but it was something to start with.

"Say I do nothing. What happens to the world?" Sorun thought. *"Most likely, Eggman wins. And that world he creates... that really a world worth living in? Assuming I'll live at all, anyways. He takes over the world and eventually I get hunted down by robots to get killed or worse."* He shuddered at the thought. *"Even if that doesn't happen, even if I survive, do I really want to live in a world ruled by that guy? A polluted, metal world where he reigns over everybody else? What kind of life is that?"*

A terrible life. For him and everybody. A life nobody deserved. He'd go as far as to say it wasn't even a life worth living, not in a world like that.

"But if I go back and fight, we just might beat him. Everybody gets to go on in peace, but I'll end up dead. But which is better? Dead or alive in a world ruled by Eggman?"

That, he didn't know, nor could he make up his mind on. So that was the importance of his life thought of. What else was important to him? Well, his Chao was certainly important. And thinking about Virgil had lead Sorun to think about the Mobian people he'd encountered. And then he realized they'd suffer in a world ruled by Eggman, too.

"I don't even want to think about what he'd do to all the Freedom Fighters if he won. And everybody else..." He frowned, and looked down at the village. *"I like them,"* he silently admitted to himself. *"I... actually like these people. I wouldn't have gone out of my way to*

save Sam if I didn't. I... I don't want anybody to suffer in that world. Not the Mobians, not the humans and Overlanders, not anybody. Nobody deserves that. And these Mobians, especially the ones in Knothole... they were all so kind to me. Kinder than my own mother in some cases, and that's a real hard bar to pass." A mirthless chuckle left him. *"I focused so much on hating my position here that I never even paid attention to everything else. Now that I've left and gotten my mind off of it, interacted with the people in that village down there... I really liked it. I like living with them. I liked everybody in Knothole. Everybody there was so considerate of me. So patient and understanding. They put so much time and effort and hope into me, went so far out of their way to try and befriend me to help me as much as possible...*

"... And I ran out on them."

He hadn't even realized any of this until he'd left Knothole. He didn't realize how much he valued their attempts at befriending him until he'd felt jealousy over Sam hugging his grandson. He didn't realize how much he liked helping others and being acknowledged for helping until he'd helped those children. He didn't realize he'd grown to like them all so much he'd actively put his life on the line to defend them until he'd done so. Like he'd done with Sam.

Like he'd done with Knuckles, when that rock almost crushed him. Because despite the incident with the Emerald, Knuckles was a solid guy who'd forgiven him with a single apology.

Like he'd done with Antoine and Bunnie, back with that train. Those two had been among the nicest people he met, and they, along with Sally, went so far out of their way to try and help Sorun adjust to the world that he couldn't help but acknowledge them all as friends.

Like he'd done with Nicole, back when they were inside of Metal Sonic's head. She and the games they played were one of the only things that had kept him together back when he was with the Freedom Fighters. She was probably his best friend there.

And even if he still harbored *some* resentment for every single one of the Freedom Fighters, with the exception of a few, for bringing him here, that animosity faded more with each day.

Sorun truly liked them all. And he couldn't bear the thought of them all suffering in a future ruled by Eggman. He didn't want to picture the grisly fates that would befall every single individual he'd come to cherish if the Doctor won. He hated the fact that they'd already suffered so much at his hands. That whole lives were ruined, that people he only now realize he'd grown close to had to take up the mantle and fight him since they were children. That they'd lost so much in this war they shouldn't have had to fight in. He just wanted them to finally live in peace.

And if possible, since he was stuck here forever anyways, he'd like to live a life in peace alongside them. But, of course, in order to give them that peaceful life, he'd have to give up his own.

There really was no winning with this.

"So what are you gonna do, Sorun? You gonna live in a fucked-up dystopian torture future and watch everybody you've come to adore die or get enslaved into a meaningless existence? Or are you gonna take the quick way out and try to save everybody?"

Well, when phrased like that, the choice was obvious.

He didn't want to die.

He wanted all his friends to die even less.

"... RRRAAAAGGH!" Screaming at the top of his lungs, Sorun bolted up to his feet and threw a Summoned Sword at the sky. "FINE! I'LL DO IT! I'LL FUCKING DO IT!" He screamed out even louder to the heavens as more swords uselessly shot up to the sky. "THAT WHAT YOU WANTED, YOU ECHIDNA FUCKS!? HUH!? WELL, YOU GOT IT! CONGRATULATIONS!"

And with that, he'd finally decided what he was going to do.

He'd do it. He'd go back to the Freedom Fighters and gather more strength from the remaining Chaos Emeralds.

He'd kill himself for Mobius.

Part of Sorun almost expected the few clouds in the sky to part and for a ray of light to shine down on him to signal that he'd finally satisfied some hidden prerequisite so that he could talk to Athair and Aurora again. Or that, after finally committing to ending his life for the sake of everybody else, he'd fall unconscious again and wake up in that alternate zone they were in. But all Sorun received was the quiet sound of the wind blowing past him from the slowly spinning blades of the windmill.

So, with his expectations completely curbed and his body out of breath, he collapsed face-first onto the top of the windmill.

Full minutes passed of Sorun just laying there, body subtly shuddering as he tried to control his own emotions. The dread and frustration coursing through him as he realized he was choosing to die. Some more minutes passed before he finally slowly picked himself up into sitting in an upright-position, a few more latent tears remaining on his face that he quickly wiped off. He sniffed once, and then looked back up at the sky.

"Well... fuck. Hah... I guess on the bright side it can't get any worse than this, right?" he muttered to himself as he slowly got up to his feet. "It's all up from here, Sorun. At least 'til I die and it all comes to an abrupt, screeching halt. Fuck, my life sucks." He took in a deep breath, and then slowly exhaled. "But I guess if they all get to live in exchange, it's worth it. Better that than let Eggman win. No way am I letting his fat ass ruin everybody's lives.

"I better get a whole chapter in the history books for going ahead and doing this. I want shit named after me. I want a fucking movie made in my honor. Maybe a video game, too, if society manages to

pick itself back up far enough to start producing all that stuff again." A morose, joyless smile on his face, Sorun walked up to the edge of the windmill's top and looked down at Scrap City. "Well, before any of that, I gotta get back to Knothole. Problem is I don't know where it is exactly. Maybe Sam knows- I gotta go get Virgil back from him, anyways." A sigh left him as the Bringer Claws manifested. "Guess it'd be a good time to say goodbye to him and Gary, too. Doubt I'll ever live to see them again once I leave."

With that, he jumped off the windmill and flew in the direction of Sam's house.

Sorun hadn't made any stops or delays on the way to the two cats' dwelling. He had too much on his mind to deal with any of the other villagers, and after what happened with Infinite and his jackals, he didn't really know what their reactions would be towards him. Most likely positive, seeing as he had gone and saved their village from a bunch of crazy jackals. The overwhelming kind of positive that would involve a large crowd and a lot of heartfelt thanks and maybe hugs.

No, that was a bit too embarrassing for his taste, and if he was really gonna commit to a death march in the name of peace for the world he wasn't gonna attach himself to more people than necessary. Better for him to be that one weird human guy that had briefly stopped by town and saved them only to never be seen again than become somebody too well known. That wasn't gonna work for Sam and Gary, though, hence why Sorun was bothering to visit them one last time to say goodbye.

Plus he needed his Chao and directions.

Touching down right in front of the front door to Sam's house, Sorun wasted no time in knocking on the front door as his Bringer Claws disappeared. Some seconds passed before he heard small footsteps approach from the other side of the door, followed by the door quickly opening.

"Hey, S- huh?" There wasn't an aged cat man standing in front of Sorun. When he looked down, however, he saw that it was a much younger cat boy that had answered the door, black ears and tail stuck straight. "Oh, sorry about that, Gary. You know where your grandfather-?"

"Sorun!"

What happened next was that the Mobian child jumped right up to Sorun, wrapping his arms around the human's waist while burying his face into his abdomen. Sorun, with a small "oof", stumbled backwards at the new weight settling onto him, some slight panic going through him at the unexpected contact. He looked down at Gary, and then managed to take a deep breath in order to calm himself.

"Really gotta remember to thank Bunnie for that breathing tip she gave me. Thing's been a lifesaver," he thought, sighing as he rubbed the top of Gary's head. "Missed you too, pal," he muttered. A few more seconds passed, and while Sorun couldn't find the energy to pry the child off of him, the contact was still beginning to make him uncomfortable. "You can let go now."

Thankfully, Gary complied and let go of Sorun's torso, stepping back while staring up at the teen with his wide, green eyes. "Everybody's saying that you fought off the bandits and saved the village."

"... I guess that's technically accurate," Sorun said in response. Gary's eyes had brightened up so intensely from the response that Sorun had actually winced and turned his head slightly to the side.

"You're so cool!" The high-pitched praise and the sheer intensity of the smile being beamed at Sorun was almost too much to endure, and he was forced to resort to brushing his dark locks of hair over his abashed face. "Grandpa said that they almost did something really bad, but then he said you came in and beat up a bunch of those mean jackals with your blue arms and chased them off!"

"That all happened, yes," Sorun agreed with a small laugh. "Gary, come on, calm down. It wasn't anything special."

"What do you mean is wasn't anything special!? You saved the village!" The Mobian child stopped bouncing on his feet, though he still had that wide, grateful smile on his face. "You're the best, Sorun! Now come on!" He reached forwards and gripped Sorun's right hand. "You need to come in and tell me all about it!"

"H-hey!" He found himself quickly pulled inside of the house, though Sorun didn't at all resist against the child's pull despite his vocal protest. He in fact closed the door right behind him, and at Gary's behest, sighed and began recounting what had happened earlier today.

He left out a lot, of course. Mainly a majority of what he'd said to Infinite and the part where he'd actually broken all of the jackal's limbs, as he felt that maybe glorifying the act of crippling somebody in such a way to a child wasn't the best of ideas. So the story Sorun told Gary was about as barebones as it went: he'd seen trouble, so he'd swooped in, saved Sam, and beat up jackals with his Bringer Claws until they went away. The consequence of such censorship was that it wasn't the most glamorous of stories, but Sorun at least tried adding a bit of flair by mentioning the Summoned Swords.

To somebody like Sorun, it was an even more droll story to listen to than actually say. Gary, on the other hand, practically had stars sparkling in his eyes. Sorun didn't know if it was because he was desensitized to action at this point due to a life of gaming combined with a very short real-life career in life-threatening situations, or if Gary's life was really just that quiet. But whatever the case may be, by the end of the story the pair had landed in the house's kitchen, both sitting in separate chairs at the table. Sorun's form was slumped over it, elbow on the table with his head resting on his palm, whereas Gary was standing on his chair and leaning over the table.

"Woooow..." The kid was practically starstruck by the time Sorun had finally finished. "So... you really saved grandpa's life?"

"Well, I mean... you know, he... he probably wouldn't have..." Sorun trailed off, turned his head a bit to see Gary's eyes, sighed, and turned back. No use in trying to hide it, he supposed. "Yeah," he breathed out, "I saved him."

"Oh..." Gary's mood instantly deflated as he sat down in his chair. Sorun looked back over to him, softly sighed, and then picked his head up and fully turned towards him.

"Gary, it's fine," Sorun said to him in a soft voice. "He's alive along with everybody else."

"Yeah, I know. It's just that thinking about what could have happened..." The Mobian child took a shuddering breath, and then gave Sorun a small smile. "I guess the important thing is that it's over and nobody got hurt." His smile brightened. "Thank you so much for everything you've done, Sorun. You're one of the nicest people I've ever met!"

"Chao!"

The noise drew both the human's and Mobian's attention towards the kitchen entrance. Gary's expression brightened even further when he saw Sam standing there in the entrance, while Sorun's eyes locked right onto the cat's left shoulder, where he saw a Chao waving wildly at Gary.

The child laughed. "You too, Virgil. You're really neat, too."

"Hey, how come he gets praise?" Sorun complained as he pointed at the Chao. "He didn't even do anything."

"Chao."

"Emotional support!?" The teen sputtered in outrage. "What are you, my mascot now!?"

Virgil shrugged.

In a huff, Sorun collapsed right into his chair with a defeated expression. The act caused both Gary and Sam to burst out in laughter, and even the Chao on Sam's shoulder was mildly chuckling in delight. The sight was enough the bring the smallest smirks to Sorun's face as well, though he tried his best to turn his head enough to hide it.

After a few seconds of laughing, Sam sighed out and picked Virgil up off his shoulder. "To think yesterday you were askin' me if Chao were even smart," he commented as he set Virgil on the table. "Now you're acting like you understand the little guy."

Sorun shrugged as he watched Virgil waddle towards him. "Eh, still don't, but it's not really that hard to kinda get what he's saying if you can read the subtext," he explained. "Play enough games like I have where you gotta raise the stupid relationship levels of pets and companions through actions and dialogue and you learn to read subtext REAL well."

The looks he got from the cats and Chao were ones of confusion. With a sigh, the pale teen rolled his eyes.

"... The gestures help." They continued to give him confused looks, causing him to sigh again. "Geez, forget what I said," he muttered as he picked Virgil up and placed him on his left shoulder. "Thanks for looking after him, Sam."

"Er, yeah." The older Mobian regained his composure and gave him a nod. "I think *I* should be the one thanking *you* though, Sorun. After everything you-"

"Chao."

"- and Virgil have done, I wasn't gonna forget you," Sam added, causing Sorun to shoot the Chao a dirty glare. "Ever since I met you yesterday you've been nothing but a big help for all of us." He started to rub the back of his neck. "Didn't think you'd end up savin' the whole village from a buncha jackals, though. Eheh."

"Yeah, speaking of which," Sorun began. "You guys, uh, did you hear what I actually was talking about with that one guy? And, um... nobody got freaked out by, you know, how hard I went on him, did they?" he asked, a nervous tone to his voice. "I was really angry at the time when it happened, and I'm not exactly sorry for what I did, but looking back I kinda realized that most people probably woulda seen what I did as... you know. Distasteful."

With a wave of his hand, Sam shook his head. "Nah, don't worry none about it. Guy had it comin' to him, and a few broken bones never hurt anybody. 'Sides, not like you did anything that won't heal up," he said, "and maybe it'll go to be teachin' him some humility and have him stop harassing folk."

Sorun let out a sigh of relief. He'd been worried that the people wouldn't take to kindly to the way he treated Infinite. He supposed considering he'd almost killed one of them, though, they weren't going to be too overly sympathetic for his him. Seemed like everybody was just happy Sorun saved the day according to Sam.

"But, uh, nah, we were all a bit too far away to hear anything specific," Sam continued. "Heard a lot of shouting from you, though. What were you trying to say to that fella?"

"I was trying to take the diplomatic approach and maybe talk some sense into him so they'd leave in peace," Sorun said with a shrug, relieved all those embarrassing and explicit words he said hadn't been heard. "Diplomacy failed."

"Ha! That it did. Suppose you did the right thing trying to talk it out first, even if it didn't work." Sam pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with the rest of them. "That all being said, I don't think I'm ever going to be able to repay you for what you've done, Sorun. For savin' my life and the village and... making sure my little Gary here didn't lose his only family left." He reached over and ruffled the top of the cat child's head while giving Sorun a sincere smile. "Really. Can't thank you enough."

A soft groan of embarrassment left Sorun as he crossed his arms and turned away from the smiling pair of cats. He felt something tap his shoulder, and he glanced over to see Virgil smiling at him, too. But while the smile was a happy one, his eyes were closed just the slightest amount. Like they were teasing, almost.

"What the hell, you were so sweet yesterday. When'd you get so cheeky?" Sorun thought as he lightly flicked Virgil on his forehead. He ignored the indignant sputter of the Chao and turned back to the Mobians. "It was nothing," he said. "I wasn't just gonna sit by and do *nothing* . Especially when I got powers that make it easy." He glanced off to the side. "And even then, y'know... everybody in this village seems nice and it wouldn't have felt good doing nothing."

"Chao."

"Yeah, plus Virgil would have never let me forget it."

"Heh heh. I imagine not." The smile on Sam's face fell a bit. "So, Sorun, when we first met you said that you were lost. Dunno if you ever had a destination in mind, but, well, everybody in the village practically already loves you-" Sorun's chest jolted at that, "- and we have a spare bedroom, so, you know, if you wanted-"

"Yeah, just stay with us!" Gary said enthusiastically as he leaned over the table again. "Please? It'll be really fun, I promise! We can play ball and do all sortsa stuff together and you can be, like, the village defender or something if anybody like those jackals or Eggman or whoever shows up!"

Sorun found himself blinking in surprise. He'd entertained the idea of just staying, but he hadn't thought that the possibility would come this easily. And from the way they were looking at him, it almost felt like they wanted him to stay. Gary for sure, but even Sam seemed a bit hopeful.

It was almost enough for him to take it, too. It wouldn't be home on Earth, not by a long shot, but it wouldn't be terrible. Living in a

peaceful village full of people that already accepted him after everything he'd done. To just settle down from all the craziness and just relax. Finally get some of that peace he'd been searching for.

But no. He couldn't do that. Protecting a single village was nice, but protecting the entire world and everybody inside of it, including that village, was more important to him. And he'd already made up his mind.

Sorun gave them a smile- a grateful smile- but, to their disappointment and Virgil's visible confusion, he shook his head. "Sorry, guys," he said, "but I can't stay. I'd like to, but I can't. Thanks anyways."

Gary let out a whine of disappointment and slumped back into his chair. Sam looked slightly disappointed himself, but unlike his grandson the black-furred cat had a thoughtful look on his face.

"I see, I see," he mumbled. "Well, that's a shame, but I can't rightly try to chain someone down who doesn't wanna stay. That said, Sorun, I don't rightly know where you're headed, but... have you ever considered going to Knothole?"

Sorun's ears perked up in interest, and he turned to face Sam completely. "Why do you ask that?" he asked.

"Well... Sorun, I'll be honest with you," he said. "Seeing everything you can do with those arms and swords, well... you're a pretty powerful fella, ain'tcha?"

The pale human scoffed. "Arguably."

"Don't be coy, now, I saw what you did to them bandits," Sam said. "Doubt you don't know this, but the whole world's on the brink of falling into the hands of that madman, Eggman. There's a group out there called the Freedom Fighters that've been trying to beat him back since the start of this whole mess, but, well, they've been hurtin' real bad as of late," he admitted. "I just thought that somebody like

you would maybe have a place there with them. Not just 'cause you got power, but because you got heart, too. You saved that Chao there, helped me and my grandson out, saved the whole village outta the kindness of your heart without askin' anything in return... well, I wouldn't know personally, but if that don't make a good Freedom Fighter candidate, then I don't know what does. I could show you on a map where the place is if you're at all interested."

It almost seemed too good to be true. Enough that Sorun burst out in a quiet, disbelieving chuckle as he held his face in his hand, shaking his head. *"Alright, world, I get it. I gotta go back. I can read the damn room."* Whether it be through unlikely coincidence or some unseen force, something was telling him that he needed to go back to the Freedom Fighters. Well, luckily for whatever that was he was planning on doing exactly that. But he supposed that, before anything, he should at least be straight with Sam. It was the least he deserved.

"Well, Sam... to be honest with you, I already checked that place out," Sorun admitted, causing the eyes of both cats and the Chao to widen. "Even ran around with them for a bit. Some... stuff happened between us and I had to leave for a bit." He sighed. "But I chilled out, and everything that's happened to me in the village got me thinking."

"So that's what you meant when you said you had to think about something," Sam realized. "So what-?"

"You were a Freedom Fighter!?" Gary shouted in excitement. "Did you ever meet Sonic the Hedgehog!?"

Sam shot the younger Mobian and annoyed glare. "Gary...!" he groaned out while palming his face.

"What?" With a nervous chuckle, Gary shrugged. "I-I've always wanted to meet him, so I just thought-"

"Yeah, I've met him," Sorun said, causing stars to appear in Gary's eyes. "Had to sleep in the same room as him, actually."

"Sleeping in the same room as Sonic..." The amount of awe in the young Mobian's voice was almost enough to make Sorun scoot back in his chair. "What was he like!?" Gary almost demanded. "Was he cool!? I bet he was cool! Sonic's the coolest ever!"

Sorun regarded the young Mobian for a few minutes, and then rose a flattened hand and began shaking it. "Eh. He was an okay guy. Kinda full of himself," he blandly answered.

The answer caused Gary to practically flop onto the table top. Sam roared out in laughter at the sight, an actual tear of joy streaming down his face.

"Ha ha ha ha! Ah, I needed that," the old Mobian sighed as he wiped a tear away. "Don't mind him none, Sorun. Sonic's a big hero around in a lot parts around the world to a lot of people."

"Yeah, apparently," Sorun muttered, blowing a lock of hair out of his face. "You were saying something?"

Sam tilted his head to the side, and then remembered what he was going to say and perked up. "Oh, right. I was just gonna ask if all that thinking changed your mind."

"... It did," Sorun said. "I wanna go back to Knothole. Back to the Freedom Fighters." A few blue, spectral feathers briefly appeared over his back, floated down, and disappeared. "Figured all these powers of mine should be good for something. And I... kinda miss them." He gave Sam a serious glare. "Don't tell them I said that, though. I mean it. If you ever see a Freedom Fighter never tell them I missed them."

"Ha! No promises." Sam sat up out of his seat while Sorun grumbled something under his breath. "Well, I've heard enough. Sit tight, Sorun. I'll go get you that map."

He left the kitchen shortly after. Sorun continued sitting in his seat, occasionally glancing at Virgil and a window outside. He heard

shuffling in front of him, and then looked forwards to see Gary sit up in is seat.

"So you're really leaving?" he asked, his voice a bit quieter than normal. The disappointment on his features wasn't lost at all to Sorun, who nodded in confirmation.

"Well, someone's gotta save the world," he said. "Right, Virgil?"

"Chao! Chao!" Virgil clapped his arm-limbs together happily in agreement.

"See?" Sorun pointed at the happy Chao. "Virgil gets it. Sorry if you wanted me to stick around, Gary."

"No, it's fine. I understand." A quiet sigh left the young cat. "I... I think it would have been really nice having someone like you around. You could have been like my big brother," he said.

The fact that somebody would even consider such a thing towards him moved something inside of Sorun's chest, but he did his best to smother the warm feeling so it wouldn't leak out onto his face. He still saw Virgil give him an almost knowing smirk from the corner of his eyes, though, and Sorun had to resist the urge to flick the Chao again.

"But you going out there to help save the world is more important," Gary continued. The downcast look he had turned into a smile. "I bet you'll be great. So great that you'll be even more famous than Sonic!"

"Oh, that'd be awesome. I could lord it over him forever," Sorun commented with a light smirk. His head perked up when he saw Sam reenter the kitchen, a rolled piece of paper in his hand. "Yo, Sam. That the map?"

"Sure is," Sam said with a nod as he tossed the paper to Sorun. "Kinda funny that Knothole's location used to be such a well-kept

secret, but after it got so big I guess it kinda became an open secret since everyone knows where it is now. I'm actually surprised you don't know where it is since you're from there and all, Sorun."

Sorun opened the map halfway, and then glanced up at Sam. "Directions are hard." He ignored the snickers from the two cats and rolled the map open further. He saw Northamer and a circled spot labeled "Scrap City", and a circled spot lower down on the continent labeled "Knothole". He gave a satisfied nod, and then rolled the map back closed. "Alright. I can figure it out from here," he said, focusing back on the two Mobians. "So, uh... guess this is it, then."

"Guess so," Sam agreed. "Well, Sorun, it's been a pleasure. Truly." He stepped closer to Sorun, and then held a hand out. "You're always welcome here if you ever need somewhere to sleep. Now stay safe out there, y'hear?"

Glancing down at the hand, Sorun let out a chuckle at the irony of the statement before grasping the cat's hand and shaking it. "Yeah. You too, old timer." He let go of his hand and looked towards Gary. "Bye, Gary. Try not to kick that ball too high. Your old-old man can't handle the stress." He got the barest bit satisfaction from the clicking sound Sam's tongue made.

"I won't!" Gary waved his hand in Sorun's direction. "Bye, Sorun! Bye, Virgil!"

"Chao!" Virgil cried out happily, waving his limb at the direction of the two cats. Sorun stared at the pair of cats for a long moment, taking in the sight of their happy faces so he could memorize them, and then smiled the barest amount while he turned around and gave them a two-fingered salute from over his head.

He walked out of the kitchen right after. The teen made his way to the house's front door, and then stepped out without a moment's hesitation. He closed the door behind him, and then took in a deep breath as he took in the sight of the vibrant village around him. His eyes lingered on the happy villagers walking by, some of which had

smiled and waved in Sorun's direction. He'd waved back at them as he began walking forwards.

"Yeah. I'm makin' the right choice here." He didn't want to see all this peace snuffed out by Eggman. Not Sam or Gary's peace. Not the peace of everybody in this village. Not anybody's in Knothole. Not the peace of his friends in the Freedom Fighters. Not any of the Mobians' or humans' or Overlanders' peace on any of the continents. Not to anybody's peace in the world. He may not have been able to undo the damage that psychopathic Doctor had caused, but he could at least ensure he was stopped so that this world had a true chance at peace. For whatever that was worth seeing as he'd never be able to experience it personally. As long as everybody else was happy, though... well, he wouldn't say he was satisfied with the outcome, but he'd take it. *"Consequences be damned. May not be my first choice, but if I'm really stuck here I'd rather die saving the world than live seeing it rot."* He made a sad smile as his Bringer Claws formed. *"I made my choice. Everybody is just too important to me. Time to get more power and end this."*

"Well, Virgil," Sorun sighed out as he looked up at the sky, "you ready to go be a Freedom Fighter? I'm gonna warn you right now: it involves gratuitous amounts of violence and friendship, and copious amounts of stress from both."

"Chao-chao!" He vigorously nodded at Sorun and excitedly clapped his arms together.

"Heh. Alright, then. Let's go save the world." The Bringer Claws began flapping. "Even if it kills me."

The Bringer Claws beat down on the ground, and Sorun, carrying Virgil on his shoulder, shot up into the sky. The only sign they were ever there were a few loose blue, spectral feathers that had fallen off of the Bringer Claws that slowly touched down on the ground before dissipating into nothing.

A/N- He's back in, boys and girls. He's back in.

So I wanna take this moment to talk about the gag curse, since I keep getting asked about it. Truth is the gag curse is a convenient plot device I made, because while planning this story out I thought to myself, "Well Sorun's just gonna tell them and they won't let him touch any more Emeralds. And he's not gonna go out of his way for them. What am I supposed to do about that?" Gag curse was kind of a band-aid in that regard to remedy the problem, and it added another layer to the story so why not, but a lot of the reasons I didn't go too far into it was because I figured as long as I had at least some moments where Sorun tried to get around it it'd be good enough until we got here.

But yeah, the gag curse is kind of moot now since Sorun just consigned himself to death. He actively wants to absorb all the Emeralds now, and telling anybody about the negative effects would be counter-productive to that, so he'll willfully keep it a secret. If anything he'd actively make sure it remains a secret at this point.

To be honest I feel like the gag curse is kind of a weak point in this story since it feels kinda slapped together. It kinda also has to exist because without it the whole plot falls apart, but, eh, it just didn't seem that eloquent to me but I couldn't think of a better alternative. I tried my best to make up for it by writing around it and all the mental trauma it caused Sorun. But again, that curse is pretty much useless now since Sorun's made up his mind.

Chapter 24

Recursion Error

Episode 24- Back in

Step one in Sorun's "commit suicide for the sake of the planet" plan: Sorun needed to get that red Chaos Emerald he'd left in Freedom HQ ASAP.

Before that, though, he needed some advice, or at least to talk to somebody about what he'd done. About some of his internal feelings. About *something* , because while he'd finally made up his mind on what he was going to do, Sorun felt that maybe some guidance was in order. Or at the very least a second voice to help clear his head of any lingering doubts. And there was no way he was just gonna fly right into Freedom HQ immediately, walk in, and pretend nothing happened to everybody that was there. That'd be too awkward.

No, he needed time and help from somebody else to prepare him for that disaster in waiting, and as it happened, there was one person that came in mind. Sorun had only ever had one conversation with him, but he was somebody that was technically outside the Freedom Fighters and who could at least barely relate to Sorun's plight.

It probably wasn't an ideal choice, but since he really needed to talk to somebody, he'd take it.

"Well, there it is, Knothole. And... it looks the exact same as I left it," Sorun thought. Flying through the sky, he and the one-winged Chao on his shoulder came to a halt as just above the city with the evening sun and an orange sky overhead. *"Guess I was just gone for a day, so I... don't really know what I was expecting, actually. But it still isn't bombed out, at least. So that's great."* His head tilted further downwards, towards Castle Acorn. *"He better be in."*

The Bringer Claws beat forwards and propelled Sorun's body towards the castle. He made sure to stay as high as possible as to remain unseen from those below, and then dropped straight down until he'd made it to the side of the castle. The Bringer Claws beat downwards, holding Sorun steady in the air as they slowly moved him towards the center of the castle, near the walls.

After flying around for a bit, he saw what he was looking for: large, vertical windows lining the side of the castle's wall. He chose the window furthest in the back, and then flew up towards the top where there was a small, secondary window on top of the main one that swung open. He flew up, slowly pushed the window open, and then climbed towards the top.

Looking inside the room on the other side of the window he was above, Sorun saw that the castle's throne room looked about the same as it had a month ago, when he'd visited on his second day here. Really long and really empty, aside from the large throne chair at the back. A chair with a familiar red-haired squirrel Mobian sitting in it.

Sorun didn't make a move at first. He just stayed still up on the window, staring down at Elias as he thought over what he was supposed to say to the king. He also was waiting from him to eventually notice Sorun was just hanging out up there so they could go from there, but much to Sorun's growing annoyance, whole minutes passed of him just staring at Elias waiting to be noticed. Eventually, he sighed in frustration and called down to him.

"Yo, Elias, you blind? Up here." The sudden voice startled Elias, practically forcing him to jump out of it as he looked up. His eyes widened and he looked even more startled when he saw the human up on the window, back against the wall and another leg pressing into the window's frame as his second leg hung down freely.

"S-Sorun?" Elias called back, voice in disbelief.

"Yep." Sorun tore his gaze away from Elias to look around at the empty throne room. "Hey, breaking into the castle like this doesn't make me an enemy of the state or anything like that, does it?" he asked as he turned back to Elias. "I woulda just used the front door, but, well, I didn't want people knowin' I was back yet."

The squirrel blinked his blue eyes in confusion, and then shook his head. "No, no it doesn't- can you please get down from there?"

Shrugging, Sorun leaned fully past the window and dropped down. His Bringer Claws flapped a few times to slow his fall, ending in his feet softly touching down on the ground as the winged arms disappeared completely from his back.

With both of them now at the same level, the human and the Mobian took a few minutes to take each other in. Sorun's expression was mainly passive, if a bit nervous from the way he would occasionally fidget. Elias seemed more baffled then anything, blinking over and over as if to make sure it was Sorun standing there in front of him and not an illusion. He was the first one to speak.

"So you're back," he said, and then looked towards Sorun's shoulder. "Pardon me, Sorun, but may I ask why you have a Chao on your shoulder?"

"Don't worry about the Chao." Sorun held a hand up to block Virgil, forcing him to let out a "chao!" of outrage. "You know, it's kinda creepy how you're just sitting here all alone in this giant room."

"I was just taking some time to myself to think."

"Ah." Sorun slowly nodded. "So, uh... nobody's mad at me, right?"

A few seconds of silence passed, ending with Elias' face turning into a wince as he gave Sorun a pitying look. "Well..."

Sorun's arms went limp. "Aw, that ain't the good noise."

Elias sighed, and then rubbed at his forehead. "Sorun, you ran away-"

"I know, kn-"

"Everybody was beyond upset, Sally was furious, Sonic almost ran off to go look for you-"

"Yeah, I figured something like that would happen, but-" Sorun paused, and his pupils shrunk in fear. "Wait, how mad was Sally, 'cause she really scares me somet-" He stopped himself at the withering look Elias shot him. "Okay, fine, I get it. Going AWOL wasn't an okay thing to do." He held his index finger up. "But you know, technically I was only gone a single day, so if I really wanted to I could just say I went out on a really long walk-"

"You told them you were never returning," Elias reminded him with an unamused face.

The finger wilted and fell to Sorun's side. "... Oh yeah, I did say that." He sighed, and then hung his head. "Ooh boy, it's gonna be way more awkward than I thought."

He slowly walked past Elias, letting out a tired breath as he sat down on one of the few steps leading up to the platform where the throne was. Elias stared down at the human's slumped form, and then gave an equally tired sigh as he stepped in front of the pale teen.

"Sorun," he began, "I don't know what possessed you to run away or to break into the castle like this, but something is clearly wrong with you. Just tell me what the matter is. What happened that made you so upset you needed to abandon Knothole?"

"I came back, didn't I?" He glanced up at Elias' face, but when he saw that it still had a stern if not worried look on it, he hung his head downwards again. "I needed to get out for a bit," he answered. "I just... look, it's been a lot, okay?"

"Okay," Elias said with a nod, "then why don't we start with why you chose to break into Castle Acorn's throne room?"

Sorun looked up towards the window he came in from. "Is it really breaking and entering when you leave the window unlocked?" he asked.

Elias's eyes narrowed. "If you don't start taking this seriously I'm calling Sally and the others to tell them you're here."

"Wait-wait-wait, hold up, let's not do anything crazy!" Eyes wide in panic, Sorun snapped his head towards Elias while waving his arms out in front of him. The squirrel's stern gaze hardened, causing him to sigh and have his arms fall back down. "I needed to talk to somebody," he said. "And I wanted to talk with somebody outside of the Freedom Fighters so I could, I don't know, mentally prepare myself and maybe get some advice. I wanted to talk to you because the only other candidates were Sonic's relatives, and there was no way I was gonna risk running into him."

"Okay..." The king nodded his head. "Why me and not somebody else? Sally had told me you and that tailor, Honey, became well acquainted."

"Seriously? I don't need more crazy right now," Sorun said with a scoff. "Geez, man, she drives me nuts, but I have to deal with her because she is literally my only source of pants in this world." His face scrunched in irritation. "Seriously, nobody wears pants. Nobody! I haven't met a single Mobian other than Rouge that wears pants, and I don't even know if those weird leggings she wears counts as pants!" He looked up at Elias's head, and then narrowed his eyes. His vision traveled down from the gold, acorn-shaped crown he wore, to the regal blue coat and red cape he had on, to his legs and feet, which were completely bare save for the red boots he wore. "Even you," he hissed. "You wear everything *but* pants. Why are you like this?" He looked back up to Elias' face. "What do you people have against pants!?"

"I don't- why-?" Elias palmed his face in exasperation. "Sorun, what does this have to do with anything!?"

"Nothing, I just- this is really uncomfortable for me, okay!?" he yelled out. Sorun took a deep breath, and then allowed his body to go lax as his muscles became less tense. "I came to you because you said you ran once, too."

The squirrel blinked his eyes in surprise, his expression softening a bit. "What?"

Sorun rose his hand to the Mobian, shook his head, and allowed his hand to fall back into his lap. "It was too much, okay?" he muttered out. "The-the-the whole thing with being a Freedom Fighter, the Emeralds, my home, almost dying on a practically weekly basis, it-it all just kept adding up, and I never talked to anybody about it, so I-I blew up when it became too much. I left because I *thought* that's what I wanted to do, but then I took a really hard look at myself and realized that it *wasn't* what I wanted to do, so I came back, but I just don't know what I'm supposed to say to everybody." He finished with a loud breath, looking down at the floor. "You said you ran away once. Because the whole king thing was too much or whatever, so you ran out but came back later." He sighed and looked back up at Elias. "I mean, look, I know it's really weird that we only ever had one conversation, and that was like a month ago, only for me to come back now with all this heavy stuff, but I am *desperate* for help here, man, and I can't go to anybody else with this."

Because he truly didn't know what he was supposed to say to everybody to explain himself. He knew a simple sorry wasn't gonna cut it, but what was there beyond that? There was only so much he could explain while leaving the Emeralds and their debilitating effect on his body out. Maybe he could string some lies together- say all the stress got him, and it wouldn't even be wholly untruthful- but what was there passed that? He had no clue.

Elias might have had a clue, though, because he had experience in this dilemma. So Sorun had gone to him because maybe he had

some answers. More than that though, it was somebody to talk to. Somebody Sorun could just vent at for a bit so that maybe he could get some good advice. It wouldn't make him feel better about the fact he was planning on dying- nothing was going to make him feel better with that- but it was something, and right now he needed something to help him if just a little bit.

The silence held between them was broken when Elias let out a small, knowing sigh and began to step closer. Sorun didn't move at all when the young king settled next to him on the same step he was sitting in, hands folded over his knees as he leaned in closer to Sorun.

"I suppose it makes sense why you'd come to me if that's the problem," Elias said. "I'll admit that I am sympathetic towards you since, yes, I did run out on the people I had a duty to. Though, eh heh, I took a bit longer than a single day to return," he said with a light laugh. "And it took a great deal of convincing for me to return with my new family. I came back because I was shown that everybody in the kingdom needed me." He reached over and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "But you didn't even need that, Sorun! You came back all on your own. You should be happy that you managed to come to your senses before something awful happened."

Sorun looked up at the room's ceiling with a groan, not even bothering to remove the hand on his shoulder. "Yeah man, sure, but I never asked for all this responsibility," he mumbled. "I didn't ask to be a Freedom Fighter. I didn't asked to be ripped away from my home forever or to get super powers from Chaos Emeralds and all that. I never wanted any of this. I just... I just wanted some peace."

"I understand all too well what you mean," Elias assured him with a comforting squeeze on his shoulder. "I felt the exact same way when I ran. It's why I tried settling down to make a new life. I had never asked to be brought into royalty. I'd been living a peaceful life up on Angel Island until I was whisked away to take up the crown. I suppose, just like you, the pressure became too much and I folded. I

felt what had happened to me was unfair and unjust, and I just wanted to go back to the life I had beforehand, or at least something close to it."

"That was pretty much what I was feeling, too," Sorun admitted.

Elias made small laugh. "I know it's difficult, Sorun. Believe me, I do, but whether we like it or not we do have responsibilities. Me with my kingly duties, you with your powers helping out with the Freedom Fighters... it's responsibilities like those that ensure we eventually will have that peaceful life we desire, is it not?"

It made Sorun upset at how right he thought Elias was being, but he didn't have it in him to manifest any of that anger. Instead he just released a listless breath. "Mh-hm, hey, Elias, you're not the one going out there getting stabbed at by robots." He didn't ask to die, either, but this was left unsaid as he turned his eyes back to the squirrel. "I don't know how you Mobians do it, but humans can't just brush off all these near-death situations I keep having like it's nothing. Or at least I can't. I... I'm getting better with it, but this is still hard, you know?"

"I know," he said with a nod. "I know. It's not as easy for us, either, believe it or not. But having those close to us around to help us through dark times make it all the easier. All of your friends in the Freedom Fighters would surely help you with this. They were all frustrated at you being so closed-off because they were worried something like this would happen to you."

Sorun rolled his eyes, though he did feel his heart warm a bit at the squirrel's words. "Why do you gotta use the 'F' word?" he mumbled out.

"... You mean 'friends'?"

"Yeah, right. My 'friends'."

Elias tilted his head to the side. "You do consider them your friends, correct?" he asked.

Yes, he did. "No, not really," he said. "... Maybe a couple, but... ugh. I don't wanna be mad at them for bringing me here, I know it wasn't their fault, and if I'm being real with you at this point I barely even feel mad at them over it anymore so eventually maybe, but... no, it's too soon for me to be calling them something like friends."

"But... there must be at least *some* you consider friends," Elias pressed.

"Well, I mean, you know, Nic-" Sorun roughly shook his head, causing Elias' hand to leave his shoulder. "Would you get off the friendship bit!? Geez." He breathed heavily through his nose, and then slumped forwards. "Beyond that, though, past all the stress of fighting for my life and the responsibility and everything else... on the day I ran, Tails told me it was impossible to return to my home zone. So I'm pretty much stuck here forever." He looked back at Elias, who continued to look at him somberly. "I needed to take some time to come to terms with that."

Elias didn't say anything at first, his face a mixture between sympathy and pity for the human next to him. He blinked, and his features relaxed as he lowered his head. "Tails had mentioned as such, but are you positive-"

"Elias. I can't go back."

"... I see," he said with a slow nod. "And you're quite understandably upset that you will never see your world again."

"Oh, I'm super depressed over it," Sorun agreed, the flippancy of such a statement making Elias freeze in shock, "and I... haven't really, you know, gotten over it or anything, but I'm getting there. I think." His voice lowered a bit. "I hope."

The squirrel next to him remained still for a few seconds, and then regained his composure. "You're very carefree over your... distraught condition," he noted.

"Dude, I'm not lying when I say all this dry humor and sarcasm of mine is the only thing keeping me from becoming a crying mess. It's how I cope with it. I think that's one of the only ways to deal with depression." It was his own best explanation for it, at least. He didn't know how he felt admitting this to Elias, but at this point, seeing as he planned on dying, he just didn't care enough to hide it. "Don't get too worried about me, Elias. I'm going back to the Freedom Fighters. Being around others'll help me. I just, you know... it's rough. Knowing I left everything there behind. It's really rough."

"I... imagine so," Elias said, voice lowered and saddened. "I won't pretend to understand how you're feeling, I simply can't imagine, but I think you're right in wanting to return to the others for healing in addition to continuing your Freedom Fighter duties." A beat passed. "Does this not then technically makes you homeless, Sorun?"

Sorun shrugged. "Guess so." He turned his head back to Elias. "Wait, am I technically an illegal citizen since I'm living at Sonic's house?"

"No, no it doesn't... well technically an argument can be made if you were to take up permanent residence here-"

"Where's my visa, Elias?" Sorun interrupted with a frown. "I want my green card. I'll marry you for it if I have to."

"Pardon me, but I don't know what those- w-what the-!?" Elias leaned back in shock, arms frozen to one side as he stared at Sorun with wide eyes. "S-Sorun, I'm married! And-and you're a-!"

"Ah, come on, everybody here is so progressive. I'm pretty sure they wouldn't look twice at polygamous marriage." A blush began to form on Elias' face, and he began to incoherently stammer. Sorun burst out in short laughter at the sight. "Relax, man, I'm just messin'

around with you." He laughed again. "I really needed a laugh, though, you have no idea."

The king sighed in relief, and then crossed his arms with a pout. "That's not a very appropriate joke to make, Sorun," he muttered.

"You people have no sense of humor," Sorun claimed. "The shot was there. I had to take it."

"Eghh..." Elias ran a hand over his face, and then shook his head. "Back to what I was trying to say, if you wanted, it wouldn't be any issue to offer you official citizenship within the Kingdom of Acorn. After everything you've done for the Freedom Fighters already it's practically earned. And I *am* the king, you know."

"Pulling political favors for me? We're already practically married." A small grin formed on Sorun's face when Elias began sputtering again. "Seriously though, uh... don't worry about it," Sorun said with a shake of his head. "Right now I just wanna focus on the Freedom Fighter stuff. Maybe after the war has ended we can talk about my residency."

That's what he said, at least. Really Sorun wasn't worried about his citizenship at all considering he was going to die before it became important. It was nice to know it was something that could be done for him, though. Helped him feel like he belonged. It made the weight on his heart that much lighter.

"Of course, Sorun. You need only ask." Elias calmed down and gave Sorun a worried look. "Are you going to be okay, now?"

In response, Sorun blew out a long breath. "I don't know." He really didn't, he realized, as he stood up and began walking towards the windows. "I, um, feel better, though. Yeah. Talking helps. I guess that's why Sonic was always so insistent on it." His face fell as he came to a stop and stared out the window. "He can never know I admitted he was right." He did truly feel a bit better, though. Not by

much, but it was progress. Enough that he felt he could go back to Freedom HQ with a reasonable amount of confidence, at least.

"Heh heh." Elias rose up from his sitting position on the stairs. "I'll be sure to keep mum on that around him."

"Ah-huh. Hey, Elias?"

"Yes?"

"What's with the giant, robot wasp over there?"

Upon Sorun's question, Elias ran over to the teen's side by the window. Sorun, in turn, pointed his finger in the direction of what he had been referring to.

It was definitely a wasp. Or something shaped like a bee, at least, with a silver carapace and fitted with a pair of buzzing wings that were *somehow* keeping it aloft. It was a fair distance away, at the edge of the city, and was flying off in a direction away from Knothole. It took Sorun a few moments to realize that was the direction of the HQ.

"... A goddamn bee? Are you kidding me?" He glanced over towards Elias, and sighed when he saw the concerned look growing on his face. *"I swear to god if I have to fight something* again *when I already had to fight all those jackals this morning..."*

"I don't know what that is, but based on its mechanical nature, I would have to assume it's of the Doctor's creation," Elias said, causing Sorun to groan in exasperation. "I'll go and inform-"

"Nah, don't worry about it." The Bringer Claws flashed into existence on Sorun's back. "I gotta make up for all the trouble I caused, and I'm in the mood, which is really unfortunate for that wasp." He took a step back and look up at the window. "Thanks for the talk, Elias. I gotta go now." He glanced back at the squirrel. "And for god's sake,

man, lock your windows. You never know what kinda creep's gonna come sneaking in."

"Er... I'll be sure to relay your advice to the guards." Rather awkwardly, Elias gave Sorun a stiff parting wave. "Farewell, Sorun. Good luck."

"Mm." The pale teen looked back up at the windows. "Seeya, Kingy."

He flew up and out the open window without another word, with Elias silently watching the human fly off in the distance.

It wasn't even that he was upset at all this insanity that kept forcing Sorun to fight things. He'd long since accepted that this was just something he had to deal with. That wasn't the issue. The issue was the sheer frequency these events kept happening.

He realized the rest of the world was already taken over. He realized the current situation was bleak and the numbers and odds were really stacked against them all. He realized that, because of this, maybe an inordinate amount of fighting and missions was necessary. He couldn't even remember anymore if he'd ever even had a single week on Mobius that hadn't had at least one life-threatening event he'd been involved in. He understood the necessity of it all, but there was a certain limit of how much of this he could tolerate.

Then again, Sorun supposed he couldn't complain too much. Sonic and the rest had been doing this kind of thing all their lives since childhood, and they all still had their respective sanities perfectly intact. Whether it was because they were just that strong or because they'd all always had each other, he didn't quite know, but he couldn't help but respect their mental fortitude they had that allowed them to weather all the craziness. Because Sorun himself? He was on the brink of losing it. Because after dealing with the mountain yesterday, and the jackals this morning, and dreading whatever was gonna happen with the Freedom Fighters, the last thing, the absolute last thing, he needed right now was another fight.

And yet here he was, flying through the sky and racing towards a gigantic, house-sized robotic wasp flying towards Freedom HQ. And nine-to-ten odds said it was something from Eggman he'd have to smash. Because this was the rest of his life now until he died.

"Different day, same shit..." he internally sighed as he stopped in the air. He'd followed the wasp far enough that, down on the ground, he could see the small hill and the flagpole that Freedom HQ rested under. He could just barely see a blue shape and a black and red shape down there, too. Sorun winced and briefly wondered if Sonic or Shadow managed to spot him yet.

And of course, hovering in the air but still below Sorun, was the metal wasp. Sorun was tempted to rain down Summoned Swords on it right now from where he was, but he stopped himself when he heard a voice be projected out from the robotic insect.

"Alright, you mangy animals, give it up!" He knew that annoying voice anywhere despite only ever having heard it once- that was Snively's voice. And now that Sorun looked closer, he could see that there was a glass dome on the top of the wasp robot's head, and, indeed, the Overlander even shorter than Sorun was sitting inside of the dome operating what he assumed to be the controls to the wasp. "I have a Chaos energy detector right here telling me there's a Chaos Emerald in there! Now fork it over or else!"

Sorun's face fell. *"Oh, he's attacking because I left the Emerald here. The same thing Shadow said could happen. The thing that's happening right now."* He sighed as the Bringer Claws went slack and allowed Sorun to drop. *"He's never gonna let me live that down, damn."*

Well, all in all, it could have been worse. At least he got to slap Snively around now to relieve some of this stress. The thought alone was already making Sorun feel better.

A few moments of falling later and Sorun's feet landed right on top of the wasp's head dome with a loud *thunk!* Snively, from the inside,

started at the loud noise, and then looked up in annoyance. His irritated expression shrank right down into worry when he saw Sorun standing above him, hands casually tucked into his pocket with the teen's blue eyes glaring angrily into Snively.

"Yo, Snively," Sorun greeted, the cold, angered edge to his tone betraying his otherwise casual demeanor, "your days of terrorizing people with a bee mech are over."

The worried expression Snively held morphed into rage when he finally recognized the human. "It's a *wasp* , not a bee," he disdainfully hissed out.

"Ah-huh." At that point, Sorun remembered the weight on his left shoulder, causing his head to turn towards the Chao angrily glaring down at Snively from the teen's shoulder. "Uhp, hold on," Sorun said as he turned back down to Snively. "Gimme a minute to take care of something real quick. I'll come back and slap you right after."

Ignoring the indignant yelling from the Overlander, Sorun lazily hopped off the wasp's head and safely floated down to the ground with the help of the Bringer Claws. He walked forwards a few steps after touching down, the spectral hands proceeding the rest on Sorun's shoulders, and then came to a halt when he felt he came to a satisfactory distance.

For a moment, the pale teen had glanced ahead to catch sight of Sonic and Shadow. And to his great discomfort, they were both staring straight at him with wide eyes and shocked expressions. He breathed out of his nose in worry, and then did his best to put them out of his mind as he crouched down. "Alright, Virgil," he muttered as he removed the Chao from his shoulder, "this is your stop. Stay here a second."

"Chao-chao! Chao!" Even after setting the Chao on the ground, Virgil didn't look at all pleased over his treatment. He was giving what Sorun assumed to be the equivalent of a Chao's frown as he hopped on his feet while reaching out towards Sorun. "Chao!"

"Huh? No, you're stayin' here," Sorun said with a shake of his head. "I got wing-arms and swords. You're down a wing."

Virgil shook his head and tried reached forwards again, only to be pushed back when Sorun pressed a single finger against his forehead. The dot floating above its head turned into a exclamation point. "Chao!"

"Not happening. I'm serious, it's too dangerous for you."

While Sorun continued arguing with his Chao, the giant mechanical wasp buzzing up above them flew back a few feet. From inside his control seat, Snively gave out a cruel smile as he pressed a few buttons on his control console. At the same time, the wasp's metal thorax, at the bottom of which was a giant, metal spike, shifted upwards so that the point of the spike was aimed right at Sorun's back.

There was the sound of a small explosion, and the conical spike fired out of the wasp and straight towards Sorun. Sonic and Shadow, who had been standing by nearby with baffled expressions, saw the spike rushing through the air towards Sorun and were both ready to sprint over him and carry both him and the Chao away to safety.

This proved to be unnecessary, however, as right before the spike made contact with Sorun, his right Bringer Claw snapped out behind him and clamped down on the spike, instantly stopping it completely in its hold. The sudden stop had carried enough power behind it that a heavy amount of wind rushed out from the action, causing the leaves on nearby trees to rustle and for Sorun's hair and clothes to flit about. The human, with his spectral arm holding the spike behind him, remained completely motionless in his crouched position for a few moments, and then slowly breathed out as he turned his head enough so that he could glare at Snively with one eye.

His face was completely passive, but his one visible eye was so livid that Snively began unconsciously sweating.

"... Seriously? You seriously just tried shooting me and my Chao in the back...?" The Bringer Claw chucked the spike in the air, the projectile spinning round and round as it flew up. The teen rose up to his feet with a sigh, and slowly began to walk over to the wasp mech. The Right Bringer Claw held its hand out, and then caught the spike when it fell into its grasp. "You really wanna earn that slap, don'tcha, Snively!?"

The Bringer Claw threw the spike like a spear right at the wasp mech. It buried itself right into its thorax with the accompanying sound of screeching metal and sparking wires. The wasp shuddered in the air, and Sorun's Bringer Claw reached up to grab it by the end of its thorax. The blue hand found a solid grip, squeezed down, and slammed the mech right onto the ground.

A large cloud of dust had picked up as a result of the mech being slammed down. Sorun, not missing a beat, willed the Bringer Claw to reach back and grab onto one of the large, metal antenna sticking out of the wasp's head. The spectral arm stretching out contracted, pulling Sorun right towards the fallen mech. He swung around the antenna and landed right on the wasp's back, where he proceeded to reach out with both Bringer Claws and grab each of the mech's wings right as they began to try and flap. And then they started pulling.

"Hey! Hey, stop!" Snively shouted from the inside of the wasp's head as the metallic insect wings were slowly torn out from the mech's body. "You can't just pull my Egg Wasp's wings off like that! It's not fair!"

"You don't get to talk after that cheap shot you took back there." With the sound of tearing metal, both of the wasp's wings were torn off by the Bringer Claws and casually tossed to the side. Afterwards, Sorun stepped over the wasp's head, hopped back down to the ground, and without even looking back willed the right Bringer Claw to grab onto the wasp's face. It did so, lifting the mech, and Snively who was screaming inside the cockpit, up into the air before slamming it back down in front of him on its back. At the same time, twenty

Summoned Swords appeared over it and rained down on its body, impaling the mech and pinning it to the ground at various points along its body.

With the mech stuck into the ground, once more Sorun's right Bringer Claw gripped onto its head. It began pulling harder and harder, the metal on its neck beginning to give out as sparks and wires began to become exposed before, finally, the head was ripped off completely. The body instantly became lifeless as a result, and with a flick of its thumb talon the head Snively was in was sent spinning while balancing on the tip of the claw's index talon, the Overlander within's screams being distorted from the speed. Sorun continued to watch the spectacle for five seconds, let out a single, dry laugh, and then in an instant willed the Bringer Claw to grab the head and flick it up into the air.

Watching the spinning head rise up to its apex, Sorun let out a content sigh as gravity began bringing it down. *"I could kill him right here. It'd be so easy, too. All I gotta do is hold the head down and turn Snively into a living pincushion with Summoned Swords. Or just crush the head."* He began winding his right arm up, the right Bringer Claw moving in tandem with the real arm's movement. *"Too bad I'm terrified that Eggman'll blow Knothole up in retribution if I kill his nephew. Ah, well."*

The Bringer Claw reared back, its blue glow seemingly intensifying as the spinning head dropped nearer to the ground. Right before it impacted, the spectral hand lashed out and savagely slapped the head right on its face with enough force that, not only did the head go flying away, but the branches on the surrounding trees began to rustle.

Spinning uncontrollably through the air, the severed head eventually stabilized itself when four jets on the head's underside came to life. The flames from the jets stopped the spinning altogether, and made it so that the head was hovering midair. From where he stood, Sorun could clearly see Snively holding a hand to his mouth with a ill expression on his face, and deep inside he felt immense satisfaction.

There was a loud, electronic squealing sound as the speaker from earlier came back on. "Urp... oh... this... isn't over-"

Snively was interrupted when a Summoned Sword shot from Sorun's side and embedded itself through the dome, the tip of the sword resting mere centimetres from Snively's forehead. He screamed in fright after the sword shattered, and the wasp's head turned around and fly away after the jets of flame roaring out of the thrusters intensified. The satisfaction in Sorun only grew as he watched the heady fly away and shrink down until it disappeared completely.

"Ahhh... I'm gonna smack him every single time I see him," Sorun decided as he turned towards the spot he'd left Virgil. He began walking over towards the Chao, the ghost of a smile that had formed on his face disappearing quickly when he noted the blue and black and red colors from the corner of his vision. *"Oh, man. This ain't gonna be fun."* He shook his head. *"Alright, Emerald first, then I can deal with this."*

He hadn't been naive enough to assume nobody would be at the HQ, and if there wasn't that none of the Freedom Fighters would take notice of the fact there was a fight with a giant robot wasp happening, but he'd at least been hoping people like Sonic or Shadow wouldn't be there. He wasn't really sure he was ready to deal with them in particular quite yet. Didn't even know what to say, really.

Well, they were there, and it was way too late for him to run now. He'd have to deal with it one way or another anyways, but the Emerald and his Chao came first.

Stopping in front of his Chao, Sorun tilted his head downwards to see, with some amusement, that Virgil had crossed his arms and was pouting up at Sorun. The thing floating above its head at least turned back into a dot, so he figured that was a good sign. "Chao," he grumpily said.

"Come on, don't look so sour." Sorun bent down and picked the Chao up. "It's my job to do all the dangerous stuff. Your job is emotional support, remember?"

Virgil huffed and turned his head to the side as Sorun placed him in a sitting position on his left shoulder. "Chao-chao."

"Hey, no, you do help. Who else is gonna motivate me to be so stylish when I'm slapping somebody silly?" he asked as he turned towards Freedom HQ's entrance. "'Sides, you can't move that well with only one wing."

"Chao..."

Sorun sighed as he began walking towards the HQ's entrance. The fact that the two hedgehogs were to the side of his path and staring intently at him was not lost on him. "Look, Virgil, don't worry about it, okay?" he said. "If anything you're the lucky one. You don't have to fight."

Virgil didn't say anything in response, but the Chao still had an upset look on his face. Sorun didn't much know why. Upset at his own inadequacy to help his friend fight, probably, as he'd been really mad when Sorun had just offloaded him like that. Or maybe he just wanted to stay on Sorun's shoulder as he fought for the thrill. He didn't truly know, but no matter what face Virgil made he wasn't gonna put the Chao in danger by taking him into a fight with him. He just had to learn to live with it, Sorun supposed.

The human teen felt his heart rate increase a fair bit when he approached the two hedgehogs, though he kept his eyes forwards on the HQ's door entrance as he tried his best to look towards them. This proved to be in vain, however, as Sonic had stepped closer to him and held a hand out.

"Sorun-"

"Not a word, Sonic." Sorun stopped in his tracks and, not even looking towards Sonic, pointed his index finger at him. "Not. A single word. Out of you."

He lowered his hand back to his side and continued walking to the entrance. He opened the door, and then quickly descended the steps down into the HQ itself. He stepped into the HQ's living room, a bit of nostalgia hitting him as he looked around at the familiar surroundings along with relief when he didn't see anybody. He only got one step in further when Sonic zipped in front of him in a burst of super speed.

"Sorun, can you stop for a sec-!"

"What did I say- oh, forget it. Hold this." Without another word, Sorun picked Virgil up off his shoulder and deposited him into Sonic's hand. The blue hedgehog looked down at the Chao he was holding in bewilderment, and then looked back up as Sorun stepped to the lab's entrance.

Taking a deep breath, Sorun opened the door to the lab and stepped in. As he suspected, he saw the red Chaos Emerald resting on a nearby table. He also noticed that Tails was there at the computer, though the fox was mainly ignored by the human as he walked towards the Emerald. He wasn't ignored by Tails, however, who stopped whatever it was he was doing to stare bug-eyed at Sorun as he stopped in front of the table and reached to pick up the Emerald with his left hand. He made a small noise when he felt the red Emerald stick to his hand, and then promptly turned back around to walk back into the living room.

Walking back out into the living room, Sorun saw that Sonic was still there, his gaze shifting from Sorun to the Chao he was currently holding with confusion in his eyes. Shadow had arrived, too, looking just as confused as Sonic was as his eyes traveled down to the Chaos Emerald stuck to Sorun's left hand.

He avoided both of their gazes and turned towards the couch. Grumbling under his breath, he walked over to it and began

removing the cushions from the furniture piece before he began laying them out on the ground.

"... Sorun, what are you doing?" he heard Sonic ask from behind him, voice almost exhausted at watching Sorun's antics.

"I want something soft to land on when this thing knocks me out," Sorun answered as he put down the last cushion.

"Fair enough," Sonic said with a frustrated sigh as the human turned towards him and Shadow. "Can you just please slow down so we can talk?"

"Mm. Sure, in a minute after I wake up," Sorun agreed as he looked down at the red Emerald. He stared down at it for a second, and then took in a deep breath to prepare himself for the coming shock. *"Here goes... well, everything."*

He slammed his right hand down onto the Emerald, his breath hitching in his throat when he felt the Chaos energy beginning to rapidly surge within him. All too suddenly he felt an overwhelming jolt of power run through him, and automatically began tilting backwards as a result. He'd gone unconscious before his body had even hit the cushions.

Chapter 25

Recursion Error

Episode 25- Dilemmas

Oddly enough, absorbing Chaos Emeralds was becoming less and less of a painful process. Ironic, really, seeing as they kept bringing Sorun closer and closer to death.

He'd noticed it as far back as the second Chaos Emerald. Its power had flooded into him much faster than the first one, and while it had still been painful, he'd been knocked out so quickly that time it didn't even compare to the first time. That first time where it had felt like he'd been struck by a lightning bolt.

The third time around he actually noticed that the energy surge didn't hurt nearly as much. He wasn't even sure he was knocked out that long; he'd gone under, that much was for certain, but when he began to blearily open his eyes he still saw faint wisps of smoke wafting off his body. Convenient enough, he supposed, but suffering less and less pain absorbing these things the further he went didn't really make him feel all that better seeing as he'd die shortly after the last one.

The one thing that did feel better, though? The back of his torso and head. Because his brilliant idea of cushioning his fall had paid dividends. He may still have been fried by the Emerald, but he was fried comfortably.

Small victories.

"Best idea ever," he thought to himself, blinking more and more to try and clear his vision as he offhandedly patted the couch cushions he landed on. As feeling began to return to his numb body, he noted a

small amount of pressure resting on his chest. He made a low noise and rolled his eyes towards his chest, where he saw a blue shape with bits of yellow sitting directly on him.

"C-chao?" The noise that came out of Virgil was small and worried, and the Chao's eyes were widened in concern as he stared down at Sorun's face. He even went as far as to shuffle forwards and touch Sorun's face with one of his limbs, causing Sorun to snort in amusement. "Chao? Chao!?"

"Hey, Virgil," Sorun muttered as he lifted his right hand up to stroke the top of the Chao's head in an effort to calm him. "I'm okay. Little charring never hurt anyone."

The Chao tried smiling at the joke, but it was a wavering smile that did nothing to erase the concern in the Chao's eyes. A dry chuckle left Sorun, and he scooped the Chao up with his right hand only to place him down on the arm of the couch right behind him. With a small groan, he sat up and scooted backwards so that his back rested against the couch for support. He breathed out, and then lifted his head upwards.

Sonic and Shadow were, of course, still there. The shocked and confused expressions they'd had on their faces earlier had greatly diminished, though now they held unreadable, questioning looks on their faces. Tails had joined the group, too, and Sorun had a hard time pinning down a single emotion to read on the fox boy's face: relief, worry, surprise, and a whole lot of astonishment just to name a few he managed to see. And his eyes were so wide and his mouth was hanging so far open that Sorun couldn't help but chuckle.

"Tails... your face looks really funny right now," Sorun mumbled, lowly chuckling further as he pulled a knee up to sling an arm over it. "I really wish I had a camera right now. Too bad I dropped my phone in that store."

The younger Mobian tilted his head in confusion, and then he sputtered in outrage at Sorun's words while closing his mouth. "What

the- Sorun! You can't- you can't just run off like that only to come back saying stuff like that!"

"Sure I can. I just did."

Another voice began chuckling. Sorun shifted his gaze towards Sonic, who was shaking his head while looking from Sorun to the Chao on the couch behind him. "It's great to see you haven't changed at all, Sorun, but can I ask you what the deal with the Chao is?" he asked. "And... what happened with its wing?"

"Oh, Virgil?" Sorun mumbled as he tilted his head up to look at the Chao in question. "I found him like that and decided to rescue him. He's mine now, I guess."

Sonic blinked in surprise, and then focused back on Virgil. "You went out of your way to rescue a Chao...?"

"Why do you sound so surprised?" Sorun asked, tilting his head back down to look at Sonic. "His Chao Garden got torched by a bunch of robots and he was the only survivor. I wasn't gonna leave Virgil to starve."

He saw Sonic flinch in dismay after Sorun mentioned the Chao Garden. The same expression was more pronounced on Tails' face, and even Shadow momentarily grimaced. "That's awful," Sonic said, "but... but you really went and named him and everything?"

"Do you seriously have that low of an opinion of me that you thought'd I'd just abandon him to death?" Sorun asked in a flat tone.

"N-no! I wasn't saying that at all!" Chuckling nervously, Sonic waved his hands out in front of him. "I'm just really surprised. Not that you'd rescue something in danger, of course you would, I just didn't think you'd, well... keep it," he said. "I saw the bandage, so you must have gotten him treated somewhere. Why'd you keep him?"

"'Cause I wanted to? I dunno. Just did." Sorun shrugged. "There isn't a rule against pets in the Freedom Fighters, is there? Because if there is I'm ignoring it."

The blue hedgehog remained silent at first, his gaze going from the Chao to Sorun. He gave the human a critical look, and then chuckled while shrugging his shoulder. "And what if there is? Don't tell me you're not so dedicated to the cause that you wouldn't follow every rule to the letter."

Sensing Sonic's sarcasm, Sorun breathed out a single chuckle and rubbed at his head. "Oh, so there is? Dang, guess I'll just leave again."

"Ah, come on, Sorun. You're not gonna leave again," Sonic said. "We all know you just came back 'cause you missed my mom's pancakes."

"Oh, as if!" Sorun rolled his eyes in an exaggerated movement before focusing back on the blue Mobian. "She's great, but she ain't that... alright, she is, but I came back for more than just that."

Both teenagers stared silently at each other for a few more moments, and then they both burst out in quiet laughter. "Ah, man. Called it," Sonic said through his chuckles. "Glad to have you back, Sorun."

"Yeah..." Sorun laughed as well for a few more moments, and then stopped as the mirthful smile fell off of his face. "Alright, let's get the obvious out of the way. I'm never going back to my zone again."

And just like that, the semi-light mood that had settled over the room plunged right into nervous awkwardness. The small smile that had been on Sonic's face fell off immediately. Tails had begun to wring his hands together, and Shadow's eyes became half-lidded as he looked towards Sorun.

Sonic was the first one to speak. "Sorun, you don't know-"

"Dude, come on. Read the situation," Sorun mumbled as he looked up at the ceiling. "I didn't even need Tails to tell me. I... had a feeling before even that, but when he did all that work and confirmed it for me, I just... I didn't want to believe it. I mean, who would? Seriously, who?" He let out a sigh as his eyes fell back on the trio. "I left for a lot of reasons. Denial over being stuck here in this world forever. Anger because I had to talk with the same people responsible every single day. Fear over dying fighting Eggman." He paused, looked to the side, and then looked back at the Mobians. "Let's be honest, you guys pretty much ruined my life. And I didn't really see the point in being a Freedom Fighter after all that. So I just left 'cause... well, it was all way too much.

"Buuuut... I rescued Virgil, and seeing him all hurt and seeing a field full of dead Chao made me realize I don't really wanna see people die because of, you know, the *war* . And then I did some heavy thinking and... thought about all of you." Sorun forced himself to look away from them as a tinge of embarrassment rose in him. "I know that you people would never willingly ruin somebody's life and drag them into a war they didn't want to fight in and that what happened with me was a horrible mistake made out of desperation. That doesn't make it better," he elaborated with a quick glance back at the three before looking away again, "but I understand. And... you're all pretty cool. You know, for putting so much on the line to save the planet and everything. And you're not the worst people to hang around." Sorun's eyes flicked to Shadow. "Most of you, anyways."

Shadow made a "tch" sound. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Kidding, man," Sorun mumbled. "Anyway, beyond all that... I figured, you know, since I'm stuck here forever and I got all these powers, I might as well help out so my new zone doesn't become a metal wasteland of suffering under Eggman. And honestly, I don't really have anything better to do. So I came back." He stopped, and then began drumming his fingers against his knee. "That's all I got."

Nobody said anything at first after his long-winded explanation, making the teen begin to grow more anxious over their reaction. He

heard something shuffle towards him, causing Sorun to look back forwards. He wasn't that surprised to see Tails standing there in front of him, though the sight did still make him take a heavy breath in preparation for what was to come. The fox's two tails were dragging against the ground, and his ears were lowered to match the saddened look he had on his face.

Of all the conversations Sorun foresaw coming, this was one of the ones he dreaded the most.

"... Hey, Tails," Sorun began in a soft voice. "Sorry for throwing you."

The fox shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Sorun, it's fine. You didn't even throw me that hard." A beat passed, and his whole form seemed to deflate. "... I don't really know what to say," Tails mumbled out, eyes trained on the floor in an effort to avoid Sorun's gaze.

"I don't really think there is anything to say, Tails," Sorun said.

"Probably not," he agreed, "but... I know you lost your home-" Tails winced, "- and I know that's really horrible, but I don't think your life is ruined."

"That's debatable." Doubly so considering Sorun was going to die.

Tails' face grew a bit exhaustive at the statement. "Sorun, really, I mean it," he said. "You're still alive, and there's people here that care about you."

"Yeah, and you practically live here already," Sonic added as he stepped next to the fox. "It's not the greatest solution in the world, I get it, and it doesn't make up for what we did. I don't think anything ever will. But if we can't give you back your old home, the least we can do is give you a new home." He outstretched a hand out to Sorun, a hopeful smile on his face. "And... maybe a few friends to help you along the way?"

Sorun stared deeply at the offered hand, a blank expression on his face as he contemplated the pair's words. In truth, he would have loved to have taken that outstretched hand and accept that offer of friendship. To maybe build a new life around all these people and make the most of what had been given to him despite everything that had been taken. He could even see him doing it; he liked each and every one of them already, after all. It wouldn't be a terrible life. It'd be great, really.

But, unfortunately, he just couldn't. Not when he was going to die from all these Emeralds. And the last thing he wanted to do was give everybody even more grief because he'd gotten so attached to them all before dying. No matter what way he played it he doubted that it would be unavoidable, and Sorun himself wasn't even so sure how long he could keep the facade up after failing to distance himself the last time he tried this, but he still wanted to try nonetheless. If only to make his death as painless as possible for everybody else.

A deep sigh left Sorun, and he shook his head as he denied the offered hand and stood up to his feet. "Sorry, Sonic. It's not happening," he said, doing his best to ignore the disappointed look the hedgehog gave him. "Just because I understand why you all did what you did doesn't change that you still did it. It doesn't mean I'll never forgive you, if anything I already do, but... I can't do anything like that. Not just yet." He looked to the side at the wall. "If we actually manage to beat Eggman and you manage to give me this 'new home' you're talkin' about... then we'll talk. 'Til then, though, we're still just comrades."

Sonic's gloved hand lowered to his side as a deflated breath left him. A humorless smile soon found itself on his face as he shook his head. "Still, huh?" he muttered.

"Yeah. Still," Sorun confirmed with a nod. "Not forever, though."

"... I guess that's fair," Sonic conceded with a sigh. "The important thing is that you're back, though. No more issues with the Emeralds?"

It took all Sorun had not to sarcastically scoff at that. "Nah. It's sorted."

"Great, great. Glad to hear it." Sonic shot Sorun an inquisitive look. "So what snazzy new power did you get out of this one?"

"Huh? Oh!" In all this awkward conversation, Sorun had forgotten he'd even gotten a new power just a few minutes ago. He didn't even know what it was yet. "Yeah, no clue. Lemme just... try and feel it out or something." He slowly rose his right hand up, furrowing his brows as he concentrated. "I don't... really know what I'm looking for here. Usually they just kinda come out naturally." He closed his eyes and concentrated harder. "I'm feeling *something* here. Gimme a sec..."

It was an odd, foreign sensation he was feeling. A sensation not unlike the new sensation he felt when he gained his Summoned Swords and Bringer Claws. It was different and unique, though. A sensation that stood out from the other powers in the same way the other two powers stood out from each other so he could differentiate the two. He wasn't exactly sure how it felt different, either- it just was different.

Well, whatever the case, it was still a third, new sensation he felt inside of himself. So he reached in towards it and pulled on the sensation.

He got bonked on the head by something for his effort.

Sorun cried out, more in surprise than pain, after the hit on his head and stumbled back. At the same time he heard whatever had fallen on his head clatter on the ground in front of him, and then heard the other three Mobians step back. He reached up and rubbed the spot on his forehead he'd been struck, letting out an annoyed mumbled in the process, and then opened one eye as he looked down at the ground where he heard the clattering noise.

What he saw on the ground surprised him immensely, enough so that he lowered his hand and opened both of his eyes up. On the

ground was an object. Not a transparent, spectral object like the Summoned Swords or Bringer Claws, but an actual, solid object. An object that gave Sorun much confusion until he looked closer, and then immediately recoiled upon seeing the shape.

"It's... a katana?" He'd seen enough in his previous life to know one when he saw one, though the three Mobians were looking down at the sword lying on the ground in confusion. It was what it was, though: a simple, ordinary-looking katana nestled in its scabbard lying flat on the ground. "Are you kidding me? The Chaos Emerald gave me a weeb stick?" Sorun angrily muttered as he bent down to pick up the sword. "Of all the... wait. *Wait a minute* ... I know this sword..." Sorun's eyes widened dramatically in realization, and so shocked was he from the revelation that he almost dropped the sword back on the ground. "Oh, no way, it gave me *this* ...!?"

There was absolutely no mistaking it; he recognized the design anywhere. The black, seemingly lacquered wood scabbard with the decorative, metal bit on its tip. The flat, dark blue cord tied near the bottom of the sheath with the two ends freely hanging off like ribbons, with faint gold dots seen in the blue material. The ornamental, hexagonal, dark blue guard just below the sword's gold neck, split in half by the sword passing through it and with more intricate gold designs along its faces and rim. A handle made from a strange blue material not unlike the scales of a reptile, diamond-wrapped in white cloth. More gold on the handle's flat pommel.

Of course there was no way for Sorun not to know this sword at a single glance. He'd seen it too much to ever not recognize it. It was practically burned into his memory.

It was Vergil's sword.

"This is... Yamato..." Sorun whispered in wonder, his voice so low it was barely even heard by his own ears. He gripped the sword's handle with his right hand, and with his left hand gripping the sword's scabbard he slowly unsheathed the sword. The soft, scraping sound of the metal blade being unsheathed was almost as quiet as the

teen's own awed voice, and he didn't dare drop the scabbard as he gazed into the curved, silver blade of the sword, his own reflection distorted by the temper line running through the blade's length.

So amazed was he by the sword that the odd looks he was being given by the three Mobians and the Chao on the couch were completely unnoticed by Sorun. They'd all given each other looks, and after collectively shrugging Sonic took it upon himself to step forwards. "Wait, so... your new power is a... is that a sword?" he asked in an unsure voice. "Kind of a weird-looking sword, isn't it?"

"It's a katana," Sorun explained, voice not all there as he stared at the incredibly sharp-looking tip of the sword. "Its name is Yamato."

"... Tomato?"

Sorun's grip on the sword's handle tightened, and he sharply inhaled as he head snapped in Sonic's direction. "Gonna pretend you didn't say that," he muttered out as he lowered the sword. "It's *Ya* mato," he reiterated. "And what do you mean it looks weird? Just because its blade is curved a bit? I never heard you complain about Antoine's sword being weird."

"That's 'cause his sword's a saber, and that thing... I mean, look at it," Sonic said as he pointed at Yamato's blade. "It's real long, sure, but doesn't it look kinda, I dunno, thin?"

"You've never seen a katana before, have you, Sonic?" Sorun turned his body fully towards the hedgehog, his eyes trained down at the sword. "Guess it's not surprising seeing as eastern culture got blown up along with everything else when the Xorda hit. Then again, a lot of things managed to survive that somehow." He looked up at Sonic. "The design is eastern in nature. They might have swords similar to this in Yurashia, but I don't know for sure. I've never been there." He held the unsheathed sword up, scabbard still held in his left hand. "That said, this isn't a normal katana. It's a power from the Chaos Emerald." He paused. "It's very special."

"Pfft. Special? I don't know, Sorun," Sonic replied. "I've seen a magic sword or two in my time, but that? I'm just not seein' it." The blue Mobian reached forwards. "Here, lemme see-"

Right as Sonic's gloved hand hovered just a few inches over the katana's blade, he stopped dead in his tracks. Sorun's eyes narrowed in confusion, and he looked from the hand towards Sonic's body to ask what the matter was when his voice caught in his throat. The hedgehog's entire body had gone stiff. His green irises shrunk down a fair amount, and even some of his blue quills were standing up on end.

He almost looked like he was incredibly disturbed by the object he was reaching out towards.

Before Sorun could question the hedgehog's reaction, Sonic quickly pulled his arm backwards while taking a few steps away. "W-wow, I take it back. Eh-heh, that thing's... really something." Sonic's voice almost sounded nervous as he rubbed at his arm, his eyes still trained on the sword. "Sorun, me and Chaos energy have always had a kind of funny relationship. I've been around a lot of the stuff, so it's real easy for me to get a feel for it. And that sword... Sorun, that sword is putting off a lot of Chaos energy. Like, *a lot* a lot."

The perplexed teen continued staring at Sonic as he sheathed the sword. "It did come from a Chaos Emerald," Sorun reminded the hedgehog. "One of the infinite sources of Chaos energy? Like all the rest of my powers?"

"Yeah, and I always felt something out of your other swords and arms, but not that much," Sonic said. "You're sure that thing is safe, right?"

Sorun blinked, and then looked down at Yamato. "It's just a sword, Sonic." An incredibly powerful sword. A sword with very special abilities he would have to explore later. The applications for this thing if he was right were mind-blowing...

"Alright. If you say so." Sonic loudly exhaled, almost as if he was attempting to calm himself down, and then stepped back towards Tails. "Well, we're gonna take off. I guess I'll, uh, see you back home, Sorun. I'll tell my folks you're coming back."

"Okay?" Head tilted in confusion, Sorun waved goodbye at the retreating hedgehog and fox. "Uh, bye then, guys."

"Bye, Sorun." This was said by Tails, who waved back at Sorun while turning his head towards a retreating Sonic. He seemed to be just as confused as the human teen, but then turned around to follow the other Mobian out of the HQ.

After the pair had left, only three were left inside of the HQ's living room: Sorun, his Chao, and Shadow, who had mostly been silent since entering and who continued even now to just stare at Sorun with his arms crossed. This did not go unnoticed by Sorun, who rolled back and forth on his feet before sighing and turning to face Shadow.

"Was there something else you wanted?" he asked, half nervous from the stare and half curious at what the dark hedgehog had to say.

"Nothing important," he said at last, uncrossing his arms as he stepped closer to the human. "I don't see why they were so surprised at your return. I knew you would come back."

"Did you, now?" Sorun dryly remarked. "You looked just about as surprised as Sonic was while I was beating up that dumb wasp mech. And you sure didn't sound like you wanted me to come back after everything you said right before I left."

Shadow winced at that, looking down at the ground briefly before looking back up at Sorun. "I may have overstepped my boundaries without thinking clearly," he admitted with a long sigh. "I was unaware that you were permanently situated here against your will. I failed to consider that, at the time, you may have been struggling

heavily with this information. Evidently you *were* struggling, and me pushing for you to take the Emerald so hard may have been uncalled for." His red eyes flicked towards the HQ's entrance. "That being said, Chaos Emeralds are still Chaos Emeralds at the end of the day. Doctor Eggman would never admit it, but he knows the danger just one of those gems possesses. I don't doubt he somehow knows the power you gain from them as well. The fact his nephew went as far as to come here to try and reclaim it a single day after you retrieved it-"

"Yeah, they're dangerous to hold onto right now, I get it," Sorun finished. "Look, Shadow... don't worry about what happened back then. I wasn't in a good state of mind, you regret what you said, it was bad all around. But it's fine now. I'm back, and I plan on touching any other Emeralds we get our hands on as soon as we get them. So there's no problem anymore."

If he was being honest with himself, he was completely shocked that Shadow was going out of his way just to say all this. Knowing Shadow, Sorun had gone into this expecting snide remarks and maybe a bit of belittling on how his actions potentially put people in danger. He didn't expect a full-blown apology from the hedgehog. Especially when it looked like Shadow was just as uncomfortable doing this as Sorun was.

He did appreciate it, though. He had just as hard a time showing it as Shadow did making the apology, but he deeply appreciated it nonetheless. He just couldn't say it.

"Right. Of course," Shadow said as he nodded his head. "Well, regardless, I'm glad you managed to set your head on straight while you were out there. It seems some of my words actually managed to reach you after all."

"Huh? Oh, nah," Sorun denied with a shake of his head. "I wasn't thinking about you at all. I did all that on my own."

It was true for the most part, but this was mostly said by Sorun for the sake of playful spite. Shadow picked it up easily enough, as he'd huffed and turned to the side while crossing his arms again.

"Tch. I'm sure." He glanced to the side towards Sorun. "You've become very proficient with your Chaos abilities. I was surprised you managed to take down that wasp Badnik with so little effort."

"It was just one bee," Sorun said with a shrug. "It's not like I haven't been trying to learn how to survive out there with these powers. I'll kinda die if I don't."

"Hm." Shadow's eyes trailed down to the sheathed katana held in Sorun's left hand. "... The Faker is right about that sword," he said. "The amount of Chaos energy radiating from it is... concerning, to say the least. Are you sure you can handle that properly?"

"I can handle Yamato just fine," Sorun assured him as he held the sword up. "I just, y'know, gotta figure out how to use it is all. And see if it can do what I really think it can do."

At that, Shadow's eyes narrowed slightly. "There you go again. Acting almost familiar towards your new powers." A low hum left him as he turned back towards the human. "Are you absolutely sure there isn't an important detail regarding those powers you're neglecting to mention?"

Sorun tore his eyes from the Yamato towards Shadow. He opened his mouth to answer, but then quickly closed it as he thought to himself. He pondered Shadow's words over in his head, came to a conclusion, and then opened his mouth again.

"... Tell you what, Shadow. Later on we'll talk about my powers. Maybe when I try to figure out Yamato's abilities. When we're alone. You can call it training if you really have to." He closed his mouth as he finished his sentence, and then winced when a sudden wave of vertigo hit him. "But later. Later," he said as he held his right hand up to his forehead.

Shadow's eyes widened a bit in concern. "Are you feeling unwell?" he asked.

"No, I'm just... kinda dizzy, is all," Sorun answered as he lowered his hand. "Just, uh, tired I guess. Heh. It's been a long day."

The striped hedgehog continued looking towards Sorun, and then accepted the answer with a nod as he turned to leave. "Understandable. Get some rest if you're really feeling unwell. Until next time." With that, he fully turned around and left towards the stairs leading out of the HQ.

Sorun watched the hedgehog leave, and then breathed out a sigh of relief once he was out of sight. That hadn't gone horribly, at least. Not nearly as horrible as he expected the reunion between him and Sonic and Shadow to be. If anything he felt a slight bit better. Mentally, at least. Physically he was still a bit dizzy.

He suddenly felt something warm and wet drip down from his nose. He touched two fingers towards the spot, and when he pulled the hand back to examine it, he saw two dark red splotches on the tips of his fingers. He sighed, and then wiped the blood away from his nose. *"A nap. Yeah, Shadow's right. I could use a nap."*

Turning towards the couch, Sorun bent down and scooped the cushions up from the ground. He stepped forwards to set them down, and then stopped when he saw Virgil on the couch's arm looking up at him.

"Chao?" He still looked a bit concerned, and the dot above his head had turned into a question mark. A Bringer Claw momentarily manifested to give the Chao a reassuring rub atop its head as Sorun set the cushions back on the couch, but the upset look on Virgil's face remained. "Chao."

"What's got you so sour?" After finally setting the couch back to the way it was, Sorun tossed his body onto it and leaned his head back

on the couch's arm. "Don't tell me you're upset over what I said to Sonic and the rest."

"Chao." Sorun gathered he was right on the money when, after the question mark turned back into a dot, Virgil nodded.

The pale teen sighed. "So what if I lied about not wanting to be friends with all of them? Doesn't really matter." Sorun interlaced his fingers behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling. "Fighting for the freedom on the planet's dangerous, Virge. I might die. I'd rather not grow too close to them knowing there's a good chance I'll die just to try and spare them as much emotional harm as possible."

The answer didn't seem to satisfy the Chao, as he gave Sorun a stern frown. "Chao-chao."

"You think it's stupid?" A shake of the Chao's head. "Paranoid?" A nod. "Mm." He just barely managed to hold in a chuckle. "Yeah, probably," he airily replied, "but I've already made up my mind. And to tell you the truth, I don't really know how long I'm gonna be able to keep the act up." A sad smile placed itself on his face. "As much as I keep saying and denying it, I really do like all of them. That's why I don't want them to be too sad wh- *if* I die."

"Chao?"

"What's the point, then? Gotta try at least, Virgil," Sorun answered. "Even if it's in vain and I give up halfway, I wanna at least try. But maybe it'll be a different story once the war ends and I don't gotta worry about all this heavy 'dying' stuff," he said in an effort to appease the Chao.

A dissatisfied "chao" left Virgil's mouth, but he gave a small nod as he leaned back against the couch. Sorun breathed out a chuckle through his nose at the sight, and then closed his eyes.

Apparently he hadn't been as tired as he thought he had been, because try as he might, he couldn't catch any sleep. Either that or he was unconsciously resisting sleep as, a few minutes in, he realized he in no way, shape, or form was gonna make the mistake of sleeping on that couch again. Ten minutes in he gave up on tossing and turning, and decided to just open his eyes again and stare up at the HQ's ceiling while he thought to himself. Most of those thoughts had lead the teen to thinking back to Earth, putting him in a rather melancholic mood.

Now it was an hour in and, growing bored, Sorun had unsheathed Yamato once again so he could examine the sword's blade. *"Of all the swords the Emerald could have given me, it gave me Vergil's,"* he thought with a bemused chuckle. *"Of course it would. They already gave me Vergil's Summoned Swords. Why not his actual sword, too? And if this thing really is like the original... I'll need to experiment with it later."* He angled the sword just right so he could see his distorted reflection in the blade. *"Out of all the powers that Emerald could have given me... the ability to summon the Yamato isn't too shabby."*

Oh, the things he could get up to if even just some of the powers from the games' version of the sword transferred to this Chaos-created version. He had high hopes some did, too, based on Sonic and Shadow's reaction towards the blade. The fact they seemed so nervous around it was nothing but encouraging for him. He really would have to see for himself just what was possible with it later on at some point.

He opened his mouth to examine his teeth in the blade's reflection, and then sighed and began to pick at the plaque on a tooth with a fingernail. *"Where the hell did all this crap on my teeth come from? Consequence of skipping out on brushing, I guess."*

His thoughts ended there when he heard a single set of footsteps descend the steps into Freedom HQ's living room, and then stop right at the end of the couch. Sorun ceased picking at his teeth and,

too lazy to look up himself, angled the sword so he could see the reflection of whoever it was that had stopped at the couch.

There was no suppressing the sigh that left him when he saw Sally's distorted visage in the blade.

"Welp, no getting outta this one," he thought as he sheathed the sword and sat up on the couch. He looked forward to the meeting with her even less than he had with Sonic and Shadow. Mostly because of what Elias had said, about how she'd been mad at him leaving. He could see from her perspective why that would be, but he had to wonder how this conversation was gonna play out. How worried she was going to be over his well being versus how angry she was that he'd tried leaving the Freedom Fighters.

It wasn't going to be a pretty conversation regardless, and unfortunately for Sally, Sorun wasn't having it.

"Yeah?" he asked, sinking deeply into the couch after sitting upright. He saw out of the corner of his vision that Virgil was still asleep on the couch's arm. At least he didn't have to be awake to witness all this coming drama. Lucky him.

"That's all you have to say?" He could hear in Sally's voice that she sounded mad. He turned his head just enough so that one of his eyes could see her, and yes, he could see that she looked the same way she sounded. Narrowed eyes, tense posture, creased lips, the works. "You run out on the Freedom Fighters, come back a day later, and all you have to say in response is 'yeah'?"

"Yeah."

A sound somewhere between an exhausted sigh and an angered huff left Sally. "Why are you acting like this, Sorun?"

The teen turned his head in her direction. "Sally, I'm sad and tired. I don't wanna deal with you yelling at me." He turned his head back forwards. "Maybe tomorrow. Preferably never."

"I didn't come here to yell at you."

Sorun turned his head towards Sally again. The frustration in her eyes was clear, but now that he looked closer he saw that her expression looked more concerned than anything else. "Alright, then why'd you come?" he asked.

"I just wanted to check up on you," she answered as she stepped around the couch. "I... admittedly *did* have some choice words for you for running out on us, but I had a talk with Sonic, and he told me about some of the difficulties you've been having." She paused and looked Sorun in his eyes. "Why did you decide to come back, Sorun?"

"You talked to Sonic, didn't you?" Sorun asked back. "I already told him."

"Well, I wanted to hear it from you."

At that, Sorun sighed. He leaned forwards on the couch, placing the tip of the sheathed sword on the ground while folding his wrists over the bottom of the handle to use the sword as a cane. "Don't get me wrong, Sally. I didn't come crawling back to the Freedom Fighters just because I suddenly grew some backwards set of morality saying I should put my life on the line for everybody just 'cause it's the right thing to do. Maybe people like Sonic like to subscribe to the idea of 'with great power comes great responsibility', but I have to question how great that saying is when me getting powers automatically meant I had to go risk my life for a bunch of people in a world I don't even belong in. Kinda put the whole 'freedom' part of 'Freedom Fighters' in question for me."

"Then why did you bother coming back at all?" Sally questioned him.

"Because... as is stands, I live in this world now. And there are certain things here I want to protect," Sorun answered in a quiet voice. "Fighting alongside you all against my will is one thing, but fighting because I choose to is something else entirely. I can't protect

anything if I don't fight, and if Eggman wins then it's game over for Mobius."

Sally nodded at Sorun's explanation, her features softening a bit. "And what did you decide you wanted to protect?"

Sorun rolled his head back with a groan. "Does it really matter? Look-" he rolled his head back forwards, "- Sally, you and me? We're in the same boat. You don't wanna see the world get wrecked by Eggman, and I don't wanna see everybody in the world suffer under him. I've already seen enough of that." His eyes briefly flicked to Virgil's sleeping form, and then went back to Sally. "If I'm gonna live in this world, I may as well make sure it's a happy one to live in. Besides, you people kind of need me anyways. Wasn't the whole reason you summoned me here to begin with was because you were all losing against Eggman? Nothing's really changed in that regard."

"I'm painfully aware of this." Sally continued looking at Sorun, and then silently moved forwards to sit next to him on the couch. Sorun had followed her with his eyes, but didn't make a move to stop her as he leaned back against the couch while resting Yamato on the couch's side. "I would have liked it if you would have talked to somebody at some point about your problems, but I'm happy that you made up your mind and returned to us. Because you're right- we really do need your help. And I saw the Badnik wreck outside of the HQ." She turned her head towards Sorun and gave him a small smile. "You've come a really long way since you first came here, huh?"

Meeting the chipmunk's gaze with his own, Sorun let out a small laugh. "The powers help," he said, "but yeah. I guess I've gotten kind of good."

"I'd say more than 'kind of', Sorun. And... your new ability is that sword, right?" She tilted her head in confusion. "What is it supposed to do?"

"Oh, Sally, this sword can do stuff you've probably never even dreamed of." Sorun reached to his side to take the sheathed sword in his hands, turning it over as he admired it. "At least, I think it can. I haven't really tried it out yet. But don't worry too much about the sword." Suddenly, and much to Sally's surprise, the Yamato collapsed in on itself, disintegrated in a shower of blue particles, and then disappeared entirely.

Sally stared at the empty air where the sword had been, and then chuckled while turning back towards Sorun. "Well, I'll take your word for it." Her smile lessened as the concern returned to her eyes. "And don't get me wrong, I'm glad to see you're trying to get stronger for everybody's sake, but you know I would have let you back into the Freedom Fighters even without your powers, right? Especially after everything you've done and gone through. You really do have a place here alongside everybody else."

"I know," Sorun replied with a small sigh.

"... You're doing okay, right, Sorun?" she asked him.

"No, Sally, I wouldn't call me being depressed 'okay'."

Sally allowed a few silent moments to pass between them before speaking again. "Do you want to talk about why you're so upset?"

Sorun's head rolled in her direction with an incredulous look on his face. "Sally, I literally just accepted the fact that I've lost my home planet and everything and everyone I ever knew on it forever. Why would I not be upset? What possible future did you envision where I was actually okay with this?" The fact he was going to be dying relatively soon was still heavily weighing on his mind, as well. More so than the fact his zone was lost to him forever, actually, though by now he didn't even know if he was more frustrated over him actually dying or over the fact he couldn't even talk to anybody about it.

But he could tell that his words were making Sally more and more worried from the way her face was falling more the further he spoke,

so Sorun decided to try and dial his mood back a bit. "Look, I'm trying to get better, okay?" he tried. "It'll... it'll pass. I just need... gah, I don't know what I need..."

"I think some helpful words would be a good start," Sally told him. "I was in the same place you're in right now way back when all this started."

At hearing her words, Sorun very much wanted to rebuke her claim and tell her that no, she wasn't, because he really did doubt she knew how he was feeling right now. But both her face and her words seemed sincere, so he kept quiet and allowed the Mobian to continue.

"Robotnik had just overthrown the whole kingdom. Everybody lost everything when we were forced to retreat back here to Knothole to escape him. It's almost hard to believe how small it was back then compared to how it is now." A single, sad laugh escaped her as Sally looked down towards the floor. "I always tried to stay strong in front of everybody, they all had as many problems as I did, but more than that I was their leader. I never wanted anybody to see I was suffering just as bad on the inside as they all were." She looked back up at Sorun. "I know it feels awful. Losing everything, losing people and knowing you'll never see them again. It won't get better immediately, but over time it heals." She looked down again and smiled a bit. "Having others that you trust around you helps a lot, though."

Sorun nodded along, his expression still gloomy as he leaned back into the couch. "I think you're neglecting a very important difference between the two of us, Sally," he mumbled. "You got your kingdom back. You got your family back. I won't."

Sally flinched, and then slowly nodded. "I know, Sorun, but-" She stopped herself when he noticed the withering glare the human teen was sending her way. "I... I'm sorry if I made you upset."

"... You didn't make me upset," Sorun said, sighing through his nose as he leaned further into the couch. "But did you ever hold out at

least some hope you'd get your family and kingdom back all the way back then?"

"Of course I did," Sally softly answered. "Half of the reason I lead the Freedom Fighters was to gain back everything we'd lost, or at least as much as possible. The other half was to stop Robotnik so he'd stop harming everybody in the planet. Most of what kept us going through all those years was the hope that, one day, we'd take it all back and return to living normal lives. The lives we had before all this."

"Well... I don't have that hope, Sally. Earth is already gone for me." Sorun's eyes tilted down to his lap. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

Sally reached out towards him and tried to answer him, but no words managed to come out of her mouth. Her hand lowered back to her side, and after frowning in contemplation she began reaching into her vest. "Sorun, listen, I have to go now. But I'm leaving Nicole here with you."

The pale teen's eyes snapped back up to Sally in slight panic. "Wow, Sally, really wish you woulda told me she was listening in on this conversation before I went and said all that stuff." He doubted he would have been able to hide it anyways, but if there was one person didn't want to know of his current mental state, it was her. And now she'd just heard him spill his guts out in front of Sally.

That death by Emeralds couldn't come quick enough for all the sudden embarrassment he was feeling.

She didn't say anything in response, instead choosing to simply take out the handheld computer and place it on the other end of the couch. She hesitated for a moment, and then reached back inside of her vest before pulling out a Power Ring. Sorun groaned at the sight and turned away while asking, "Why are you doing this?"

"Because maybe she can get through to you better than I can," she answered as she began inserting the Power Ring into the computer. "She told us herself that she's the only one you go out of your way to hang out with. And I'm not leaving you alone while you're like this." She finished slotting the Power Ring in, and then got up off of the couch. She walked to Sorun's side and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Hang in there, Sorun. We're all there for you if you need it."

He didn't say a single word in response. Sorun just chose to keep facing away from both her and the end of the couch where Nicole's computer body was. Sally, seeing the sight, simply slid her hand off of Sorun's shoulder and proceeded to walk towards the stairs leading out of the HQ.

Once he heard the door leading outside faintly close in the distance, Sorun felt his body deflate as a breath left him. The presence of the computer laying on the couch near him alone was making him more and more nervous, and he felt his body tense up when he felt a sudden weight compress the couch even further. "Nicole, don't," he pleaded in a small voice.

"No." He felt another hand fall on his shoulder, and though his head was still facing away, he'd turned his eyes down enough to see the appendage. A black-furred hand connected to a brown-furred arm compressing down on his shoulder. "Sorun, please talk to me."

He practically wanted to shout at her and everybody else for not leaving him alone, but he couldn't. He couldn't bear to do something like that to her of all people, and deep down he truly was grateful everybody was going out of their way just to try and help him. It was that same friendly, helpful nature that had helped him decide that he was going to save them all.

So, with a heavy sigh, he obliged Nicole and turned his body in the opposite direction to face her. He almost felt worse when he saw her face looking almost as gloomy as his was. It reminded him of all the way back during the incident with Metal Sonic's head, back when

she had a similar look on her face. Upon seeing that face, Sorun had briefly felt the desire to get that sad look off of her face overpower the more negative feelings weighing himself down.

"Sorun?" Nicole quietly called out his name while she slowly took her hand off his shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

"Mm... on a scale of one to ten, ten being the worst... I'm feelin' a solid fifteen here, Nicole." His words hung in the air a bit, and soon enough a low, bitter chuckle left Sorun. It caused the barest of smiles to form on Nicole, too, and though it was already wavering and faltering, Sorun felt better knowing he at least caused that much of a change. "Sorry, awful joke. I couldn't help it."

"No, no. It's fine," she assured him as she slid slightly closer to him. "I know how terrible this must feel for you, but if you want, we could..." Her eyes darted to the side almost desperately as she searched for something to take Sorun's mind off from his thoughts. Her eyes stopped on the TV. "We could play a game?" she suggested, turning back to Sorun with a forced and hopeful smile.

The teen glanced over towards the TV and game console, and while there was a slight sense of longing in him, he couldn't bring himself to acknowledge it. "I'm not in the mood," he said.

Nicole's forced smile dropped instantly, and she seemed almost disturbed by his claim. "That's okay," she said, a bit quickly. "We can do something else if you prefer-"

"Nicole," Sorun interrupted, eyes tired as he looked back at her. "What do you want?"

"... I just want to make you feel better," she answered. Her long, triangular ears had dipped down slightly with the answer, and she'd slid even closer towards him. "You're my friend. I can't bear to see you like this. I... I can't comprehend what it is you're feeling, I know, but I want to help so you stop feeling this."

Sorun felt a wave of gratitude wash through him, and then slowly breathed out as he sunk further into the couch. At the very least, he wasn't going to deny her the chance to at least try and make him feel better. He didn't want to risk making her feel even worse at his expense, and deep down, he really did want her company at the moment. "Then just talk," he told her. "If you want to help just stay here and talk with me."

She eagerly nodded in response, pulling herself even closer to Sorun while also pulling her legs up to rest on the couch behind her. "Of course I'll do that, Sorun. Just say whatever's on your mind."

"Mm." Sorun pulled his own legs up on the couch, pressing then to his knees as he kept an eye on Nicole from the corner of his vision. "You're not mad I left, are you?"

The lynx shook her head. "You came back. That's all that matters," she said. "Nobody can blame you for how you're reacting. I certainly do not. And I'm thankful that you've decided to come forwards to try and talk through your emotions. In the past you were rather... closed-off with your feelings, and it caused much vexation among some of the others. Sonic noticeably." A humorless smile found its way onto her face as she looked to the side. "You were always so quick to try and talk others out of their issues, like you'd done with me, and you never even considered yourself. It's a trait that I oddly admire about you, and yet at the same time it frustrates me."

"Well, nobody's perfect. Least of all me," Sorun muttered in response. "But I can only go so far before I have to admit I need help, Nicole. Otherwise Sonic might tie me to a chair or something until I start talking."

A single laugh left the lynx. "You joke, but from how much you've strained his patience, I would not put it past him. I'm happy that a chair wasn't necessary for you to finally open up."

Sorun turned his head towards her. "... Only because it's you." He looked back forwards, eyes still trained on Nicole. "Since... since

we're friends." He mentally cursed himself at his weakness. Not even a day in an he'd already failed at never calling anybody a friend. *"It's Nicole, though,"* he reasoned with himself. *"I can make an exception for her, right? And I already kind of slipped and almost said her name in front of Elias, and Sally's already aware of it, so... so a single exception won't hurt, will it?"* He sighed. *"Why am I even bothering?"*

Nicole's eyes widened just the barest amount, and her ears perked up slightly. "I'm very glad to hear you say that, Sorun," she said. "Is talking with you like this helping?"

"... It's helping," he honestly answered, feeling better when he saw another, more genuine smile begin to grow on Nicole's face. "I wonder what my mom is doing right now?" Sorun wondered.

The smile faltered for a bit, but Nicole managed to maintain well enough as she paused in thought. "I'm unsure. You've never talked about your mother before. I'm sure if she saw you now that she would be proud her son is putting so much effort in to try and free the planet."

An amused scoff escaped from Sorun. "You kidding? She'd flip out if she found out I was almost getting killed on a weekly basis here. She'd drag me all the way back to Earth if she could." He laughed a bit at the mental image of the sight, the last laugh exiting as a sigh. "Man. I really hope me disappearing like that didn't crush her too much," he murmured. "I mean, it probably did, but... she's never even going to know what happened to me. We didn't have any other family, either. I was literally all she had." He felt his shoulders slump. "I really hope she gets better eventually. That she moves on with her own life. It hurts knowing me up and vanishing like that is probably tearing her apart so much." He felt his body slump forwards. "I really am a terrible son."

"Don't say that. It isn't your fault." Nicole reached over and put a reassuring hand on Sorun's back. "I imagine any mother would be devastated to lose her child, but she will move on. If she is anything

like you, I am sure of it." She began to slowly rub at Sorun's back in an effort to comfort him. "You had friends, too, did you not?"

"Yeah, but I wasn't nearly as close with them as my own mother. They'll get over me leaving. Probably won't even take a month for them to move on," he said. "Dave might take longer, he was my best friend, but he'll get over me, too. They all will. It's for the best, really, since I can never go back anyways."

Nicole tilted her head to the side with a small frown. "I'm not so sure you could call people like that friends if they would move on so quickly from your memory."

"Ah, don't hold it against them. We were all kind of cynical and pragmatic over there." The soothing rubbing on Sorun's back caused a bout of drowsiness to hit him, causing the teen to make a long, drawn-out yawn. "Thank you, Nicole. For staying with me for a bit." He gently removed her hand from his back and stood up from the couch. "But listen, it's, it's been a long day for me, and I think it's pretty late out anyways. I'm going back to Sonic's house to go to sleep." He looked the holographic lynx in the eyes. "But really, thank you. I... I needed this."

He wasn't back at a hundred percent, that was a foregone conclusion the moment he decided to go through with absorbing all the Emeralds, but it still helped him feel better. Having someone there to talk about at least some of his issues and to get some of this thoughts off his chest. And if it had to be with anyone, he was glad it was with Nicole. She was the only one he'd willingly admit to being friends with around others, even if it did make his resolve to distance himself from everybody else crumble that much faster. He didn't care. He needed at least one friend for his sanity's sake at this point.

But he was sure he made the right choice in at least allowing himself one friend. He did feel better. Enough that he felt confident that just maybe things would go back to normal starting tomorrow. It was just the refresher he needed before going back into this life, and he'd always be thankful to her for helping him. Enough that he was

actually able to tell her how grateful he was despite how embarrassing it was to admit it.

And, strangely enough, even though he was too tired to now he wanted to keep talking about other things. Some of his doubts, about things left on Earth he never saw again, just... anything on his mind to help him further. It was hard for him to acknowledge, but he needed this. He wasn't sure how much further he could go without it at the moment.

Nicole herself, meanwhile, had pulled her hand back while shyly smiling in Sorun's direction. "It's no issue at all, Sorun. I'm just happy to be of help. I trust you'll be fine now?"

"Yeah, I'll be alright." The teen dipped his head down slightly to hide some of his face behind his hair. "But I mean, you know, I wouldn't mind doing this with you again. Maybe play a few more games when I'm feeling up to it. Just to... help with the therapeutic process. You get what I mean."

"Of course I do," she assured him with a nod. "I don't think that will be an issue at all." She glanced back to the handheld computer. "You're leaving right now, then?"

"I was planning on that," Sorun slowly answered as he followed her gaze to the computer. "Should I carry you back to Sally, or...?"

"No, do not worry about it. She's busying herself with royal affairs at the castle; she doesn't need the distraction at the moment," Nicole informed him with a shake of her head. "I'll simply remain here for the time being until she comes back to collect me tomorrow."

Sorun frowned at the answer. "You just wanna stay here all by yourself?"

"It's not a problem, Sorun. I'm used-"

"Nah, I'm not accepting that." He walked over and picked up the handheld computer, much to Nicole's surprise. "Look, I'll just take you back to Sonic's house with me and I'll bring you back later, alright? We can, eh... make it a sleepover or something, I dunno. It's gotta be better staying the night in this lonely place."

"I would hardly call this place lonely. But if you insist, I'll agree to it." After finishing, Nicole's body started to dissolve into a cloud of dark pixels right before Sorun's eyes. He could have sworn he saw a thankful smile grow over her features right before her head disappeared, but it had happened too quick for him to know for sure. Seconds after her body completely disappeared the green screen on the small computer lit up. "Shall we depart now?" she asked, her words appearing on the screen.

Sorun nodded. "Yeah. Lemme just grab Virgil real quick. Oh, Virgil's my new Chao by the way." He reached to the side of the couch and picked up the sleeping Chao's form, cradling his body in the crook of his elbow.

"You decided to take a pet?" Nicole asked him as he began walking towards the HQ's steps.

"Well, uh, yeah." He looked down at the sleeping Chao in one arm, the computer in his other hand, and then felt a smile grow on his face as he began ascending the steps. "I rescued him and he started following me around, so I thought why not, y'know? It's a long story, actually. See, after I left..."

Chapter 26

Recursion Error

Episode 26- It slices, it dices, it cuts through everything

Everybody had a different morning routine. Some people went to go get breakfast first thing after waking up. Others exercised, took care of their hygiene, did miscellaneous chores, or went to go get the morning newspaper. Just something relaxing to help that somebody prepare them for the rest of the day.

Sorun had been bunking in the same house as the Hedgehog family long enough that by now Sonic had been able to roughly pin down Sorun's own morning routine. That routine was for him to wake up, go back to sleep, wake up a second time, and by that point it was a fifty-fifty split of him finally getting up or going back down for a third nap. And then after finally getting up at some point he'd go to the bathroom, and then go to the kitchen, and would then carry on with the rest of his day. This was a routine Sorun rarely deviated from. If there was one thing Sonic could safely say he knew about Sorun, it's that the human liked peaceful routines.

That's why he was so confused when he'd woken up that morning to see that Sorun, who'd fallen asleep in the other bed in the room the night prior, wasn't there. The fact he'd even gotten up before Sonic had was shocking enough to the hedgehog, but when he looked outside of the window he was even more shocked. Sorun was out in the house's small backyard, swinging that katana of his around. Like he was attempting to practice with it.

After all the complaining Sorun always did about training, him practicing something on his own was the last thing Sonic ever expected. But there he was. Doing practice swings with the sword.

He didn't know how long he was watching Sorun, but he was only roused from it when he heard a knock on his room's door. "It's open!" he called, prompting the door to slowly open. He felt some amount of relief go through him when he saw that it was just Tails after the fox had poked his head into the room.

"Hey, Sonic." The door opened further as Tails stepped inside. "Do you know where Sorun is? Sally is wondering where Nicole is and he was the last one with her."

"Nicole? She's over there," Sonic said, pointing his thumb out to a nightstand near Sorun's bed where the small, handheld computer was set down. "He brought her here with him last night."

As he finished speaking, dark pixels began forming and coalescing into the vague shape of a body, until finally they condensed and recolored. Seconds later the cloud of pixels had transformed into Nicole's body, the lynx having chosen to form in a sitting position on Sorun's bed while facing Tails. "He did not want to leave me alone in Freedom HQ, so he took me back to Sonic's home," she informed him.

Tails' eyes widened in surprise. "Oh! That was nice of him."

"Yes, it was," Nicole agreed, the corners of her mouth turning upwards. "Was there something Sally needed that required my attention?"

"No, she was just wondering where you were," Tails said with a shake of his head. "Where is Sorun, anyways?"

Sonic nodded towards the room's window. "Out there. Take a look."

All three of them shuffled towards the window so they could get a better look at the human in the backyard. He was still swinging that sword around, though what he was actually trying to practice, Sonic had no clue. He personally had little to no knowledge about actual swordsmanship, nothing about stances, styles, special techniques or

anything like that. He'd seen Antoine handle a sword, though, so he had a vague idea of what handling a sword was supposed to look like. And his assumption was that, since Sorun's katana was so similar to a saber, he would swing it at least somewhat similar to how Antoine swung his sword.

Sorun was in no way swinging that sword in any way Sonic had seen before.

They weren't random swings, at least. He could see that much as the human was repeating very specific-looking swings. It was the actual manner he was holding the weapon and swinging it that was throwing Sonic for a loop. He almost always held the sword's sheath in his left hand, for one thing. He didn't tie it around his waist using the blue cord already tied to the scabbard- he continually just held it with his hand. His right hand, of course, held the katana itself. He'd do various repeated one-handed swings with the sword, and oddly he'd sometimes sheath the sword only to quickly draw the blade out in a large slash.

It... wasn't very smooth. Even Sonic could see that. The swings were slow and unimpressive-looking, and a lot of the times when Sorun tried to sheath the sword he'd completely miss slotting the blade into the sheath. His movements were completely amateurish, which, considering Sonic didn't imagine Sorun ever actually tried swinging a real sword in his life on Earth, he could understand. He kept wondering where Sorun had seen the sword swings he was attempting to practice, though.

He wondered even more about that sword itself.

"So Sorun's trying to practice with the sword?" Tails wondered aloud, his twin tails slowly swishing behind him. "I don't really get why the Chaos Emerald gave him that sword. Can't he already make a bunch of swords with that first power he got? Why does he need one more?" His eyes narrowed in an inquisitive manner. "And it's not all... blue and ghostly-looking like his other two powers are. It looks like a real sword," he noted. "Why do you think it's like that?"

"I couldn't tell ya, bud," Sonic muttered in response. "I'll tell you one thing, though. That sword... something's really off with it. Thing gives me the creeps."

Both Tails and Nicole turned towards him with questioning looks. "You looked really off-put by the sword back in the HQ, too," Tails said with some concern. "It looks normal enough to me. What's so weird about it?"

"You mean other than the fact I got the willies just by being near it?" Sonic mumbled out. "... It feels wrong. Call it a side effect of me being Chaos-sensitive, I don't know, but there's something really wrong with that sword. The amount of Chaos energy it gives off, the way the energy feels... geez, I think I can feel it from here."

He knew for a fact that there were a precious few people in the world that had been exposed to even nearly as much Chaos energy as he ever had. He could only count Shadow and Knuckles off the top of his head for people that even closely compared, and past them he doubted there were many others. He'd handled Chaos Emeralds all the way from back when he was five years old, back when they'd numbered in the thousands before they'd all been combined into the seven. He'd even handled the seven themselves. Past that he'd handled Power Rings, he'd interacted and fought with people with Chaos powers of their own... he knew what Chaos energy felt like.

Chaos energy had an unmistakable feeling. Sonic had always felt it the clearest whenever he'd gone into his Super form. It felt like he was standing next to the sun in a way. Not nearly as hot, of course, though there was an intense, warm feeling that would come over him. The raw *power* was there, though. A deep sensation within him, an instinct informing him of the limitless energy running through him, and a tingling, static feeling constantly tickling his body. They were comforting feelings to him. The warmth. The power. The tingling.

That sword. Yamato, Sorun had called it. It didn't feel anything like that.

It was so strange, too, because Sonic often felt Sorun's other powers. The Summoned Swords and Bringer Claws. He always felt the comforting sensation of Chaos energy faintly radiate from them whenever Sorun summoned them, and knowing they came from the Chaos Emeralds, Sonic had never paid them any mind. But when he felt out the Yamato... it was completely different. The power was certainly there. Almost too much- Chaos Emeralds were conduits for channeling an infinite amount of Chaos energy, but at least all of that energy was *contained* in the Emeralds. Sorun's katana radiated even more energy than an Emerald, but that wasn't the problem. Sonic's own body had channeled infinite amounts of Chaos energy without a sweat; the amount of energy the sword gave off was nothing to him, even if it was massive. It was how it *felt* .

There was no warmth to be felt in the power constantly wafting off of that sword. Just the opposite, actually: it felt cold. Not cold as in frigid, but cold as in... deep. Something raw and instinctual. Even the static energy he felt from the blade felt more intense and sharp than it ought to have been. The sword as a whole just felt wrong to Sonic. Something that felt darker than it needed to. Something that exhumed a cold presence that promised death.

How could something that looked so ordinary feel so *off* ?

"I don't know, Sonic," Tails voiced, stroking his chin with his hand. "I don't think I've ever seen a sword designed like that, but it really does just look like a normal sword. And I never felt anything off about it."

"I agree with Tails," Nicole said. "It is merely a construct of Chaos energy given shape by Sorun's will, as with the rest of his powers. I see no cause for alarm if Sorun himself feels at ease around it. He has, after all, shown a stunning amount of competency when it comes to the abilities granted to him by the Chaos Emeralds. There is no reason not to trust him."

"... A sword shaped from Sorun's will, huh?" Sonic echoed as he gazed towards the sword grasped in Sorun's hand. "I wonder what's

going on in his head that made him make something like that..."

Because what if Nicole was right on the money and the aura that sword gave off was just a reflection of Sorun? There was so much staggering power inside of that sword, and all of it was subdued in such a deceptively simple-looking blade. The only thing Sonic could think of as a comparison was a calm dragon, coiled in a resting pose but with its eyes open and just ready to attack at a moment's notice. It did remind Sonic somewhat of Sorun now that he thought on it- like the time he'd come back from that mission with Sally and Rouge, completely calm and at ease. The way he'd snapped from being that to the enraged state he'd been in when he'd slammed Knuckles into that wall with his new power. Even all the way back on the first day Sorun had arrived here Sonic had noticed it. How Sorun had been completely furious over what had happened and then calmed down to a normal level at an almost stunning pace over the course of the day. Sonic himself understood anger just as well as anybody else, but the way Sorun could just snap from one emotion to the next and back again in the most extreme manner left him speechless.

But what about how the sword felt? That deathly, cold dread that seemed to hang around in the air just centimetres above the actual katana's blade? Was that how Sorun felt? Sonic could certainly see it, but at the same time he had a hard time comprehending it. He knew loss, of course. Everybody did. He'd lost his parents and uncle, and even though he'd gotten them back, he'd still *felt* that loss. There were friends of his who *had* died, and when he thought back to all those times, the emotions he'd felt... he was shocked to find that they were eerily similar to the cold feeling he felt off the sword, minus the frankly uncomfortable amount of power mixed in with it.

And Sorun... Sorun had lost more than Sonic had ever lost. He'd lost *everything* . His whole zone, and the life he'd had within it. A loss on that scale was something Sonic just couldn't comprehend, because he simply had just never lost anything on a sheer scale Sorun had. Of course the human felt terrible about it, Sonic would be more worried if he didn't, but what was that feeling even supposed to be?

The same sadness and dread Sonic had felt when a friend died, multiplied hundreds of times over? What did that even feel like? Was it close to the feeling Sonic had felt from that sword? The endless, deep cold?

"Sorun, buddy..." Sonic sadly thought as he looked out the window at Sorun. *"How bad does your heart have to be hurting that your subconscious made that thing you're swinging around? An awful-feeling thing like that?"*

Well, Sonic couldn't give him back what he'd lost, but there was no way he was going to leave Sorun to drown in all of those negative feelings. As much as Sorun always claimed to never be friends with them, Sonic just never believed him, especially with how unconvincing he'd sounded last night. And he absolutely refused to leave a friend hurting like that.

"Do you guys think he's doing fine?" Sonic asked the other two as he turned towards them. "I know he's just now accepting he lost everything so he can move past it, but he's gotta be hurting." His green eyes glanced back out the window. "He looks fine on the outside, but I'm really worried about what's going on with him on the inside."

When he looked back to Tails and Nicole, he saw that both of their faces had turned into sad frowns. "It's really hard to tell with him, Sonic," Tails said after a long moment. "He's acting fine, but there's no way he's actually fine, right...?"

"No, Tails. I really don't think so," Sonic said with a shake of his head. "Nobody's gonna be fine after going through what Sorun's gone through. Honestly, I'm... I'm really amazed that after everything that's happened to him he came back because he actually wants to help save the world, even though we're the ones that did this to him." A sad smiled formed on his face as he ran a hand through his quills. "He's a real cool guy. I just wish we could help him more so he didn't have to go through so much."

"I think we are doing all we can for him," Nicole told them as she looked out the window towards Sorun. "Sorun had finally made the conscious effort to come forwards with at least some of his feelings. Matters of the heart are still a new concept for me, but from my understanding, extrapolating feelings onto trusted friends who will listen and be there for you is the most effective method for healing emotional injuries like the ones Sorun has sustained. He made a joke and referenced it as therapy, and I think he said this because he is aware of this fact."

Sonic eyed the lynx standing next to him in surprise. Since when had Sorun gotten so deep with anybody? "Yeah, well, it'd be way easier if he actually acknowledged us as friends so he could do that."

"He does. He acknowledges me as a friend," Nicole corrected him. "He told me so himself."

"Ah-hu- wait, wait what!?" Sonic did a double-take on Nicole, and even Tails looked to her in complete shock at the statement. Nicole herself just looked confused at the looks. "What the- he said he wasn't ready to be friends with anybody! What's different about you!?"

"I... spent a large amount of time with him," Nicole hesitantly answered. "Playing those games. They are a relaxing pastime for him and we formed a bond over time. That is why he calls me a friend."

"Are you serious...?" Sonic muttered as he ran a hand along his face. "Gah, if I woulda known that video games were the way to getting through to him I would have practiced more. Unreal..." He wasn't even that surprised. Sorun was so weird at times it just fit with him.

"But this is a good thing, right?" Tails asked, eyes lighting up as his tails began to excitedly swish in the air around him. "If he has at least one person to go to with all his feelings, then he can get better, right?"

The hand on Sonic's face dropped away as his head perked up. "Hey, yeah, you're right!" He looked back to Nicole with renewed vigor in his eyes. "He's gotta have opened up to you at least a little, right?"

Nicole looked a bit uncomfortable at the question, but she did give a nod, which made the other two brighten up even further. "He confided certain things to me, yes. And he expressed a desire to talk further at later dates." She looked back out the window. "I truly do think that talking helps him," she continued, "and I simply desire to help my friend the same way he helped me. If simply talking with him will help him recover from his tragedy, I am more than willing. You do not have to worry about him weathering this alone." A small smile made its way onto her face. "I've found myself looking forwards to talking with him regardless."

"... Really, huh?" Before anything further could be said, Nicole's form began flickering and disappearing bit by bit, causing Sonic and Tails' eyes to widen in panic. "Whoa, Nicole, are you alright!?"

"I'm just fine, Sonic. The Power Ring from last night is merely running out of energy is all," she informed the pair as her body began to disintegrate more and more. "I'm afraid we will have to leave it here for now. Tails, would you be so kind as to bring me back to Sally? And Sonic, if you could tell Sorun where I went so he doesn't worry when he sees me gone?"

"Yeah, sure thing," Tails said as he began walking towards the nightstand.

"Totally, no problem," Sonic said with a nod right as Nicole's body disappeared entirely. He watched Tails pick up the small computer, and then hopped off his own bed. "I think I'm gonna hit some breakfast and get going. You good to bring her back on your own?" he asked Tails as he began stretching his legs.

The fox nodded at him. "I'll be fine. See you later, then?"

"'Course you will." Sonic found himself glancing back at the window. He frowned slightly, though it turned into a hopeful grin when he eyed the computer held in Tails' hand.

"Ow! Dammit..."

"Chao!"

"Geh! S-sorry, Virgil. It slipped out." Sorun sent the Chao sitting on a nearby rock an apologetic look, and then shook his left hand to sooth the burning sensation left when he'd accidentally cut the hand with the Yamato. "This is way harder than it looked..."

As great as it was being able to summon the Yamato at will, the fact of the matter was that Sorun just didn't know how to properly utilize a sword. He'd never even picked up a real sword, and he wasn't sure the Summoned Swords counted. The closest thing he could think of was when he had a plastic katana as part of a Halloween costume years and years ago. He didn't have any formal training. He didn't even have any experience to lean off of.

What he did have was an intimate knowledge of Vergil's moveset. He had to of after playing as him so much on the highest of difficulties. Succeeding at the highest difficulties 'Devil May Cry' offered meant analyzing and memorizing every single, intricate movement the character models made, as a fair number of moves required frame-perfect timing on the player's part.

So when it came time to play as Vergil, like Sorun did with any game and the characters, he studied him. Every single movement, every single attack and combo, and every single little detail was memorized by the pale human. It was completely necessary just to live through those difficulties, but Vergil for Sorun was different since he liked him so much. So those memories of studying his moves and attacks stayed with him. Practically imprinted on him. So, he'd figured, if he had the sword, then why not copy the moves, too? It wasn't like he had anything better to emulate.

But there were problems with this method that became readily apparent when Sorun tried it. He knew how to make the movements themselves. He knew from examining Vergil's animations how to hold the sword, where his feet should be when initiating the moves, and how to actually swing it. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that Vergil wasn't fully human, and a video game character to boot, so a lot of his attacks and movements got away with the sheer power and speed of his sword moves because of that.

Sorun was human.

He didn't have the superior strength and agility needed perform powerful attacks barely perceptible to the naked eye. He didn't have the inhuman reflexes and precision needed to sheath and unsheath the sword dozens of times in the blink of an eye- he'd gotten his hand cut for just trying. He didn't have the supernatural hand-eye coordination needed to swing the sword fluidly and gracefully like Vergil could.

He knew the moves perfectly. His body just couldn't perform them.

"This isn't working," Sorun decided with a tired huff. He sheathed Yamato and walked over to the rock his Chao was sitting on, groaning softly as he sat down besides him. "I got no clue what I'm doing," he admitted, more to himself than to the Chao. "I gotta learn how to use this thing, but trying to copy a guy who can casually block bullets out of the air ain't gonna cut it. Strength isn't a problem, not with its ability. The problem is speed. This thing's useless if I can't actually connect with the attacks." He hummed in thought as he rolled the sword in his hands. "I need... some legitimate technique here to maximize my swing speed and accuracy. From there it's just a matter or practical experience fighting Badniks. But if I don't have a good base to launch off of, a foundation, I'm not gonna get anywhere..."

"Chao-chao?"

Sorun tore his gaze from the sword to Virgil. "What?"

"Chao."

The teen tilted his head, trying to parse together the swinging motion the Chao was making with his arms. "You're... swinging a sword...?"

Virgil paused, and then shook his head in impatience. He swung again, and then did a little hop to reverse his position while making the swinging motion again.

"Copying... oh, learn from somebody who does have experience?" he guessed. Virgil dropped his hands and then nodded at Sorun with a smile on his face. "That makes sense, I guess. But who? Who in the Freedom Fighters do I know that uses a sword?"

Sorun dipped his head downwards, eyebrows furrowed as he went deep into thought. This continued on for a solid thirty seconds until, finally, he shot straight upwards so fast that he startled the Chao next to him. "I got it!" he cried out. "Espio!"

"... Chao...?" Virgil questioned, head tilted to the side in confusion.

"Well, I mean, I've never *seen* him use a sword, but the guy's a ninja! He's gotta at least know how to use one, right? Ninjas are Japanese, katanas are Japanese, it-it fits!" It was flawless enough logic to him. At the very least it was sound enough that he felt it had a good chance at working. And it wouldn't hurt to ask, even if by some slim margin he was wrong. Which he didn't think he was. "Alright," Sorun muttered, Yamato disappearing from his hands as he began scratching the side of his head. "So where would Espio be hanging around at this time of day...? Freedom HQ?" He shrugged. "Eh, better lead than anywhere else."

When he'd gone all the way to Freedom HQ in his search for the chameleon, by some stroke of luck, he'd found him. Specifically, on the couch and right next to Vector. The two were talking about something, though what it was Sorun didn't have a clue. Nor did he care, as he was here with a purpose.

"Never thought it'd get to this point. Hope he can actually help me out," Sorun thought to himself as he approached the back side of the couch. *"How do I even start this? Eh, I'll just go for it. That's what I'm supposed to do when I wanna talk with someone, right?"*

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Sorun stopped behind the couch, grabbed onto the top of it, and then hopped over so that he sat between the two Mobians.

"Espio, my man." The two seemed incredibly startled by Sorun's sudden intrusion into their conversation, though they soon calmed down when they saw that it was just Sorun. "My dude. My homie. My-"

"What do you want, Sorun?" Espio interrupted, eye ridges quirked upwards in confusion at the human's manner of speech.

"Right into it, huh?" Sorun muttered, voice slightly dejected. He shook it off quickly and held his empty left hand out. "So look. The last Chaos Emerald I got gave me a sword, and I don't have any idea how I'm supposed to use it." He gripped his left hand, and in a flash of blue particles the Yamato materialized in his grip. "I figured, y'know, it's a katana and you're a ninja, so you'd probably know how to use one of these."

The reactions of the two Mobians besides him wildly varied. Vector, for whatever reason, started blinking in worry at the sight of the sword. Espio started to narrow his eyes almost in contempt at it. Both reactions caused Sorun great confusion, causing him to look back and forth between the two.

"Oh, you've done it now," Vector mumbled, bringing his hand to his face as a low groan left him. "You don't know what you just did."

"... Huh?" Sorun gave the crocodile a questioning look as he blinked his eyes. "I-I don't- what do you mean?"

"A *katana* ?"

Sorun didn't know if he'd ever heard a word spoken with so much venom dripping off of it. And it had come from Espio of all people, who as far as Sorun knew was one of the more chill Mobians around. It was why he was so surprised, and even further surprised when he looked towards Espio to see him actually glaring at the sword in anger.

"... Yeah...?" Sorun hesitantly answered, unconsciously holding the sword closer to his chest. "Did I do something wrong?" he asked as he turned back to Vector.

Vector shook his head while lowered his hand from his face. "No, it's just- he's got this thing with katanas, I don't know what it is," he answered.

"It's not a *thing* ," Espio denied, going as far as to step up off the couch while turning to Sorun. "It's a principle. Katanas are the weapon of the samurai. A group of honor-bound fool warriors who care more about titles than actually succeeding." The chameleon glanced his yellow eyes down at Yamato, and he actually looked offended by the sight. "I'm a ninja, not a samurai. I absolutely refuse to use their weapons."

The pale teen blinked once, looked down at the sword, and then blinked again when he looked back up at Espio. "I'm... I'm pretty sure ninjas use katanas too, dude." He wasn't an expert on the subject, but in all the games and movies he'd ever interacted with ninjas had katanas. Carrying around a slim melee weapon like a katana seemed practical enough for ninja use. These were all assumptions, sure, but he figured they were reasonable ones. Now he didn't know how to feel seeing Espio react to the sword with so much hostility.

"Well, I don't." Espio huffed, crossed his arms, and turned his head away from the object whose mere presence was evidently an offense to him. "Why on Mobius did your new power have to be a katana, Sorun?"

"... 'Cause this katana's special and cool?" Sorun tried in a small voice.

"Well, you're wrong. There's absolutely nothing 'cool' about that weapon."

And now Sorun was beginning to grow offended. "Hey. Espio. Don't diss Yamato."

Even Vector seemed mildly disturbed by Espio's attitude towards the sword. "Yeah, man, chill out. It's just a sword. And you know Sorun can't control what powers those things give him."

Espio glanced back at the two, though only for a moment, and then allowed his shoulders to relax as a sigh left him. "I apologize, Sorun. I didn't mean to belittle you or your weapon. I just... do not have a very good relationship with katanas is all," he explained as he fully turned back to the human, who began to visibly calm. "I'm honored that you would come to me for help for sword lessons, but I'm afraid I can be of no help in this regard."

Sorun's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You don't even know how to use one, do you?"

"... My training was more oriented towards stealth tactics and throwing weapons," Espio quietly admitted as he turned his head away slightly.

"Ugh, I get it. Thanks anyways," Sorun mumbled as he leaned further into the couch. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do, guys. I gotta learn how to properly use this thing somehow, and it's not like Yamato came with an instruction booklet with it. Woulda been amazing if it did."

"I think you're on the right track seeking others for advice," Espio told him while flipping one of his palms up at the ceiling. "Why not try asking somebody else for help?"

"That's probably what I'm gonna have to do," Sorun admitted. "But who, though?"

Silence soon settled over the group of three for different reasons. Sorun had stopped talking as he took on a thinking pose, his face deep in concentration as he thought on his answer. Vector and Espio looked to each other in confusion, and then slowly turned back to Sorun.

"Er... you don't know anybody else in the Freedom Fighters who uses a melee weapon like yours?" Vector asked. "Anybody at all?"

"I'm pretty sure Amy's more into hammers than swords."

Espio actually twitched in irritation at the response, as if he was upset Sorun was missing such an obvious answer. "I think perhaps that Vector is referring to somebody who uses a weapon similar to yours," he slowly supplied. "Somebody who has been trained in and has a large amount of experience, specifically, using a sword." Espio's eyes practically began to shake at the clueless look on Sorun's face, and he clapped his hands together while pointing the fingers at the human teen. "A swordsman, so to speak. In the Freedom Fighters."

"... You think Sally knows how to use a sword?"

Both Espio and Vector gasped out in exasperation, the former slapping a hand right under his horn. "Sorun, you know who I'm talking about."

"Yeah, but I don't really wanna consider him as an option."

"Well, beggars can't be choosers," Espio mumbled out. "Go bother Antoine with this."

"Oh, come on. The *Frenchie* ?" Sorun threw his head back to the ceiling with a loud groan. "Dude, I don't wanna go to him for this."

"Why not?" Espio asked. "I thought that you two had become rather close after that mission with the train."

"I mean... yeah..." He'd never say it aloud, but him and Bunnie were among some of the first people that came to mind when he thought about who in the Freedom Fighters were his friends. Nicole was still dead-first. What could he say? Their accents grew on him and he genuinely enjoyed their company. "It's not that I don't like him or anything, it's just... it's kind of embarrassing asking *him* of all people for help, you know?"

Espio didn't look convinced with Sorun's answer at all. "I realize his personality can be a bit strange, but despite appearances he's an accomplished Freedom Fighter and an incredibly competent swordsman. He has the experience you're seeking. There should be no issue."

"Yeah, but I was hoping for advice on using Iaido style or something similar, but he uses that saber, so I don't even know if he-"

"Iaido, Sorun, really?" The chameleon shook his head with disgust. "It's such a uselessly flashy style with no practical-"

"Espio, I do not need your weird anti-weeb position on katanas right now. I need solutions," Sorun interrupted with an exasperated breath.

An embarrassed cough came from the chameleon as he rubbed at the back of his head. "Right. Of course," he said with a small nod. "Well, regardless of how you feel, I doubt there is anybody else you can turn to that would be of more help to you in this matter than Antoine."

A deep sigh escaped Sorun. "Yeah, you're right." He wasn't the teen's first choice- not by a long shot- but he was strapped for alternatives. And on the bright side if there was anybody, literally anybody in all of Knothole Sorun was comfortable talking with that knew a lot about swords, it was Antoine. How that conversation

would go, though, Sorun hadn't a clue. But he knew it was going to be really uncomfortable for him.

Well, as usual, he didn't have that much of a choice it seemed. Because there was no way he was going to get caught with his pants down fighting robots without knowing how to swing the sword. He wasn't gonna risk dying or, even worse, someone getting hurt over something stupid like that. So he'd swallow his pride and go to the coyote for help. Even if he really didn't want to. Really, *really* didn't want to.

"Alright. I'll go to him later," Sorun said as he stood up off the couch. "I better get something out of this, though, because if I actually go through with this all for nothing I swear..."

"I'm sure it will turn out alright, Sorun," Espio assured him. "Just trust in his ability and try to pay attention."

"Yeah, that guy knows his stuff when it comes to swords," Vector added. "You don't gotta worry about a thing."

"Mm." Sorun nodded at both of them. "Thanks, guys. I gotta go. Seeya around." He gave them each parting waves, which they reciprocated with waves of their own, and stepped around the couch in a move to leave. He only made it a few steps when he noticed a red form approaching from one of the doors leading into one of the HQ's rooms. "Oh, hey, Knuckles," Sorun greeted with another wave.

Knuckles waved back at him. "Hey, Sorun! I heard you came back. You doing alright?"

"Yeah, fine. Thanks." Sorun began walking again and passed the echidna. "Great talkin' with ya."

The human teen had walked so briskly past Knuckles that he'd missed the echidna freeze completely in his steps. It was when Sorun passed him, the Yamato still clutched in his left hand. The sword had been close enough to Knuckles that it had almost touched

him as Sorun walked past. And in those few moments he was close to the sword, Knuckles found himself freezing completely and his fur standing up on end from what he felt from that sword.

He watched as the human walked up the steps leading out of the HQ, and then, while taking a steadying breath, turned towards Espio and Vector. "Hey, guys, what... what was that sword Sorun was carrying back there?" he asked.

Vector shrugged. "He said it was his new power or somethin'. Why?"

"... No reason," Knuckles said as he glanced back at the stairs. "Thing just... kinda felt weird is all."

Epsio made a hum of agreement. "I'm not too surprised considering it was a katana."

"You really gotta get over this thing with katanas, Espio..." Vector muttered into his hand.

So as it went, Sorun needed a lot of time to mentally prepare himself and steel his nerves for what was was probably the biggest ask he would ever ask in his life. Not due to the gravity of said ask, because it really was something he doubted Antoine wouldn't agree to. If anything, he would probably be thrilled. He did go as far as to offer to help teach him about swords one time. Sorun wasn't worried about a refusal. No, Sorun just didn't know if he could emotionally handle such a thing. He would, of course, since necessity demanded it, but boy was he not looking forward to this.

Because of his hesitancy, the teen had been rather slow in preparing himself. In other words, he'd been stalling. A lot. Spent most of the day just relaxing and not doing much of anything productive after the morning's failed training session, actually. And all this stalling had taken him into the night just after sundown, and by then he practically needed to force himself to approach Antoine because, if he didn't do it now, he doubted he'd ever find the resolve needed to

do it again. So after eating a quick meal and leaving Virgil with Sonic and his parents, he set out in search of the Mobian swordsman.

After asking around a little bit, he'd found the house-slash-hut that Antoine and Bunnie shared. It looked almost the same as the rest of the homes everybody lived in, but there was at least a mail slot on the front door with the last name of the owner printed on it. Sorun almost burst out in laughter when he saw the name etched on the slot.

"His last name is seriously D'Coolette? Pfft." This time Sorun did laugh, and then did his best to stifle it into his closed fist. *"Tch-ha-ha... ahh, who am I kidding? It's better than my last name."*

Calming down, Sorun approached the front door to the home, rose his hand up, and reached forwards to knock on the door. He stopped with his fist inches away from the door's surface, and then quickly pulled his hand back as second thoughts began to hit him.

"I seriously wanna do this? Yeah, there's no doubt Antoine can help me with this, but... ah, man, I'll never be able to live this down with myself accepting help from this goober." He grimaced, took in a deep breath, and put his balled fist back up towards the door. *"Suck it up, Sorun, you need this. You don't even have any dignity left anyways, so what do you have to lose?"*

Sucking in mouthful of air through his teeth, Sorun closed his eyes and, very steadily and evenly, knocked loudly on the door. He exhaled the breath he was holding knowing he was now at the point of no return, and tried to make his expression even as possible as he leaned on the door frame in front of the door.

"What do I even say to him?" Sorun silently wondered, breathing becoming a bit more rapid when he heard footsteps approach from the other side of the door. *"Shit, I shoulda rehearsed this or something before coming here. Too late now."* His nerves skyrocketed when the door's handle began turning. *"Alright, man,*

calm down. What's the worse that can happen? We're good. We're fine. I'm just coming to ask a completely reasonable request."

The door opened, causing Sorun's body to freeze completely. The absolute first thing Sorun noticed was a lot of yellow and a bit of pink in his vision, and when he focused closer he saw it was just Bunnie. She looked just about as frozen as Sorun was, though it was less because of nervousness and more because of shock based on how her green eyes had gone so wide. They spent a good five seconds just staring at each others' faces before Sorun finally chose to speak up.

"... Hi," he shyly greeted. "Antoine in? I need to talk to him."

"Er... yeah..." She hesitantly answered, nodding her head just a small amount. "Did-did somethin' happen?"

Sorun shook his head just slightly. "No, no I just... need something from him. Specifically from him. I figured this was his house, so he'd... he'd probably be here." He nervously coughed to the side. "Could you please go get him for me?"

Bunnie slowly nodded. "Sho' thing. Wait here."

She darted off back into the house. Sorun stared off after her, and then quietly sighed as he waited for her return while his eyes traveled downwards. A few seconds later he heard a pair of footsteps approach, and then stop at the door's opening. He sighed again, and then looked up. Antoine was standing there, looking just about as bewildered as Bunnie was, who was closely standing behind him.

"Hey, Antoine," Sorun greeted in a stiff voice. "I need a favor."

"A... favor?" Antoine repeated in an unsure voice. "Can I be asking what eet iz?"

"Yeah, I, uh... I need... so there's this... umm..." Sorun clicked his teeth, and then clutched his left hand. The Yamato materialized in his

grip, causing the two Mobians to flinch back in surprise. "So I have this magic sword," he began. "The problem... is that I don't know how to use a sword. You know how to use a sword." He slowly inhaled and looked into Antoine's eyes. "Can you please teach me how to use a sword?"

There, he'd said it. The relief he felt at finally having gotten it out was overshadowed by the anxiety of the coming reaction, however, and Sorun watched the coyote's features intently with bated breath for a reaction. There wasn't much of one on the Mobian's face at first. Just surprise at Sorun's request. Slowly, though, it started to morph into something else. His eyes began to grow wider, and to the detriment of Sorun's anxiety a large smile was rapidly etching itself onto his face. It was just as Sorun feared: he looked completely ecstatic at the request.

"I'm starting to regret every choice I've ever made."

"Oh! Why did you not say zo earlier!?" He was beyond ecstatic, actually. Antoine was practically jumping up and down on his feet at the mere prospect of teaching Sorun about swords, and it took all the human had in him to not turn around and walk away right there. "Of course I will help you with ze swordsmanship, mon ami!" He turned around and began speed walking into the house, though he still kept talking as if he expected Sorun to follow him. He didn't. "We cannot be having you go off to battle swinging zat thing around willy-nilly, non? I am already seeing now what what we can do in..."

The coyote's volume trailed off as he went deeper into the house. Both Sorun and Bunnie stared off after him, looks of mild amusement of both of their faces. They turned back to each other just as a cold gust of wind blew past the doorway into the house. Bunnie shivered a bit, pulling the short brown jacket over her pink top closer. "Ya mind comin' in and closin' the door, Sorun? It's a might bit cold outside."

"Is it? I didn't notice," Sorun said with a shrug as he entered through the doorway while closing the door behind him. "I saw the name on

the mail slot. How's it feel swapping your last name out with Antoine's since you're both together?"

A small blush came to Bunnie's cheeks. "Ah, well, technically speakin' we're still jus' engaged. 'Til the actual marriage ah'm just Bunnie Rabbot."

"Oh, okay." A beat passed, after which Sorun did a double-take. "Wait, your last name's Rabbot?"

"Yup."

Sorun blinked, and then stared down at Bunnie's artificial arm and legs. "... That is a very unfortunate and coincidental last name for you to have."

"... Yup."

An awkward silence passed between the pair. "So, Bunnie. About a couple days ago-"

"Naw, I don't want to hear it. Don't even worry 'bout it," Bunnie said as she held up her palms to stop him. "Ya've been through 'nuff without me lecturin' ya."

Sorun looked back at her in surprise, and then gave her a thankful smile as he rubbed the back of his head. He'd never be able to express how grateful he was for these people being so understanding so he didn't have to have all these awkward, apology-ridden conversations. "Thanks, Bunnie," he mumbled out.

"Don't mention it. Ya farin' well?"

"Eh, surviving. For now, at least," he quietly muttered. "But boy, Antoine looked really happy, huh? I didn't think me asking for sword lessons would make him so excited."

"Aw, well, to tell ya the truth, Sorun, mah darlin' Antoine ain't the most... confident of people sometimes," Bunnie told him. "Ah think

it's 'cause he's always been fightin' around people like Sonic with powers and whatnot or people like Tails n' Rotor with their brains almost his whole life. Ah mean, shoot, even ah got mah cybernetics, an' all he's got is his sword. Don't get me wrong, he's amazin' in his own right, but he needs a li'l reminder every now and then." She gestured to Sorun with her robotic limb. "Ya get what ah mean, right? No offense or nothin', but back when ya first came here you were, well..."

"Total dead weight?" Sorun finished for her with a flat face.

Bunnie winced. "Ah wasn't sayin'... ya just weren't all that much compared t' how ya are now, know what ah mean?"

"Yeah, I'm know. Just havin' a bit of fun," Sorun said with a grin, causing Bunnie to roll her eyes. "But you're not wrong. I was pretty useless back then." He let out a disbelieving chuckle as he held Yamato up. "Then the powers happened, and I think it's safe to say at this point I got a marginal amount of experience to work with. I can barely believe it myself sometimes."

"So yer new power's really another sword? Can I see it?" Bunnie asked. Sorun shrugged, and tossed the sword her way. She caught it with her robotic limb, looked down at it, and then made a "huh" sound as an unimpressed expression made its way onto her face. "'Fraid to say it don't look like much to me, Sugah," she admitted as she tossed the sword back to Sorun.

"Yeah, I'm getting that reaction a lot," he muttered as he caught the sword. "Antoine not being very confident, though?" He looked down the hall where the coyote had disappeared to. "I don't really see it," Sorun said. "Sure, the guy's kinda wimpy, but all of that disappears when it matters. Practically didn't even recognize him during that fight with robot Sonic."

"Mm, kinda like someone else I know," Bunnie said while giving Sorun a knowing look. His response to the look was to give her a confused glance, causing her to shake her head and look up at the

ceiling. "Anyways, don't tell Antoine ah told ya this, but ah think he's a bit jealous ya got so strong so quick. Not to say he don't like ya," she assured Sorun as she looked back down at him, "he really likes ya a lot since ya both got so much in common-"

"I have absolutely nothing in common with him," Sorun interrupted with a shake of his head.

Bunnie chuckled again, much to Sorun's confusion once more. "It just makes him happy, you askin' fer his help with the sword trainin'. Makes him feel useful, so thanks fer that," she said with a grateful smile. "Just, er, try tah be a bit patient with him, alright? My darlin' 'Twain can be a bit... eccentric when it comes to the sword stuff."

The hairs on the back of Sorun's neck stood up straight when he heard Bunnie utter that word. "Me and the word 'eccentric' don't really have a good track history, Bunnie," he muttered in a low voice. "How 'eccentric' are we talking here?"

She waved her hands in a dismissal manner. "Oh, nothin' ya can't manage, Sugah. If ya can survive a bout with a buncha Badniks then ya can survive an afternoon trainin' with Antoine. Ya got through a whole day trainin' with all of us, didn't ya?"

"Pfft. Barely," Sorun begrudgingly agreed. "But I'll put up with him. Just 'cause you asked nicely."

"That's all ah'm askin'."

The sound of footsteps began to approach them, causing them to turn their heads towards the source. Antoine had gone back to the pair, approaching with his sheathed saber clutched in one hand. His eyes were practically shining with excitement when he stopped in front of Sorun.

Sorun glanced down at the sword, and then back up at Antoine. "Uh-
"

"Zo, what should we be starting with first?" he asked, still happily grinning. "I am thinking on seeing how your footwork is being before we-"

"Whoa, dude, slow down," Sorun told him as he backed up a step. "It's, like, eight at night right now. I kinda wanted to do this tomorrow."

"... Oh, right." Shyly, Antoine moved the saber behind his back as he rubbed the back of his neck while avoiding Sorun's gaze. "Of course, how silly of moi. For sure we will be doing zis tomorrow. Ze afternoon will be a better time for us, non?"

"Noon?" Sorun thought the time over in his head for a bit, and then gave the coyote a nod. "Yeah, that works. Sure. Noon."

The wide grin returned to Antoine's face. "Fantastique! It's decided, zen!" He made a move to turn around, but then stopped and refocused on Sorun. "Oh, and Sorun, me and Bunnie were just getting finished weeth dinner. Zere was zome leftovers if you were wanting to-"

"Nah, thanks, but I already ate," Sorun declined, giving Antoine a polite yet forced smile as he backed up towards the door.

"It's carrot cake," Antoine said, and from the side Bunnie started giving Antoine a pointed glare. This did not go unnoticed by Antoine, whose smile began to grow nervous as he sent Sorun a pleading look. "We 'ave more zan enough for ze two of us. I insist."

The glare Bunnie was sending him intensified. "Ya seem awful eager to be gettin' rid of all that carrot cake I very painstakingly made fer dessert, *darlin'* ."

Antoine's irises shrunk down a slight a mount. "N-non, non, I am not ze one to be belittling your culinary skills, mon amour. I am quite happy you have been taking after me in ze cooking arts even if you are very... limited in dishes outside of those including carrots." He

was practically sweating at this point from Bunnie's intense stare, causing the pleading look he was giving Sorun to turn frantic. "I am only wishing to offer a sharing of your work weeth our very good friend Sorun." His teeth began chattering when he saw the teen grip the front door's handle. "Will you be taking zome home, Sorun?"

The pale human looked at Antoine, glanced at Bunnie and her intensely narrowed eyes, and shook his head. "Maybe some other time," he said as he opened the door.

"A-are you sure?"

"Super sure." As quick as he could, Sorun slipped out of the front door while closing it behind him. Not even five seconds later he heard loud arguing going on inside of the home he'd just exited. A majority of it, he realized with a grimace, had a Southern accent to it. *"Poor bastard,"* he thought as he peeled himself off of the door. *"Well, that went well. Noon tomorrow, huh? Yeah, I can work with that."*

That was the hard part done. Now all he had to do was actually show up and commit to the training, and he didn't see that being harder than mustering up the courage to walk up and ask for the help to begin with. "Eccentric", a word that still haunted Sorun's dreams, aside, Antoine was one of the nicest people he knew. He was sure it was going to go great.

The next day

"I'm gonna smother this fucking coyote in his sleep."

One new fact Sorun learned about Antoine: he was apparently the most overbearing teacher in existence. It was such a shock to him, too; the Mobians personality took a complete turnaround as soon as the sword lessons started in the backyard of Antoine's home.

Of the hour Sorun had been learning from Antoine, he'd enjoyed only around the first five minutes. The other fifty-five were insufferable. He was one more minute away from jamming Yamato down Antoine's throat.

"Non, non, non!" Antoine cried out, reaching forwards to adjust Sorun's stance. A stance the human was fairly confident was *not* a stance associated with katanas. "Your arm is out too far, and-"

"Antoine, for the last time, this *is not how you hold a katana* ...!" Sorun hissed through grit teeth. The pose he was holding currently had his feet out wide, his left arm splayed out to the side- Antoine wouldn't let him hold the sheath, either, which Sorun took great objection to- and had his right arm, holding Yamato, pointed outwards with his arm outstretched.

He looked ridiculous. Worse, this wasn't how one held a katana. A saber, maybe, but not a katana. The issue was that, while Antoine was practically an expert with the saber, he knew shit-all about katanas. Didn't stop him from trying to treat Yamato like a saber, though.

"Sorun, I am telling you, just because your sword is not exactedly shaped like le sabre-"

"No, Antoine, listen to me." Sorun dropped the stance and turned towards the coyote, breathing outwards to try and steady himself. "They are two completely different-" He paused. "Say 'saber' again."

"Sabre."

Sorun cocked and eyebrow and tilted his head to the side. "Y-you're putting this weird inflection in at the end-" He shook his head. "Look, a katana isn't the same as a saber, alright?" He held the Yamato up for Antoine to see. "This style you're trying to teach me? This fencing style? It's not gonna work for it."

It was some kind of fencing style Antoine was trying to impart on him, he could see that much. A lot of one-handed swishing and parrying. Light, short swings that just didn't feel good to perform with the Yamato due to its design. Antoine had even gone as far as to have Sorun try to attempt to copy his own movements with his saber.

He understood perfectly and was grateful for Antoine trying to help. But this wasn't the help he needed. And Sorun was beginning to have trouble containing his impatience with the coyote.

"I am failing to understand what eez so difficult about zis, Sorun," Antoine told him as he sheathed his own saber. "If a kanana-"

"Katana," Sorun corrected.

"Ka-ta-na, oui. I am sorry, Sorun, but I 'ave nevair even seen zis type of sword before in my life," Antoine said. "What style iz it suppos-ed to be if not one similar to mine?"

"It's... lemme try showin' ya." Sorun sheathed the Yamato and bent down a bit. "I got a rough idea of what this is supposed to look like, but just that: what it *looks like* . Performing it is evidently a way different thing." He wrapped his right fingers over the sword's handle. "Truth is there's a lot of styles that go with katanas, but the one I know that I'm trying to emulate involves basically quickly drawing the sword from the sheath, making big, quick slashes, and then putting it back in the sheath."

Realistically he couldn't pull the moves he wanted to pull off, Vergil's moves, with any real effect, but he *could* do them extremely slowly as a demonstration. He slowly drew the blade and, even more slowly, slashed it outwards in front of him in a wide arc. He slowly swung more and more, just briefly making the sheath disappear with some swings so he could grip the handle with two hands for more powerful, demonstrated swings, only to have the sheath reappear so he could slip the sword back inside of it.

These swings were the ones that felt right to Sorun. Like they fit naturally with the sword, even if he couldn't perform them on a level that was actually usable for combat. None of that fencing that Antoine had tried to impart on him. That style, Antoine's style, focused on dueling an enemy fairly. On a endless series of blocks and parries and quick footwork. Taking time to examine and study the opponent for possible openings. Something that respected the opponent to give them a fair fight.

The style Sorun was trying and failing to emulate, the style Vergil had used, Dark Slayer style, was the exact opposite. It wasn't about respecting the opponent. It was tailored towards cutting the opponent down with overwhelming power, speed, and precision. It was designed around ruthless efficiency as to defeat the enemy as quickly as possible.

But, Sorun didn't blame Antoine in trying to teach Sorun his own style. He could understand the coyote not knowing much outside his preferred weapon, but beyond that, there was something... inherently Mobian about how honest and respectful that style he used was. And Sorun himself could respect that, but he wasn't in the game for honesty and fairness. He was in it to win.

It was a rather... un-Mobian-like method, he would admit. More human-like. Sorun couldn't care less, and if anything he preferred the human way if it meant getting him closer to killing Eggman before he died from the Emeralds.

After sheathing the sword, Sorun turned back towards Antoine. The other male had been giving Sorun's sword swings a critical look the entire time, scrutinizing the movements with focused eyes. At the end he had sighed helplessly while shrugging his shoulders. "I am admitting zat I am, how you say... unfamiliar with zis style you are trying," Antoine told him. "If I am being truthful weeth you, Sorun, I myself learn-ed very little on swordsmanship in a formal manner. When I was but a young tyke my fathair had taught me az much az he could, but weeth me being separated from him because of

Robotneek and joining ze Freedom Fighters, my skills left... very much to be desired."

"I mean, you were still a kid, right?" Sorun asked as he slung Yamato over his neck. "You couldn't have had much by then besides the basics."

"Oui. Ze basics were about all I had. Over time I had merely... refined what little my fathair had taught me through fighting Robotneek's Badniks over ze years and years of fighting." Antoine gave Sorun an apologetic look. "I am sorry if I am not ze good teacher, Sorun. I 'ave nevair done zis type of thing before, zo I had tried doing what my fathair had done for me. But you are right. Your kitty-na-" Sorun's hands shook at his pronunciation in barely-subdued rage, "- eez not a sabre. And eet iz very clear ze style you are demonstrating to me eez not one I can help you with."

Sorun eyed Antoine for a few seconds, and then let out an understanding sigh. "Yeah, I know," he agreed with a small nod. "I'm not blaming you for trying. I... seriously appreciate you taking the time to help me out with this," he said, causing Antoine's features to brighten up a bit, "but there's a very specific style I want to use with Yamato, and your techniques just don't mesh with it. You have any recommendations on what I should do?"

Antoine hummed in contemplation. "You zeem to already know zis style of yours at least somewhat. Be believing it or not, but back zen, I was in ze same place you are in," he said. "I would say you will have to do ze same thing I did. Do not worry about styles or stances- just get to knowing ze basics. After zat? Practice on your own a little. Fight zome Badniks az best you can and slowly grow your style from zat. And if nothing else, well..." he chuckled a bit, "Badniks often do not use a sword. Zometimes just swinging ze sword to cut ze robot in half eez good enough."

He got him there, and he wasn't going to argue with the "keep it simple, keep it stupid" philosophy he so enjoyed. Styles on their own didn't really mean all that much when "just cut it" was also a viable

option. That was, in essence, a glorified summation of the Dark Slayer style Sorun was trying to copy: just cut it- the style.

Antoine had a point, though. Sorun couldn't learn Dark Slayer from anybody, as, technically speaking, he himself was the premier expert on the style on all of Mobius. And even if he couldn't physically perform the moves due to them being physically impossible for his body to perform them, he still knew them. He could make his own bastardized variation using normal, human strength and speed. And it wasn't like he didn't know how to grab and swing a sword period. And considering Yamato's abilities, it didn't really matter how on-point his sword skills were as long as he actually connected with the blade. That was the essence of Dark Slayer: overwhelming offense using Yamato and its abilities. He just needed to hit and he was good from there.

Well, Sorun could roughly do that much at least. It was just like Antoine said: he needed practice. Real-world experience fighting Badniks so he could grow his own style derived from Dark Slayer. Or at the very least just get good at swinging the thing in a decent fashion. Again, it didn't matter how bad it looked as long as Sorun was efficient with the thing and struck true with the sword against anything he was fighting. But he still needed help with the very crucial thing needed to make the dream come true. He needed help with the basics.

Good thing Antoine knew that much.

"Alright, well, can you at least help me learn the standard, universal stuff so I can go on from there on my own?" he asked Antoine. "You know a lot about that stuff and I really need it. Help me out?"

At the request, Antoine's face broke out in a large smile. "I would be more than proud to help you with zat much, mon ami."

From there, the lessons proceeded much more smoothly and tolerable, and unlike previously, Sorun found himself listening intently on Antoine's advice to the point that he somewhat enjoyed the

experience. As expected, it was about as basic as basic could be. Instruction on how Sorun should properly plant his feet on the ground and evenly disperse his weight, keeping low with his legs slightly bent, being aware of his center of gravity, that sort of thing. Things that, over time, Sorun probably could have inferred on his own, but he was happy Antoine was teaching him it now so he could get a head start with the more advanced stuff on his own later on. The sooner he got that out of the way so he could jump onto developing his style so he could grow competent with using Yamato, the better.

Eventually, when Antoine deemed Sorun had a solid enough grasp on the basics, he offered to go as far as to have a sword fight with the human. Nothing too serious, just a little sparring match, but Sorun had readily accepted anyways if only to get in as much practice with the katana as possible before facing life-or-death circumstances with it.

What had he learned? A couple things. One was that, quite understandably, Sorun wasn't too good. Seeing as he was a beginner it made sense, but it really shined when he fought with Antoine. The other thing he learned, though, was that Antoine was *scary good* with his saber.

Five times. That was the number of times Sorun had been tossed onto the ground, only for the point of Antoine's sword to be pointed at his throat before he could get up, which would end that round in Antoine's favor. Five out of five times Antoine had won, with the longest match probably going on for, Sorun guessed, around twenty seconds. Between both Antoine's freakish Mobian strength and his overwhelming skill with the sword that eclipsed Sorun's own, the human frankly never stood a chance. He wasn't too upset over it; he was growing, after all. Painfully slowly, but the growth was there. He could feel it. The way Yamato's handle felt more and more comfortable in his hand the longer he went. The way he was stringing his swings together faster and responding more quickly with swings that were increasing in speed and accuracy.

They were all minor, incremental increases that barely amounted to anything, and Antoine still dominated him like nothing every single time, but progress was progress. Sorun would take it.

With a loud grunt, Sorun was sent sprawling onto his back yet again as Yamato skidded away from him. When he opened his eyes, Antoine's saber was, once again, pointed right at his throat. A large, teasing grin had settled its way onto the coyote's face. The guy was actually having fun with this, much to Sorun's bemused chagrin. "Zat eez ze score being left as six to zero, non? Are you ready to be giving up yet?"

"Yeah, dude, I gave up a while ago." He made it longer this time, though- thirty seconds, roughly. The increase was minimal, but tangible. He was getting better. "There isn't some kind of hidden Mobian decree that says I'm your slave for life or whatever now for admitting you beat me in a sword fight, is there? I'll go for it if there is, but I want weekends off."

"Ah-ha. Maybe zere iz. You would not know, would you?" Antoine said with a smirk, sheathing his saber while bending down to help Sorun to his feet. "Ze house could use a good cleaning from time to time, I admit. All of zat dust, mon dieu, no matter how much I clean it always comes back..."

"Sounds awful," Sorun dryly stated, taking the offered hand and grunting again when he was pulled up to his feet. "I'm not wearing a maid outfit to fulfill any weird fantasies you have, though. You got Bunnie for that."

Very clearly, and much to Sorun's delight, Antoine became flustered at the human's words. "Zat-zat iz not... I zink zat perhaps we should be getting back on track, n-non?"

"Ha-ha. Gottem," Sorun thought with a mischievous grin, feeling immense enjoyment at Antoine's expense. Satisfied with the outcome, Sorun clenched his left hand and caused the Yamato to vanish from the ground and reappear in his grip. "Anyways, thanks

for helping me out with this," Sorun said as he turned back to Antoine. "I think I'll be fine on my own from here."

"Ahh, eet iz no problem at all, mon ami. I am happy to help," Antoine told him with a nod. "If I were to be giving you advice, perhaps, maybe, focus a bit more on ze blocking? You are tending to dodge more zan block."

"Why would I block the damage when I can just avoid it entirely? Besides, blocking with Yamato's kinda useless since everything's stronger than me already. Plus, uh... its ability kinda negates the need to block as it is." He opened his left hand and let the Yamato disappear. "But that's not really important," the teen said as he looked up at the sun, its position suggesting a few hours past noon. "Anyways, Antoine, I gotta go. Promised to talk to Shadow about something important, and there's some more experimentation I gotta do with my powers." Sorun pointed at Antoine. "I'll catch ya later, though. Been fun."

"Oui, Sorun, of course. Ze pleasure was mine." Antoine waved the human off as he began to retreat away from his backyard. "Feel free to be dropping by anytime to visit! We could even be practicing with ze swords again if you so want!"

"Sure, man." Sorun turned his back to Antoine, giving him a wave back as he began walking away. "I might do that."

A deep, contemplative hum slowly left the teen's throat as he looked at the pile of crates in front of him, all cut to pieces. Shadow had taken his advice on calling this conversation they'd planned "training", so he'd wanted to have it in Shadow's usual haunt: the field of wooden crates he and sometimes Sorun used for training. However, Shadow wasn't scheduled to be here yet, so Sorun had been using some of the extra time to train with the Yamato. Not with holding and swinging it, but with its abilities. He'd decided to bring Virgil along just for the company meanwhile, the small Chao having clapped happily whenever Sorun had cut apart a box.

Through his experimentation, he'd come to a few conclusions. The thing about this Yamato was that, as he expected, it wasn't the exact same sword from the games it had originated from. It wasn't a Devil Sword carved from one-third of the Legendary Dark Knight Sparda's soul. It wasn't the key to sealing and unsealing portals to the demonic realm, though Sorun had yet to rule out if portals of any kind were a possibility or not for his Yamato's capabilities. This wasn't the same exact sword used by Vergil. No, that was impossible. Because that sword was pure fiction.

This sword he had, *this* Yamato, was a facsimile of the true Yamato. A true copy, but at the same time not a true copy as a majority of the games' Yamato's abilities were often... left to interpretation, due to on one hand the story clearly defining Yamato's limits while on the other hand the sword performing differently gameplay-wise for gameplay's sake. Making a copy from a non-tangential item with sometimes nebulous limits just wasn't possible.

But nothing was impossible for Chaos Emeralds and Chaos energy, apparently. So the workaround was the same for when they had copied the Summoned Swords and Bringer Claws abilities- they'd taken what knowledge he did have and made it reality in the form of the powers. "Power shaped by the heart", in Aurora's words. The Yamato was the same. It looked like the true Yamato, but as for its abilities? They went as far as Sorun knew about the true Yamato's powers which, to be fair, was about as well as possible seeing as he was an expert on the lore of those games as well as an expert in actually playing them. And despite the story of 'Devil May Cry' being a bit wishy-washy about Yamato's abilities here and there, a majority of them were clearly defined enough for the teen to have a solid understanding of the sword and its powers. So when the Chaos Emerald had created the sword and used his knowledge, it seemed to have automatically given abilities based on what Sorun *thought* it had, which, while extremely close to the original's abilities, differed in that the Chaos Emerald was rather loose with Sorun's own personal interpretation of the true Yamato's abilities.

So what did all of that boil down to in the end with Sorun's Yamato? It meant that it only had one ability.

Separate. Everything.

The kicker was the "everything" bit. The games' Yamato hosted a wide array of abilities, mainly cutting through everything (unless it didn't because of plot or gameplay reasons made by the games), opening and closing portals, cutting space itself, cutting apart vague concepts such as cutting "man from devil" if the fifth game was to be trusted, and "unlocking true potential" if the fourth was to be trusted. He honestly didn't know why that last one was even possible, but again, the details of the games' Yamato's powers were vague in that regard due to the story not being the series' largest focus.

Sorun's, he assumed, had the same abilities, but the problem was that one Emerald could only grant one power. That was the established rule. Yamato, however, had multiple abilities even though it was technically only one "power". The Emerald's solution was to file all of these abilities under the main ability for the Yamato to "separate". Because of this, the limits of what Yamato could and couldn't separate ended at the word "separation". There was no defining limit for Yamato's power of separation, which meant quite literally *anything* could be separated by Yamato. Absolutely anything.

The implications for this were staggering to Sorun. If his Yamato truly differed in that, unlike the games' Yamato, this Chaos-created Yamato truly had no limit to what it could separate, then this went beyond just granting him all of the games' Yamato's abilities. To what extent, though, he hadn't a clue. Because try as he might, he just couldn't figure out how the damned thing worked.

"Am I wrong?" Sorun thought to himself as he ran his hand along the katana's handle. His thumb briefly hovered over a spot on the hilt where there was a small relief of a golden dragon attached to the blue hilt, nearly completely concealed by the white wrappings. *"Maybe separating anything by touching it is all it can do, because that's as far as I've gotten. I can't figure out how to do the long-*

distance Judgement Cuts Vergil could do. I can't make portals with it. Am I just doing it wrong? Absolute separation means it can separate anything, but what does that mean?

"But... no, that can't be right. It HAS to be able to do Judgement Cuts and open portals and all that stuff, right? It's the Yamato. It has to have its abilities- all the other powers were the same as the games' powers. I know *it does. I can feel it."* The only reason he even knew of Yamato's ability of absolute separation was because he just instinctively knew, as was the same with his other powers. That same feeling, like a wordless, incomprehensible whisper in the back of his mind, told him that, yes, Yamato could perform its other abilities due to its absolute separation. But at this point Sorun didn't know if that was just him lying to himself or if it was true, but he couldn't figure it out. Because if they were possible, they weren't the main function of Yamato. That was its separation. Everything else was a secondary derivative of its primary function, which, unlike the primary functions of his powers, weren't as clear for him to comprehend.

In short: the Yamato could separate anything. Through absolute separation, it may also be able to perform the abilities of the original it was based off of. Sorun wasn't sure if it could, and if it truly was capable of performing those secondary functions, he didn't know how to use them.

"Well... then again, 'absolute' might be giving it too much credit." Sorun held up the Yamato, and then deeply sighed when he looked at his left shoulder. It was covered by his shirt now, but the small puncture mark on his shoulder still remained. It at least had stopped bleeding by now. *"It couldn't cut the Emeralds out of me, after all."*

Of course when he'd learned of Yamato's absolute separation the first thing he'd tried to do was stab the sword into himself to see if the Yamato could separate the Emeralds from his body. It didn't work. He'd felt the Yamato try, though. Felt its power of separation run through him as it tried to obey his will. The Emeralds wouldn't budge, though. It's why he was doubting that, despite Yamato's

ability to separate, it could perform long-distance cuts like Vergil had done or open portals or anything like that. But they were established powers made possible through separation, and until he saw definitive proof that said otherwise, Sorun would keep attempting to perform these techniques.

It also reaffirmed Sorun's belief that the Chaos Emeralds were permanently stuck inside of him. Because if Yamato couldn't remove them, then nothing could.

"I dunno, Virgil," Sorun finally muttered out as he lowered the sword. "Thing's complicated. I don't do complicated too well."

"Chao."

"Mm." He had no idea what that meant, but he still gave the Chao an appreciative pat.

His ears perked up when he heard a single set of footsteps stepping on the soft ground and approaching him. He turned his head towards the source, his expression remaining neutral for the most part when he saw it was Shadow. It was around time for him to show up, Sorun supposed.

"Greetings." The dark hedgehog's eyes shifted from the human sitting on a crate to the pile of cut crates in front of him. "May I ask what the meaning of all these sliced apart crates is?"

"Testing out the Yamato's powers," Sorun answered as he held the katana up for Shadow to see. "I've been having some struggles with it."

"Struggles?" Shadow echoed as he walked closer to Sorun. He stopped just next to Sorun, eyeing the sword in his grasp with curiosity. Curiosity and, Sorun noted with little interest, apprehension. "I don't doubt the sword has some ability tied to it outside of it being a stabbing implement, but forgive me for not

seeing what it is." His eyes shifted up to Sorun. "What exactly is your Yamato supposed to do?"

Sorun didn't answer him. Instead, he wordlessly reached down to pick up a rock that had been resting next to him with one hand. He held Yamato out from his body, edge of the blade facing upwards, and Shadow's eyes widened in some interest when he could barely see and feel faint wisps of blue, ethereal energy waft over the length of the sword's blade. Sorun held the rock over the blade, and then dropped it.

The rock had fallen cleanly through the blade. There was no moment where it was stopped by the sword, nor where it even lost momentum once making contact. The rock was simply and cleanly sliced right through the middle merely by falling on the katana's edge, the two halves dropping to either side of the blade.

"That's what it does," Sorun answered a bewildered Shadow as he put the sword back in its sheath. "It separates everything."

Shadow blinked down at the rock, and then refocused on Sorun. "Everything?" he repeated, some disbelief in his voice. "Define 'everything' for me."

Sorun shrugged. "Doesn't really have a definition. It is what it is: the Yamato can separate everything. Matter, energy, space, time, dimensions... *maybe* concepts? Not sure."

The striped Mobian followed along with Sorun's explanation, his frame growing more and more tense the further he went and ending with him looking at the sword with narrowed eyes. "If this sword originated from anything other than a Chaos Emerald, I'd call you mad. But I know better than most the potential of those gems." He looked into Sorun's eyes, and much to the human's surprise Shadow looked *extremely* serious. "Listen to me very closely, human," he said in a low voice. "If that sword does indeed possess that ability, then I strongly recommend you refrain from carelessly cutting apart the fabric of space-time with it. There can be certain consequences

for such a thing. I know firsthand how destructive the power of even a single Chaos Emerald is."

Sorun listened with a half-interested expression, and then lazily waved his hand. "Relax, Shadow. I'm not about to go cut apart the fabric of reality with Yamato. I don't even know if it *can* do that," he said, causing Shadow's form to relax somewhat. "So far all I can do is slice objects apart with the blade if I run Chaos energy through it. It's supposed to be able to do stuff like cut at long distances and open portals and... something about helping unlock true potential? Which I guess this sword interprets as separating the user from their personal limits if that's something it can do? It's not really clear."

"'It's not really'- where are you basing this information off of?" Shadow asked him, shaking his head at Sorun's explanation. "Time and time again you've displayed an unnerving amount of intuitive insight into your abilities. I had previously assumed you were just naturally inclined towards these abilities, but I'm beginning to question this assumption." He gestured towards the sheathed Yamato as Sorun impassively watched on. "You named the sword 'Yamato' the second you saw it. You reacted towards it with familiarity. Now you're claiming it has abilities you *think* it has but can't demonstrate."

"That actually does sound really suspicious when you put it like that," Sorun agreed in an even voice, his lack of a reaction to Shadow's deduction seemingly making the hedgehog more annoyed.

Shadow's eyes had narrowed considerably at the human's indifferent reaction. "Then perhaps you could confirm for me if my suspicions are correct?"

"They suuuure are, Shadow." The Mobian looked about ready to shout now, but before he could Sorun lifted up a finger to stop him. "Listen, Shadow, I'm gonna tell you what the true deal with my powers is. The big skinny. And I am *only* going to tell you." He turned his body so that he was sitting while facing a standing Shadow now.

"I only wanna tell you because you're one of the only guys here I completely trust. So don't tell anyone else, okay?"

The statement from Sorun proved to be surprising enough that Shadow went completely still. His mouth even dropped open a bit, and Sorun saw the sharp fangs of his teeth poke slightly past his lips. He wanted to continue talking, but he found the sight of a stupefied Shadow so funny that he held his tongue and kept silently staring at him in great amusement.

Unfortunately, Shadow decided to end Sorun's fun by shaking the surprise out from his features before refocusing back on Sorun, eyes still wide. "Why would you choose to confide this with me and nobody else?" he asked him, his tone genuinely confused. "You've grown a friendlier repertoire with literally everybody else. Why place so much trust in me?"

"Why indeed, my man?" He'd decided a while ago he needed to tell somebody this. Partly to get a secret off his chest and partly so somebody could maybe help him in some way with them. Shadow was an expert on this Chaos nonsense, so he was the greatest candidate he could think of. But even all of that wouldn't be enough if he didn't trust Shadow. Fortunately enough he did, though he decided to explain why at Shadow's confusion. "Well... you told me you didn't vote to bring me here using the coordinates on the tablet. That you were the only one. That's all," he answered with a shrug. "Out of all the Freedom Fighters, you were the only one that didn't have a part in ruining my life."

"And you are honestly telling me that's enough to earn your trust?" Shadow breathed out in disbelief.

"Don't get me wrong, everybody else is great, but... that's still there for me," Sorun muttered. "It's really screwed up considering our relationship, but you're the only person in the Freedom Fighters I can completely tolerate without thinking of that." He paused. "Well, you and Nicole," he corrected himself.

"I understand me, but why does Nicole get special privileges?"

Sorun grinned and turned his head to the side. "She's my gamer pal, man. I gotta make an exception for my gamer pal." He looked back to Shadow. "I know I told Sonic I wasn't ready to be friends with everybody because I'm not totally over it yet, but I'm willing to make exceptions. You and Nicole are exceptions," he said. "But I know if I did something like ask you to be my friend you'd go and pull a me and say 'let's just keep it professional for the sake of the mission' or something like that, so can I just please ask you to keep all this to yourself?" He leaned back on the crate he was sitting on and waved his arm in a random direction. "If you wanted to we could go so far as to call it a quid pro quo arrangement. If you ever wanted to talk to me about something without it getting out to anybody else, I'd be willing to."

Shadow just continued to stare silently at Sorun. He blinked, and then scoffed while crossing his arms. "Why not bug Nicole with this since you value her as a friend?"

"I don't really wanna weigh her down with all this heavy stuff."

"You have absolutely no guarantee I won't tell the others what you trusted to confide in me," he said.

The teen scoffed. "Dude, c'mon. You're not gonna betray my trust just to screw with me. We both know it'd just be a waste of time for you with no gain, and you have better things to do than that," Sorun said with a roll of his eyes.

"And you suddenly know me so well?"

"Believe it or not, but I actually do pay attention to people. I just pretend not to." The human teen propped his arm up and rested his head against his closed fist. "You never have to talk to me about private stuff if you don't want to. Option's just on the table. I'm only asking you keep what I'm about to tell you to yourself this one time. Fair enough?"

The hedgehog turned his head to the side, closing his eyes as he silently mulled over Sorun's words. He was worried based on the hedgehog's initial reaction he'd refuse, and began wondering what he would do in response. But eventually, Shadow deeply sighed, nodded his head, and turned back to Sorun while opening his crimson eyes. "Alright, human," he said. "I'll keep whatever is said between us private. Just don't ever expect me to actually approach you with such matters."

"Sure," Sorun said with a nod. "The powers I get aren't random. I stole them all from a video game."

Complete and utter silence followed the confession. Sorun expectantly looked towards Shadow, who looked down slightly to process the information he had just received. His face went through a range of emotions from disbelief to exhaustion, and eventually he settled on plain confusion as he looked back up at Sorun. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah, none of it's original," the pale teen elaborated. "The Summoned Swords. The Bringer Claws. Yamato. Not even any of the Summoned Swords formations I use are original. The Spiral Swords and Blistering Swords and all that. I stole literally all of it from a series of video games." He straightened his head up and crossed one leg over the other. "It's the truth. I'm nothin' but a filthy ganker through and through."

"... 'Gank'..?"

"It means 'steal'," Sorun explained. "... That seriously your reaction to this?"

Shadow roughly shook his head. "No, I just- you- Sorun, *why* ?" He didn't sound completely outraged, though there was a hint of it there. He actually just sounded more lost than anything else. "You can't actually be serious. Why in the name of anything you hold dear would you choose powers-"

"Whoa, hold up. I didn't choose jack," Sorun said while raising a hand up to stop Shadow mid-sentence. "I wasn't lying when I said all my powers are chosen subconsciously. You really think if I had a choice I'd choose these powers? If I actually had a choice I would have just asked for a Death Note so I could kill Robotnik and Snively in a minute flat since apparently item summoning is in the list of possible powers," he said as he shook Yamato. "It is subconscious. My subconscious just... decided to nick all the powers out from a video game series called 'Devil May Cry'."

"And what was the significance of this particular video game to you?" Shadow asked, his demeanor calming down significantly and eyes growing to be more curious than anything else.

Sorun breathed out a large breath, looking up in thought. "Where to even begin with that?" he wondered aloud. "Video games were my life, Shadow. I didn't have much else to do. They were my escape from it all. I had fun playing them. 'Devil May Cry' was special to me for a lot of reasons. The first game in the series was the first video game I ever played. My mom bought it for me as a birthday present 'cause, you know, cool guy in a red coat on the cover, ha ha." He trailed off in his laughs, and looked to the side. "No matter how many video games I beat, I always came back to that series. I liked the story. I liked the characters. I liked the challenge the games gave me, because as I got older and played more and more games they just all became too easy for me and I started to blow through them all like nothing. It was fun, for sure I had a blast playing them all, but I was going through them all way too fast for the enjoyment to last past the stories they provided.

"But the 'Devil May Cry' series was a real test of skill by design." Sorun leaned forwards and focused in on Shadow. "I *mastered* those games, Shadow. All of them. Beat all the missions with S-ranks on all the highest difficulties and everything. Did deathless runs, hitless runs, there was even a difficulty where your player character got one-shotted while all the enemies and bosses were juiced up on the highest difficulty parameters. I beat all of them with S-ranks, the

highest possible score. Doing this required in-depth knowledge of *every single mechanic* that game offered, of knowing perfectly every single enemy's attack animation and their hitboxes, having absolute frame-perfect timing in every single move you made..." Sorun ran out of breath, and sucked in a huge gulp of air before continuing. "I never in my life encountered a challenge as good as mastering the 'Devil May Cry' series. Helped that the music was amazing and that the story and characters were really likable.

"As for the powers..." Sorun lifted up Yamato. "With the exception of the Bringer Claws, all of the powers came from one specific character: Vergil. Bringer Claws came from his son Nero, dunno why I got those."

Shadow, who had been listening intently to Sorun's explanation while nodding along to it, paused. "Vergil?" he repeated. "Isn't that the name you gave your Chao?"

"Huh?" Sorun glanced back at Virgil, who waved happily at him. "Nah, man, this is Virgil spelled with an 'i'. The one I'm talking about is Vergil spelled with an 'e'," he said as he turned back to Shadow. "Completely different names."

"... Okay," Shadow conceded, not sounding entirely convinced. "What was so special about this Vergil character?"

"Vergil was a complicated guy. Had a real angsty personality that resulted in a endless lust for power that only really ended when he got some outside perspective on his choices and after his son suplexed some sense into him," Sorun began. "I liked him the best, however, because of two things. One was the color. I like blue, sue me," he said with a shrug. "More importantly, though, was his moveset." A low laugh left Sorun as he shook his head. "Shadow, Vergil was *busted* . He was only playable in Three and Four, and I had to get a mod trainer to play him in Five, but man in all of those games he absolutely slayed. He did insane damage with his attacks, his power kit meshed well with his combos, he couldn't even be touched if you played him right..." He trailed off when a wave of

happy nostalgia hit him, though he quickly brushed it off for Shadow's sake. "Point is, out of all the characters in the games I played, Vergil was the easiest one to get all those high-level S-ranks with just because he was the strongest if you played him right. OP to the max. So I studied him hard. Harder than the rest of the characters. All his moves and animations, all his powers, all the high-level advanced combo tech you could perform with him, and every single aspect there was to learn about playing Vergil. So if you wanna know why I'm so good with something like the Summoned Swords, that's why." He held up a finger and manifested a spinning Summoned Sword to float over it. "I've technically used and mastered these powers before in the past. It was just on the other side of a screen. I've seen how they perform and how they can be used. I just... applied it to real life, you could say." The sword shattered as the teen put his hand back into a resting position on his thigh. "I've been trying to use Vergil as a benchmark to kinda try and guess what powers I'll get from the other Emeralds since they all seem to revolve around him. Well, except the Bringer Claws, but two out of three is still pretty telling. Might get stuff from his twin brother, too, but they had almost all the same abilities anyways, so... yeah, I don't know."

"That... makes sense, I suppose," Shadow hesitantly agreed. "Sorun, try and help me understand how a mere video game could possibly have this much depth to it. I've experienced them for myself, and I'm struggling to comprehend how you could have attained so much from a collection of moving pixels on a screen."

"It was multiple games, Shadow. Weren't ya listening?"

"Sorun."

"Alright, alright." The teen let out a single chuckle at the Mobian's irritated tone. "Video games in my zone were a lot more advanced than the ones I've seen here. Byproduct of the world's cultural progress getting reset by aliens and then stagnated by a crazy egg guy I guess. Just trust me here."

Breathing in a heavy inhale, Shadow slowly nodded his head. "I'm attempting my best here," he told the human. "So... you unwillingly copied this character's abilities because of a subconscious mental bias towards his power which, from what I'm getting at listening to your words, you deeply respected. I suppose, seeing the trend in your abilities thus far, inferring back to this character to try and predict future abilities to prepare beforehand would be a reasonable course of action." He hummed, and then began rubbing at his chin. "What other abilities did he have?"

Sorun hummed, and then looked down to begin counting off his fingers. "Ah, man, him and his brother had quite a few. Enhanced physical abilities, regeneration- *insane* regeneration, guy got cut in half and regenerated completely before the sword left the other side of his body-, teleporting, though in the games they referred to it as Tricking, his brother Dante had a time stop ability in one game... stuff like that," he said, listing off each power with an extended finger.

Shadow followed along with the human's list, eyes furrowed in concentration as he considered his words. Afterwards, his eyes widened slightly as a realization hit him. "Sorun... these abilities are remarkably similar to the Chaos Control abilities I myself possess. Time stop, teleportation, regeneration and enhanced strength..." Shadow looked down at his hand, and very briefly a few arcs of greenish power arced over his fingers. "Even your Summoned Swords are similar to my Chaos Spears. They seem too similar to each other to be a coincidence."

"... That is kinda weird, huh?" Sorun agreed, his eyebrows rising in surprise. "Who knows? Maybe that's why I'm getting these powers. They're so close to regular Chaos Control abilities that the Emeralds are trying to recreate them using my knowledge of something similar enough that it just makes them instead. But we're just guessing at that point." He sighed, and held up Yamato. "Doesn't really explain this, though."

"It could just be unique to you," Shadow suggested. "The only limit to the capabilities of Chaos energy are limits placed on those

manipulating it. Chaos Control is merely the art of manipulating that energy to suit the user's purpose." A scowl formed on his face. "But, that said, there are precious few besides me who even have the capability of practicing the technique. The echidna, Knuckles, had... some form of experience in the past from what I've heard, though now he's nowhere near my level. More of his kind may know, they made a concerted effort on studying Chaos energy, though things up on Angel Island are severely strained at the moment. The Faker has some limited experience with the Emeralds and Chaos Control as well, though not nearly as much as me. Aside from them and that strange mammoth they keep locked up in Knothole's jail, I'm afraid I don't know of anybody else that can perform it."

"That so? Huh." Sounded to Sorun like this "Chaos Control" thing really was exceptionally rare even among Mobians. The comment about the mammoth had Sorun slightly curious, but not enough that he desired to ask any further about it. "Well... either way, it still leaves one burning question in my mind." And, with that sentence said, Sorun reared back and threw the katana forwards with as much force as he could. "IF THEY CAN MAKE ITEMS THEN WHY DIDN'T I GET EBONY AND IVORY!?"

The sudden outburst was unexpected enough that Shadow had stepped back in surprise. He turned his head to follow the katana as it bounced to a halt on the ground nearby, and then he turned back to Sorun to see the teen heavily panting, an indignant look in his eyes as he straightened out his posture in a huff. Shadow thought about what response to form next, and then cleared his throat to gain Sorun's attention.

"Ebony and Ivory?" he asked.

"They're guns," Sorun clarified, inhaling deeply to calm himself. "Twin .45 handguns that may or may not have unlimited ammo, I dunno, the lore got real weird with them." He held his hands up. "I mean, I wanted guns at the beginning of this, but instead I got Summoned Swords." He frowned, and then let his hands drop. "You know what it is? The games classified Summoned Swords as 'guns'

since they're technically a ranged attack, so that's probably what happened." He scoffed and rolled his eyes. "And yeah, I guess the swords are better since guns are pretty much useless against Badniks, so it's actually a good thing that I got them instead of Ebony and Ivory... but still, man."

Shadow, for his part, didn't see why the human was sulking so much over having *not* gotten a potentially useless power, though he kept his tongue in check in an effort to focus on more important matters. "Are there any other potential abilities you can reasonably expect to gain from the Emeralds?" he pressed. "Knowing beforehand could be beneficial."

Sorun sighed, and then shrugged his shoulders. "A few, yeah. There's Royal Guard." He breathed heavily through his nose as a breathy chuckle left him. "Man, if I actually got Royal Guard I could end the whole war. I could just walk right into New Megaopolis and end Eggman right there." When he noticed Shadow's questioning glare, he opened his mouth again to explain. "It's a blocking ability that completely negates enemy attack damage while at the same time builds up a meter for an attack called Royal Release that does big damage. You needed frame-perfect timing to actually pull the style off right, but man, if you got it down you were basically invincible and melting enemies away with Royal Release. Which I did." He sighed and shook his head. "Somehow I don't think the universe will be nice enough to give me a power that'd make me functionally invincible. It's a nice thought, though."

"Anything else?"

"Mm. There's one more thing I can think of off the top of my head. It's actually a power I'm really hoping I'll get," Sorun admitted to Shadow as he sat forwards on the crate he was sitting on. "Devil Trigger."

"How scary," Shadow commented in a deadpan voice.

Sorun rolled his eyes again. "Yeah, real ominous-sounding. It's a... transformation of sorts that multiplies the user's base physical

abilities. I mainly just want it so I can keep up with you guys since you're all so strong and agile, but... ah, I don't know. There's no telling what these Emeralds will give me." Finishing with a sigh, Sorun leaned back on the crate while interlacing his fingers behind his head. "What do you think?"

Humming in thought, Shadow looked down. He crossed his arms and began tapping his elbows with his fingers, whole seconds passing as Sorun patiently awaited the hedgehog to vocalize his thoughts. "I think..." he finally said, picking his head up, "that your subconscious is making this much more difficult than it needs to be." The statement made Sorun's face fall, making Shadow continue in a slightly lighter tone. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not blaming you. It'd just be easier for everybody if the way your powers manifested didn't rely on such an unpredictable system."

"Hah. Yeah. Tell me about it," Sorun mumbled in agreement. "So no advice, then?"

Shadow shook his head. "Based on everything you said, I think it would just be easier to gain your powers and then work from there. If it's true that some of the abilities you gain are similar to my own Chaos Control abilities, then perhaps I could help you learn to control them. Otherwise, there's little we can do until such a time arrives."

"... So just keep doing what I've been doing?" Sorun summarized.

"Essentially."

"Ah." With a sigh, Sorun hung his head. "Man, this has been a huge waste of time."

"I wouldn't say that," Shadow denied, causing Sorun's head to pick back up. "We have a somewhat vague understanding of what abilities you could gain and how to proceed forwards. And... I do appreciate you confiding with me the origin of your abilities, as ridiculous as it is. It certainly does answer some of the questions I

have." He breathed out in an exhausted manner. "But, as ridiculous as the origin of your powers is, I cannot deny the results. And besides, it's not as if copying useful and pragmatic abilities from those whose strength you respect is wrong in any way. It's simply learning and adapting to better yourself. There's no shame in that."

"Mm-hm, is this going back to how you stole Sonic's Spin Dash?"

The dark hedgehog's features scowled at that remark. "I already told you I was the one to pioneer that ability. I was first."

"Sure you were," Sorun replied, making Shadow's scowl deepen. "Guess you got a point, though. Nobody can judge me for copying powers from a video game if it works so well. Not like I got a choice in the powers anyways."

"I'm glad you see it that way," Shadow said, features relaxing a bit. "... Earlier you said something about killing Eggman and Snively if you could," he suddenly said, making Sorun's head tilt to the side in curiosity. "Do you honestly intend on killing those two?"

The question caused Sorun's brows to furrow in confusion. "... Yeah?" he answered, voice becoming unsure when he saw Shadow's eye ridges raise in surprise. "W-why are you looking at me like that? I thought the whole goal here was to take Robotnik down and kill him so he never hurts anybody ever again?" It was even in the name. "Freedom Fighters". Implying they were all fighting to free the planet from the man oppressing it. Which also inherently implied they would make sure he would never be in a position to oppress it again afterwards. Considering all of the suffering that man had caused Sorun assumed "kill him" was an objective so obviously clear it didn't even need to be discussed.

So why was Shadow looking at him like that?

"Forgive my surprise, Sorun," Shadow apologized, his features returning to a neutral expression, "I just... didn't assume you would be willing to go that far."

An uneasy feeling began to grow in Sorun's stomach. He recalled so long ago, during the night of the first Emerald when he'd met Snively. About him saying that Freedom Fighters didn't kill. He'd put that statement off in the back of his mind, but with the way Shadow was acting, he was suddenly being reminded of it. And he did not like the implications. "Isn't the plan to kill Eggman by the end of all this?" Sorun slowly asked, voice going a bit lower.

Shadow's eyes narrowed a bit, and with a scoff he turned to the side. "The Freedom Fighters would rather just lock him away forever than do something as that. Killing isn't a very heroic thing to do, after all, and they pride themselves on being a symbol for peace and hope for the planet."

"Oh, come on," Sorun tiredly exclaimed while slapping his palm against his forehead. "No, man, no. Come on, no. I know Mobians are generally nice to a fault, but you can't stand there and tell me they're gonna let that maniac live just 'cause 'killing is wrong'."

"That is indeed what they plan," Shadow confirmed.

"Oh, for the love of- don't tell me you agree with that," Sorun said, voice growing a little more heated as he stared straight into Shadow's eyes. "Do not tell me you are actually okay with that."

To the human's relief, Shadow shook his head. "Of course I'm not. I think it's a moronic decision on their part," he informed Sorun. "Half the reason I chose to stick with G.U.N. before Eggman's takeover as opposed to allying with them was because unlike the Freedom Fighter, G.U.N. actually realizes that sometimes there is no 'clean' solution to every problem."

With a groan, Sorun rubbed at his head again. "Yeah, I'm not surprised in the least. But seriously? Just lock Eggman away?" he said, voice irritated and incredulous. "Listen, I understand life is precious and priceless and unique and all that and killing is wrong. I get that, really, I do. But this is Eggman we're talking about. The guy that's borderline ruined the planet, committed... I don't even know

what to call it, *robot slavery* against living people, responsible for who knows how many deaths, all that stuff and more, and the Freedom Fighters' grand plan is to beat him and lock him away." Sorun snapped his fingers. "Just like that. Instead of, you know... takin' the easy way and murking the guy."

"The Freedom Fighters consider themselves morally obligated to take the high ground in matters such as these," Shadow told him. "It doesn't help that their leader, Sally, is the princess of the kingdom and is technically a representative for them as a result. Any actions taken by any Freedom Fighter reflects on her, and by extension the Kingdom of Acorn." He let out an almost frustrated breath and shook his head. "That said, the idea of not killing is so ingrained within them that they don't even consider these ramifications. Mobian culture in general frowns on killing as I've learned. It seems that the only thing that ever shook them of this belief were legitimate wars."

"But we are in a war! Possibly the biggest war there ever was!" Sorun argued. "They... what do you mean you learned Mobian culture? Ain't you a Mobian already?"

Shadow's eyes widened a small amount. "It's a long story. It's not important," he said. "I understand your frustrations, but it's their belief to not kill. It's all about not stooping to Eggman's level for them."

"'Not stooping to Eggman's'- man, this isn't about what moral standing you're left on once this is over."

"Then what is it about?"

"It's about definitively making sure he never does this again!" Sorun argued. "I mean Snively, sure, guy kinda gave off a low threat vibe, so who cares? Whatever. But Robotnik? The guy's a psychotic super genius, Shadow! I'm not saying I doubt they'd take every single precaution necessary to contain him if they finally captured him. I'm not saying that at all. I'm just questioning why anybody would ever take the risk of containing him for the rest of his life and risk him escaping just so he could start this all over again when, instead, we

could be a hundred percent sure he never does it again by killing him. And would people even think twice about it? Really? Seeing as it's Eggman we're talking about? After everything he did?" Rather tiredly, he began to rub at his eyes as frustration continued to ebb through him. *"Jesus, it's the fucking Batman not killing the Joker argument all over again. 'Cept this is real. What the fuck..."*

No, he wasn't playing that game. If he was gonna die saving this planet, he was making damn sure he was leaving it in a state where this didn't happen again. That meant Eggman had to go. Not be locked in a super jail cell at the bottom of the ocean or whatever they had planned for him. He needed to be *gone* . Because Sorun wasn't so sure he was comfortable dying saving the planet if there was even a one percent chance of Eggman someday and somehow restarting this cycle of suffering and make all of his friends fight for freedom *again* just because they didn't take the practical approach and kill him.

It wasn't the good thing to do, he knew that. He didn't want to kill anybody. He didn't even want to fight. It was, however, the *smart* thing to do, and when it came to the lives of however many men, women, and children of all species on this planet compared to the life of one man who was crazy enough to be dead-set on ruining those lives for him own hedonism? Oh, that wasn't even a hard choice for Sorun to make. Man had to die. Simple as that. Sorun didn't care it was the wrong thing to do, and he didn't care if the Freedom Fighters disagreed with him. He was gonna die anyways, and it was all for their sake.

"I agree with you." Sorun's head picked up in absolute shock at Shadow's words. The dark hedgehog's eyes looked sincere, and Sorun thought he was crazy for thinking so, but his tone almost sounded actually *appreciative* of Sorun's words and viewpoint. "Doctor Eggman has caused this world too much suffering and is too dangerous to let live. A threat that severe shouldn't be contained. It should be destroyed for the good of the planet and all its inhabitants." His head tilted up towards the sky. "What is the point of

protecting the planet if I cannot keep it safe, after all? I'm relieved to hear at least one other person here be like-minded with me on this matter."

Sorun released a disbelieving scoff. "Oh, you gotta be kidding me. Even Rouge disagrees with killing him?"

"She's indifferent on the subject," Shadow said with a shrug as he looked back down on Sorun. "Though, honestly, I never knew you felt this way," he added, and for probably the first time since meeting him Sorun saw a ghost of a smirk play out of Shadow's face. "You sound like you belong more with G.U.N. than the Freedom Fighters talking like that, you know."

The human teen was honestly too shocked from seeing the smirk to respond properly at first. Eventually, he managed a bemused snort as he reversed the positions his legs were crossed in. "That's the human and Overlander defensive government across the ocean Eggman took over, right? Makes sense, I guess, seeing as I'm a human, too. But... I can see from the Mobians' point of view why most of them absolutely refuse to kill," Sorun admitted. "They're so nice and accepting of life that I'm not even surprised killing is so against their nature. But if even they make an exception to that in times of war, then there's not even a question, Shadow. Eggman's gotta die."

"I know," he agreed, "but the other Freedom Fighters would never allow it if we ever manage to defeat him. An argument could be made that, as an Overlander, Eggman would rightfully have to be extradited over to G.U.N. where I would assure you he'd be executed without question. As an agent of G.U.N. myself it's within my jurisdiction to make that call." A withering sigh left him. "But, as it stands, his tyranny affects the entire planet, and admittedly the Mobians have suffered more under him than the humans and Overlanders. His evil has stretched so far to so many different people and cultures that it's almost impossible to properly judge him for his actions. Because of this, if the Freedom Fighters were to be the ones to defeat him, the Kingdom of Acorn would automatically be

responsible for administering his judgement. And we both know that just means they'll imprison him."

"... They can't judge him if he dies first," Sorun claimed, a sly smile forming on his face. "I mean, you know... if we had a cool, climactic final battle and everything and he's lying defeated on his knees and, I dunno, a Summoned Sword just *happened* to suddenly fly through his face..."

Shadow shook his head. "Sally wouldn't let you," he said. "Sonic would likely actively take steps to stop you."

"They can't do anything if you or I get to him first."

At that, Shadow lowly chuckled. "You honestly think you can beat the blue hedgehog of all people in a race against Eggman?"

"I can if I cheat," Sorun said, causing Shadow to chuckle even further. "Whaddya say, Shadow? You want to protect this planet as much as I do. Wanna conspire to kill the fat man?"

"I'm not so sure that would go too well with the Freedom Fighters."

"Eh, you let me worry about that."

The hedgehog hummed in interest. "At the moment, we have no way to actually get to him," Shadow reminded him. "There's nothing we can actually plan for. At best, when Eggman is at the cusp of defeat, we can work together and improvise a plan on the spot to get to him and kill him before any of the other Freedom Fighters have a chance to detain him. That is the best we could ever hope to do, and that alone is an incredibly small window with too many possible variables to account for."

"Wait for the opportune moment and make it up as we go from there, huh? Yeah, it's a pretty dicey plan, but I'll take a plan with a low chance of success over doing nothing for a zero percent chance of success," Sorun said. He leaned forwards on the crate and held his

right bare hand out towards Shadow. "So is it a deal? If the moment ever arrives we work together to cheat our way to Eggman before the others get to him?"

Shadow stared down at the hand, eye ridges furrowed in contemplation as he considered the human's offer. Eventually, he rose up his own gloved hand and and firmly grasped the one being offered to him. "We're in agreement," he said, squeezing the hand and giving it a shake. "If the chance to end his life is ever revealed to us, we take it. Regardless of what the others say."

"Alright, cool." That was a small load off Sorun's shoulders. He at least had one ally in his completely sensible quest to kill Eggman. And as frustrating as it was, he understood the reason of why the Freedom Fighters wouldn't go as far as to kill him. But just because he understood and respected their decision didn't mean he had to adhere to it, Freedom Fighter himself or no.

Besides. By then he'd be too dead to care anyways. The planet and the people's wellbeing mattered more.

"Welp, Shadow, good talk, but I think we gotta cut it here. It's getting late." With a grunt, Sorun hopped off of the crate, briefly wincing after reaching towards his shoulder. He rolled it, and then bent backwards to pick Virgil up in his right hand while making Yamato appear in his left. "I got a date with some delish pancakes, and you... I don't really know what you do with your free time, but I'm sure you got stuff to do. Seeya later."

"... So long, Sorun." Shadow gave the retreating human a two-finger wave, which he reciprocated with his own. He watched as Sorun, carrying his Chao and sword, walked further and further away, and it was only until he was out of eyesight did Shadow allow himself a small laugh. "Powers from a video game... why am I not even surprised?" he grumbled, shaking his head in disbelief. "Only Sorun could make something so absurd a reality. Still... I suppose he's not so bad after all."

He allowed himself a small smile for a brief moment before it disappeared just as soon as it arrived. Afterwards, he closed his eyes and began to intensely focus. Greenish-yellow energy crackled around him, the arcs of energy coalescing into two points around his body. The two points eventually transformed into two Chaos Spears floating in front of and behind Shadow, each pointing outwards. They began to slowly rotate around Shadow's body, though, to the hedgehog's disgruntlement, he lost his concentration when he opened his eyes, causing the two Chaos Spears to vanish along with the energy crackling around him.

A dissatisfied huff left Shadow as a result of his own performance. "Hm. Needs more practice..."

Chapter 27

Recursion Error

Episode 27- Tea with the king

"Yep. This is... this is the life. Hoo boy..."

Some days were just slow. It was a fact of living. But today wasn't just a slow day- it was a particularly slow day. A day in which absolutely nothing was happening. No missions, no life-endangering conflicts to resolve, and no mindless training to get to. And Sorun figured that he should have been happy with this change of events. And he was until he realized nobody else had an abundance of free time like he did, which meant that he had nobody to hang out with.

What was a man to do when overcome with such overwhelming boredom? Sorun found his answer plugging away at Solitaire in the Freedom HQ's lab's computer, just like most other people bored out of their minds with little better to do back on Earth did.

Some things apparently never changed no matter what zone one went to.

Leaning back in the chair he was sitting on with his eyes practically dead, Sorun languidly clicked away at the cards being displayed on the screen in front of him. He'd gone through eight rounds of this game already, and through it all he realized a very important fact: he hated Solitaire. And yet he had nothing better to do than continually match up a bunch of virtual rectangles. Truly a meaningless existence.

"Are you sure you can't hop out for, like, five minutes to get in a quick round of games with me?" Sorun asked aloud, tone practically

begging as he matched up another card. "Whatever you're working on can wait five minutes, can't it?"

On the lower right side of the screen, a small icon in the form of Nicole's head blipped into existence. "No, Sorun, I can assure you that this project I am working on requires my utmost attention at the moment," Nicole informed him through the computer's speaker.

Sorun scoffed. "Your super secret project you won't tell anybody about? Even me?"

"Yes. That one."

"Can't be that important if you can split your focus doing that while talking with me here," the teen muttered in response as he finished the Solitaire game. "Yay, congrats to me. Let's do it again..." And, with a heavy sigh, he reset the game and began matching up cards once again.

He'd actually take Eggman randomly attacking the town right now if it meant he could finally tear himself away from Solitaire.

"You do realize there are more entertainment programs installed onto the computer's hard drive aside from Solitaire, correct?" Nicole asked a vapid-looking Sorun.

The human scoffed. "No way am I playing Minesweeper. Nobody understands how that game works, Nicole. It's impossible." Greater minds than him had tried to decipher the inner workings of that game. And while they may have actually succeeded, Sorun never endeavored to learn from them how Minesweeper actually worked. He somewhat regretted that now.

"I was not referring to Minesweeper. I had a more engaging game in mind." An icon of a black chess piece popped into existence right next to Nicole's icon. "A game we could both play." Nicole's icon moved against the chess piece and nudged it up towards the center of the screen. Sorun watched the display with an unamused

expression. "A very thought-provoking game that I happen to very much enjoy." The icon was pushed up further. "Perhaps it could even jumpstart a conversation between us so you could quit staring at the screen as if you were asleep with your eyes open."

The hint the AI was giving was not lost on Sorun as he watched Nicole's icon continually push the chess icon closer towards the center of the screen. Unfortunately, he was having none of it. "How about no," Sorun said as he dragged the mouse cursor towards the chess icon in an attempt to remove it from the screen.

Nicole's icon moved right between the cursor's point and the chess icon, making Sorun's eyes widen and his wrist freeze, halting the mouse's movement. "Sorun, give chess another chance."

"You blasted me in eight moves the last time we played. I don't wanna." It wasn't his fault he was so bad at strategy-type games. Or that Nicole was a super genius AI who could probably beat out the world's greatest chess grandmasters without even breaking a sweat. With both of those aspects combined, what possible hope did Sorun have of even standing his ground against Nicole in chess?

Answer: none. So he wasn't going to try playing chess against Nicole again.

He maneuvered the mouse cursor so that it swung around Nicole's icon and towards the chess icon. However, Nicole's icon moved at an even greater speed, intercepting the clicker's path yet again. Sorun furrowed his brows as he continually swerved and dragged the mouse in all sorts of different directions at various speeds in order to try and elude Nicole. She was keeping up well with him, though, her face icon blocking him at every single turn whenever he even got close to the chess icon.

Changing strategy, Sorun made bigger drags backwards using strokes that slowly increased in size. It was right when he should have pulled the mouse back far enough that it would have touched the border of the screen did Sorun act. He'd moved the mouse a

quarter of the way in order to bait Nicole into moving into his predicted position and, right when she moved, he let out a loud "ah-ha!" as he reversed movement, the mouse pointer practically flying towards the chess icon.

The teen's eyes nearly bugged out of his head when the cursor froze right before its tip managed to touch the icon. When he looked towards the mouse cursor's rear, he was shocked to see a black icon suspiciously shaped like Nicole's hand holding the cursor back.

"Come on. Come on, really?" Sorun tried moving the actual mouse around to try and break the cursor free of the AI's grasp, but while the cursor wiggled around due to his efforts, it remained locked in Nicole's grasp. "You're really gonna play a guy like this?"

"You put up an admirable effort in evading me," Nicole praised, and he could *hear* the smugness in her voice, "but I'm afraid it's futile. I refuse to watch you waste any more time playing Solitaire."

"This really is some next-level cyber bullying you're laying down on me," Sorun complained, though a smirk began to play across his lips as his finger hovered towards the right mouse button. "Too bad I don't play that way!"

A bit harder than he ought to have, he pressed down on the right mouse button. Immediately after, a white window full of shortcut keys appeared next to the mouse cursor. The sudden appearance of the window smacked away the hand that had been holding the cursor, causing Nicole to gasp out loud. Her head icon and a second hand icon attempted to zoom forwards to try and stop the cursor, but it was too late. Sorun's mouse cursor was just too close to the chess icon.

"And that's jackpot!" Sorun cried out victoriously as he successfully clicked on and dragged away the chess icon from the middle of the screen. He moved it over to the left side of the computer screen, hovering the mouse cursor and the chess icon dangerously close to the recycling bin icon located near the top of the left side.

He moved down slightly and safely deposited the chess icon in the empty space right below the recycling bin.

The two of them silently stared at the chess icon, with Nicole's head icon having moved right next to it while Sorun watched on. Afterwards, the two slowly broke out into mirthful laughter, and Sorun had to hold onto the sides of his chair just not to fall out from the laughter rocking his body. Eventually the laughter tapered off, Sorun in particularly shaking his head with a large smile still plastered on his face. "What did that even look like from your perspective?" he playfully asked as he brushed some of his dark hair out from his face.

"Like a giant, floating arrow flailing about," Nicole said, sounding just as joyful as Sorun looked. "I suppose I must concede this thrilling round of cursor combat to you."

"Inventing a new game and being the first one to win it all in the same hour? This day's goin' up for me," Sorun said to Nicole as he hovered his cursor back to the Solitaire board. The AI laughed again, making Sorun chuckle along with her. "But man, do I miss the internet," he added as he began matching cards again, the smile on his face lowering slightly. "Nobody could get bored on the internet. I don't even wanna think about how much time I spent on it."

"You've mentioned this 'internet' to me quite a few times in the past," Nicole noted, a tick mark having appeared over her icon's forehead when she saw the mouse cursor go right back to Solitaire. "Tell me about it."

Sorun hummed in thought. "It was, uh... it was a computer network, basically, but on a global scale," he explained as he continued to match cards. "Back in my world there wasn't an apocalypse that reset the whole world, so society was going pretty strong. All the world's governments were functioning, eh, relatively well and communication, transportation, and travel was good everywhere. And at the point where I left practically everybody had a computer or

some other device to connect them to the internet. It was a commonplace thing."

"But what exact purpose did this computer network serve that made it such a prevalent aspect of your zone's society?" Nicole questioned him.

"Oh, Nicole, *everything* was on that network," Sorun said while slowly exhaling. "The sum total of all human knowledge was collected and put in that thing. There were server banks all over the world dedicated to storing all that data and maintaining the internet. I'm talking petabytes upon petabytes of data here." The eyes on Nicole's icon widened. "Yeah, a lot, right? History, technical knowledge, scientific articles..." His eyes darted away from the screen as Sorun's cheeks went red. "... Other things."

"Such as?"

"A-ack, ahem!" Coughing, Sorun quickly shook his head to get rid of the blush before refocusing on the the computer. "Ah, you know, things like... the ability to talk to people from around the world through various message boards and websites. A website where people could create content in video format and post literally whatever they wanted for entertainment and educational purposes for the whole world to see. Games, oh man, the games, Nicole. Most of the games I ever played I just downloaded off the internet. You could download practically anything off the internet." A sigh left him as he leaned back in his chair. "Sorry, but I don't think I can accurately describe just how big the internet was with words alone. That's how significant it was. Of all of the creations humanity ever conceived, I don't think anything ever surpassed the internet. Its ability to just... connect the whole human race like that, you know? The world just got so much better with it." He glanced off to the side. "I mean, antibiotics were pretty important, too, but you get what I mean."

There was just so much he missed from the internet at home. Steam and all its games. YouTube. All those pirate and torrent sites where

he would get his music, comics, manga, and anime from. The chat boards. The ability to look up whatever information he ever needed on the fly. Having been cut off from it for so long just left a void in Sorun's heart along with everything else he'd lost.

"There is no need to apologize, Sorun. I think I get the picture," Nicole assured him. "An entire world connected together through technology sounds rather wonderful. And with how you talk about it you make it sound as if its conception was a revolutionary turn for your world."

"That's 'cause it was," Sorun affirmed with a nod. "Technology alone is an amazing thing that makes everybody's lives so much better. You know, as long as it's used right." Because some people like Eggman just couldn't take the hint. He'd cut his head off for perverting technology to the point that the world was at the brink of ruination if it was the last thing Sorun did. Which it likely would be. "After all," Sorun continued as he leaned back forwards in his chair, "you only exist because of technology, right? And you're amazing."

Nicole's icon blinked owlishly, and then slowly began to slide downwards towards the bottom of the screen, almost in an effort to get away from Sorun's sight. Even so, he could clearly see how bashful the icon's face had become. "W-well, Sorun, with how great you've made the idea of an internet sound, perhaps Mobius would benefit from such a system. If nothing else, it sounds like a fun enough project."

"Build the internet from scratch, huh?" Sorun mused. "Sounds like kind of a long-term goal. Like way after Eggman's dealt with and the world becomes stable again, but after that... sure. Go for it. If anybody could do it, it's you." At the very least it was one more thing to help put him at ease once he died. Knowing he gave somebody the idea of jumpstarting the internet revolution for this world.

From behind him, he heard the door to the lab open. Sorun tried to ignore it, but he was forced to pay attention after he heard his name be called. "Sorun? There you are." He suppressed a sigh at hearing

Sally's voice, and then turned the chair around halfway so he could meet her eyes. "Is... is this seriously where you've been all day?"

"What time is it outside?" he asked her.

She blinked. "Around eleven in the afternoon, I think?"

"Then yeah," he confirmed with a nod. "Is this the part where you send me on some life-threatening mission because Eggman poisoned the water supply with nanobots or whatever?"

Sally shook her head. "No, nothing severe like that. Seriously, though, don't say that kind of stuff around people. You're just gonna scare them." The momentary, stern look in her features relaxed into an easy expression. "Actually my brother wanted to talk to you about something, so he asked me to go look for you."

The apprehension that had been growing inside of Sorun in dread at a coming mission collapsed instantly in place of a severe sense of unwant. "Ugh, your brother the king? What does he want?" Sorun asked.

"Apparently he just wants to hang out with you. As weird as it sounds."

The levels of unwant inside of Sorun grew. "Oh. Yeah, I don't wanna," he said as he turned his chair back towards the computer screen. "Tell him I'm busy with something else. *Anything* else."

He began matching cards up in his Solitaire game again, trying and failing to ignore the approaching footsteps from behind. He could just see Sally's face over his chair behind him from the reflection on the computer's monitor once she got close enough to him. She didn't look very convinced with Sorun's statement. "Busy, huh?" she deadpanned.

"Sally, I am not joking when I say the fate of the whole universe depends on the result of this game of Solitaire," Sorun replied in an

equal deadpan.

There was a withering sigh from behind the chair. "You know, he told me about the talk you two had. I was honestly surprised you went to *him* of all people for support," she told him. "I guess I kinda got what you were thinking when he told me the reason, though. So you'll have to help me understand why you don't want to talk to Elias seeing as you're both on good footing already."

"Listen, it's not like I got anything against the guy, I just..." Sorun paused as he attempted to think of a good excuse. Unfortunately, he had none. "To be honest, I just really don't feel like it. That's all."

He could almost feel the dissatisfaction beginning to radiate off of Sally. "Of all the excuses I've ever heard from you, that one was probably the laziest."

"Oh-ho, oh, Sally, I could think of way worse than that," Sorun boldly claimed with a laugh. "I feel honored the king himself wants to blow an afternoon away with me, and admittedly I don't have anything better to do and have absolutely no reason to refuse, but I'm gonna refuse anyways."

An exasperated breath came from Sally. "Nicole? You still in the computer?"

"Yes," came Nicole's voice from the speakers, causing Sorun's eyes to widen and shoot towards said speakers.

"How long's he been at this?"

"Approximately two hours, seventeen minutes, and forty-five seconds," the AI happily informed Sally, much to Sorun's chagrin. "Based on my observations this activity has been insufficient in thoroughly stimulating Sorun's higher thought processes. It is my assertion that he is wasting his time on this thoughtless game and should therefor do something more engaging so that his mental ability does not atrophy."

"Et tu, Nicole...?" Sorun mumbled, his arm falling off of the mouse and table to limply hang off his side. Nicole's response was for the small icon of her face on the screen to flash him a playful grin.

From behind him, Sally crossed her arms as a satisfied smirk played across her lips. "Oh, really? Well, I can't have a Freedom Fighter's brain go and melt on me because they decided to waste all day playing a mindless card game." She nodded her head towards the lab's door. "You heard her, Sorun. Go play with my brother."

With a loud groan, Sorun slowly started to remove himself from the chair. "Arigato Mrs. Roboto," he sarcastically muttered to the computer. He stood up fully, and then turned to Sally. "And do you really gotta say it like that? I'm not eight."

"No, but you act eight sometimes," Sally said with a shake of her head. "Like right now, for instance. Now are you gonna go or am I gonna have to pull rank here?"

He rolled his eyes in response, but otherwise said nothing as he turned around and made his way towards the lab's door. He heard stifled laughter from both Sally and Nicole from behind him, and then began to angrily mutter under his breath as he all but slammed the lab's door behind him.

"Sorun! I'm so happy you could make it!"

"Yeah, I can't say the same." That's what Sorun wanted to say to the young king standing in front of him. What he actually said was, "Mm-hm, yeah."

He may as well have just greeted Elias in the same jubilant manner he'd greeted Sorun, as that's how the Mobian acted with his wide, grinning face as he spun around while gesturing towards the castle. "Follow me, if you would. I already have our venue picked out."

"... Right." With a barely-audible, resigned sigh, Sorun began dragging his feet forwards as he followed the squirrel into the castle. He began to mentally tune himself out when Elias began leading him around the labyrinth-like corridors inside of the castle, so he instead turned his focus into his inner thoughts. *"Weird feeling, seeing somebody I barely know so happy to see me. Feels kinda nice, actually. But what the hell does Elias want with me so bad that I had to drag myself all the way to the castle?"* He'd even been waiting for the human out at the castle's entrance. Sorun didn't know what to make of that. *"Guess I just gotta wait 'til he tells me what's up. Doesn't mean I can't have some fun with him in the meantime."*

It was Sorun's time that was being spent here, after all, as useless as it was at the moment. He had a right to a little bit of teasing if only to milk as much amusement from this experience as possible.

With that decided, the human sped up to Elias' side as the pair rounded a corner. "You know I was serious when I said I was joking about the marriage thing, right?" Sorun asked. "You didn't have to bring me all the way out here for a date."

"Huh?" Elias turned his head to meet Sorun's gaze, and then immediately grew a flustered look when Sorun's words finally caught up with him. "T-this isn't anything like...!" He cut himself off when he saw Sorun silently snicker besides him, causing him to huff and turned his head to the side. "Was this type of humor commonplace in your world...?" he almost whined out.

Sorun scoffed at that. "Oh, no. It was way worse. You have no idea how much I've been holding back since Mobian ears are so pure." He was honestly surprised at himself that he'd been able to avoid swearing in front of people he liked for the most part; he was sure he would have crumbled and given up at this point. But it was nice living with a bunch of people who acted like curse words weren't even in their vocabulary, a stark contrast of his life on Earth, so he'd endeavor to keep that going for as long as he could. Self-censoring was a small price to pay for the peace it provided him.

A good thing he could vent once in a while against people he didn't like, though, because otherwise he probably would have exploded by now. But nobody in Knothole deserved to hear any of that, so he'd keep a lid on it.

"Well, I suppose I should thank you for being mindful of your words," Elias told him, though he sounded unsure of himself as he said this. Sorun couldn't rightly blame him. "Ah, here we are. Right past this door."

As Elias said, the two exited through a small pair of doors. Where they ended up was, surprisingly, back outside. In from of them was a small, cobblestone patio fenced in by short shrubs with a view of a large, open courtyard in the background. In the middle of the patio was, simply enough, a single table with two chairs. There was a small box on the top of the table, too, though this went ignored by Sorun as he turned towards Elias.

"... I know you said this wasn't a date, and I was kidding around when I said that, but in all seriousness this is looking really suspect," Sorun said in a slow and even voice.

With a roll of his eyes, Elias walked forwards towards the table while gesturing for Sorun to follow. Rather reluctantly, the human did. "Sorun, I assure you this is nothing more than a strictly platonic meeting of the minds. Was simply spending an afternoon with friends not an occurrence in your world?" he asked with some concern as he turned back to Sorun.

"Well, no, it's just that this... this kind of formality really just died out after a while," Sorun answered.

"Oh. Shame," Elias said, shoulders lowering slightly. He brightened up a bit, though, and even went as far as to pull out Sorun's chair for him. He couldn't help but raise his eyebrows at the sheer politeness. "Well, things at the castle were going particularly slow today." Sorun suppressed a scoff at that. "I had some free time, and there was something I wanted to discuss with you. So I thought we would get

together, enjoy the afternoon and chat, maybe have some tea. We promised that we would if you remember."

"... Oh yeah, that did happen. Man, that was a long time ago," the teen realized with a small nod. "Geez, I don't think I've ever even had tea," Sorun muttered out as he sat down in his chair.

"Truly?" Elias remarked as he sat down in the chair across from him. "What did you have, then?"

"Too many brands of energy drinks to count," Sorun embarrassingly muttered.

Elias's brows furrowed at the answer. "I was lead to assume that consumption of such beverages at such a regular scale was unhealthy."

Sorun shook his head. "Nah, man, it's totally fine. I'm still alive, aren't I?" Despite his claim, he wasn't willing to admit how many caffeinated beverages and sodas he'd used to binge just to make it through all those overnight gaming sessions. With how much he drank that Chao-Cola from the HQ's fridge he'd worry Elias would assume he'd have a caffeine addiction and send him to a rehab center or something.

But wow, could he go for a Chao-Cola right about now. The light tenseness of the situation was giving him a craving.

"Anyways, what's with the box?" Sorun asked as he pointed at the aforementioned box laying between them.

"This? Oh, it's just a game I thought we could play while we talked. After all..." Elias reached forwards and removed the top of the box. Sorun had to resist strangling the king with his Bringer Claws when he saw the contents. "Nothing stimulates the mind quite like the game of kings, eh? Eh? Eh-heh."

It was chess. The box was the box to a goddamned game of chess.

"Son of a bitch, I can't escape this game no matter how hard I try," Sorun silently lamented as he watched Elias set up the board and pieces. "I won't lie to you, Elias. I'm not the best at these strategery-type games," Sorun warned him.

Elias paused. "... Strategery...?" he quietly mumbled to himself as he continued setting the pieces up. "I'm sure you aren't as bad as you say, Sorun. Maybe we can turn this into a learning experience for you as well!"

"Ah-ha, yeah, don't count on it," Sorun mumbled in response, forlornly looking down at the black pieces set in front of him. "Alright, dude, you got me all the way out here playing chess with the king. What do you actually want?" he asked, greatly desiring to get to the truth of the matter of why he was bothering with all this.

The squirrel paused, and then softly sighed as his shoulders slumped down a bit. "In truth, Sorun, I wanted to talk to you for a chance at gaining some outside perspective."

Sorun blinked in surprise, and then reached forwards to move one of the black pawn pieces forwards. "Okay...?" He responded, not really sure what to say at such vague reasoning. "Perspective on what?"

"Being the king is a... trying position. Especially to someone like me who is so young and so... inexperienced," Elias replied as he moved a white pawn forwards. "My mother and father, and even my sister, are practically leagues ahead of me on the subject. They try their best to help me, bless their hearts, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm not so skilled at this. That is why I wanted your assistance on a certain subject."

The pale teen hummed in response. "I'm unsure as to how helpful I will be to you, my dear compatriot, at advising you on the inner workings of socioeconomic matters necessary towards successfully steering a thriving kingdom in times of war when I myself am woefully inexperienced in such matters." He moved a black piece

forwards, and then completely froze when he heard the words leave his mouth.

Elias reached forwards to move a white piece, but then stopped and looked at Sorun with widened eyes, almost looking as surprised as Sorun himself did. "... Sorun, just how... extensive is your vocabulary?" he asked him as he grasped and moved his white piece. "I admit, your way of speaking greatly confuses me sometimes. I always assumed it due to being your zone just having a different vernacular to ours, but Sally sometimes mentions that you'll say something uncharacteristically, well, pardon me if this sounds offensive... complex."

Sorun shrugged. "You might find this hard to believe, but I'm well-versed in verbiage due to my voracious consumption of volumes of literature," he said, causing Elias to smile in amusement. "Yeah, I read a lot before becoming a gamer. Actually, I tried my best to get some reading in every now and then even after my transition to gamer status. So I... talked really weird and fancy back when I was a kid. Then a bunch of other kids decided they didn't like me talking like that so they dragged me to the back of the school and beat me up."

The smile on Elias' face immediately fell away and was replaced by grief. "That's horrible!"

"Yeah, and guess what, it's real hard to fight back when everybody is literally twice as tall as you." Sorun moved a black piece. "I... started to talk like everybody else after a while of that happening. Practiced by listening and emulating the dialogue in a lot of shows and games. Heh." He let out a sad sigh. "Looking back I really was a nerd."

"You shouldn't say that about yourself," Elias admonished. He looked down at the board, and then hummed briefly in thought before moving a white bishop forwards. "Nobody would think twice here if you were to slip back into your old speaking habits. Nobody would certainly... assault you just for speaking," he added, looking like he was concerned over the fact he even had to speak that sentence.

"I know they wouldn't. But my speech right now is kinda permanently ingrained in me at this point." He picked up his rook and began rolling it between his fingers. "But even still, the fancy stuff kinda slips out randomly, especially when I'm focusing on something serious. Or when I'm playing old-timey games like chess that kinda have this weird vintage feel to them." He placed the rook down on the board.

Elias didn't reach for a new piece, and instead looked towards Sorun with a sad look in his blue eyes. "Are humans really so cruel that they would do something unthinkable to one of their own...?"

Sorun paused, and then slowly looked up at Elias. He did not like this train of thought, and he was shutting it down right now before it became something bad. "You shouldn't judge a whole species based on the actions of a few of its members," he told Elias. "I ran into this crazy jackal guy out there when I ran away. Just 'cause I meant one bad Mobian doesn't mean I think your whole species is bad. You're all pretty great, actually."

"But even still-"

"Look, Elias, they were just a bunch of kids. And kids can be cruel. That's just how it is," Sorun said. "Kids in general are just... they're idiots because they're kids and don't know any better. And then sometimes you get people that act like that but never grow up even after becoming adults. It's a real bad combo."

"Indeed," Elias morosely agreed as he moved a white piece. "My father often tells stories of how... unusually cruel the Overlanders were during the Great War. He doesn't favor them in a very good light."

"... Yeah, that doesn't make me nervous or anything," Sorun commented while looking over his shoulder. "He ain't around, is he?"

At that, Elias laughed a bit. "Settle down, Sorun. My father is a fair man." The smile died a bit. "That said, the war did... color his views a

bit, we'll say, so if you two do happen to meet you'll have to forgive him if he seems a bit... course with you."

"Fair enough," Sorun sighed as he sat back down. "So why the sudden concern over Overlanders?" he asked, looking over the board to think over his next move.

"The war with Eggman won't exactly last forever," Elias began, propping an elbow up on the table as he looked out into the courtyard. "I'm expected to bring the kingdom back to the state it was in previously and maintain it until the next ruler takes over. That kind of position involves maintaining relations with other governmental powers across the world in order to keep the peace. Including..."

"The Overlanders," Sorun finished for him, still staring down at the board. He reached for a piece, but then shook his head and brought his hand back. "Yeah, sounds scary," he agreed. "Is this why you wanted to talk to me? Because I am very possibly the only human you have access to who's actually friendly with Mobians? Someone that you can comfortably talk to so you can get a good idea of what talking with a human is like?"

Elias laughed at Sorun's deduction. "You caught me," he admitted. "That among other things. Forgive me if this sounds crass, but you're a rather unique source of information given your background and character. I just simply wanted to speak to you of such matters."

It made enough sense from Sorun's perspective. Rookie king was trying to gather as much information as possible to make things easier on himself. He couldn't blame him; Sorun would probably try doing the same if he were in his shoes. He was curious as to what actually Elias wanted to ask of him, though.

"If I move the knight here... ah, screw it," he thought as he moved the black piece. "'Among other things', huh? Like what?"

The human teen mentally cursed when Elias' white rook took his black knight. "You spoke of a government in your world when we first

spoke. France, I believe it was called? Could you, perhaps, tell me more of your world's governments?"

Sorun slowly nodded in understanding. That's what Elias wanted. No wonder he wanted to speak with him so badly seeing as Sorun was quite literally the only human in the world with a rudimentary understanding of the various governments and their systems in a world exclusively ruled by humans. "So that's the perspective you want," Sorun realized. "You want me to tell you about Earth's governments so you'll have at least some idea of what you'll be dealing with when it comes to the Overlanders since they'd likely be somewhat similar."

"Essentially, yes," Elias confirmed with a nod. "I realize you likely weren't the most studious of history scholars in your world-"

"- *Boy* was I not," Sorun agreed with a nod.

Elias breathed out a single chuckle before continued. "Nevertheless, I would still like to hear of your world, if only to be as prepared as possible to help protect mine." He moved a white piece. "Check."

"I can respect that," Sorun said in an honest tone. "Alright, Elias. My head might not exactly be the wealth of information you're looking for, but, ah... I'll try my best. I'm not exactly well versed on all of human history, but I know a good bit about Earth. I'll tell you what I can," he vowed as he moved a black piece. "Just don't expect a lot out of me."

In response, Elias flashed him a thankful smile. "I'm in your debt, Sorun." He moved a white piece. "That's checkmate, by the way."

Sorun's head snapped down to the board, and then looked back up to see Elias playfully tossing his black king up and down. "How the...? Man, reset the board."

Never before in Sorun's life did he imagine that he would adopt the role of a teacher. Teaching Nicole tricks with video games was one thing. Going full-on historian was another, especially considering that Sorun was the furthest possible thing from a historian.

But Elias had paid rapt attention to him as Sorun tried his best to outline what he could about human governments. It was kind of funny in a way, seeing him beam that curious look of his towards Sorun the more he spoke. It gave him a strange sense of importance he didn't often get, so it helped spur him into going further.

As to the actual content of his lecture: it wasn't much. He wasn't going for anything especially detailed or specific. Just basic governmental systems and how well they generally operated. He'd also gone over some light history on some of the major countries just for context, and while he'd been all but forced to mention the wars, he made sure to gloss over a *large* portion of the details just for Elias' sake. Times like these made him wish he actually had paid more attention in history, but he thought that he had a basic enough understanding to give Elias a good picture.

"- Yeah, like I said, royalty ruling countries pretty much fell on the wayside. Like the country I grew up in, for instance. America was really weird in that it was this confusing mess of a government system due to evolving into this weird democratic-republic fusion over the decades," Sorun explained as he leaned back in his chair, only paying half of his attention to the chess board. Elias had forgotten it entirely and was leaning forwards on the table as he intently listened to Sorun talk about the actual governmental system of his home country. "Small stuff was generally voted on by the populace, which made it a democracy, while big stuff while handled by democratically-appointed officials, which made it a republic."

"It still boggles me that your world's governments did away with monarchies," Elias said as he stared wide-eyed at Sorun. "Was it really considered that outdated a system?"

"I guess you could say outdated. Pretty much, yeah," Sorun confirmed. "I mean there are were places like Britain that *kinda* still has a monarchy, but they had an elected head of government that ran the country alongside the queen as an example of how, I dunno, diluted the monarchy system got over time to places that still used it. I guess people started to realize that letting a royal bloodline handle political affairs wasn't really that great an idea if there were others more suited to the job but could never do anything about it. Plus when you give that much power to so few people, and those few people don't listen to the general population, they start to realize real quick that an angry mob of people with pitchforks can be just as deadly as an invading army. Monarchies, autocrats, dictatorships and the like got dissolved or heavily reformatted pretty quickly in all the major countries once people started figuring that out. Governments should be a lot more afraid of their own people than the other way around." Sorun leaned back forwards and began poking at the black chess pieces. "Wasn't really surprising how few revolutionary wars there were when people got a say in how the government was ran, but I suppose the advancement of civilization played a part in that, too. Fact is, though, pretty much every stable country back on Earth ran on some form of democracy or republic. America, Canada, the European nations, Russia, Japan just to name a few... none of them were perfect, sure, but they worked for the most part."

"But if they didn't work perfectly-" Elias argued, but stopped talking when Sorun held a hand up.

"Elias, I'm gonna tell you probably the most important piece of advice you'll ever hear: no country or governmental system, absolutely none, is perfect." The squirrel seemed almost shocked by the claim, but Sorun continued unabated despite the wide-eyed stare he was given. "Governments are just... they're just too big and too complicated for it all to fit together nice and perfectly. People- humans, Mobians, *whatever,* just people in general- are all inherently flawed in their own ways. There are so many idiots that'll screw things up and so many variables that just come with life that a

perfect system just ain't gonna happen. It's not about making it perfect. It's about making it good enough that it works. The trick," Sorun said as he pointed towards Elias, "is choosing the flaws of the country or kingdom or what have you. That way you can focus on the all the good stuff while you live with tolerable flaws." Sorun shook his head. "'Cause trust me, man. You're gonna end up doing a lot more harm than good if you try making everything perfect."

"And how would you go about choosing flaws?" Elias asked.

Sorun shrugged. "I dunno. That's your problem."

Elias sighed as he upper torso flopped onto the table, rattling some of the discarded chess pieces. "Sorun, after hearing all that you've said about your world, I must say... I have to question your people's sanity." He groaned and began rubbing at the sides of his forehead. "Just... so many different governments and systems, all the complexity... and the wars," he gasped out as he looked up at Sorun. "Why did your people have to have so many wars?"

"... Look, man, humanity ain't perfect," Sorun admitted after a long beat of silence. "Are we more prone to taking the violent route as opposed to Mobians because it's simpler and easier? Yeah, we are. Was there way more violence than necessary? Can't really dispute that, yes, there was. We were a relatively young species still learning. But there was a bunch of good stuff that came out of all that, too! Mainly the advancement of civilization and culture in general, but it was really great! It's just... really hard running that much stuff, you know? So of course stuff goes wrong. Accidents happen. Wars happen, but they happened a lot less the more time went on and the more advanced humanity got. Do I think that, given time, wars and conflict as a whole would be wiped out? Nah, I'm not that naive, but they'd get real close, though. And sometimes close enough is good enough." Sorun leaned back in his chair. "I don't know what's different with you Mobians. Maybe it's just because you all had a different history, or you're all just... naturally nicer than humans and don't have such a propensity for violence generally speaking. Whatever the case, you all share a world with humans-

slash-Overlanders. So it's probably a good idea you came to me with help on the subject." He looked at his right hand and began rubbing his fingers together. "Peace with them is within the realm of possibility. You guys got along with the humans that live in Station Square after all, right? Humans would like nothing more than peace with everybody, too, and I imagine Overlanders are the same. It's just that sometimes an idiot like Eggman comes along and screws it all up for everybody."

"But I just don't know how I'm going to deal with them," Elias said as he sat up in his chair. "From how you put it, there's no telling how their government leaders would act towards me. How am I supposed to prepare for something like that?"

"Yeah, welcome to dealing with people," Sorun deadpanned. "Mobians ain't exactly rocking cookie-cutter personalities, either." He blew a lock of dark hair out of his face and looked to the side. "Just be amicable and don't provoke them. If you're lucky you'll get to deal with a bunch of fair Overlander leaders in the future when you're piecing international relations back together once the war is over. If you get people that aren't so agreeable, well, bear with it, but don't give them any pull, either. You gotta stand your ground and stay confident. You're the king. Besides that?" With a shake of his head, Sorun shrugged as he turned back to Elias. "I don't know, man. I don't deal with politics. Never had an interest. I just cut up robots."

"Ha-ha. I can understand that." Elias ran a hand through his red hair as he straightened his posture up. "I can't say you've given me definitive answers to my problems, but if nothing else, you've certainly shown me the way forwards towards finding my own answers. And at least given me somewhat of an idea on what I'll be dealing with in the far future." He flashed Sorun a smile. "I really can't thank you enough for everything you said, my friend."

Sorun started in his seat and felt an urge to rebuke the friend claim made by Elias. He even went as far as to open his mouth to do so, but when he saw that thankful look on the king's face, he couldn't bring himself to do it. So he simply breathed out through his nose

while crossing his arms. "Don't mention it," he murmured under his breath.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw a Mobian dressed in a maid's outfit approach the table the two were sitting at, holding a tray in her hands. She and Elias exchanged quick pleasantries while Sorun watched on, only really becoming engaged when a cup full of brown liquid was placed in front of him. The maid turned to walk away while Elias had bid her farewell, while Sorun continued to look at the cup.

"Oh, Sorun, you said you never had tea before, correct?" Elias asked as he picked up his own cup. "Try it. I assure you it's quite relaxing."

The human watched as Elias sipped at his own cup of tea, and then looked down at the cup in front of him. He wasn't sure how he felt about warm drinks, especially seeing as he could practically feel its heat radiate onto his hand as he picked up the cup. He gave it a quick whiff, tilting his head to the side at the sweet and earthy aroma it gave off. *"Doesn't... seem all that horrible,"* he thought as he slowly brought the cup to his lips.

He had to set the cup back down on the table after the first sip.

"People actually drink this shit!?" His thoughts screamed as he stared down at the cup in alarm. There was no describing the smooth yet bitter taste that assaulted his senses the moment he tried taking a drink from the cup. Not bad, per se, but it was far from being tolerable to his non-existent pallet. *"Shoulda just brought a soda or somethin' with me, geez..."*

Elias seemed to notice Sorun's distress at the drink, and then put down his own cup. "Is it not to your liking?" he asked with some worry to his voice. "The maid put some sugar aside for us."

Blue eyes followed Elias' hand as he gestured to a small pyramid of sugar cubes stacked near the end of the table, resting on a plate. *"Oh, that's the problem. Didn't come with sugar,"* Sorun thought as he took a few cubes and a small, wooden stirring stick. "Thanks," he

muttered as he dropped the cubes in and began stirring. "So are we done with politics? My brain can't really take much more of that talk."

"I suppose we can end that discussion there," Elias said with a small laugh. "Would you like another game of chess?"

Sorun glared down at the board with a flat stare as he dropped more sugar cubes in his drink. "How many times have we played this game?" he asked as he continued to absentmindedly stir.

"Oh... six times, I believe. And I won all six." The subdued yet cheeky grin was not lost on Sorun, whose only response was to put more sugar cubes in his drink. "E-er, Sorun, I think that's quite enough," Elias advised with a hint of nervousness to his voice.

Sorun briefly stopped, looked up at Elias, and then looked down again as he tipped the plate in order to dump all the sugar cubes into his tea.

Elias sighed at the sight. "I was actually hoping to have one..." His eyes widened in surprise when a single sugar cube bounced off his forehead and plopped into his drink. He looked down at the quickly-dissolving cube, and then looked at Sorun who was blankly staring at him as he stirred his own tea. "You really can be a child sometimes," Elias mumbled as he took another drink.

"You know, your sister said the same thing. I think you both just don't know how to have fun," Sorun claimed. "How'd you get into the king game so young, anyways? You said something about being taken away and brought here to take the crown up or something like that. What's the story with that?"

"That's quite the tale you're asking for," Elias said as he put down his cup. "I suppose it's only fair you know it since I already know the story of how you wound up here, and we've plenty of time. I'm willing to tell you if you truly desire it."

Did he desire it? Sorun wasn't really too sure. He was a bit interested in the Mobian's history, he'd be lying if he said he wasn't, and it wasn't like they had anything better to talk about at the moment. Sorun sure couldn't think of any topics that would probably interest the person sitting across from him. And he'd be damned if he'd get suckered into another game of chess.

"Sure, man. Go for it," Sorun said.

"Right. Ahem." Elias removed his hand from the cup and clasped his hands together on the table as he began. "When I was young, My mother and I were separated from the rest of our family. It was during the Great War, and our transport vessel had been shot down by Overlanders." He paused to gauge Sorun's reaction, though when it didn't budge an inch, he continued. "My mother was rendered comatose in the accident, though some... acquiescent echidna helped us after the crash. They put her in a type of stasis in order to stabilize her."

"She fine now?" Sorun asked.

Elias nodded. "Yes, she's quite alright. Thank you for asking. It was me and two older Mobians that were left, excluding my mother. Due to the war and us being, for lack of a better term, stranded, we... decided to start a life there," he explained. "I, ha... spent the majority of my youth as an adventurer exploring the island. That all came to a crashing halt when a detachment of kingdom's Secret Service happened upon me when the situation with Eggman had temporarily died down and my father, who had assumed the worst had happened to us, grew curious enough over our fate to send them. I'd helped them when situations arose, and it was decided I was to return to Knothole with them. The two Mobians who had been looking after me all that time, royal retainers who had survived the crash along with me and my mother, chose to stay behind while me and my then-comatose mother returned here." He exhaled and looked towards the courtyard. "My father turned his crown over to me, and... well, you know the rest. I left, came back with a family, and have been struggling to run this kingdom in the months since

against Eggman's tyranny." He looked back towards Sorun. "Be truthful with me, Sorun... do you really think I'm doing an adequate job here? Because even after all this time I still have doubts."

Sorun hummed in response. "I can tell you right now that if I were in your shoes I woulda already ran this place into the ground. So you got that going for you."

At that, Elias made a humorless chuckle. "Forgive my bluntness, but I do not think that is a very high standard to surpass."

"I'll give you that one," Sorun agreed as he looked down into his tea. By now its consistency was the same as syrup with how much sugar he'd put into it, though when he drank from it he felt a happy feeling bloom in his chest. *"Ohhhh, that's the good stuff..."* he blissfully though as he licked the sweetness off from his teeth. "Do you even want to be king?" Sorun asked Elias as he set his cup down. "Because it kinda just sounds like you sorta, well... fell into the position."

"More like I was born into it, but... you're not entirely wrong." The squirrel shifted in his seat and leaned over across the table. "Sometimes I wonder what life would be like if I just stayed up on the island, or if I'd just stayed in that village where I met my Megan. I'm grateful for coming back here, having met my family, and healing my mother, and I can never repay the love and support they've all given me, but... oh, I don't know." He started to trace the lip of his teacup with his hand. "My father says I've a knack for the position- 'in the blood' he keeps claiming-, and I've managed to keep the kingdom afloat so far, but that does little to assuage my doubts."

"Why not just give Sally the crown?" Sorun asked. "You don't want it, she'd probably take it, and Elias, I'm telling you, Sally is really cut out for this leader thing. I've been working under her long enough to see it. She's got this kind of 'take charge, no-nonsense' attitude when she gets serious, you know? It's a stark contrast to how she acts usually." He made a "tsk" sound. "'Stark contrast'- Jesus, there I go again. Stupid tea makin' me talk weird."

Elias laughed a little. "I think I quite like your verbose side better than the norm. But you're correct. Beneath my sister's sweet exterior is a rather... fierce ruler."

Sorun nodded in agreement. "I'll be real. I'm too terrified of what she'd do to me if I ever disobeyed an order from her to ever defy her. Not that I would, she's super great, but there's no way I'm poking that dragon." There would be not telling what would happen if he did. He didn't even know what she'd do; just that he would regret it. It's why he'd been so apprehensive returning after he'd ran and how he was still counting his lucky stars he'd made it out without so much as a lecture. Or worse.

Not knowing what "worse" could possibly entail but knowing it was a distinct possibility made it so that Sorun decided to never, under any circumstances, make Sally upset. His backup plan in case that failed was to run behind Nicole in hopes that the AI could calm her down since they were rather close. He was confident in saying he was done for if all that failed.

"I can see that," Elias said with a nod and a small smile. "To be completely honest with you, she probably would be better in this position than me. But she's busy leading you and all the other Freedom Fighters, and beyond that, I'm the older sibling and a male. The crown defaults to me whether we like it or not."

"Oh, it's one of those deals, huh?" Old-timey monarchy rules, then. He should have figured when Elias looked so surprised when he told him of Earth's abandonment of the system, and while he knew it still operated here, he didn't know the monarchy rules ran that deep. "Do you happen to have another long-lost older brother that could take it for you?"

Elias scoffed. "If only," he said with a roll of his eyes. "It would be a different story if Sally officially married. Then I could hand the crown down to her so she could become queen and her husband king. But I fear I don't see that happening anytime soon with everything being the way it is."

"I hear that." Sorun picked up his teacup, thoughtfully rolled around its contents, and then downed the entire cup down in one swig. Elias watched him with raised eyes, flinching slightly when Sorun softly slammed the cup on the table. "Alright, fine, you convinced me. I'll marry Sally."

There was a moment of silence that passed where Elias processed his words. He sputtered out in complete shock right after, causing Sorun to snicker in amusement as he reached for his tea in order to calm himself. "So you've given up your pursuit for me and set your sights on my sister now? Is that how it is?" Elias sarcastically remarked as he set the cup down.

"Anything for that royal dosh, my dude," Sorun replied, a wide grin on his face.

The squirrel shook his head, half in amusement and half in exhaustion. "Well, then, congratulations to you and my sister. My sincerest thanks for relieving me of this position in order to take up the crown yourself despite your earlier claims of you having no skill in being a king. You truly are a kind soul for taking such a burden on yourself for my sake."

The grin on Sorun's face slowly began lowering. "... Oh yeah, that'd make me king, huh?" he realized. "Changed my mind, don't wanna marry Sally."

"Probably for the best," Elias said with a nod. "Honestly, I wouldn't think anything of it, but if father found out she married a human, and that human became king... I'm not sure his heart could take it. I severely doubt he'd even allow it."

"You know if I was actually serious about this I wouldn't let that stop me, right?" The grin fell away altogether as Sorun's form slumped. Elias had shaken his head meanwhile. "Real talk though, I'm... not really looking for a serious relationship or anything like that with anybody."

"Really?" Elias tilted his head in curiosity at the statement. "Why ever not?"

"Because I'm gonna die before I'd ever get anything meaningful off the ground," Sorun sadly thought, with those thoughts making his features turn a bit gloomy. He saw Elias's features twitch as a reaction to this, though, so he decided to make up an excuse. "Don't get me wrong, I think Mobians are great, it's just... I don't know if that's something I'm willing to do."

At Sorun's explanation, Elias froze and slowly started to narrow his eyes. "Why would somebody being a Mobian be a deciding factor for you...?" he slowly asked Sorun in an even tone.

The sudden shift in Elias' demeanor caused Sorun's back to go straight, and his eyes to dart back and forth as he thought up something else to try and diffuse any negative thoughts Elias was probably having. "Elias, I lived almost my whole life in a world exclusively inhabited by humans. I didn't even know what a Mobian was until a month ago. Cut me some slack here," Sorun said, breathing out in relief when he saw Elias relax slightly. "I'm not... *totally* against the idea," Sorun added as he began to nervously tap on the table, "but that-that's a big adjustment for me. And I'm still too busy dealing with everything else inside of my head to even start to try and mess around with that idea."

It wasn't technically a lie, though it was exaggerated a bit. He was more hesitant than willing to even consider such a thing, but, seeing as he'd die before he'd ever have to even consider relationships, he wasn't worried too much about it. He needed some excuse to get people off his back if they ever asked, though, if only so he could continually distance himself from the topic. The one he'd just invented seemed satisfactory enough for Elias, though, as the squirrel's form had relaxed completely.

"Fair enough, I suppose," Elias said, giving Sorun an understanding nod. "I have to wonder what people would say if you did do such a thing, though. To my knowledge there's never been a romantic

relationship of any kind between a Mobian and an Overlander- er, human, excuse me."

"Gee, wonder why?" Sorun sarcastically remarked.

"Quite." Elias blinked and leaned forwards in his seat. "If you're open to the idea, though-"

"Implied, I implied I'm open to it," Sorun quickly interrupted. "I didn't say I definitely was. Hinted at best."

Elias waved a hand at Sorun's words. "As you say, as you say. I'm sorry if this is a bit forwards of me, Sorun, but at least hear me out. I realize you've certain reservations over the matter, and your other duties with the other Freedom Fighters may keep you preoccupied, but you know fully well that there are those in the Freedom Fighters that manage to balance their work and a fully functioning relationship."

Sorun sighed and went slack in his seat. "Elias, come on-"

"Just hear me out, please," Elias repeated. "I know your heartache over the loss of your home is great, but take it from somebody who found a significant other of their own when I say that having somebody at your side can help a great deal. It could maybe perhaps even help to clear your head so you could focus more on fighting."

"Nah, you ain't gonna get me by appealing to my pragmatic side. Good try, though, Kingy," Sorun thought with a shake of his head. "I get what you're saying, and you're not wrong, but... well, it's not *not* an option, I guess..."

The king sitting across from him seemed to pick up on Sorun's hesitancy, and then perked up in surprise. "You sound like you've already given this some thought," he noted.

"You don't know that for a fact," Sorun denied.

"Of course not," Elias replied in a knowing tone. "You've been here for long enough now and have gotten to know a number of people. It wouldn't be surprising at all to hear there was at least one person you've at least considered." A beat passed as he turned his head in thought. "It's obvious you were joking earlier, but... you haven't actually considered asking my sister-"

Sorun burst out in short laughter hearing that, interrupting Elias. "Me and Sally? Pffft. No way, man." He shook his head as the laughter died off his lips. "She's a wonderful person and all, but I'm not a brave enough boy for that. Godspeed to whoever does end up with her though, if anybody. They'll need it." He slowly exhaled as he leaned back in the chair. "But no, I haven't thought that way about anybody. Well, maybe... nah, nah." He shook his head. "I can't, man. I talked about the same thing with Antoine, so I'll tell you what I told him: I just want to focus on the war and fighting robots. After all that is done and over with?" His eyes became half-lidded as his shoulders slumped. "I'll, uh... I'll worry about everything else later. Alright?"

Elias didn't look so convinced, and for a moment Sorun was worried he'd press the argument. The Mobian sighed in resignation, however, and slowly nodded his head, which put Sorun at ease for the moment. "Very well," he sighed out. "It seems as though your mind is made up on the matter. I won't argue it with you any further. And I'll respect that you think that you need to wait until you're ready, but you should know I truly think you're fit as it is."

"So he says." He was probably right in all honesty, but Sorun just didn't know. It didn't change the fact he practically had a death counter over his head, though, and that killed pretty much any notion he had about any relationship period. He was already stretching it with the bonds he was making as-is. So whether Sorun was truly ready or something like that didn't matter. He plainly refused to go down that route due to it not mattering in the end.

"Oh, what's this?" The black-haired teen saw Elias sit up in his seat, and at the same time Sorun heard a few sets of footsteps began to

approach from behind his position. He saw a warm smile bloom across Elias' face at the same time as he sat back down in his seat. "It seems we have some visitors."

"Really?" Sorun drawled out as he crossed his arms. "Who?"

"The rest of the family," Elias answered. "It seems my father is with them as well." He turned his head to Sorun with a bit of a strained smile. "He's a fair man, Sorun, but... can you please try to be patient with him if he says anything unintentionally untoward?"

"Mm. No promises." The answer didn't seem to satisfy Elias all that much, but he hung his head in silent resignation all the same. Sorun didn't care enough to be cordial towards somebody he was just about to meet if they had a problem with him. Maybe on a good day he would, if he was in the right mood. And while the day itself had been rather pleasant he just plainly wasn't in the mood.

In fact, he wasn't even in the mood to meet the rest of the Acorn family at all. He wondered if he could just leave right now and save himself from all of that.

"Should I just go, actually?" Sorun asked as he made a move to get up from his chair. "I can just leave if-"

"Nonsense, sit back down." Internally, Sorun was heavily cursing as Elias gestured for him to sit back down. Begrudgingly, Sorun did so. "I assure you they won't bite."

"Then what was with the warning about your dad?" Sorun wanted to ask, but the appearance of a brown squirrel Mobian in his peripheral vision caused him to keep his mouth shut. A female Mobian in a dress, cradling an infant in her arms. When he saw Elias smile warmly at the new woman, Sorun found himself shyly looking away from the couple while shuffling further into his seat.

"I didn't think I'd find you all the way out here," the woman fondly stated after stepping to Elias' side. "Is this your new friend that

you've been talking about?"

Something inside of Sorun got tickled upon realizing there were people telling others they were friends with him, but this feeling fell to the wayside when he saw Elias nod at her. "Yes, it most certainly is." He turned his head to the teen attempting to shy away form them in his seat. "Sorun, this is my loving wife Megan and our daughter Alexis. Meg, this is Sorun, the human that joined the Freedom Fighters and has been a big help to everybody."

"I wouldn't say I've been that big a help," Sorun quietly mumbled as he shuffled around in his seat. "I punched and stabbed a couple robots. That practically nothing compared to what everybody else has done."

"Oh, don't be so modest." When Sorun looked back upon hearing that statement, he almost had to look away again when he saw Megan beaming a large smile at him. "I'm always overhearing Sally tell Eli about how glad she is you became a part of the team."

It sounded to Sorun like he was being given too much credit, but he'd take any positives about himself he could get at this point. He saw that the child wrapped in a bundle of clothing was beginning to stir in Megan's grasp, and then he saw the brown-furred head of the squirrel infant lift up and turn towards Sorun. The human locked eyes with Alexis, the two being completely still for whole seconds as they silently stared at each other.

And then Alexis started crying.

Sorun's eyes widened in surprise when the infant started crying just at the sight of him, and he found himself shuffling further into his seat with an uncomfortable look on his face. Megan, still holding Alexis, was trying her best to sooth the child. Elias had even gone far enough to get up out of his own chair to try to assist his wife in calming their child while Sorun watched on.

"Why do kids always gotta ruin everything?" Sorun thought. He saw a third Mobian figure rush forwards to try an assist the couple with the child, and from a brief glance he saw a number of features on her that were similar to enough to Sally that he had a pretty good assumption on who she was. That assumption was all but confirmed when he heard her speak to Elias.

"Are you sure you don't need help with her, dear?" Came the worrying tone from the older woman.

"Mother, I'm telling you we're fine," Elias claimed, though the distressed tone to his voice implied otherwise.

Squeak.

There was something menacing about that metallic squeak Sorun heard right next to him. He wasn't sure what it was, just that, for whatever reason, he really didn't like it. He almost hesitated in turning his head towards the source just to see what it was, but he found his answer when he saw the wheels of a wheelchair out of the corner of his vision. He felt a bit better knowing it was just somebody in a wheelchair that stopped next to him, and the newfound courage allowed him to fully turn his head to the side.

All that courage immediately withered when he saw the Mobian sitting in that wheelchair and staring right at Sorun.

Sorun's first and likely correct assumption was that he was Elias' father, the former king. The teen remembered all too late of Elias telling him he was bound to a wheelchair these days. He was a squirrel like him, albeit much older-looking, especially with the white hair. He also gave off a very stern aura that seem to be directed right at Sorun, and the piercing gaze he was giving the human wasn't helping matters all that much. But, despite that, Sorun managed to muster up some newfound resolve within him and managed to turn his body just slightly to address the former king.

"Kids, huh?" Sorun asked, referencing to the crying child near them while nodding his head at the other.

"Yes. Kids," The aged Mobian replied as he turned his head towards Alexis. "It's quite strange. I live in the castle alongside my son and his step-daughter, and I can tell you from experience that the child rarely ever cries, especially with her parents present. I find it a bit odd how she became so distressed at the mere sight of you."

Sorun frowned. The undertone to his voice wasn't lost on him, and though Elias had warned him of such, and Sorun didn't even blame him, he at least wanted to try getting on good footing with the man. "I would like to point out that I am from a completely different zone where Mobians don't exist and have been nothing but help to everybody within Knothole upon my arrival here," Sorun carefully said. "But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. My name is Sorun."

"... Maximillian Acorn. Of the Royal House of Acorn." The Mobian turned his head back towards Sorun, and to somewhat the human's relief his features softened just the tiniest amount. "You'll have to forgive me. Your circumstances were made clear to me and I've been made aware you have been putting considerable effort towards the sake of the kingdom. For that you have my sincerest thanks. If I seem a bit off by your presence you'll have to realize that I have had little, if any, positive brushes with your kind."

"The war, yeah, I know," Sorun responded with a nod. "To be fair it's technically not my kind 'cause, again, different zone, but I get what you mean. Don't worry about it." To be honest, a single thanks for his efforts was a lot more than he had been expecting out of the man. He was expecting complete animosity towards him as a worst-case scenario, and while Maximillian didn't exactly seem overjoyed to be in Sorun's presence, he seemed to at least be willing to be fair with Sorun and give him a chance. He'd take that much alone without any hesitation.

Besides. They didn't exactly have to like each other in order to get along. Maximillian seemed to understand this sentiment as well as

Sorun did based on the looks they gave one another, which caused the aged squirrel to scoff and turn back forwards.

"Right, how contentious of me," Maximillian said. "My apologies if I seem a bit overbearing towards you."

"Hey, man, as long as I don't get any grief for no good reason we're square."

Maximillian hummed. "Of course. I'm glad we understand each other." His eyes glanced towards the table, lingering on the tea cups and chess board, followed by him glancing back at Sorun. "You truly came all the way out here just to have an afternoon with my son?"

"Technically he was the one that invited me, but yeah," Sorun answered with a shrug. "I actually am friends with some Mobians, you know, your son included. I wouldn't be fighting for my life here if I actually didn't want to help save you all."

"I'm duly aware of this fact."

He didn't sound like he was, but he at least seemed genuine enough. That would have been good enough for Sorun, Though he was suddenly reminded of an important question he wanted to ask. Since they were on speaking terms at the moment and Sorun doubted he'd ever actively seek the former king to talk to him again or vice versa, he decided to ask now before he forgot again.

"... Hey, Maximillian, sir." The "sir" part almost made Sorun cringe, but he wanted to be as respectful as possible as to not cause any undue ire from Maximillain. It seemed to do the trick, as the squirrel turned his head towards Sorun to give him his attention. "You know that wooden tablet? You know, the one with the coordinates that brought me here? The one passed down in your royal family?" Sorun asked. "Tails told me they had to burn it because the tablet had instructions on it that said I couldn't see it. That honestly sounds really weird to me, but ignoring that for now... what was actually the

deal with that tablet? It was in your family and you're the oldest one, so you'd know most, right?"

That tablet had been nothing but a constant hole being burned into the back of Sorun's mind, because that wood slab had been the sole reason his life had been ruined by being dragged here in the first place. There were so many questions he had about it that nobody seemed to have the answers to. Like who made it and why it seemed to be able to predict the future. Why it had coordinates pointing to a grocery store in Detroit in a whole other universe. Why Sorun couldn't have been allowed to see it.

The last one in particular really had him interested, but he doubted he'd ever get an answer to that, especially considering it was gone now. But maybe Maximillian, being the current elder of the Acorn family, would have at least some answers for Sorun. It wasn't like there was anybody else more likely than him.

Maximillian slowly nodded at Sorun's question, and then looked up in thought. "All things considered, you have a right to know. I'll tell you what I can." He looked back towards Sorun. "That wood tablet had been in the care of the Acorn family since the time of its founder, my ancestor Alexander. As the story goes, the Kingdom of Acorn, still in its budding youth, had mysteriously come under assault by a band of strange creatures. It's said that the kingdom's defenses were powerless in overcoming these creatures, though before any serious casualties occurred a mysterious stranger foreign to the kingdom, wielding what was described as a strange sword, vanquished the creatures."

Sorun, had been listening intently to the story, tilted his head with a questioning look on his face. "A mysterious stranger just came in and took care of the problem? Just like that?" He snapped his fingers for emphasis. "Who were they?"

The former king shook his head. "That, I cannot say, as the details were lost to history. This story comes from when my own father passed down the tablet to me when it was my turn to overlook it. He

told me that, when my ancestor King Alexander went to thank this mysterious stranger for helping rid the kingdom of this menace, the stranger had presented to him the tablet with the single request to keep it protected by the royal family and to not have it read by anybody else other than the current king of the Kingdom of Acorn at a specific date during a time of great duress." He paused to take in a breath as Sorun absorbed his words. "The date arrived, and my son, the current king, read it along with the Freedom Fighters in the midst of the conflict with Eggman. Due to its seemingly prophetic writings they chose to follow its instructions. That is all I know, I'm afraid."

"So... the tablet was given to the Kingdom of Acorn. To the current king at the time no less," Sorun thought. *"A mysterious stranger. And a specific time to read the tablet. A tablet with specific coordinates."*

To the mysterious stranger, Sorun hadn't a clue; it was too vague for him to draw any conclusions. But it almost sounded like that not only was that portal meant to open at that grocery store, but that it was supposed to be opened at that specific time. And he just happened to be the only living soul even around at the time it opened. Not even that store employee he'd run into minutes prior had been there.

Was it just sheer coincidence that he happened to be there? Was it meant for somebody else, and the Freedom Fighters had just opened it an hour or two too early or late? The way Aurora and Athair described it implied *any* human from Earth could gain powers from absorbing Chaos Emeralds since nobody from Sorun's zone had a natural bond to the Chaos Force due to its nonexistence there. By that logic any human should have done.

So why was there a specific date tied to the contingency of not reading the tablet until a great conflict arose that necessitated its use? It had illustrations according to the other Freedom Fighters that suggested it predicted that conflict to be Eggman. But Eggman had been a problem for over a decade now with the world. So why now? Because this was at its worst?

And why the *fuck* did it predict Sorun liking orange juice back when Tails brought him that glass way back when?

"... I don't like how any of this sounds." Too many implications, too little information or proof to confirm or deny any of Sorun's suspicions. And much to his frustration, nobody had the answers he sought. Anything that even *might* have held a clue was nothing but ashes now. *"It was just random chance I was the one that got pulled through the portal, right? Was it? I just don't know."* With a sigh, he stood up off his chair. *"Well, whatever. No use worrying over things I can't control. What's done is done."*

"Thanks, Maximillian," Sorun muttered, stretching his stiff arms behind his back from having sat down for so long.

"The least I could do," the aged Mobian replied. "Did I answer any questions you had?"

"No, you just gave me a million more. But thanks anyways." He began stepping away from the wheelchair-bound Mobian towards the trio in front of him dealing with the child. Fortunately Alexis had calmed down by now as evidenced by the lack of crying sounds, and from what Sorun saw there were relieved faces all around that the child had finally calmed.

Well, at least some people were at ease. Sorun couldn't say he was in that group after his talk with Maximillian.

"Oh, Sorun!" The first to notice his approach was Elias, who then moved a couple of steps forwards to greet the approaching human. "Is everything well?"

"... Yeah." He glanced back at the Mobian sitting in the wheelchair behind him, and then looked back at Elias. "That your mom?" he asked, nodding his head to the older Mobian woman standing behind Elias.

"Hm? Oh, yes." Elias turned and gestured a hand out to her. "My mother, Alicia."

The older woman smiled at Sorun and waved in his direction. He met her gaze briefly to wave back, and then turned back to Elias. "Listen, man, it was great coming out here to spend and afternoon with you and meeting the family and all that, but I gotta get going. I got things to do."

By that he really meant that he was too unsettled by what Maximillian had told him to focus on anything else for the rest of the day, but fortunately Elias didn't look too far into Sorun's words and simply nodded in understanding. "Alright. I trust you'll be able to find your way back?"

"Yeah, I'll just go around the castle. Don't worry about it." Because there was no way he was taking the short way back through the castle. He'd get lost within the minute and never get out. He couldn't understand why they had to make the interior layout of castles so confusing.

"In that case, I'll bid you farewell," Elias said. "I'd say we should do this again sometime, but attaining free time to myself is a rare occurrence these days, and I'm sure that being a Freedom Fighter is an equally time-consuming position, so..."

"I get it. Don't worry about it." Sorun began walking backwards, waving a goodbye to Elias and the other members of his family standing behind him. "It was fun, Kingy. Have a good one."

Elias and the rest waved back to Sorun as he continued to walk away. He turned around when he got enough of the happy looks they were sending his way, his eyes briefly crossing Maximillian as he stepped away. The aged Mobian found it in himself to give Sorun a silent nod, which the human responded to by nodding in turn. He also chose to walk even faster in order to get away from them all as quickly as possible.

"I guess Elias is a pretty nice guy. Kinda rough how he got blindsided by this king position he's holding, but it looks like he's doing well enough now. Not surprising seeing how he's got such a great family. Good for him. Don't think his dad likes me too much, but eh, I can see why he'd be so salty over humans. 'Least he gave me a fair chance, which is honestly more than I could have asked for from the guy. All that stuff with the tablet, though... man, I really wish they didn't burn that thing. I woulda liked to have a look at it." He hummed in thought. *"That thing must have been old, too,*

There was no use thinking about it now, but it would have been nice to at least get some hint towards why things were the way they were. It would have been far from closure, but it would have been something for Sorun. At the very least it could have helped some of the questions he had.

But it was fine. His path was the same whether he knew the reason behind it all or not. He just would have liked to know why things were the way they were at the very least before he died. But he supposed it didn't matter much either way.

He needed a nap.

Chapter 28

Recursion Error

Episode 28- Defend that other kingdom

Technology on Mobius was always a strange subject to Sorun. In most areas of tech it was lightyears ahead of anything Earth had ever produced, but yet, at the same time, there were times all this advanced technology didn't *look* advanced. Eggman's machines, for instance. There had been a time he'd been bored enough and curious enough to ask about them and Tails had gone as far as to show him a half-disassembled Egg Pawn he had just hung up in his workshop. The internal components and circuitry were so unbelievably advanced that Sorun got lost pretty much immediately in trying to figure out the mass of metal and electronics under that shell.

None of that changed the fact that there was something... childish about their design. They were all threatening, for sure, but at the same time they weren't what Sorun pictured when envisioning and advanced, streamlined design. It was the same with computers, too, like the one in the HQ's labs. Nicole had shown him the specs when he'd asked out of curiosity, and he was surprised to find that thing was pumping out more processing power and speed than any computer he'd ever heard of on Earth. It made sense to him why they had to keep that lab so cold if it was performing that hard. But again, nothing about that computer screamed "incredibly advanced" at a first glance. It looked below average, if anything. Even the user interface looked like something out of the nineties.

And then there were things like the vehicle he was riding in right now. A straight-up flying saucer. Admittedly it only hovered a few feet off the ground, but it was still a saucer-shaped vehicle that floated. That counted as far as he was concerned. He didn't even know

where that fell on the spectrum of performance versus external design.

Currently he was laying down on his back, fingers interlaced behind his head with one leg slung over the other as he stared up at the daytime sky and the clouds rapidly passing by his vision due to the speeding vehicle he was in. He had been napping for the first few hours of the trip, but he'd eventually woken up and couldn't go back to sleep. This lead him to staring up at the sky while deep in thought, though even that grew dull after a while.

With a soft groan, he sat up in the saucer and turned around. The only other two occupants of the saucer with him was the golden-furred squirrel driving it and the black and red armadillo sitting on the edge of the saucer and watching the forest and trees pass by them. Sorun yawned, rubbed at his eyes, and then slowly made his way towards the edge of the saucer before sitting down on the edge next to the Mobian.

"Hey," Sorun muttered in greeting. Mighty flicked his eyes in Sorun's direction to acknowledge his new presence, and then stared back forwards at the trees. Sorun did same. "So what's the deal with this Mercia place we're heading towards? I've heard of it, but I've never really looked that deep into it."

"It's a small kingdom of Mobians. Not nearly as big as the Kingdom of Acorn, but they get by. Had a bunch of rough patches with Robotnik back in the day, but they recovered well enough up until he got his hands on the seven Chaos Emeralds," Mighty airily replied. "The people there kept getting into skirmishes with his forces after that, though they've managed to scrape by with help our help from time to time. But I guess something major happened for them to send that messenger to Knothole."

"Yeah, about that, who uses an actual mail carrier to deliver messages anymore?" Sorun asked with a quirked eyebrow. "There's a whole communications network back at the HQ. They couldn't

have just used that and saved the poor guy a whole trip across the continent to hand Sally a letter?"

The guy had even been a pigeon Mobian of all things. Dressed in a green leotard. He just knew it had to be outside of the norm when even other Mobians had been giving him an odd look right before he collapsed on the ground from exhaustion after handing Sally that letter that was written on parchment. Not paper like everybody else he'd seen in Knothole use. Actual old-school parchment. Apparently there was an issue in the Kingdom of Mercia, and since the Kingdom of Acorn were allies with them, it was decided that a detachment of Freedom Fighters were to be sent.

Sorun was lucky enough to be a part of that team.

Mighty shrugged at the human's question. "Mercia isn't really all that advanced technologically speaking. They're kinda old-fashioned like that."

"Yeah, but still, *parchment* ...?"

"Don't know what to tell ya. They just have a different way of doing things over here."

Sorun tilted his head in Mighty's direction. The armadillo seemed a lot more sullen than what he was usually accustomed to seeing. Every time Sorun saw him his demeanor had been relaxed and overall happy. But right now it almost seemed like he was despondent from the way he was blankly staring ahead at the trees passing them by. He even noticed that Ray would tear his attention away from driving to look at him sometimes, like he was attempting to check to make sure he was alright.

"Usually I'm the quiet, sulky guy. What's his problem?" Sorun tapped Mighty's shoulder to gain his attention, earning a sideways glance from the armadillo. "Something the matter? You seem a bit more quiet than normal," Sorun noted, his concern completely masked by his otherwise impassive expression and tone.

"Mercia doesn't really hold that many fond memories for me," Mighty answered.

"Hmm. Okay."

"..." Mighty's ears perked up, and he turned his head further towards Sorun. "You're not gonna ask anything else? Not why I'm not really excited to go there or anything like that?"

To the armadillo's surprise, Sorun shook his head. "I'm not really in the business of prying into people's backstories unless they ask or offer to tell me. Past is the past. I'd rather just focus on the future. Plus it's kinda rude to just pry like that outta nowhere." Not to mention he had better things to worry about than whatever was plaguing Mighty. Besides, he was tough. Sorun was sure he would be fine.

An inquisitive look overcame Mighty's features. "Most people would see trying to pry into people's past as a way of trying to figure out what's making them upset so they can help. I wouldn't see it as you being rude if you asked."

Sorun rose an eyebrow. "Do you *want* me to ask? Or even talk about it to begin with?"

Mighty's ears fell flat. "Well, no, not really..."

"Then why are we having this conversation?"

"... Heh. You got me there," Mighty admitted with a sigh. "Thanks for lookin' out for me, but I'll be fine. Don't worry."

"Never said I was." With that said, Sorun scooted away from the saucer's edge and back into its circular interior. He cast one final glance back at Mighty, and then shifted his view towards Ray.

The brightly-colored squirrel had mainly focused his efforts on flying the saucer they were riding in forwards at this point. Feeling a bit

mischievous, Sorun slowly crept up to the Mobian's back, taking care to keep a low stance as to not be easily seen. He slowly leaned in towards the back of Ray's head while holding his breath, and then, when he was close enough, said, "Yo, Ray!" in a bit louder than necessary voice.

Hearing his name be called so suddenly caused Ray's hands to fumble on the controls, making the saucer wobble slightly. He scrambled to take back the controls and reorient the saucer, all the while having to listen to Sorun's snickering from behind him. He glanced back towards the human with a none-too-pleased look, with Mighty at the rear looking even more irritated due to almost having fallen off the saucer. Sorun was just grinning.

"C-can you please try not to d-do that?" Ray asked as he turned his head back forwards. "I'm trying to drive."

"Sure, sure." Sorun nodded in agreement and stepped a bit forwards, lowered himself in a crouch besides Ray. "I know we're going to Mercia, but is there a specific destination we had in mind or what?"

"M-most of the inhabitants of Mercia live in a s-settlement inside of the Deerwood Forest. It's-it's where we're going," Ray informed him as he steered past a dense thicket of trees. "Actually, I think... yeah, that's it up there."

With that, Ray pulled the wheel back in order to bring the floating saucer's speed down. Soon enough it came to a complete halt, prompting the trio to step over and hop out of the saucer. Sorun, once his boots hit the ground, took the moment to step forwards a bit to observe the surroundings in front of him.

It was definitely a Mobian settlement as far as he could see. Lots of colorful Mobians were running around doing whatever. What surprised him was the actual structure of the settlement itself: it didn't lie in a large clearing of trees to make room for a lot of homes and structures like he was normally accustomed to seeing, but rather

from what he saw a majority of homes were up in the trees. Dozens upon dozens of wood structures were suspended high in the treetops, with a complex system of bridges and ladders connecting everything together. There were some structures on the ground, as well, but from what Sorun observed those were few and far in-between compared to everything up above. In fact, there were more giant piles of logs strewn about on the ground than actual houses.

"Well, this is certainly different." Sorun slowly began traversing into the settlement, Mighty and Ray following closely behind. He couldn't help but note the looks that were being sent their way, though he was somewhat put at ease at seeing they were all mostly curious looks, even if a majority were aimed at him. *"Antoine said his family's from here, didn't he? Am I gonna have to deal with a bunch of French-speaking people I can barely even understand? Agh, why'd she choose to send me along and not him?"*

"Good morrow there, sir!"

"... Eh?" His ears perking up from the voice, Sorun tilted his head up just in time to see a Mobian figure drop down from one of the bridges above and land right in front of Sorun. He about had a stroke when he took a look at the newcomer's features. *"Oh dear god, not another one..."*

He almost mistook him from Sonic at first glance, as the hedgehog he was looking at looked about the same. The fur color was off, though. More of a teal color than the solid blue he recognized as Sonic having. He was pretty sure Sonic never wore a brown hood and carried around a bow and some arrows, but aside from that and the brown boots in place of the usual red sneakers, the guy was a dead ringer for Sonic.

Sure didn't talk like him, though, which Sorun rapidly began to discover once the hedgehog began speaking again.

"Good tidings, stranger!" the hedgehog greeted in an accent that already began grating on Sorun's nerves. "Prithee, may I ask where

thou hails from and what thou's intentions are?"

"Fuck me, he's speaking in some old school English. I know Mighty said these guys were kinda backwards, but damn, he didn't tell me the half of it..." It wasn't exactly a dialect he was fond of, but he'd put all that aside for the pressing business. "We're from Knothole," Sorun slowly said in a strained voice, the muscles in his face struggling to resist from grimacing. "You asked for help."

The teal hedgehog blinked at Sorun in surprise, and then leaned a bit to the side to get a better look behind him. His eyes lit up in recognition when he saw the other two Mobians standing behind Sorun, and then proceeded to look back towards the human's face. "Ah, so it is! I recognize friend Ray and friend Mighty, but I do believe we have never met, good sir."

"I'm Sorun," the teen greeted. "Sorun the Freedom Fighter, a horribly ironic title given my current circumstances. But that's neither here nor there." He gestured to the hedgehog. "Who're you?"

"My name, good sir, is Rob O' the Hedge, king of the Kingdom of Mercia." He even went as far as to do a highly-sophisticated bow right in front of Sorun, which had him feeling more uncomfortable than honored from how low the hedgehog had bowed down. That along with the accent forced him to take a step backwards. "'Tis unfortunate, but I fear any further formalities must be halted o'er the foul evil approaching our good lands," Rob continued as he straightened back up. "'Twas the reason I sent for the Knothole Freedom Fighters. My sincerest thanks for having arrived here post-haste, my friends."

Sorun slowly nodded along, and then held up his index finger to stop Rob from speaking. "... Hold that thought." He backed up away from the hooded hedgehog, and then turned around to his two companions. He leaned in close to Mighty in particular, holding a hand up to his mouth to try and conceal his words. "Mighty, I don't wanna deal with this guy. Can you talk to him?" he asked in a hushed whisper.

The armadillo cocked his head back, a questioning look creasing his features. "Uh, Sorun, I don't-"

"Dude, come on, I can barely understand half of what this guy is saying," Sorun desperately whispered to him. "You got more experience with them anyways. I'll wash your socks or whatever as thanks, just do me this solid!"

It was more that he just didn't want to deal with that accent Rob was speaking in more than anything else. That added to the fact he looked like Sonic was setting off a lot of warning flags in Sorun's annoyance indicator. It was perhaps a bit biased of Sorun, and now that he thought it over he realized he may be acting a tad bit unfair here, but these days his tolerance for bullshit was astronomically low. He just wanted to help these people as soon as possible so they could all leave.

At first Mighty looked like he wanted to decline, which had Sorun worried, but after glaring at the human's pleading face for a few moments the armadillo sighed and nodded his head. "Alright, fine. I'll go to Rob and assess the situation. You two do whatever until I get back with you."

"That sounds like a great plan, Mighty." Sorun clapped the red-shelled Mobian on the back and stepped aside. Mighty rolled his eyes in response, but otherwise chose to walk forwards towards Rob, who had been watching the exchange with some curiosity.

Watching as the two Mobians began conversing and walking away from him and Ray, Sorun allowed himself a small breath of victory. That was one item of potential stress eliminated for the time being. The actual source of his stress, the mission they were on, was still a prevalent force hanging over him, but that would be dealt with in due time once Mighty got back to tell them what they were actually doing here. That left him and Ray plenty of time to do... something.

"... So, uh... what, what should we do?" Sorun found himself asking as he turned towards Ray. "Should we, like, help out or something?"

"I don't know. Everything l-looks fine to me," Ray noted as he took a look around the settlement. Sorun did so as well, looking up at the homes in the trees and the Mobians walking around on the ground and on the bridges above. Everybody had gone back to their own devices for the most part, though there was a certain tenseness hanging in the air that was not lost on the two Freedom Fighters. "Everybody s-seems a bit nervous, though."

"Probably because of whatever's going down that needed us to come all the way out to another continent," Sorun reasoned as both he and the yellow squirrel began walking in a random direction. "But, it'll be fine. We'll fix whatever's going on then head back home. Hope Virgil's doin' okay. I left him with Jules to feed him, but the li'l guy gets real antsy whenever I leave for a mission."

"But what if we can't fix what's going on?" By now Sorun had interlaced his hands behind his head as the pair continued walking, though Sorun had tilted his head to the shorter male in response to Ray's question. "I-it's just the three of us, and I-I know you and Mighty are real strong but-"

"Ray." Sorun's calm and even tone snapped the squirrel out of whatever trance he had been, making him look up to Sorun. "I don't care what the problem here is. Whatever it is, we're gonna fix it." He looked back ahead as his features creased slightly. "We came here to save people, so we're not gonna do a half-baked job and leave these people to whatever messed-up scheme Eggman's made up. We're saving everybody here."

What was the point of him giving up his life for the planet if he didn't go all-in? Maximum effort wasn't exactly the norm for him, but seeing as *this was it* , he didn't see a reason not to. And it wasn't like he wasn't going to try and save as many people with his powers as he could anyways before finally dying. It'd leave a bad taste in his mouth and reflect poorly on the Freedom Fighters, and they all didn't deserve that. So maximum effort it was, if only it meant he got to vent more of his rage out on the robots.

When he looked back towards Ray, he saw the yellow Mobian looking up at him with shaking eyes. He shyly smiled and began pulling on his short, blue jacket as a small laugh left him. "You sound just as brave as Mighty is," he said. "I think it suits you."

At that, Sorun scoffed. "It ain't bravery, Ray. It's consummate professionalism. It's me wanting to spite Eggman as much as possible by wrecking his plans." A few seconds passed, and a small breath left his mouth. "And... I don't really like seein' people suffer, so... yeah. We're gonna help everybody here not matter what." He looked up at the tree canopies, hands still clasped behind his head. "Besides, you know how disappointed everybody would be if we messed up and let everybody here down? We got a title to uphold here, man."

"Ha-ha! Yeah. Yeah, you're right." Ray's smile turned a bit more confident, and he cast a thankful look towards Sorun. "Thanks, Sorun. I really needed that."

Sorun hummed and looked back down at the squirrel. "Er, that wasn't me being motivational, that was just me thinking aloud- you know what, I'll take it. Sure, no problem." The pair stopped after walking a fair distance in what was... actually just another part of the settlement seeing as nothing about the surroundings changed. "Mighty's probably gonna take a bit to get back to us with the situation," Sorun muttered as he moved his hands to the pockets of his sleeveless hoodie.

"Yeah," Ray agreed with a nod. "Do you think we should maybe split up to see if we can help around? Like you said."

An apprehensive sound left Sorun's throat. "I was kinda more just talking about the mission as a whole, but, ah... sure, if you wanna grind out a few side quests before that, go for it." He turned towards a nearby log and began walking towards it. "You've been here before, right?"

"On a mission a couple months ago, yeah," Ray confirmed with a nod.

"Then you know the layout and people a lot better than I do," Sorun said as he sat down on the log. "I'm gonna sit here and contemplate life and all the decisions that've lead me to this point." He held up his left hand, the sheathed Yamato appearing in his grasp. "If something bad happens, you know where me and Mighty are."

"Okay, got it." Ray nodded towards the human, and then turned around and began walking off. Sorun watched him go for a few moments before sighing and leaning back on the log, Yamato resting in his lap.

"Good guy, Ray. Bit shy, but his heart's in the right place along with the rest of the Freedom Fighters. Not really that surprising, I guess. They're all great people." Sorun felt his eyes close as he began thinking. *"Hope Mighty's doing alright. Guy seems kinda angsty about Mercia, so I feel a bit bad leaving him with the king of the place. Rob seemed like a nice enough guy, though. But that accent... egh..."* He had to stick his tongue out at the mere thought. *"I was expecting French, not something out of a medieval play. Makes sense, I guess. From the map I saw this place used to be a part of Europe."*

Yet again he was left wondering how the dialect, or any dialect, really, managed to survive the world getting reset by the gene bombs. He'd quit questioning these things a while ago and had just chosen to quietly accept it, as there were a lot of oddities on Mobius that he chalked up to the logic being a bit screwy here due to it being an alternate universe. It's the only explanation he found that made even a modicum sense.

Well, regardless of how strange he found the people's way of speaking here, and how he frankly he wasn't a fan of it, they all still seemed like good people. A bit backwards like Mighty had said, sure, but good nonetheless. And people were people. He'd already promised himself that he'd save the whole planet no matter what.

"Is this seat taken?"

Sorun had heard the new voice, a smooth male's voice, but he chose not to open his eyes and instead merely shrugged. "It's a free log, man. Go for it."

"Many thanks."

The pale teen felt a new presence sit down on the log next to him in silence. He would have liked for it to have ended there so he could have kept thinking to himself, but he could innately feel the eyes of whoever had just sat down become attached to Sorun. He quietly sighed and leaned forwards into a normal sitting position, and then opened his eyes so he could look at the newcomer.

From a single glance, he saw it was a deer Mobian, with antlers and everything. Somebody dressed in brown robes who had exceedingly kind eyes. Kind eyes that were aimed straight at Sorun, which put the teen a bit off as he chose to scoot back a few inches away. Nice or not, he didn't know how to feel about a complete stranger looking at him like that.

"If you wanna talk then just say so. It's really creepy when I open my eyes and the first thing I see is some stranger staring so intently at me," Sorun said.

The deer chuckled lightly. "My apologies. I was just considering how to best proceed with starting a conversation. You looked a bit lost."

"I'm not lost. I'm contemplating my life and the decisions I've made that have taken me here."

"Ah, the art of inner reflection, I see. And what have your findings told you?"

"That I'm an utter fool."

The deer laughed a bit more loudly when he heard that. Sorun allowed himself a small smile, too, though it was quickly wiped off when he looked to the side. Eventually the deer calmed down and refocused on Sorun.

"Forgive my outburst, but it's not often I find that many people so blunt."

"I don't have the patience for anything but blunt," Sorun replied. "That a thing you do often? Talk to people about their inner turmoils? What're you, a priest?"

"More of a friar, really," the deer answered, "which, coincidentally, happens to be my name."

Sorun tilted his head. "Friar the Deer?"

"Friar Buck."

"'Course," Sorun sighed as he brought his right hand up to rub at his eyes. "I'm Sorun. You seriously just come here to observe my mental state, or did you just wanna come look at the human Freedom Fighter?"

"I try not to let such insignificant things cloud my judgement, which, I'm happy to say, is the same for most people in Mercia." Friar's eyes traveled down to the katana in Sorun's hand. "I must admit, though, your weapon is strange to my eyes."

"You hang around me long enough and everything starts being strange." The teen held the sword up higher for the Mobian to see. "It's meaning would be pretty appropriate to somebody like you. Yamato. The Dark Slayer. A sword whose purpose is to divide and wipe out the darkness." He scoffed and put the sword back in his lap. "Well, that's how the saying goes, anyways. It's actually just a magic sword that separates everything. Makes fighting robots real easy."

Friar hummed in contemplation, his eyes traveling up from the sword to the teen's face. "Truly a noble cause for a sword," he said, "but what of its wielder?"

A sardonic laugh left Sorun at hearing the question. "Oh, there ain't nothing noble about that guy," he claimed as he turned his head to the deer. "Friar, I'm possibly the angriest and saddest teenager on the face of the planet. And that's really messed up when you consider how much everybody else in the world has suffered because of Eggman."

"Hence you calling yourself a fool?" Friar questioned. "Pardon my asking, but how is it that a human wound up joining the Knothole Freedom Fighters to begin with? As I understand it your people are on the other side of the world from them."

"Are you asking for real or is this just idle chat?"

"I ask because I believe it is my purpose to help sooth the minds of others," the Mobian calmly answered. "The fact this sometimes means I must join my friends in combating the evil that plagues the land is an unfortunate side effect, though I tend to leave the fighting to them."

Sorun rose an eyebrow in surprise. "Oh, so you're part of the Mercian Freedom Fighters, then." He wasn't even surprised. Freedom Fighters seemed to be drawn to Sorun like a magnet. He never expected a friar of all things to be one, though. In fact he never expected to meet a friar to begin with.

The offer was tempting. Talking to a priest was something Sorun had never, ever partaken in during the duration of his life due to his complete detachment of any sort of religion, and while this was a total stranger, he'd grown somewhat overly trustful of Mobians. And this person seemed sincere, and the fact he was a friar and a Freedom Fighter did nothing but add credibility to Sorun's perspective of him.

But was he really going to bother him with his mental problems, though? He didn't think he should, but on the other hand... well, maybe there were things he could tell him that he wouldn't dare talk to some of the others back in Knothole about. Maybe to help put him at ease. If nothing else, it'd be a good way to kill time. It wasn't like he had anything better to do.

"Everything I say will be confidential, right?" Sorun hesitantly asked as he bit at his lower lip.

The deer nodded. "You needn't worry about a thing. My only interest is in aiding a troubled soul who needs help."

"... Fuck it. I could use some spiritual guidance." He rolled his eyes at that statement, but otherwise nodded in acceptance. "I'll give you the condensed version, so buckle up, Buck." The teen took in a deep breath and began speaking. "I'm from a different universe entirely. Got pulled in through a portal to this zone by the Freedom Fighters because prophetic shenanigans. Can never go back to my home again because of further shenanigans. Joined the Freedom Fighters since I'm stuck on Mobius forever."

Sorun himself was almost shocked that he'd been able to summarize most of his plight, minus some important details such as his inevitable death. Amazing how living the life he just described put everything in such a small perspective. Friar seemed much more taken back by the explanation, though to his credit he seemed to recover from it fairly quickly after clearing his throat.

"Ahem. Well, that is... certainly more baggage for the soul than I'm used to seeing," he admitted with a shy laugh. "I imagine you must feel great conflict over all that."

The pale teen fixed the deer with a blank look. "All that world-shattering stuff I just said just washed off you like water, huh?" he dryly stated.

A wry grin came to Friar's mouth. "Such is the consequence of a holy man, I suppose."

"Why am I not surprised?" Sorun muttered with a shake of his head. "It's not that I'm mad at them anymore. I saw where they were coming from, and yeah, losing my zone sucks, but I'm slowly getting past that. None of that's the issue anymore. I just... never told anybody the full truth of things. It doesn't really matter in the end, but I just keep wondering how everybody's gonna react when it happens."

"Is there a reason you never confided these truths to anybody?"

Sorun scoffed. "There was a time I wanted to tell people, but there were... things holding me back from doing so, no matter how hard I tried." His free hand briefly reached up and rubbed at his neck, and then brushed past his chest as it lowered back to his side. "Now it's the opposite. I don't want to tell them since it would inhibit my abilities as a Freedom Fighter, but at the end it'll... I'm just worried about how it'll affect them. And it's frustrating, because there's nobody I can talk about this to. Because how am I supposed to tell people there's a terrible secret I'm keeping and ask for help with it when I don't want them to know what it is?"

How would they react to his death? That, he wasn't so sure of. There'd likely be grieving, especially due to the fact he'd ingratiated himself so far into them despite his moderate efforts. And he was confident they'd quickly manage to pull themselves back together. They were all accustomed to loss, after all. At the end he'd just be another casualty, albeit one that had tipped the scaled in their favor if he played his cards right. He liked to think he'd at least be remembered, though, which was a slightly comforting fact.

Did absolutely nothing about the knowledge he was gonna die, but it helped a little.

"There's me," Friar reminded him. "Is this not the reason we are talking? This seems to be troubling you a great deal."

"Yeah, you're not wrong." It's not like he could even tell Friar- he plainly couldn't-, but maybe he could try being vague about it. Just vague enough that he would get the idea without Sorun actually revealing anything. "I'm keeping some health issues away from all my friends. Congenital heart defect. I'm worried that the more I fight, the more my symptoms will be aggravated."

Congenital heart defect. A total lie to cover his shortening life, and one he was surprised that the curse let him get away with. Maybe it was being lenient with him since he was talking to a friar vowed to silence, or maybe the lie was just vague and removed enough to not count. He almost wished he'd thought of this lie sooner, maybe all the way back to the first Emerald, but Sorun soon realized the Freedom Fighters probably would have taken him to a doctor to check him out and dispute the lie afterwards. Well, regardless, he was happy to get this off his chest and talk about it to somebody.

Friar's eyes widened a bit, and then softened as a solemn look overcame him. "You're worried you may possibly lose your life over this?"

"..." Sorun didn't respond at first, instead choosing to think over his words very carefully as to not proc the curse and have his heart stop. "Well, I mean, death's always a risk fighting Eggman, right?" he mumbled. "But... who knows? This illness might kill me. And that... that really scares me," he admitted in a small voice. "I don't want to die."

"Then why fight at all?" the deer softly asked him. "Surely there are others that could take your place if this really is so life-threatening for you."

In response, the teen spawned four Summoned Swords at his sides. Friar jumped back a bit in shock, while Sorun continued watching on. Both the swords and the Yamato disappeared, the Mobian quickly calming down while Sorun let out a long, drawn-out breath.

"Because I have powers that nobody else has, and I have it on some good authority that if I don't help out things'll go pretty bad. Part of the whole prophetic thing I said earlier," he answered. "And I'm not good at anything else. It was either use my powers to help fight or do nothing as I watched the world around me die." He looked down at the ground and shuffled his feet. "What a choice, huh?"

"And you chose to use your powers because of a feeling of responsibility and obligations towards helping others?"

To the deer's surprised, Sorun laughed at that. He laughed and shook his head, and yet despite the fact the human's lips were upturned, he didn't seem at all happy. "I'm not a good enough person to say that I value their lives over mine. I don't," he said, though he noted with some interest Friar didn't react much to this. "It's not a numbers thing, either. Not a 'me versus everybody else' type deal. Life just doesn't work with numbers like that. It's too precious." He turned his head fully at the deer. "There was a proverb where I'm from, about a train and some tracks. It goes that there's five people tied to a track a train is about to run over, and if you want, you can pull a lever to divert a train to a second track. But there's one person tied to that track that'll end up dying as a result.

"Of course if it were me as I am now, I'd just use Yamato to cut the ropes and save everyone, but this is assuming the person in charge of the lever is a normal person that can't do anything else. So what do you do? Do you try to save as many people as possible at the expense of the few? Do you pull the lever because you're 'morally obligated' to save people since you're in a position to do so? Because it's the right thing to do? How's killing somebody the right thing to do?" Sorun shook his head. "I wouldn't pull the lever. I'd let the five die. If they die, then it's not my fault. It's the fault of whoever tied them to that track. I pull that lever, though, and I'm actively murdering somebody. And that just doesn't jive with me." Sorun's face scowled a bit. "Everybody's life is just as unique as the next person's. Nobody's life should be more important over somebody

else's. One random person shouldn't die just so five others can live. I don't care if people say I'm wrong. It's what I believe in."

To his further surprise, the deer nodded in understanding to Sorun's words. "An understandable position. There truly is no winners in such a scenario. But tell me, if you're not fighting because you think it's the right thing to do, then why are you fighting at the risk of your own life?"

"Because I can." Out of everything Sorun said, that one, simple answer seemed to be the thing that shook the Friar most from the way his ears went straight up and his eyes to widen. "Not because I think they deserve to live more than I do. Not because the lives of the many are more important than my own. I'm doing it just because I want to." He looked up at the canopy's of the trees, and for the first time since he started talking with the friar a genuine, albeit small, smile formed on Sorun's face. "Everybody in Knothole is so great. They're all just... these really wonderful people that are nicer than anybody else I've met in my life, and I can't stand to think about what they've gone through in this war. What they will go through if they lose. What everybody else in the world will go through. I don't want that future to pass, so even if it kills me, I'll make sure it doesn't happen. Because I don't want to see my friends suffer." He looked back down to Friar. "Is it a superficial reason? Maybe. Does it make me a bad person? Probably. I don't really care as long as they get their future. So if you're asking why I fight... I fight so I can protect what's important to me."

The large, wide-eyed stare on the deer settled back into his normal expression. Friar nodded to Sorun explanation while looking to the side in thought. "You said that you don't value their lives over your own. And yet, by that logic, it almost seems like you do."

Sorun shook his head in denial. "I don't value them over me because that's the right thing to do. I value them over me because I choose to. There's a difference," he said.

"So you... *do* , in fact, value them over you?"

"... Quit pokin' holes in my philosophy, man."

Both quit talking in order to stare quietly at one another, and then broke out into soft laughter which quickly died out due to the mood. "Honestly, though..." Sorun continued, "I'd rather just go home to my world and forget about all this. Does that make me a bad person? Knowing that, if the opportunity was available, I'd abandon everything and go back home?"

"I wouldn't go that far." It was Sorun's turn to look surprised as he listened to the robed Mobian's words. "There's nothing wrong with wanting to stop risking your life to return home, and to say you are obligated to help others with your powers would be rather hypocritical coming from a Freedom Fighter. In matters such as these it's less about what is right and wrong, and rather what you perceive is right and whether or not you can live with the choices you made and say you did the right thing." He leaned forwards a bit and glared into Sorun's eyes, using those kind-looking eyes that seemed to look so deep within him. "If the opportunity did present itself for you to leave, and you did knowing everything you left behind and the possible repercussions, could you truly live with that decision?"

He didn't answer at first. Sorun stared silently back at the deer, and then sighed out as he leaned forwards while hanging his head towards the ground. "I don't even know, man," he answered. "Does it really matter? I can't go back anyways."

"True enough," Friar agreed with a nod. "We all go through our own periods of darkness, Sorun, even me. In the end it's less important on what we think but on the actions we take towards others, though how we perceive those actions still plays a vital role in keeping yourself in balance. Is living a life where you can't hang your head high in satisfaction at the decisions you've made worth living?"

Again, Sorun sighed. "No..." He got what he was saying. He was only doing this to begin with because he freely chose to do so, even if his alternatives weren't at all appealing. But he couldn't lie to himself and say he'd be completely satisfied with himself if he did

turn and run after making the decision to save everybody. Whether he would actually do it at this point or not was something he wasn't even sure of, but he knew he'd probably never get over it if he did. He'd just gotten too attached to everybody over time.

And it wasn't as if he'd get to live that much longer anyways, what with his life being dramatically short due to getting thirty-six years cut off so far from the Emeralds. It wasn't exactly the point of no return, but it was still all the more reason not to go back on his decision at this point. And as short as it would be, he didn't want to live it feeling guilty about all the people he would have hypothetically left behind in this scenario.

"... There's still my life here, Friar," Sorun quietly muttered. "I'm fine with fighting to save everybody. I can learn to live with never seeing my zone again. Dying isn't... it wouldn't be a wasted life, but I still would have liked to live it with all these people I'm dying to save." His back straightened up as Sorun looked forwards. "Everybody's gonna be so upset, too. Is it weird I'm just as worried over that as actually dying?"

"You speak as if dying is an inevitability for you," Friar noted in a curious tone of voice. "I realize that fighting jeopardizes your health, but your heart defect certainly can't be that severe, can it?"

"There's certain things I can't say. Let's leave it at that."

"... I see." The Mobian besides Sorun took a deep breath and looked forwards in the same direction with Sorun as he folded his hands over his lap. "Perhaps you are worrying too much. Nothing is set in stone, Sorun, and from what I hear the medical techniques of those within Knothole are top-notch. And I'm sure if you ever got to a point where your life was seriously threatened due to your help, your friends in the Freedom Fighters wouldn't let you fight anymore at the risk of death. You shouldn't sign off your life being forfeit already so casually, especially on matters as insignificant as 'maybes' or 'mights'. Life is too short to live thinking such things."

"Mm." Sorun hummed in agreement, but otherwise remained silent as he listened to Friar continue to talk. Honestly he wanted to laugh right in his face, as he *did* know for a fact he would die. But he didn't want to risk going that far with him. If anything, he was actually a bit upset this was the conclusion Friar had come to with his lie with the heart defect. It did little to comfort him, if anything.

And it wasn't like he was dwelling over his imminent death. He tried his hardest not to think about it so he could enjoy what little life he had left, just as the Friar said. But something like his death was a hard thing to ignore for him, no matter how hard he tried. He would still try, though, right up until the very end. If not for his sake, then at least for the others so they wouldn't bee too concerned over his mental well being.

"But, for whatever comfort it brings you... I truly do think you are making the right decision here," Friar continued. "For one as young as you to fight for a world that isn't even yours after losing your home is truly unfair, but it doesn't matter what I or anybody else has to say. At the end, you're the only one who can decide if what you are doing is right." He leaned in closer to Sorun's view. "Do you think you're making the right decision?"

After deliberating with himself internally, Sorun gave the deer a nod. "Yeah. I do. I wouldn't be here talking with you if I didn't," he answered. He reached up to brush a few locks of dark hair away from his face, remorsefully chuckling to himself all the while. "Thanks for this, Friar. I... needed somebody to help me order my thoughts. I'm fine now."

The deer smiled widely and nodded his head at Sorun. "I'm just happy to be of service to you. 'Tis my calling, after all. So what is next for you?"

"Eh, I got some time to kill doing something productive until we gotta go do whatever it is we came here to do. Mighty's sorting it out. Don't really know what to do, though."

"Well, I think I can make a suggestion." Friar raised his arm up to point at something in the distance. Sorun followed to where he was pointing, and across the way and past some trees he saw that there was a small group of around twenty children meandering about. "The troubles we've been having with the oppressing forces across the way have had the children's parents absent for some time with preparations." He lowered his arm and looked to Sorun. "Helping is good for the soul, and I often find that there's something about the innocence of children that soothes the mind. Perhaps they could help you as much as you could help them."

"... I dunno, man, that seems like kind of a stretch," Sorun said in uncertainty as he turned back towards Friar. "Are you sure that- the f- what!?"

He wasn't there anymore. Where Friar had been sitting down on the log was now nothing but empty space. Sorun blinked in surprise, and then looked around for any sight of the robed deer. He even went as far as to check behind the log and some of the nearby trees, but there was nothing around.

"Why do the spiritual guys always gotta act so spooky?" Giving up on his search of the Mobian, Sorun huffed out and turned back to the far-off group of kids. To his surprise, in doing so he finally found where the Friar had vanished off to. The children were gone, and in their place was the deer. As for where the kids went, they were suddenly all in front of Sorun and staring up at him.

Sorun started in surprise, and then looked up from the group of children at the deer in the distance as light panic and confusion began racing through him. All the deer did in response to Sorun's shocked expression was to smile and wave at him, and then walk off only to disappear behind the tree lines.

"... Alright, deer dude, you haven't steered me wrong yet." Setting aside his momentary irritation at Friar, Sorun took in a deep breath and looked down at all the children. He didn't have a terribly good record with kids, but they were already here in front of him. And

maybe there was something to what Friar said. So he took in a deep breath and addressed the odd-twenty children in front of him.

"How do you do, kiddos?" Sorun asked, voice a bit stilted in nervousness at all these colorful animal children looking up at him. He couldn't even place the looks they were sending his way. It was a lot of interest in place of raw curiosity, so he figured that was probably a good thing. On the other hand he knew fully well how unpredictable kids could be, and he found his forehead began to throb as he took a unconscious step back. "So, uh... F-Friar send you guys?" he asked when nobody responded to his question.

Several nods all around, but still no words. Sorun didn't know whether to be concerned or just plain creeped out.

"Okay, uh... so your parents are all busy doing something or some such...?" Sorun tried in an effort to glean some response from someone.

To his immense relief, one of the kids, a bird-looking Mobian, spoke up. "All the adults are all worried because they said there's a bunch of mean robots, so they're all doing something and told us all to leave them alone," she said. "Are you a Overlander?"

"Nah, I'm a human. We're closely related, though," Sorun said with a shake of his head. "I-I'm Sorun. I came here with the Freedom Fighters to help out."

Another Mobian child in the back rose his hand. "Are humans mean like Overlanders are? My da an' ma said that Overlanders were mean."

Some of the other kids around tensed up at the one child's words, and some of them even began giving Sorun cautious looks. Acting quick, Sorun quickly shook his head again to try and ease their doubts.

"It's nothing like that. Humans are alright. Overlanders, too, just not all of them, you know?" Sorun explained.

The one child who had spoken against Overlanders nodded his head. "Ohh, okay. Are you nice?"

"... I'm pretty sure?" Sorun gave a half-hearted shrug. "I mean, they let me in the Freedom Fighters. They don't do that with mean people."

All the children nodded in understanding at that. One child in particular, a child that was a deer or some other such mammal, raised her hand. "So you're really a Freedom Fighter?" she asked. "What's it like?"

Quickly exhaling, Sorun placed a hand on the back of his neck and rolled back and forth on his feet in thought. "Uh, you know, it's... pretty dangerous, fighting robots all the time. The people I work with are nice enough, though, and, uh... helping out feels good, so... yeah." He saw their eyes were quickly becoming disinterested, so he tried a new approach. "Wanna hear a story about it?"

That caused all their eyes to eagerly light up, with one child in particular raising their hand up to gain his attention. "Ooh! Ooh! If you're a Freedom Fighter does that mean you know Sonic!?"

At that, Sorun frowned. His frown only deepened when he saw a lot of the other kids grow even more excited at the mere mention of the hedgehog's name. It was utterly amazing to him how Sonic's name was so synonymous with the Freedom Fighters all around the world. He understood he saved the whole world on multiple occasions, but still, the sheer fame the guy had was staggering to Sorun. "Yeah, yeah I know him. I arguably know too much about him. I know his stupid sock size because he's always leaving those things around the room. I'm gonna soak his cereal bowl in one of his used socks one of these days I'm getting so sick of it. *That's a good idea, gotta make a note of that* ." Sorun whispered to himself before clearing his

throat and looking back to the children, who had grown confused at his antics. "As for a story, um..."

What did he have? The story of how they met? He didn't exactly want to turn the children all depressed with his origin story. A story about a mission with Sonic? Usually they went the way of "Sonic smashed all the robots and said a bunch of one-liners while everybody else on the team watched on" and that was the end of it. Stories about being roommates with him? Those caused Sorun nothing but ire. He really was serious about poisoning the hedgehog's cereal with his socks. He did enough harmless pranks against Sorun to justify the retaliation.

But why did he have to tell a story about Sonic? The guy was famous enough, and sure, Sorun had a ton of stories about being a Freedom Fighter, but he had other stories, too. He could probably get by just telling them a children's story from Earth or someth-

Sorun's head shot straight up. Stories from Earth. He knew too many to count, and they were all good. And there was no way any of these kids ever heard any of them since they were from a whole other universe entirely. And since he was the only person in this whole universe that knew them, he had to keep them all alive somehow. After all, it wasn't like he'd be alive forever to remember them. The least he could do was spread some Earth culture to these children for the sake of entertainment. But which one to pick? A relatively short story he could bang out in a hour or two would be ideal. One that embodied all the morals of hope and friendship all these Mobians kept trying to preach. Something cool.

A smile slowly began to spread across the teen's face. He knew just the story. One of his favorites.

"Alright, kids, you wanna hear a story? I'll tell you a story. Not a Freedom Fighter story, though. This is way better." Some of the kids looked disappointed about him not telling a Freedom Fighter story, though they perked up when he mentioned this story being better. "This story," Sorun continued as he sat down on the log as the

children gathered closer, "is one from my childhood. A really famous story that I guarantee none of you have ever heard. By the time I'm done none of you are even gonna remember Sonic's name.

"This is the story of a man who has yet to realize his destiny..."

Up above in the trees, the door to one of the huts hanging up above the ground opened. From that doorway stepped out Mighty, who had to rub a tired hand across his facing after hearing what he had just heard. He stepped out towards the beginning of one of the bridges connecting to the other huts, where he proceeded to lean his body over the rope railing. He heard Rob's footsteps trail behind him as the door was shut, though he paid it no mind as he looked down at the people below.

"Yeah, that is pretty bad," he said at last, eyes still trained on the ground below. "I'll get what you told me back to the others, but... agh, I don't know. We'll figure something out," he promised as he turned around to face the teal hedgehog, body still resting against the rope railing. "You guys have been shoring up the defenses in the meantime, right?"

Rob nodded. "I would be remiss as the king if I neglected proper preparation. I only fear it will be all for naught," he said, a remorseful frown gracing his features.

"Don't say that," Mighty said with a shake of his head. "It looks bad, I know, but we've all faced worse, right? Just let me gather my friends up and we'll talk it over."

Well, that's what he said, at least. On the inside he still had some doubts, especially after hearing the situation straight from Rob O'. He'd faced plenty of Badnik hordes, but what he was describing? Mighty wasn't sure he was willing to bank on them getting out of a fight like that alright with so few numbers. It wasn't like they could call for backup, either. Not when everybody else in Knothole were busy with their own missions. They were all on their own out here.

That didn't mean they wouldn't try their best to save everybody. Not trying was something he absolutely refused to do, and he was sure the others would be in agreement. Even Sorun with how he'd been acting these days. He just wasn't so confident in their odds, and he didn't like that so much.

"Speaking of which, friend Mighty, if I can impose a question to thee," Rob began, waving his hand to gain the armadillo's attention.

Mighty nodded. "Go ahead."

"This new Freedom Fighter you have all recruited, Sorun... dareth I ask your impression of him?"

It took a few seconds for Mighty to register the question, after which he had to take a deep breath and grip the rope railings he was leaning against. He didn't want to assume to know what Rob was implying, so he attempted to try and stay calm at the question. "Sorun? He's been awesome," Mighty said. "Really been supportive over the cause. Kinda rough in some areas, and he's all over the place with his personality sometimes, but he's a cool friend. I trust him to help us with this. Ray feels the same."

"I'll trusteth your word for him," Rob said, an apprehensive look still fixed on his face, "however, I must admit I feel some... reluctant hesitancy. I'm sure he is the sporting sort, but his kind-"

"I'm gonna stop this right here." The calmness was beginning to melt away as Mighty pushed off the ropes, stepping closer to Rob as he flinched back. "First of all, it was the Overlanders that went to war with everybody, not the humans, and Sorun's a human. And second of all, he's one of us." He stopped right in front of Rob, the hot breath blowing from his nose ghosting across the hedgehog's own nose as he glared right into his eyes. "He's been through way too much for you to bring this kind of thing up, and he's risked his life a ton just for our sake. I trust him with my life. He's a Freedom Fighter, same as us. So drop it, okay?"

For a moment, he felt that he may have gone a bit far with the hostility he was radiating, though with how he was feeling it was hard to care. Sorun just mattered too much to him to let this pass without saying something, even if the human himself wasn't present to hear it. He calmed down a bit when he saw Rob back up a bit while nodding his head in understanding, though strangely his face looked more understanding than anything else.

"I sincerely apologize, my friend. I doth seemed to ha'e failed to make my observations proper. I t'was merely inquiring as to his actual fighting ability. Friend Sorun's kind are not known for being robust in the art of combat as we Mobians are" Rob clarified. "You know it is not my place to judge others based on appearance, same all other fair citizens in Mercia."

Mighty blinked in surprise, and then sighed out as all the anger inside of him instantly vented out. "I know it isn't. My bad," he apologized, internally berating himself for having made such an assumption when he'd tried so hard not to. "No, you don't have to worry about Sorun. He's... heh, he may not look it, but he's packing some real power."

"T'is nary a worry, then!" Rob beamed a large smile towards Mighty, though it quickly began to die down when he saw that a frown was still present on Mighty's face. "If... if thou wishes to speak of-"

Mighty held a hand up to stop him. Now wasn't a time to delve into things. "What happened happened, alright? It's in the past." He sighed and looked behind him and back towards the ground. "Really, I'm more worried about this place than anything else with what's coming. And a bit over Sorun."

"He did seem the troubled sort, did he not?" Rob O' noted as he stepped to Mighty's side. "Pray tell, what misfortunes did turn their head in Sorun's direction?"

"... He's lost a lot," Mighty admitted, not feeling very willing to divulge all of Sorun's past to the hedgehog out of respect for his privacy.

"More than I have, even. And honestly, seeing him still going despite everything that's happened... it really is inspiring. I got a ton of respect for him." He wryly grinned. "But man, does he not make it easy sometimes with all that sarcasm of his, but I guess I can't put it past him looking at the big picture." With that, he stepped past the rope railing and towards a rope ladder at the side leading towards the ground. "I'm gonna go look for him and Ray to fill them in."

"Right then," he heard Rob say as he began descending the ladder. "I'll remain at the front and do what I can. We'll reconvene on the morrow and formulate a plan of attack then."

"Yeah, we'll, we'll do that," Mighty called back up right before letting go of the ladder halfway. He dropped down to the ground and landed with a small grunt, standing up tall and dusting himself off afterwards. He set off immediately, muttering to himself, "Now where did those two go?"

From how the sun looked, he estimated his conversation with Rob had taken just under two hours. The evening sky was clear even under the canopy of trees above him, and by now the citizens were beginning to return to their homes in the trees to turn in. There were still some out, though, and it was to them Mighty had turned to in order to ask for help as to where his two comrades were.

Apparently Ray had been floating around the settlement to help with small tasks here and there, so there was no telling where he was at the moment. Sorun, much to Mighty's surprise, was reported as to have been... entertaining children, of all things. Knowing Sorun, it was something Mighty absolutely refused to believe, but the people he'd asked had been kind enough to give him directions and were adamant it was the truth. They even seemed thankful he was helping to preoccupy the children from everything going on.

"Sorun entertaining a bunch of kids? I'll believe it when I see it," the armadillo thought to himself as he stepped in the direction he'd been pointed to. *"He doesn't really have the kind of personality that kids*

find all that approachable. It doesn't even sound like something he'd want to do. There's no way he... he... what on Mobius...?"

He'd seen it. He saw it once he walked past a small grouping of trees, though he almost couldn't believe his eyes when he saw it. There was Sorun, alright, sitting on a log with a bunch of children around him. Some were all sitting on the ground while looking up to him with sparkling eyes. Others were hanging off of his Bringer Claws or sitting in the hands' palms as the spectral appendages moved around, almost like he was giving them small rides.

The most shocking thing, though, wasn't the kids around Sorun. It was Sorun himself. The human actually had a wide grin on his face, and to Mighty's further bafflement, he seemed actually *happy* of all things as he continued speaking while making exaggerated movements with his arms all around.

"And oh, man, it got really crazy after that. It was literally two mechs as big as the universe itself duking it out. The Anti-Spirals were grabbing whole galaxies left and right and throwing them like frisbees." Two Summoned Swords appeared up in the air, spinning around in circles and causing all the children to cry out in awe. "It wasn't happening, though, because with the souls of all those behind him Simon rose up his drill and-!"

It was when he saw Mighty that Sorun stopped dead, his body and even the swords and Bringer Claws freezing in place. The armadillo had chosen to lean against a tree, arms crossed, eyes half-lidded, and smile large and he looked at the human retelling a story to a bunch of Mobian children.

Oh, to think of how much enjoyment he was gonna get out of this. He always knew Sorun's grumpy exterior was just an act. He had all the proof he ever needed now, and he was gonna tease Sorun relentlessly for it.

Sorun, for his part, seemed to become incredibly flustered as he was sent into a coughing fit. His Bringer Claws set the children down and

then disappeared along with the Summoned Swords, after which he straightened up to his feet to address Mighty. To much the armadillo's amusement, his eyes were wide with embarrassment and his cheeks were burning a deep red color. "M-Mighty," he stuttered out, "look, man, I can explain-"

"Oh, there's no need for that," Mighty said, his teasing voice causing the human to grit his teeth. "I can't believe you managed to hide this side of yourself from us for so long, you big softie you."

The glare Sorun sent his way only made Mighty's grin spread wider. "That *is not* ... I..." He actually growled out in irritation and whipped his head to the side in an attempt to hide his face away with his hair. "Did. You get. The situation. *Report* ?" the teen ground out.

"Sure did, Sorun." Mighty pushed off the tree and walked towards him, big smile still plastered on his face. He only received more joy when Sorun grew increasingly flustered as he drew closer. "Wanna help me find Ray? We can set up for the night and go over what needs doing."

"Sounds like a wonderful plan..." Sorun sarcastically remarked, stepping past the crowd of kids. "Sorry, guys. Business beckons."

The response among the group was unanimous, as all the children that had gathered around let out a collective "aww" of disappointment. "But what happens at the end, Sorun!?" one of the children cried out.

"Oh, uh, they beat the Anti-Spirals and... Simon and Nia and everybody else got to live happily ever after. The end." The human flinched back when all the children behind him cheered, though a ghost of a smile still managed to make its way onto his face. "Alright, alright. Go home, everybody. It's getting late." He walked past Mighty, his expression turning serious. "Let's go."

The pale human kept walking without another word. Mighty stared after him, looked to the side at the children waving at Sorun's back,

and then briefly waved back to them before nodding and catching up to Sorun's side.

He didn't speak at first after they'd walked away from the children, though Mighty put that in part due to embarrassment due to the fact that his cheeks were still tinged red which, due to his complexion, was easily noticeable. But even so, Mighty couldn't resist lightly punching the human's shoulder as a grin played across his face. "I knew that whole gruff, aloof thing you've been pulling this whole time was an act," he said.

"... Was it really that obvious?" Sorun mumbled, refusing to meet Mighty's gaze.

The armadillo rolled his eyes. "Dude, nobody back home buys it." His actions just never backed up his distant personality, after all. Mighty didn't even need to see him happily interacting with kids to know it. He and everybody else had seen him slip up enough times in small incidents to get the idea. It was a whole different thing to see it in person, though. He was still reeling from seeing that happy a Sorun.

Sorun slowly blew out from his mouth. "Well, it's not like I was trying so hard to hide it," he said. "Don't tell the kids, but I flubbed the ending to that story I told them. I didn't have the heart to say Simon turns into a weird homeless dude."

Mighty nodded in understanding, despite not knowing the context of what he was talking about. "Ah, I see. What was that story, anyways?"

"A real man's story," Sorun immediately answered with zero hesitation. "And if you tell anybody what you saw you're dead."

"Right, suuure," Mighty replied, looking entirely unconvinced with the smile he held. "No deal. I'm tellin' everybody."

To that, Sorun didn't have a response. Instead he just groaned and shook his head, asking, "Can we just back to the main topic?"

"I wanna set up for tonight before anything," Mighty said with a shake of his head. "Rob said he'd give us a tent. Help me find Ray so we can get settled in, then I'll explain everything to both of you. We'll figure out what we're doing and get to work tomorrow morning."

With a short hum, Sorun gave a nod. "Sounds like a plan," he said.

By the time night had fallen, the Freedom Fighters from Knothole had set themselves up inside of a tent resting at the outskirts of the Deerwood Forest settlement. Inside there were currently only two of them: Mighty was standing at the head of a makeshift table situated in the center of the tent, looking down at a rough drawing of a map of the forest with several red circles drawn over it. Ray was sitting on one of the three sleeping bags in the corner, his blue eyes looking up at the armadillo in concern.

The tent's entrance rustled as a third person pushed their way in through the flap. This was revealed to be Sorun, who had an annoyed look on his face as he fully entered the tent before closing the flap behind him in a huff. "I swear I have to listen to that buff bird guy sing one more limerick I'm taking that lute and.. oh, hey guys," he greeted, his disgruntled visage turning a tad embarrassed as he waved at the two Mobians. "I miss anything?"

Ray covered his face with his hand, whereas Mighty looked up towards the tent's ceiling and shook his head. "No, you're just in time," the latter commented as he gestured towards the table. "Gather around so I can explain what's happening."

Wordlessly, the human and squirrel gather towards either side of the table. Mighty waited until they stopped and fixed their eyes on him to give him their attention, and then took in a deep breath before leaning leaning down to point at the map.

"There was a big commotion a while back, so Rob O' sent a bunch of his scouts to check it out. Apparently Eggman's getting serious about wiping out the Mercian kingdom. He's got a whole army of Badniks that're clear-cutting the forest one section at a time. Eventually the whole forest will be gone, and if that happens all the Mercians will be left wide in the open. And if that happens..."

"They'll be vulnerable to pretty much anything Eggman throws at them," Sorun finished with a grim look on his face. "It's super slow and methodical, but eventually it'll work." He looked up from the map to Mighty. "Seems kinda... inefficient, though, doesn't it? For him? Couldn't he just bomb the whole forest with his fleet and be done with it? Or set it on fire?"

Mighty rose his head up and gave Sorun a flat look. "This is Eggman we're talking about," he reminded him.

"... Right, nutcase," Sorun agreed with a nod. "How close is this army of Badniks from the settlement?"

"A day out."

"Ooh." Sorun grit his teeth and looked down at the map. "So we'll have 'til, what, sometime tomorrow to put something together before they hit?" When he saw Mighty nod, Sorun asked, "How many Badniks are we talking about here?"

Mighty pursed his lips and lowered his head. "Five-hundred," he answered in a low voice. "Five-hundred and five clear-cutting machines from what Rob reported. That's what we have to deal with."

The reactions between the other two Freedom Fighters varied. Sorun's eyes widened the slightest amount, though otherwise he just frowned deeply as he began scratching at his face in thought. Ray's reaction was much more severe, as the squirrel began wringing his hands together nervously as he looked up to Mighty.

"F-f-five hundred Badniks?" he repeated. "I don't... what are we... we can't beat that many!"

"Not all at once, no. Not even with the Mercians' help," Mighty agreed with a stiff nod. "If we kept doing hit-and-run attacks to whittle down their numbers, then eventually, yeah, we'd get them. The problem is we don't have enough time to do something like that before they hit the Deerwood settlement, and if everybody here loses their homes..." Mighty bit his lip and looked back towards the tent's flap. "Rob's thinking over some evacuation strategies just in case, but even he's pretty troubled at the prospect of moving a whole kingdom to another part of the woods and leaving everybody homeless."

It wasn't a very favorable prospect at all. It was clearly understood enough by Mighty and Ray, who could do nothing but grimly stare down at that map. There was no telling how disastrous a mass exodus of the entire kingdom would be on the people, but any way it was cut, it wouldn't be good. And no matter what, neither of them could think of a way to avoid such a catastrophe.

"I mean... five-hundred is... that's... that's a doable number."

Sorun seemed to have a different view of the situation from the way he was looking down at the map. Ray and Mighty looked to the human in surprise, with Mighty asking, "What do you mean?"

"... Mighty, you think you could take, I dunno, a hundred of them on your own?" Sorun questioned as he looked towards the armadillo.

"That's..." The question seemed sudden, but Mighty looked down in thought. "It'd be a bit hard, but... yeah? What's your point?"

"My point is that it's just a buncha jobber Badniks, right? And those things are easy to take down," Sorun said as he pointed at the red circles on the map. "You're right, five-hundred's too much for any of us. We'd get swarmed. Hitting and running is viable, but you're right, it's too slow since they're all so densely packed together. So what if

we split them up?" He began tracing his fingers away from the circles to the wooded areas around them. "I mean, shoot, I can take a hundred, you can take a hundred, Ray can take a hund-"

"Ray can't take a hundred Badniks," Mighty denied with a shake of his head.

"... Okay, so, like, fifty-?" Another shake of his head from Mighty. "Twenty?" Mighty hesitated, and then shook his head again, causing Sorun to groan. "Dude, come on, you gotta give me something to work with." The human turned to the squirrel. "Ray, how about ten? Can you do ten at once?"

Ray regarded Sorun with a nervous nod. "I-I think so, yeah," he answered.

"Okay, we'll just put you in the reserves for any stragglers that make it past, how 'bout that?" With a sigh, Sorun looked back to the map. "Look, what I'm saying is we divide and conquer. Which is... I'm pretty sure it's a legitimate strategy."

It was his go-to strategy in a lot his video games back home, after all. Sometimes in some games going into a group of a dozen or so enemies was tantamount to suicide. Drawing the enemies one by one using items to methodically wipe them out individually was easy, though. It served him well in all sorts of situations, and looking at the drawn map in front of him, he couldn't help but be brought back to that. Five-hundred enemies? Sorun couldn't do something like that.

He could do a hundred easy, though. Especially with his powers and the Yamato.

"Okay..." Mighty slowly said, nodding along to Sorun's plan, "and what about the other three-hundred Badniks? And the clear-cutters?"

Sorun opened his mouth to answer, closed it in thought, and then opened it again with a sigh. "Really wish Sally showed up here with us. Planning's always been her shtick," he quietly complained as he

rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Ugh, okay, uh... I'm not really good at this..." His head suddenly perked up as an idea came to him. "What about all those logs?"

"... The logs?" Mighty repeated.

"Yeah, I remember seeing a bunch of those giant, tree-sized logs piled up all around the village," Sorun explained. "What if we used those?"

Both the Mobians glanced at each other with questioning looks, followed by Ray raising a hand to gain the human's attention. "Why logs?" he asked in a curious tone.

"I seem to remember Badniks don't deal with getting crushed by large, heavy objects all that well." From the side, Sorun saw Mighty lean his head back in understanding. It wasn't hard to see why; that incident with the crane way back was still fresh in Sorun's memory, too. "What if we set up a bunch of traps? We drop logs on the clear-cutters and smash 'em up. Then we drop them on the crowd of robots too to split them up. We already know where they are and where they're headed, right? It's just a matter of setting up a bunch of log traps in their way. We set it up so that an odd-hundred will be drawn in one direction, where I'll be waiting, another odd-hundred will be diverted to Mighty, as for the rest, well, optimistically speaking we nail somewhere from fifty to a hundred with the traps alone, and with the remainder we can just split them up into smaller and smaller groups that can be ambushed by a bunch of groups of Mercians waiting in the tree lines. They're all over the place and they gotta have experience with climbing trees," Sorun said as he gestured his arm out behind him. "If any stragglers get through to the settlement, we can have Ray and a bunch of others here to defend the place." He paused and started waving his hand from side-to-side. "Is... is it a decent plan?" he asked as he looked up. "If Sally were here she'd just instantly slap together a way better plan, but this could work, right?"

When he looked up to see if the other two had his approval, he was surprised to see both of them were looking at Sorun in absolute shock. Ray's jaw was practically hanging down towards the ground, and Mighty looked so bewildered that Sorun was almost worried he'd fall over onto his shell. The armadillo shook his head, though, and regarded Sorun with an expression that just screamed him being impressed.

"Wow, that... kinda makes a lot of sense," Mighty breathed out. "Do you think something like that would really work?"

Sorun shrugged. "Worked in 'Star Wars'. That's pretty much where I'm basing this whole plan off of."

And like that, the impressed look Mighty had melted right into exasperation. "Do not tell me that's another video game where you're from."

"... Movie, actually. 'Return of the Jedi'. And I got the diversion idea back from my gamer days."

A loud slap was heard as Mighty palmed his face. "You know, for a second there I really thought all those strategy lessons Sally keeps giving you were finally starting to get through, but then you pull something like this." He started grinning as he lowered the hand off his face. "I honestly don't know what else I was expecting."

"Yeah, I'll be real, all those lessons she's giving me are going in one ear and out the other," Sorun admitted with a wry grin. "Seriously, though, is the plan alright with you guys?"

"I don't have any better ideas," Mighty admitted with a shrug. "How about you, Ray? You fine with it?"

The golden-furred squirrel looked down in thought, held the pose for a few seconds, and then looked up to Mighty with a nod. "I'm fine with it if you are," he said. "I-if you really think it could work, I th-think we should give it a shot."

"Okay." Nodding back to the squirrel with a smile, Mighty turned to Sorun. "We only got until midday tomorrow until they arrive here, so we'll have to set up all those traps beforehand. Any idea how we're gonna get all those logs into position?"

In answer to Mighty's question, Sorun's Bringer Claws appeared folded over his shoulders. "You have super strength. I have the Bringer Claws," he answered. "We're gonna have to hustle, but if anybody can get those logs into position in time, it's us. Some of the Mercians are gonna have to be the one to tie the traps together, though. I can't tie a knot for jack."

"Not a problem, then," Mighty said. "You really think you can do it, though? Take on a hundred Badniks? I know you've gotten way stronger since we've met because of the Emeralds, Sorun, but are you sure that's a number you can handle?"

Was it indeed a feasible number for him? With a frown, Sorun looked down at his right hand. It was a lot, but he'd beaten them before. He'd done nothing but grow since then, especially with the addition of the Yamato. Even if he was still physically weak, the powers more than made up for it. All he had to do was play it smart and he was sure he could dispense an odd hundred-man army of robots.

The whole point of him gathering strength was to protect others. If he couldn't do this, then he was already a failure. He wasn't gonna let every person here lose their homes. He wasn't going to watch those children suffer. He had power now. He just needed to use it right.

"... Yeah. Don't worry about it," Sorun affirmed. "I'll get it done. Trust me."

"Alright. That's all I needed to hear." And with that, Mighty pushed himself away from the table and made his way towards the tent's flap. "I'm gonna go run the plan by Rob, but I already got a feeling he'll go for it. Hopefully by sunup we'll be out there setting everything up." He reached the flap, made it halfway, and then turned back to the other two with a wide grin on his face. "It's a good plan. As long

as we see it through, we'll get it done." He gave them both a thumbs-up. "You should rest up now while we got the chance. I'll join you once I get back, and then we'll get started."

And with those words, he left. Sorun and Ray glanced at each other, and then wasted no time in getting settled into their sleeping bags to catch as much rest as possible.

Tomorrow would be a big day.

Apparently the plan had been an extremely well-received one. Whether it was because it was an actually good plan, or because nobody had any better ideas, was unknown to Sorun, nor did he endeavor to find an answer. What was important was that Rob, according to Mighty, had immediately gone for Sorun's plan the instant he heard it. Which of course meant that, come morning, he and Mighty had been hauling giant logs off into the forest like nobody's business.

He started to regret his plan pretty early on with all the logs they had him and his Bringer Claws carrying around.

Exhausting manual labor aside, it had actually been Rob O' of all people who had chosen all the sites where the traps would be laid for Sorun's diversion plan. Where the teen was right now was heavily panting against the trunk of a tree, looking upwards as he saw a group of Mobians use bundles of rope to tie together one of the many traps they had all devised. So far it was looking good. Once that trap was set, they'd be good to go. All that would be left was for everybody to get into their positions and wait for the enemy.

"Ho there, friend Sorun!" The teen could barely repress the sigh that threatened to escape him when he heard his name be called out in such a manner. When he looked up towards the source of the voice, he saw a teal, hooded hedgehog swinging on a rope above him. He let go of the rope, falling down on the ground right in front of Sorun. He enthusiastically hopped up to his feet, brushed himself off, and

grinned towards Sorun's direction. "Once yonder log is set our final trap will be ready to be sprung. I trust you've met thine own preparations?"

"If by 'prepare' you mean 'made peace with myself in case I die', then yeah." Sorun looked upwards. Past the tree canopies he could just faintly see dark stacks of smoke in the distance, slowly growing closer to their position. If he strained his ears he could even hear the sound of large thumps and the sawing sounds of trees being cut down. They were getting close.

The experience as whole was leaving Sorun apprehensive. He had faith in the plan, but now that the time to actually enact it was getting closer, he was losing faith in himself. Saying he'd go ahead and defeat a hundred robots compared to actually getting ready to do it in a few minutes was a wholly different feeling entirely. He'd still endeavor to do it, of course, as was the plan everybody was depending on. He just couldn't help his quickly-fading optimism.

"Not to worry, dear fellow!" Whether it was in response to Sorun's earlier statement or the hedgehog just happened to catch the downcast look on Sorun's face, Rob managed to step into Sorun's view while giving him an encouraging smile. "'Tis high spirits that gets one through dismal times such as these, my friend."

"Yeah, I'll keep that in mind," Sorun muttered, not wholly convinced by the hedgehog's words. "Your people are all set up, right?" he asked.

"Indubitably. I'll be joining one such group shortly to aid in thinning the numbers," Rob said. "With my trusty bow and their guile, I trust we will make it through this."

"Ah-huh, ah... huh?" Sorun's head slowly swiveled towards Rob. "Your what?" He eyed the bow and quiver of arrows strapped to the hedgehog's back. "You can't... you're not seriously planning on fighting the Badniks with a bow and arrow, are you?"

"Of course. 'Tis my weapon of choice," Rob confirmed with a nod, much to the human's visible bafflement. "What is the matter?"

"... Nothin', man, you know what? You do you." There were a lot of points Sorun wanted to argue on why that was such a terrible idea, the robots all having a titanium chassis chief among them. But he was fairly certain that any argument he made would fall on deaf ears, so instead he just slowly exhaled from his nose and began walking off. "I'm gonna go get in position," he informed the hedgehog, moving more out of a desire to just get away from Rob more than anything else.

The hedgehog, seemingly not sensing such a desire, instead chose to believe in Sorun's words as he waved at the human's back. "Fare thee well, friend Sorun! May we meet again after the battle!"

"If this day doesn't end with me stabbing that guy it's gonna be a miracle. A bow and arrow, sheesh..." With a groan, Sorun rubbed at his hair. *"Hope he knows what he's doing. He's gotta have experience fighting Badniks, so he has to, right? But a bow? I don't know."* He looked up at the black smoke stacks in the distance and sighed. *"Eh, we're all fuckin' doomed."*

As it was, the number of Badniks that had been reported to be cutting through the forest had been accurate. Five large, tractor-like machines with giant saw blades in place of shovels were all lines up in a line, slowly cutting through and clearing out a large swath of forest as smoke billowed from their mechanical bodies. Alongside all of those clear-cutters were five hundred Egg Pawns. Some were the standard red-colored variants, carrying their lances in hand as they guarded the machines cutting through the forest. Others were Egg Pawns painted in a red and black plaid pattern carrying various cutting implements from axes to chainsaws, whose single purpose was to aid in the clearing of the forest.

For the most part the nigh-unstoppable force of metal made its way through the forest without impunity, leaving behind a barren land

filled with fallen trees in their wake. This was until the line of clear-cutters reached a section of forest where, right above them and hidden among the tree branches, were multiple logs strung up with rope and Mobians ready and waiting.

With watchful eyes, the Mobians watched down below as the clear-cutter machines came closer and closer to their positions. When they deemed the distance suitable, they all silently signaled to each other with hand gestures, followed by them all nodding in understanding. Wordlessly, the Mobians all brandished short daggers and began cutting through the ropes that suspended the logs up. In short order all the ropes had been cut through, followed by all the Mobians leaping back into the tree branches as the traps were sprung.

Given the large, bulky nature of the tractor-like machines cutting through the forest coupled with the Badniks being caught completely unawares, there was no avoiding it when two logs, held up by ropes, came swinging down from the tree tops to either side of one of the tractors. The ends of the two logs smashed into either side of the clear-cutter, its metal chassis crumpling completely under the crushing force before the vehicle as a whole promptly and mildly exploded in a burst of black smoke leaking out from its interior. The other four clear-cutters met similar fates as more and more logs swung down from the trees, and in short order all five were swiftly disposed of.

The Egg Pawns on the ground, having seen the display, could do nothing but look around wildly up towards the top of the trees in an attempt to glean what was attacking them. They all began scrambling away when more logs began dropping on them from up high, though some were too slow and ended up being crushed completely under the logs.

From there, the Egg Pawns began scattering away as more and more logs began dropping down onto them. One group of around a hundred Egg Pawns were driven away from logs not only falling on them, but falling in a way that cut them off from the main group while pushing them back into a deeper section of the forest. A similar

group of a hundred on the other side met the same fate as they, too, were driven away from the main pack. The rest of the Badniks could do nothing but scatter and run in any direction they saw fit as more of their brethren were crushed completely.

"And here we go..."

Sorun had found a nice little perch in the way of a rather tall stump, and chose to wait there until the Badniks he was expecting arrive came. He sat there right now, left hand clenching the sheath of Yamato while the sword itself was gripped in his right hand. Nervously, he began to bounce the blunt end of the blade off his shoulders as he stared straight ahead into the forest.

Sure enough, they came. He heard them before he saw them: a thundering of heavy, robotic feet trampling through the forest and going towards where he was sitting. Next he saw the circular, blue lights that were their eyes as they emerged from the forest and into the small, circular clearing Sorun was sitting at the end of. He couldn't tell what their reactions were upon entering the clearing and seeing Sorun, given their fixed smiling expressions, but he did see that they stopped. All of the Badniks, in fact, had collectively stopped upon seeing him, with only a few dozen having made it into the clearing while the rest remained back in the woods behind them.

"So all the lights I see in the woods are enemies, huh?" Sorun slid off of the stump he sat on. He landed on his feet, straightened his form up, and held the Yamato out to his side. "Works for me."

He saw all the Badniks at the head of the pack ready the weapons they held in their hands. By the time Sorun had walked to the center of the clearing, one of the red Egg Pawns holding a lance had charged towards him. Sorun saw the incoming Badnik, and then breathed out slowly as he quickly sheathed Yamato while keeping a hold on it with both hands. Before the tip of the lance reached his body, Sorun's left Bringer Claw flashed into existence, clenched the

tip of the lance, and wrenched it out of the way of Sorun's body while leaving the Egg Pawn in front of him completely exposed.

"Focus..." Sorun's eyes narrowed, and with clenched hands he swiftly unsheathed the Yamato in a swinging motion. The silver blade cleaved cleanly and effortlessly right through the Egg Pawn's midsection, exiting through the other side with practically no resistance on Sorun's part. The teen willed the Bringer Claw to let go of the lance it held, and then he stood back to observe the robot. It stood completely frozen to the spot, with the only indicator of damage being the thin line completely bisecting its midsection. Soon enough electric sparks began to fly out from the body-long slit, the lights in the robot's eyes and mouth winking out as its upper half slid off the lower part and fell lifelessly to the ground. The lower part fell after it soon after.

Looking down at the fallen Egg Pawn with a mixture of surprise and satisfaction, Sorun looked up to the rest of the Badniks staring him down. Without another word he brandished the katana to the side as his Bringer Claws appeared folded over his shoulders and four Summoned Swords spawned at his sides. Without so much as another sign, Sorun began running towards the Egg Pawns as the Badniks met his sprint and ran towards him with weapons aimed at the ready.

One after another, the Egg Pawns that opposed him fell again and again under his mighty blows. It didn't matter how many of them tried to take him on, as his strength proved to be just too much for them to handle.

After feeling the sensation of something sharp glancing harmlessly off his shell, Mighty reached around and grabbed the arm of the Egg Pawn holding the lance that had tried to spear him from behind. He pulled the robot in front of him, and the began to spin the robot around his body with a single arm. With a smirk he threw the Badnik at a nearby crowd, toppling them all and causing them to collapse in a smoking heap.

All around the armadillo laid the bodies of around fifty of the Egg Pawns already. And while the Mobian himself was lightly panting from exertion, his eyes were still wide and energized as he gestured for the remaining robots to come forwards. "Come on," he called out, "I can do this all day!"

His provocation was met in the form of another wave of Egg Pawns rushing forwards. He punched and tore apart any that tried challenging him with ease.

Were they in larger groups, the surviving Badniks that hadn't been destroyed by the log traps and hadn't been separated from the main group would have been able to fend off any resistance against them with some success. As it was, the remaining Egg Pawns had been so split up and divided from the falling traps that the largest groups were only able to maintain a size of about four or five.

These were numbers that proved easy for the Mobians waiting above to ambush and overwhelm them. Whether it was by dropping heavy rocks on the robots from above or rushing them head on with large groups of people wielding various makeshift weapons, it proved too much for the Badniks to handle. They were just too spread out to enact any form of defense, and were all but helpless under the relentless assault. Numbers that were in the hundreds dwindled by the dozens in a matter of minutes as each pocket of robots were systematically eliminated one after another before their attackers would move on to a new group no worse for wear.

Some Egg Pawns, of course, had tried running. Due to the enemies surrounding them on all sides, their only possible route of escape was, ironically, the very settlement within Deerwood Forest that was to be destroyed by them as per the objectives programmed within the robots. But, unfortunately, emerging from the trees and into the settlement was only met with an even greater force of Mobians, all lead by a short, gold-furred squirrel leading the pack.

Suffice it to say, those Egg Pawns that had made a break for it into the settlement hadn't a chance, as their numbers didn't even reach a full ten robots. One had been dismantled immediately by a well-placed shot from a slingshot held by the golden squirrel. The projectile fired found its way into an opening in one of the Egg Pawn's plates. There was a whirring sound from the device that had been shot inside of it, and soon enough the robot fizzled out in a burst of electricity and fell lifelessly to the ground.

The rest, of course, were merely rushed and overwhelmed by the rest of the Mobians and promptly decommissioned.

"I don't... recall this being so difficult..."

Perhaps he'd overestimated himself just a tad bit. Sorun couldn't understand why; by all counts he should have had this in the bag. And to be fair, he did. Between the ranged support of his Summoned Swords, the brute strength offered by his Bringer Claws, and the ultimate cutting ability provided by the Yamato, Sorun should have been more than equipped enough to deal with a bunch of ordinary Badniks.

And, to be fair, at first it had been going well. The first twenty or so robots had all fallen to him without so much as a sweat. It was around fifty did he realize that this was beginning to become incredibly exhausting for him. Mentally he'd felt the control he had over his powers slipping. Physically he was just becoming more and more tired. Whether it was from the strain of fighting for his life against a veritable army of robots, or because these powers were so straining to his body, Sorun hadn't a clue. What he did know was that his endurance, evidently, wasn't at a level that it should have, and had, been at.

That was very concerning.

He pressed on, though, past all the exhaustion and pains wracking his body. The knowledge he was fighting to save a whole kingdom

and the faces flashing through his mind were a sufficient motivator for him. The knowledge that's he'd be killed if he fell down in the middle of fighting was an even stronger one, and as it was, adrenaline was very good at keeping Sorun on his feet.

All of this was bound to eventually fail, though. To Sorun's credit, he'd managed to get most of them. In fact there was only one single Badnik left standing: one of the plaid-painted ones holding a metal woodcutter's axe. All around Sorun were the cut-apart and brutalized bodies of all the rest of the Badniks. A testament to how hard he'd been fighting in the form of a miniature scrap yard.

Sorun himself, unfortunately, was kneeling down on one knee and panting heavily as he looked up at the single remaining Egg Pawn, his katana stabbed into the ground and being used as a crutch to keep him kneeling. Despite the fact he'd never been wounded once, blood was streaming profusely out from his nose. Any Summoned Swords he tried creating merely shattered and disappeared upon forming. His Bringer Claws only managed to flash into existence for mere moments before flickering and disappearing.

Even Yamato wasn't able to hold up from the strain his body was going through. Right before his eyes he could see cracks forming along the entire length of the sword's blade, with chips of metal continually flaking off and disappearing. His body was simply too exhausted to maintain any of his abilities. And as it was, he couldn't even summon the energy necessary to stand.

"Is this... seriously my limit...?" Sorun thought to himself as he glared up at the Badnik as it began approaching him. *"You gotta be kidding me..."*

The Egg Pawn stopped right in front of him, the large, permanent smile etched into its face almost mocking as it rose its axe up into the air. All Sorun could do was stare on helplessly, too worn out to even think any further.

But then, right before the axe was swung down onto his head, the unthinkable happened. An arrow, a completely normal, wooden arrow with a metal arrowhead, flew out of nowhere and managed to pierce the Badnik's right eye lens. Just barely, Sorun was able to stare in complete shock as sparks fell out from the pierced eye before all of the robot's lights went dark. Its arms went limp, and the axe slipped from its grasp and fell harmlessly onto the ground. And then, the Egg Pawn painted to look like a lumberjack tipped over entirely only to end up lying still on the ground.

Not believing his eyes, Sorun slowly, and with great effort, turned towards the direction where the arrow had been fired from to get a look at his savior. He couldn't say he was so surprised to see Rob O' the Hedge standing up on a nearby tree branch, bow held in his hands as he smiled victoriously down at Sorun.

An exhausted, barely audible chuckle left Sorun right as the Yamato finished disintegrating entirely in a cloud of black and blue ash. *"I can't believe he actually made a bow work,"* he thought as he collapsed onto his back. *"Mobians... are such bullshit..."*

The last thing he saw before falling unconscious was a clear, blue sky free of smoke.

The attack and subsequent defense of the Kingdom of Mercia, by the end, had only ran the course of roughly under an hour. And, short as it was, it had ended as a huge success. A large swath of the forest may have been cleared out now due to the efforts of Eggman's Badnik's, but the entire force had been successfully held back and dismantled. Even better, it had been reported that there hadn't been so much as a single casualty from the Mobian's side due to the plan thought up by the Freedom Fighters and enacted by the king of Mercia.

And even better, while that section of the forest may be barren for generations until the trees grew back, the kingdom had plenty of firewood to last.

So, of course, the next step after repelling the invasion was celebration. Mobians moved about through the whole kingdom, laughing and celebrating amongst themselves. Indeed, it was a time of great happiness for everybody. For everybody except a single, irate human who was currently talking to a group of Mobians.

"- Yeah, Honey, she does good work on my clothes. I don't really recommend traveling all the way down there these days, but if you ever do happen to stop by Knothole, you should visit her shop. She honestly makes good stuff," Sorun explained as he gestured to his clothing. "And can you do me a favor and spread the word? Advertising's hard enough when it's just me doing it."

The Mobians who had approached him as to inquire about his clothes nodded at his request, and then scampered off to their own devices. He watched them go with a small sigh, shaking his head as he ran a hand through his hair. *"She better appreciate the hustle I'm doling out for her here,"* he internally grumbled to himself.

Feeling like he'd sold his soul away aside, Sorun thought it was nice to look around and see all the celebrating Mobians around him. It had been a couple hours since the attack ended. He'd been carried to an infirmary tent and had woken up to see Ray, Mighty, and surprisingly a bunch of the children from before standing over him, but after about a half hour's worth of fussing, he was able to finally convince them he was fine. Which, mild exhaustion aside, he was.

Otherwise, though, he felt great. Great at having actually helped repel an invasion of robots and save a kingdom. From an idea *he'd* had, no less. One he'd stolen from a movie, maybe, but as far as he was concerned it still counted. Random Mobians who had heard about what he did had even went up to him and thanked him profusely for all the help he provided. Sorun, ever bashful at all the attention, had tried downplaying his role as much as possible while doing his best to shy away from the crowds.

But yeah. They'd done it. They successfully managed to defend the Kingdom of Mercia. Go team.

"Oof!" A sudden weight suddenly found itself on Sorun, causing him to become slightly off-balance as he looked down at whatever it was that attached itself to him. He relaxed immediately when he saw it was just Ray, though he did pry the squirrel off of him before he grew too uncomfortable. "Yeah, Ray, I get it. You're happy I'm okay." He huffed, looked away, and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Thanks for the concern."

"You could stand to b-be a bit happier, y'know," the squirrel reminded him with an easygoing smile. "We managed to save everybody!"

"I said we would, didn't I?" Sorun asked. "Geez, no faith." He turned around in another huff, though his tone had been just sarcastic enough that Ray had just laughed at the statement.

From the corner of Sorun's vision, he saw two figures approach. "Ah, come on, Sorun, Ray's right. You could stand to loosen up a bit," Mighty said as he stopped right in front of the pair, with Rob trailing closely behind him. "Seriously though," he continued with some concern, "are you sure you're alright? Your nose was bleeding really hard-"

"I just took a bad hit. I'm fine now," Sorun lied off with a wave of his hand. "I just... gotta pace myself a bit better next time, I guess. You good?"

"Me? Totally," Mighty confirmed with a nod. "A hundred bots were nothin' to me."

Sorun frowned a bit, and then quickly dropped it for a neutral expression as he turned towards Rob. "Thanks for the save, by the way."

"Think nothing of it, friend Sorun. The thanks should lie with me for your services in aiding the kingdom." With that said, Rob bowed down deeply before the three Freedom Fighters, which made Sorun in particular feel awkward from the motion. "It seems, once again, I am in the Kingdom of Acorn's debt."

It was still such a weird feeling for Sorun, to be thanked so profusely for his actions. He was growing used to it, though, and even more he was starting to actually enjoy it. Enough that he actually found himself in a joking mood. "In that case, do you guys have any Power Rings stashed around? Because I wanna cash in some-"

He was interrupted when Mighty playfully elbowed Sorun in the side, though for Mighty, a "playful" elbow jab was still enough to send him reeling. "You're not extorting the kingdom for Power Rings just so you can play more video games with Nicole," he said as a bemused smile spread across his face.

"Ah, come on, man, I was joking," Sorun muttered as he rubbed at his sore side. "Mostly." He softly hissed as he removed his hand, and then turned back to Rob. "So I guess we're done here? You guys are good for us to leave?"

"Most definitely, friend Sorun," Rob confirmed with a nod. "We will have to take some time to clean out Robotnik's minions from the forest, but afterwards I dare say the kingdom will be in top form." A grin formed on his face as he looked at the Mobians far behind him. "Ah, though it seems nobody had the patience necessary to wait to celebrate beforehand, though I cannot say I blame them." He looked back to the three Freedom Fighters. "Will you be staying to partake in the merriment? I hear they are already preparing the ballads to be sung-"

"Would you look at the time!" Sorun interrupted, voice laced in mock regret as he began pulling on Ray's and Mighty's shoulders. "Ah, man, we'd love to but we gotta head back, right, guys?"

"H-huh?" Ray stuttered as he was pulled away. "But aren't we staying for a bit?"

Sorun shook his head. "Nah, we gotta go back. Sally said to come back as soon as we were done here to get ready for the next mission." He sent a pleading look towards Mighty. " *Right* , Mighty?"

The armadillo looked ready to argue the point, but stopped himself when he saw the look Sorun was giving him. He paused to think for a second, and then shrugged his shoulders with a small grin. "Ah, yeah, now I remember," he said as he shrugged Sorun's hand off. "I guess you earned a break after today, Sorun, so we'll head back."

The human sent Mighty a thankful nod, and then released Ray's shoulder. The squirrel, for a moment, seemed a bit saddened by the prospect of leaving so soon, but then brightened up at the prospect of heading back to Knothole. "Well, i-if we're going b-back, should I pull the saucer out?" he asked, turning towards Sorun.

Looking down at Ray, Sorun hummed in thought and then looked up towards the settlement. Rob had already gone back to his people to enjoy in the celebrations with them, a female red echida holding an infant having joined his side. He even saw a bunch of the children from before running around in circles around each in some sort of game of tag. From the distance he could have sworn he caught glimpse of a deer wearing robes that was smiling in his direction, only for him to disappear when somebody walked past him.

No. There was no reason to stay. Their part here was done, and they had other people to save.

"Yeah," Sorun absentmindedly mumbled, his eyes still staring ahead at the Mobians as he bent down to rub the top of Ray's head. "Let's go back home."

Chapter 29

A/N- Lads and lassies, as of this chapter, we hit 69 reviews.

Yee-haw.

Recursion Error

Episode 29- Killer concert

It'd been pointed out to Sorun at one point that there was a library somewhere in Knothole. Usually this wouldn't be of much consequence to him as his time was usually spent on other things, but in a world where the internet was nonexistent sometimes you just had to dig your nose into the books to find out what you wanted to know. In this case, it was Chao. Specifically what he was supposed to be doing in order to actually take care of the one in his possession.

He'd asked around, but, much to his surprise, there wasn't all that much the Freedom Fighters knew about raising and caring for Chao. Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles apparently had limited experience with them, but nothing outside of that. Everybody else knew even less. And so far, for as long as Sorun had kept Virgil, things had been okay. The little guy seemed happy, and he ate the fruit Sorun kept feeding him. And as far as Sorun could tell, he seemed healthy. So as it stood, by all appearances, he was doing well enough with caring for the Chao. But one could never be too careful, and with how backwards this world was for all he knew these were all actually warning signs, so he'd endeavored to seek out some source of information on the strange species just so he could have a better idea on what he was doing.

To that end, his search had lead him to the library.

The affair of going the library itself had been boring. Getting a library card was apparently a free and very easy process. The woman who ran the place, a light-furred dog Mobian, had been nice enough in helping Sorun out and had even directed him to a zoology section in the library when he'd asked for assistance. And in that section, he'd been lucky enough to happen upon a book about Chao. So he'd taken it, checked it out, and was now walking through the streets of Knothole with the book open and his eyes reading over the contents.

"'Everything you need to know about Chao', huh? It's pretty in-depth so far, actually. Huh..." He flipped through another few pages while humming to himself. *"Chao are pretty weird. It says they're natural conductors for Chaos energy, though what that actually means is yet to be discovered. Diet... just nuts and fruit? Alright, so I'm good there. Evolution? What?"* He flipped a few more pages. *"'Chao, by nature, are impressionable creatures that pick up habits from any potential owners caring for them. Actions and even dispositions can often impact a Chao as it grows, and under certain conditions a Chao's evolution can be-' what the hell am I actually reading? They evolve?"*

Flipping through the book some more didn't provide him many answers to what exactly evolution meant. There were a few pictures in the book printed of a few unique-looking Chao. Some Chao colored a white and blue color with halos and other Chao colored in black and purples with weird, sharp-toothed evil smirks. From what the book said, Chao went through periods of change and evolution in accordance with their naturally-short life cycles, and the condition of somebody caring for a Chao was often the catalyst for such a evolution. There wasn't much detail outside of that, though, as the book didn't go into specifics. He wasn't so overly concerned about it. He'd just gotten the book so he could know how to care for Virgil properly, though all this information on Chao development was interesting. Or at least as interesting as it was confusing.

"Chao can adopt the personalities of those caring for them as they mature? Geez, I hope this doesn't mean Virgil become a cynical

bastard like I am down the line. I haven't noticed anything out of the normal from the way he acts." He closed the book, a frown marring his features as he stared down at the cover while continuing to walk forwards in the street. *"I'm gonna have to find somebody to take care of Virgil after I die. Sonic'd probably do it for me. Hell, anybody probably would. I don't know, maybe Antoine and Bunnie will look after him. They're a couple. Couples like pets, right?"*

"Look out, look out!"

So distracted was he by his readings that Sorun hadn't paid attention to anything in front of him. And when he looked up upon hearing a panicked voice call out to him, he saw someone speeding directly towards him from the opposite side of the street. Sorun had been too surprised to make a move, and whoever was speeding towards him was going too fast to make a proper stop.

Naturally the two collided right into each other as a result of this.

The resulting crash sent Sorun and the other person flat on their backs, both softly groaning from the impact. The sound of fluttering paper reached Sorun's ears, and when he cracked his eyes open the first thing he noted were dozens of sheets of paper fluttering around in the air above him and slowly falling to the ground.

"Oh no!" The panicked voice of who Sorun assumed was the other person he'd crashed into gained his attention, causing him to slowly sit up to looked towards them. The sight before him was a yellow-furred Mobian with long, purple hair jumping up and down in an effort to try and collect the pages that had been tossed up into the air, with an armful of the discarded papers already in her grasp.

"I accidentally made her drop all her stuff." With a groan, Sorun got up to his feet while rolling his sore shoulder. *"Now I feel bad. Guess I'll help out."*

Two spectral arms appeared behind Sorun and reached out towards the discarded papers. The yellow Mobian with the purple hair

stepped back in shock at the sight, almost looking frightful, but she seemed to calm down when she saw the Bringer Claws rapidly snatching up the papers out from the air. Within seconds he'd successfully gathered all of the lost papers in a neat stack, after which the Bringer Claws disappeared.

"Sorry about that," Sorun said with an apologetic look on his face as he offered the Mobian the papers. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

The Mobian, still looking surprised, looked down at the papers held out to her. She only finally reacted when Sorun shook the papers out of impatience. "Oh, don't worry about it! Thank you so much!" The Mobian gleefully exclaimed as she accepted the papers from Sorun. The human grunted in response, and then stepped back to bend downwards. She watched him crouch down to pick up the book he'd dropped off the ground, and then tilted her head to the side. "Are you that human that joined the Freedom Fighters that everybody's been talking about?"

"People talk about me?" Sorun thought as he grasped at the book. "There ain't exactly any other humans living in Knothole," he said, standing back up to turn back towards the Mobian. "So yeah. I'm Sorun."

"Mm!" The purple-haired Mobian nodded her head at him. "I'm Mina. Mina Mongoose."

"Mongoose?" Sorun squinted his eyes a bit and leaned forwards to scrutinize her features. She just looked like a normal Mobian to him. Then again, he didn't even think he ever saw what a mongoose on Earth looked like before coming to Mobius, so he wouldn't even know what to look for. *"... Sure."* He looked down at her clothes, his eyes widening a bit. She had on an actual top and skirt in addition to the gloves and boots most Mobians wore, with all of her articles of clothing sporting various splashes of blacks, purples, and teals. She even had piercings in her ears. *"Well she's dressed real funky. And more conservatively than half the people in this place."*

From the corner of his eyes, Sorun noticed that there was a piece of paper he'd missed that had fallen on the ground. A briefly-formed Bringer Claw snatched it from the ground and deposited it in his hand, to which Sorun brought it up for him to read. To his mild surprise, it was a poster. The front half depicted a stage printed on it with an assortment of Mobians standing on it and playing various instruments. He could very clearly see Mina at the front of the group singing into a microphone.

Sorun lowered the poster a bit, looked up to Mina who was eyeing him nervously, looked back down at the poster, and finally looked back at Mina. "You're... in a band?" he asked, lightly shaking the poster in his grasp.

She gave him an affirmative nod at the question. "Yup!"

"Huh." He looked back down at the poster, and then gazed at the name at the top. *"... The Knothole Knuts."* He found himself deeply inhaling, and he could have sworn his brain began throbbing upon having to retain the memory of the name he just read. *"Oy."*

"Is something the matter?" Mina asked, a tinge of concern to her voice as she stepped closer.

"... Nah..." Lowering the poster so that he didn't have to see that name again, Sorun gave the mongoose a stiff nod. "I didn't know bands were a thing here. I'm just a bit surprised is all."

Mina made a small "oh" of understanding. "I guess that makes sense. Yeah, we started it up a while ago. Things in Knothole can just get a bit, well... sad, you know? With everything going on in the world because of Eggman." She shuddered a bit, a sad look overtaking her features. "People always look up to the Freedom Fighters for everything they do. They're a beacon of hope that keep people going. I saw the change they make in people, and I wanted to contribute to help out too."

"But you didn't want to fight?" Sorun guessed.

To his surprise, she shook her head. "No, I... tried helping them out, but it didn't really work out too good. But I always had a good signing voice, so... yeah. I started a band with a few others," she explained, her features brightening up. "We hold concerts when we can to sing to help raise the morale in Knothole. It always manages to brighten up the mood and make people happy so they can forget all the bad that's happening for a bit, you know?"

"No, yeah, I get it," Sorun assured her. "That's... really admirable of you. Nobody seems to appreciate the importance of a smile every now and then. I can respect it." He knew he would have mentally crumbled a long time ago if he didn't find something enjoyable to do whenever he had free time. Having something to relax to was just plain necessary in this life, and he supposed not much else brought widespread happiness to a whole city of people more than a band playing in a concert.

A wide smile spread across Mina's face at Sorun's words. "Exactly! I'm so glad you understand!" Mina clasped her hands together and stepped a bit closer towards Sorun. "We're holding another concert tonight. I actually came out here to post all these posters our manager printed up to get the word out. You should really come see it!"

Looking unsure, Sorun rubbed at the back of his head and looked to the side. "I dunno, concerts were never really my thing..."

"It'll be fun, I promise! And, well, seeing the Freedom Fighters attend the concert usually helps for the people's morale. I know the rest of the Freedom Fighters usually make time to come to the band's shows since they're really supportive over what we do."

"Hmm..." Sighing, Sorun took another look at the poster he had in his grasp, wincing slightly when when his eyes scanned past the band name. There was a paragraph of information at the bottom of the picture of the band, and his eyes locked on to a particular piece of information at the bottom. "Eight tonight, huh?" He hummed again in thought, and after a few more moments he looked back up at Mina.

"I don't have anything else planned for tonight. Guess I'll go since everybody else is going." Who knows, it might be fun. And now that he thought on it, he hadn't actually heard any music at all since coming to Mobius. Maybe spending a night at a concert would be a good change of pace for him.

Oh, how he wished his phone and all the music he'd stored on it hadn't been lost to him. He really missed relaxing to Earth music.

"That's great!" Mina flashed Sorun a thankful nod, and then stepped to the side before walking past Sorun. "Thanks for coming, Sorun! Keep the poster! I've got more to give out!" Her feet began spinning up, and before Sorun could even blink she began speeding down the street. "See you at the concert!"

Sorun stared after the mongoose speeding away, heavily blinking at the disappearing blur. "Wow, she's fast," he commented. "Not Sonic-fast, but still... not bad." If there was anything more surprising than the cheerful personality that girl had, it was how fast she could run. A rock star with super speed. Strange combo.

But she seemed like a great person from the impression Sorun got from her. A great singer too, apparently, if her concerts really were so popular. And anybody who did things to help other people out of the kindness of their hearts was a good enough person in his books, which, on second thought, described almost all of the Mobians he'd ever met. Probably went to explain why he was growing so fond of them.

Well, he'd already made the promise to her, and now he was genuinely curious over how well the band was. For sure he would go.

"Guess I know what I'm doing tonight," Sorun muttered to himself. He looked at the poster, groaned, and then rolled it up and shoved it into his pocket. "Knothole Knuts, sheesh..."

"Okay, *this* time..."

"How many times have you said that by now?"

"This is the one, I feel it..."

Training was hit and miss for Sorun. Some things stuck, and some things just didn't. Things like learning practical skills were slow-going but easy enough for him to get a handle on. Fighting was something he was having to learn on his own through practical experience since nobody could really help him with his style. Training his body was... beginning to become a waste of time due to his endurance slowly diminishing with his withering body. He'd had to stop taking runs with Sonic to improve his stamina for fear that the hedgehog would notice his endurance wasn't up to snuff compared to what it used to be. Finding excuses to avoid those runs were starting to become a challenge.

Agility was still important for him, though, if only because it gave him more mobility options and made handling Yamato easier. Amy usually helped him with that, and most of the time this was done in the field of wooden posts. The occurrences where they could spend some time together to do anything was rare due to conflicting schedules from missions and whatever Amy did in her personal life, as was a similar case with everybody else, but every once in a while they found a little time together for them to do this.

Overall? Sorun wasn't really sure he ever saw any tangible results with her. He still tried, though, if only because the simple idea of benefiting from this was enough to keep him going. But all the hope in the world didn't change the fact he still couldn't hop from one post to another without falling down, even after all this time.

As was the case now, when he leapt from one post to another only for his foot to miss it entirely.

At the very least, he got the hang of not falling completely on his face. A Summoned Sword appeared right below Sorun's feet, with

the teen waving his arms out wildly to balance himself once landing on the sword. He stood up straight once finding solid purchase on the sword, and then looked up towards Amy, who was standing on one of the other posts.

"That was the one, huh?" she asked, arms crossed with a teasing smirk on her face.

With a roll of his eyes, Sorun dismissed the Summoned Sword and landed softly on the ground. "You know what, I don't need your sass," he retorted as he sat down and leaned his back against the nearest post. "I'm done with this for the day."

"If you say so." With a shrug, the pink hedgehog hopped down from her own post and sat down against the post right next to Sorun. "So how are you feeling?"

Tired. "Ah, you know. Fine," he answered. "Kinda hurts I still can't make a single post jump, but hey. I can always cheat with the swords."

"I'm not so sure that's how you're supposed to do it, but if it works I guess..." Amy trailed off and tilted her head in Sorun's direction. "Are you sure you're okay? It's just, well, lately you've been getting kind of exhausted. Like, a lot more than usual."

"It's just all these missions," Sorun played off while locking his fingers behind his head. "I swear, we've been sent all over the place nonstop. I had to go with Sally to bust up that patrol of Egg Pawns seen around this one village, the day before that I had to go with Rotor because some weird Badnik disguised as a log of all things was trying to sabotage the hydroelectric water wheel you guys have set up in the river, and that took forever to sort out... agh, it's just been a lot."

"Yeah, it's been pretty busy lately," Amy admitted with a nod of her head. "It's a good thing Sally called it a day today for missions with everything going on later tonight. We could really use the break."

Sorun quirked his brows in interest, and then rolled his head over to Amy's direction. "So what do you know about this concert going on, anyways?" he asked.

Amy's green eyes brightened up immediately at the question. "Oh, it's Mina's band that's playing tonight! I always look forwards to her music, her band's the best!"

"So they're really that good?"

"Mh-hm!" Amy enthusiastically nodded her head. "Sally likes to encourage us to go since seeing us around helps improve Knothole's morale, and it gives us a bit of stress relief." Her head stopped bobbing and she gave Sorun a questioning look. "You're going tonight, right?"

"Yeah, I'm goin'," he confirmed with a nod, which caused Amy to brighten up again. "Don't really see a reason not to. Plus it's been forever since I've actually heard any good music, so I figured why not? That being said I don't really have any plans besides just show up." He removed his left hand from the back of his head and began scratching at his hair. "How 'bout you?"

For some reason Amy deflated at the question, causing some confusion to appear on Sorun. "Oh, I tried asking Sonic out, you know, just as a small get-together, but he turned me down and said he just wanted to hang out with everybody as a group."

At hearing that, Sorun's ears perked up in interest. "You tried asking him out on a date?"

"No! No, I... yeah..." When Amy noticed Sorun staring intently, she huffed and crossed her arms in indignation. "So what if I wanted to ask him on a date? I'm allowed to try and pursue a relationship, aren't I!?"

Chuckling nervously, Sorun held up his hands to try and calm Amy down while also unconsciously scooting back a few inches. "C'mon,

that's not what I meant. I just really didn't see you going for him. You seriously like him?" He supposed he could see it. The guy was world famous. And now that he thought about it, he was surprised more girls didn't chase after him. And even if there were he doubted they could chase someone like him.

But, Sorun had always assumed that all these missions he kept going on kept Sonic too busy for things like that. Or maybe not, as there were other people in the Freedom Fighters in romantic relationships already. Maybe he just plain wasn't interested in Amy, because for as long as he'd known him he never even talked about anything romantic, nor had he even heard anybody mention such a thing before this.

"Like him!? I'm in love with him!" The sheer amount of bubbliness exuding out from Amy was enough to make Sorun scoot back another few inches. "What's not to love about him!? Sonic's the bestest person to have ever existed!" The hedgehog clasped her hands together as her eyes became half-lidded to form a dreamy expression on her face. "His looks, his personality, the way he races around to save everybody he cares about... what's not to love about him?"

"Uh... sure..." When he'd first heard of Amy's crush not even two minutes ago Sorun had been indifferent about it and had even planned on teasing her a bit over it. Now he was just beginning to grow uncomfortable and slightly concerned. "He's a great guy and all, but, uh, but love? Really? Liking him I get, but you haven't even dated-"

"That may be true, but the heart knows what it wants." The way she said this made Amy sound so sure of herself, but Sorun was just more off-put by her words. "I remember all the way back when we would write letters back and forth to each other. And then I got to be a Freedom Fighter alongside him! We're even both hedgehogs! What else could it be if not a match made in heaven?"

"What the hell, he even gets fan mail!?" Sorun thought to himself, long since having tuned out Amy's words. *"Oh, but man, this is way weirder than I thought it was. She almost sounds obsessed with the guy."* He paused, and then slowly drifted his eyes towards Amy. *"Obsessed girl who has a giant hammer... oh, that dude's fucked. She's gonna give Sonic the 'Misery' treatment or some shit."* He paused, and then shook his head as a small smirk formed. *"Nah, nah she'd never do that. Amy ain't that crazy. It's just a really weird crush, even if she's... wait, how old is she? I know Sonic's sixteen like me, but what about her?"*

"What're you smirking at?" The grin that had formed from his own thoughts seemed to have gone noticed by Amy, who began squinting at the human. Sorun coughed to the side and then began rapidly scratch at the back of his head in response.

"Nothin', nothin'. Hey, Amy, how old are you?" Sorun asked in a desperate attempt to deflect the conversation.

It seemed to work, fortunately enough, as the question caused Amy to tilt her head in thought. The question she asked in turn, though, gave Sorun pause. "Physically or mentally?"

"..." The pale teen blinked at the question. That sounded like something he would ask whenever he felt like being unnecessarily cryptic just to mess with somebody, not something he'd hear coming out of Amy of all people. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, well... physically I'm about as old as Sonic," Amy answered, "but I used to be a lot younger. Sally and Sonic wouldn't let me into the Freedom Fighters since I was so young, so there was a special Power Ring that granted wishes I used to... age myself up. Just a bit." She looked to the side with a pout on her face. "Nobody ever agreed with me and said I did the right thing, but I've gotten really mature since then so I don't see what the problem is."

And there it was. The one abnormal bit of information Sorun was expecting to make this completely normal-sounding story sound

completely insane, i.e. normal by Mobius standards. It made him a bit relieved to hear that this strangely strong crush Amy had on Sonic came from a childhood crush. And helped to explain why Amy's current attitude. The bit with the wish-granting ring had him curious enough to ask, though. "There's a Power Ring that grants wishes?"

Amy nodded. "Yeah, the Ring of Acorns. It lost all its power when I made that wish, though."

"Damn." So much for all those ideas he'd begun to form. Ah well, easy come easy go. "Well, Amy, I'm not one to judge people for who they like, so follow your heart I guess. But I'm telling you right now, in all the time I've lived with Sonic nothing has made me want to live with the guy on a permanent basis."

For a bit there Amy had begun to look pleased, almost as if she was happy that Sorun sounded semi-supportive of her pursuit of Sonic. Her demeanor soured almost instantly when she heard him speak that last sentence. "What's so bad about living with Sonic, Sorun?"

Seeing the shift in her demeanor, Sorun quietly hissed through his teeth as he carefully thought over his response. "Well... nothing overly bad..." he slowly stated, growing a bit nervous under Amy's glare. "Just, y'know... the normal struggles of two guys living in the same room. Bad jokes all the time, guy leaves his clothes lying around... oh, and his energy." Sorun rubbed a hand over his face as an exhausted look overtook him. "I don't know where he gets it. He's just so energetic all the time and I just *cannot* keep up with him. Ugh, the way he practically drags me to breakfast all the time while talking my ear off, I swear..."

He just couldn't become tired. Sorun didn't know if that was even true or not, but if it wasn't, he had yet to see any evidence to the contrary. Because as long as he'd known him Sonic was this boundless source of energy that somehow made Sorun more exhausted just by being near him. And Sorun had to live under the same roof as him. In the same room.

Sometimes Sorun was amazed he even had the energy to get out of bed.

Amy nodded in understanding to Sorun's explanation, her facial features softening to a more easy expression. "Oh, I get it. Just guy stuff," she said. "That's understandable. A guy living with a guy can't be anything like two people in love living with each other."

Sorun decided to just nod along to her words so he could steer the conversation somewhere else. "Yeah, exactly. So did you have anything special planned for the concert tonight?"

It seemed that the attempted diversion had worked, as Amy nodded enthusiastically to the human as a smile came to her face. "Yeah, I went to Honey and bought a new dress just for the occasion." Sorun visibly flinched upon hearing the cat's name be mentioned, but he remained silent and allowed Amy to continue. "Actually, I bought a ton of outfits from her a while back, and I think I remember her saying that she managed to get all of them finished along with the dress I picked out for the concert." Suddenly, she groaned out loud and held a hand to her forehead. "Ugh, there's gonna be *so many bags* ..." She froze, and her eyes opened wide while the irises drifted to Sorun's position. "Hey, Sorun..."

Sorun, seeing where Amy was going with this, immediately shook his head. "I'm not going to Honey's shop with you to carry a bunch of clothes back to your house," he said with a shake of his head. *"And no way am I going near that hellcat for any longer than I have to."*

"Oh, come on! Please?" Amy plead, turning her whole body towards Sorun while clasping her hands together again, this time in a pleading gesture. "You have your arms and your spooky blue arms! That's four extra sets of arms you have to help me with!"

"Yeah, and you're in the top ten for the physically strongest Freedom Fighter. You seriously need my help carrying a bunch of bags?"

Amy sheepishly grinned and turned away at the question. "I... I may have bought a lot..."

"Seriously, Amy...?" Sorun groaned into his palm, thinking over the request in his head. An idea came to him, making his hand slowly slide off his face as he turned to face Amy again. "I'll do it for a Power Ring," he offered.

One of Amy's eyes squinted in confusion. "A Power Ring? Why?"

"'Cause Sally found out I've been poaching the Lake of Rings for Power Rings and she ordered me not to do it anymore." An annoyed look settled on his face as he rose his hand up and began opening and closing it in imitation of a mouth. "'Everybody depends on those rings, Sorun. You can't just go and blow through a rare and precious resource playing video games with Nicole, blah blah blah...'" he complained in a mock falsetto. "I think Rouge ratted me out. She would."

"She's not wrong, you know," Amy pointed out.

Sorun sharply inhaled, and then lowered his hand to the ground. "Yeah, I can see where she's coming from, but it's still complete baloney." He crossed his arms and leaned further back into the post while staring towards Amy, face still disgruntled. "Anyways, because of Mrs. Fun Wrecker's order, I'm strapped for rings these days. So you want my help? I need a Power Ring."

"You can't just help out a friend and fellow Freedom Fighter with a little chore?" Amy asked him. She even went as far as to bat her eyelashes at him. Sorun rolled his eyes at the act.

"You're telling me I should look into my heart and help out a fellow soul in need for no compensation whatsoever for no other reason than she's a fellow comrade and that doing things out of the kindness of your heart is a good thing?" When Sorun saw Amy nod her head at the question, he shook his head much to her

disappointment. "Yeah, I should, but I'm not gonna. I'm too desperate for that ring."

It was Amy's turn to roll her eyes. "You're just gonna use it on Nicole to play more games with her when you both have some free time."

"I'm insulted you would make such a valid and likely assumption over me," Sorun said, flaking his voice in sarcasm as he held a hand over his heart. "But as it happens, I have a different idea for that ring and Nicole."

"Oh, really? What's that?"

"It's a secret. You might see it later, though, assuming I get that ring," Sorun answered.

The pink hedgehog sighed out loud at the answer. "Why do you spend so many Power Rings on her, anyways?" she wondered.

"Aside from the fact she's the only fun person to play games with?" The teen flatly asked. "I don't know, Amy, I just don't like that she's cooped up in that computer all the time. She really likes it whenever I help her make her holo-body so she can interact with the world because, you know, she just likes being around and doing stuff like everybody else, so I just thought I'd, er..." He sighed, lowered his head and mumbled something under his breath, and then rose it again with his blue eyes pleading. "Look, I don't care what it takes. I just really need that Power Ring. I'll do anything."

After he'd finished, Amy continued to look at his face, as if she was trying to silently discern something from his features. It went on long enough that Sorun was about to ask what she was doing, but before he could her face suddenly alit with realization. It was a sudden enough change in her face that Sorun had actually jumped back a bit in surprise.

"Ohhhh...!" She started to slowly nod her head, and a wide smile began to form on her face. "Oh, okay. I get it."

"Get it?" Sorun repeated, genuine confusion in his voice. "Get what?"

The question, to Sorun's further confusion, only served to make Amy's smile bigger. "Oh, it's nothing. You're in luck: I happened to have a Power Ring stashed away for rainy days like this. I'll give it to you if you help me carry me all the clothes from Honey's shop back to my home."

"For real?" When Sorun saw Amy give him a confirmatory nod, he jumped up to his feet with a happy gleam in his eyes. "Yes, plan's in motion! Er, ahem." He cleared his throat and looked away when Amy, still grinning, looked towards him with raised eye ridges. "Er, yeah. Come on, we can go right now."

"Jesus Christ, Amy, what the hell..."

Sorun would freely admit he'd underestimated many things in the duration of his life. Today he would underestimate yet another thing: the sheer amount of clothes a girl was willing to buy and haul off. When Amy had described it to Sorun, he'd assumed that she had just been exaggerating and that it wouldn't be too much at all. It was supposed to be a simple job for easy money, or in this case easy ring.

And yet here he was. Bringer Claws out and laden down with he didn't even know how many bags full of clothes. It didn't even end there, as his normal arms as well were burdened with carrying so many bags that his arms were beginning to grow sore from all the bag straps slung over his limbs.

So there he was. Weighed down with probably enough clothes to cover a whole village, standing inside of Honey's shop as the owner and Amy chatted over by the register. A process that had been going on for around twenty minutes now. He didn't even know what they were talking out; he'd mentally tuned them out thirty seconds in. What he did know was that it was now twenty minutes of him

standing in place while being slowly crushed by clothes as two girls nearby continued to chatter on and on about something. And his arms were getting too tired to tolerate this much longer.

He cleared his throat. Loudly, as to gain the attention of the two girls so they would stop talking and focus over to Sorun. "I don't mean to interrupt your conversation, but I would very much appreciate it if we could move it along at a slightly faster pace than zero," Sorun intoned, his voice barely above a hiss as he stared at the two. "Can we please hurry this up?"

Of the two girls, Amy was the first one to react by sheepishly grinning towards him. "Eh-heh, sorry, Sorun. I lost track of time. What were we doing?"

"Oh, don't mind him, Amy," Honey said, stepping past the counter while smirking towards Sorun. "No matter where I go boys just can't seem to appreciate the finer things."

Sorun scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I'm a boorish, uncultured individual who has no taste in whatever you two were talking about, now can we pick it up already!?"

All that seemed to do was make Honey's grin wider as her tail swished playfully behind her. "Sure thing. The clothes are already paid for."

His eyebrow twitching in irritation, Sorun slowly exhaled a breath while turning his head towards Amy. "Then what are we even doing here if the clothes are paid for...?"

"Oh, we were talking about the concert!" Amy happily replied, almost oblivious towards the suffering Sorun's arms were going through. "Honey said that she was going, too."

Sorun's arms felt like they were threatening to snap at this point, but he kept up appearances as he faced back towards Honey. "Oh, really now? I didn't know you were into music, Honey."

Honey shrugged. "It's too great an opportunity not to go. See, I signed on a deal with Mina's manager, Ash, to make a bunch of t-shirts with the band's logo on them. And seeing as the whole bunch of Mobians are gonna show up there, well, how could I not go and drum up some business?"

"Always about the money with you, huh, Honey...?" Sorun muttered with a roll of his eyes.

"Hey, I provide a service in the form of producing lovingly-crafted pieces of works for generous rates," Honey replied, turning back to Amy while leaning against the checkout counter. "So, Amy, you were saying about wanting bring somebody to the concert?"

Amy pouted at the question and crossed her arms. "I tried asking Sonic out, but he turned me down."

"Shame." Honey flashed her a sympathetic look that almost melted away instantly once she turned her head over to Sorun's direction. "What about you, Sorun? Got any big plans for the concert tonight?"

"That, is none of your concern," Sorun responded in a flat tone. "I just wanna get this stuff back to Amy's place so I can get that Power Ring she promised me."

"Riiight. Of course." The grin on Honey's face broadened as her tail continually swished in the air behind her. "Amy told me all about that. You seem awfully desperate for that Power Ring, huh?"

Annoyed, Sorun shot Amy a glare, the pink hedgehog responding with a small laugh while avoiding his gaze. Honey just glanced towards Amy, the two locking eyes briefly before bringing their hands up to their mouths to cover their high-pitched giggles.

"The hell is so funny?" Sorun internally wondered, though try as me might he couldn't glean any answers from looking at the girls' faces. All he saw were those knowing, smug looks in their eyes, though why they had those expressions to begin with he hadn't a clue. *"Did I*

miss some piece of context when I stopped listening to them or what?"

Fortunately, Amy chose that time to end whatever it is they were doing and walk towards the front door. "Alright, well, I guess we should get going. Thanks again for everything, Honey!"

"Bye Amy, bye Sorun." She caught Sorun's eyes just as he was making to leave, and then gave him a wink. "Have fun at the concert."

"... I will?" All Sorun could manage was a confused blink, which, much to his frustration, sent Honey into another fit of light giggling. Sorun just helplessly stared on, and then gave up with a shake of his head as he turned towards the door. Amy was nice enough to hold it open for him, but much to his chagrin he saw she still had that knowing smirk on her face just like Honey did. *"Girls..."* he internally scoffed as he stomped out the door, spectral arms covered with bags trailing behind him.

"The things I'll do for a Power Ring..."

It hadn't been the worst thing he'd ever done, all things considered. Did he get a lot of looks from people while walking through the streets carrying an obscene amount of bags filled with women's clothing? Oddly enough, not as many as Sorun would have assumed he would have gotten. Sorun didn't really know how to take that, but he'd count it as a positive. And despite all his complaining, it'd felt nice helping a friend out, even if he wouldn't admit it to Amy aloud.

The most important thing though was the Power Ring. Amy had thanked him profusely once they gotten back to her home and unpacked all her clothing, and as promised, she'd given him the Power Ring. The one sole reason he allowed himself to be subjected to that ordeal.

With that Power Ring, he had a plan. More of an idea, really, that had begun brewing in the back of his mind during his conversation with Amy about the concert. A nice thing he wanted to do, and a perfect opportunity to pull it off. A desire to do something nice born more out of a sudden whim he'd had more than anything else, really, but one he wanted to enact anyways.

So with that in mind, he descended the steps into the Freedom HQ's main room while tossing the ring up and down. He quickly hid it behind his back once he made it to ground floor when he saw all of two people inhabiting it currently, sitting on the couch and talking. Sonic and Sally, though he was less interested in the former and more interested in the latter. Specifically, something that was in Sally's possession.

Sorun heard them talking about something as he approached, though the conversation died down as he began approaching them. Sonic was the first one to take notice of the human, smiling and waving over in his direction.

"Yo, Sorun!" the hedgehog greeted. "What's shakin'?"

"Nothin' too important," Sorun blandly answered as he made a stop by the couch. "Been hearin' a lotta buzz about this concert that's going on tonight."

Sonic's ears perked up. "Oh, you mean Mina's gig? Yeah, her and her band's always slammin' out some rockin' jams whenever they play. It's gonna be great."

"We usually make it a point to have all the Freedom Fighters attend the event as well to help take the edge off," Sally added. "Were you planning on going, Sorun?"

To the visible relief of both Mobians, Sorun nodded. "Yeah, it seems interesting. I'll drop by." The teen hopped up onto the couch's arm, and then looked down at Sally. "Hey, can I have Nicole real quick? I wanna ask her something."

"Hm? Oh, sure." Nodding at Sorun, Sally began reaching into the inside of her vest wile still maintaining eye contact with him. "What did you want to ask her?"

"Just a little something," Sorun evasively answered. "Nothing you gotta worry about."

There was a scoff from the other side of the couch as Sonic leaned back, lacing his hands behind his quills. "Oh, really? You sure it's just not to just ask her to spend some more time playing games with you?"

"Yeah, keep guessin'," Sorun mumbled in response, quickly but gingerly snatching up the small computer Sally offered to him. He looked down at the computer and opened his mouth to speak, but then paused and looked up when he noticed that the other two were still looking at him. "A little privacy?" he requested.

He didn't like the way Sonic was smirking at him like that. A knowing, teasing smirk that just got on Sorun's nerves instantly because he just knew the hedgehog was thinking of something Sorun didn't like. Sally's reaction was a lot more subdued than the other Mobian's, being mostly accepting of the request as she nodded and stepped up off the couch.

"Okay, sure. C'mon, Sonic," Sally said, gesturing towards the hedgehog.

"Alright." Shrugging, Sonic hopped off the couch, his face still grinning at Sorun. "Wanna go hit the kitchen? Somewhere close by where we can keep talking while-"

" *No* , I think we should continue this conversation somewhere outside," Sally retorted, sending Sonic an admonishing glare at his suggestion.

He didn't even look fazed by the look, his mouth still set in a smirk. "Just joshin' around with ya, Sal. I would never dream of listening in

on Sorun and Nicole." He began stepping around Sally and towards the HQ's exit. "Betcha I can guess what you're gonna ask her, though. Pretty sure what I'm feeling you holding behind your back is a Pow-"

"Hey, Sonic, keep talking and you'll wake up gray one day. I'll use Yamato to separate your fur and quills from the color blue while you're sleeping," Sorun threatened.

Sonic completely froze after listening to Sorun, and then began nervously chuckling as he started backing up towards the stairs. "Eh-heh, heh, just kidding around, Sorun, come on. You know I wouldn't do anything like that." He nervously gulped. "Your sword can't actually do something like that, can it?"

"Who knows? I haven't tried it." A threatening grin began to form on his face. "Wanna help me test it out?"

"I'm good!" By now Sonic's feet had reached the stairs, and he quickly began ascending them. "I'll meet you outside, Sal! Seeya at the concert, Sorun!"

The remaining two watched the blue hedgehog disappear up the stairs, staring up after him a bit before they both broke out in quiet laughter. Sally began shaking her head as her laughter died down, whereas Sorun's expression slowly faded back to neutral.

With her final laugh coming out as a sigh, Sally turned back towards Sorun. "That was a bit cruel, wasn't it?" she asked, though the mirthful look on her face said enough as to what she thought of the threat.

"Eh, nah. Call it payback for having to listen to him yammer on and on during missions." Sorun groaned and began to tiredly rub at his face. "I already have a negative view on the word 'juice', so when I gotta hear him go 'gotta juice!' every other time he spins through a robot it feels like I'm having an aneurysm." He made a "tch" sound and looked towards the ceiling. "Besides. His color would come back

when new fur and quills grows and replaces the ones I grayed out. Probably."

Sally shot him a sympathetic look. "I know he can be a handful, but please refrain from pulling a prank that drastic. You can't tell me he's pulled a joke on you that warrants something like that."

"No, but it'd be so easy..." Sorun let out a wistful sigh, and then turned his head down to face Sally again. "Anyways, thanks. I'll only be a few minutes, so-"

"It's fine, you can take your time," Sally said, raising her palms up and shaking them in Sorun's direction as she began following in Sonic's footsteps towards the stairs. "In fact, since you're going to the concert tonight anyways, why don't you just hold onto her until then?"

Surprised, Sorun blinked his eyes as his head moved backwards just slightly. "Really? You're sure?"

Sally nodded. "I trust you with her. You're actually more careful with her than I am sometimes." She turned around to climb up the stairs, reaching a hand behind her to wave goodbye at Sorun. "See you at the concert, Sorun!"

"Uh, yeah. You too." Sorun made the effort to make a half-wave at Sally's back using the hand holding the ring, but due to his surprise he was too slow in making the movement and didn't even get to make it before she disappeared out of sight. He blinked again, and then silently slid down onto the end of the couch.

If there was one thing he wasn't expecting, it was that. He didn't even think he'd get as far as to getting five minutes alone with Nicole,especially with how selective Sally was over who handled Nicole, never mind the rest of the day. He wasn't going to be able to play games with her- he had another use in mind for the ring-, but with a lack of anything further to do for the next few hours until the concert, talking would be nice. He couldn't even begin to fathom

what they would talk about, though, as he was still reeling from what Sally said. That thing about trusting him.

It felt oddly nice hearing somebody say that about him.

He looked away from the stairs and towards Nicole's computer body he was holding, and then sighed. Thoughts for later. Important question and next step of the plan now. Assuming he could even muster up the nerve to get that far, because what Sally just said was making him weak. And he couldn't help but feel jittery as he began to realize what he was doing.

"Am I seriously about to go through with this?" he asked himself as he gently placed Nicole down on the couch cushion besides him. *"I mean friends hang out and do stuff all the time, right? Yeah. Yeah, this is fine."*

Rather hesitantly, Sorun cleared his throat and leaned back into the couch. His eyes flicked down to the computer resting next to him, the green screen lighting up when Sorun called out, "Hey, Nicole?"

"Yes, Sorun?" came the response from the small computer.

"I, uh..." Sorun unconsciously began scratching at his neck and looked off to the side. "I'm sorry I always gotta go through the whole rigmarole of having to ask for you and hand you off back and forth with Sally all the time. I get there's not much to be done about it since your body doesn't have any mobility to it, but it's... I just don't think it's very fair you have to go through that."

Nicole took a moment before responding. "I don't mind it too terribly. It's the consequence of being a computer, despite how... frustrating it can be at times. But you needn't worry about me." Another pause. "I deeply appreciate your concern, though."

"Um, yeah." The nervous scratching increased. "Of course."

"Now could you kindly tell me what is it you wanted to ask?"

Sorun mentally cursed. Of course she'd see him trying to dodge around the subject. "Could you hop out for a bit?" he asked. "I... feel a bit better talking face-to-face with you."

"Sorun, without a Power Ring I cannot maintain my hardlight body for a long stretch of-"

"I know, I know, this'll only take a minute. I promise."

Some seconds passed as Nicole seemed to contemplate the request. He was almost afraid that she'd deny him, and he found himself holding his breath when the computer's green screen lit up again. "Very well," she agreed, making Sorun slowly exhale the breath he'd been holding. "Please hold for a moment."

Right after speaking, Sorun saw the black and green pixels that were Nicole's body began to form and take shape. He leaned further back into the couch, looking up at the ceiling and humming quietly to himself as he waited for the process to finish. Seconds later he sat back forwards in a normal position while turning to look at Nicole.

And just as expected, there she was. The holo-lynx looked more curious than anything else, but otherwise seemed pleased to see him. Sorun, in response, crossed one leg over the other and rested his right arm on the couch's arm, clearing his throat as he searched for the words to say.

"So..." he began, pausing to nervously drum his fingers on the couch. He was starting to wonder if requesting to talk to her in person had been a mistake or not. "There's a concert tonight," he finally settled on.

"Yes, I'm aware," Nicole said with a nod. "Evidently Mina's music tends to draw in a large crowd. From how Sally tells it she's quite good." She looked to the side a bit, expression unchanging. "I've heard a bit, through the handheld's speakers. I've never been to one of her concerts in person, though. I was often busy accomplishing one task or another on the HQ's computer."

"But you're free tonight, right?" Sorun asked.

She gave him a confirmatory nod. "I did not plan on accomplishing anything tonight."

"Cool, cool..." With his left hand, Sorun held up the Power Ring Amy had given him and began spinning it around on his index finger. "I hustled this Power Ring off Amy," he explained upon seeing Nicole's surprised look.

One of Nicole's eyes twitched in confusion. "You... did what to Amy?"

"It was a completely consensual arrangement, don't worry about it," Sorun answered with a wave of his free hand. "Truth is I've never been to a concert myself, even in my previous life. You're always going on about how you'd like to experience life like other people more, and this concert's tonight, so I just thought, you know... we could make it a learning experience and go to the concert."

The long moment of silence that passed between them did nothing to sooth Sorun's nerves. He saw Nicole giving him a critical look, her eyes going back and forth between him and the power ring as mild shock overtook her features. Meanwhile Sorun was playing the words he just said over in his head over and over while wondering if he'd said the right thing. Finally, she asked, "You went through all the trouble of getting a Power Ring just so I could experience a concert in person?"

"I mean, it wasn't that much trouble." Oh, how he wished that was true. "I just thought we'd do something different for a change. Video games are nice and all, but there's more to life than just that. Variety being the spice of life and all that."

More silence passed, and Sorun anxiety built up. Nicole looked down in thought for a second, and then looked back up at Sorun's eyes. "Are you asking-?"

"For my best friend to accompany me to a public social event to experience life a little? Yeah, totally," Sorun quickly finished for her with a nod. "And Sonic, Sally, and everybody else is gonna be there, too, so we can all have a bit of fun. Maybe make it a big thing, you know? We don't really get a lot of time off like this so I figured we could just live it up a bit."

In response, Nicole closed her mouth at having her own thought finished with her. She didn't say anything, either. She only just continued to silently stare at Sorun with a strange, unreadable expression he couldn't place. A look that that was doing nothing to help ease his anxiety, as he truly had no idea why she was staring at him with that strange look.

And then she disappeared.

The sudden disappearance had been so sudden and without warning that Sorun had jumped in his seat in surprise at it. He almost began panicking, too, though held off when he saw the green display on Nicole's computer body light up. He breathed out in relief, and then leaned forwards.

"My apologies if I frightened you again. The power demand for maintaining that form became too great," Nicole said through the computer's speakers. "As to your invitation, Sorun... I would very much be delighted to try and 'live it up' as you put it. I think experiencing something new in my holo-body would be... rather nice. So yes. I'll go to the concert with you."

"O-oh." Well that had been easy. Far more easy than he'd expected it to be. It certainly took a weight off of his chest, and he felt himself begin to breath easier. He had a distinct feeling all that anxiety would return later tonight, but that was for Sorun in the future to worry about. Right now he just wanted to be ecstatic over the fact that Nicole had said yes. "Okay then!" Sighing, he shifted his form so that he was lying on the couch, carefully placing Nicole in a position so that he wouldn't accidentally knock her over.

All of that mental exertion had gone and made him tired. That and the physical exertion from having to deal with Amy's antics. Now that he had finally calmed down, he decided he wanted to sleep. And maybe if he was lucky he'd be able to sleep all the way to the concert so he and Nicole could just go immediately. Sounded like a great plan to him.

"Nicole? You don't mind if I take a nap, do you?" Sorun asked. "I'm just kind of tired from some stuff I did earlier today, so could you do me a favor and wake me up around seven if I don't wake up myself beforehand? I don't wanna oversleep and have us miss the concert."

"It's no problem at all, Sorun. Though I have to wonder what you were doing that made you so tired," Nicole said.

Yawning, Sorun leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "I'll, uh... I'll tell you later on the way to the concert. It had to do with Amy and the whole... eh, I'll tell you about it when I... mf..." He only managed to get that far before finally falling asleep.

It was decided by the ones organizing the concert that the event itself would take place in a large, open plaza at the edge of Knothole City, near towards the edge of the forest. Sorun didn't think there was ever a time he'd seen so many Mobians packed together in once place before; no matter where he went there were crowds of people wandering all over the place, all of them excitedly chattering about the going-ons and about the coming concert. Around two-hundred if he were to accurately estimate a number. A rather sizable portion of the city's whole population.

By now it was sunset, the sky being colored a dark orange mixed with dark blues as night threatened to settle in. Despite the approaching night, everybody around seemed to be more awake than ever. It was almost suffocating to Sorun, seeing all these happy and bustling people around him. It didn't help that he felt a bit out of place being the only human walking around, but fortunately, nobody

paid him any mind. He'd actually gotten a few hellos from some strangers, which went far in improving his mood.

It felt nice, feeling included along with everybody else despite looking so different, despite his own personal grievances over the matter. And it felt great seeing all these people around being so happy as well. It helped Sorun to forget everything else happening in the world and Eggman, which he supposed was the whole point of this event. To give people a break from it all. It really was working, too. Sorun couldn't remember the last time he felt so good.

"Huh. So this is what a concert is like." Sorun felt a rustling on his left shoulder, and looked towards it to see a Chao sitting on his shoulder. Virgil looked about as excited as everybody else from the way his eyes and smile were so wide as he looked around at the crowds around them. *"Even Virgil is all excited. Man."*

"Sorun!" The sudden call of his voice snapped Sorun out from his thoughts and made him turn to his side. Instantly he saw Nicole enter into his view, wide smile on her face. "You were right! This is wonderful!"

"H-ha, yeah, I know, right?" Sorun weakly muttered in response, a forced smile on his own face. He wasn't used to seeing Nicole, or anybody, really, this happy. But the second he'd walked her along with Virgil over to the concert and inserted the Power Ring into her computer body so she could generate her Mobian body, her face had just lit up in the most purest form of wonder Sorun had ever seen from all the merriment going on around her. Sorun could barely even keep up, as she just kept walking around to try and experience as much as possible in the time she had.

In a way, he was happy for her and glad he was able to give her this opportunity. Seeing the smile on her face alone was making Sorun beam inside and struggle to keep it contained under a neutral expression. But then there was the voice in the back of his mind telling him that he was doing too much, that even for somebody he admitted to being friends with that this was probably going too far.

That he was getting a bit too attached and would only make it worse for her when he died. He pushed those thoughts aside, though, as at the moment he didn't care too much. He rather liked seeing Nicole this happy, and he was having fun himself, so he was doing his best to ignore those voices.

"Sorun, come on!" Nicole had tried grabbing at Sorun's hand to try and drag him somewhere. Sorun avoided the attempt by quickly shoving his hands into his pockets while leaning back. The movement was subtle enough that Nicole didn't even seem to register it, and instead began waving at him to follow her. "I saw Sally and Sonic a bit further ahead!"

Wordlessly, the teen began following Nicole as she led him further up the plaza. *"What the hell am I doing?"* Sorun wondered to himself as he watched the brown and black lynx ahead of him. *"Aren't I supposed to be avoiding doing stuff like this? Argh, but it's fine, though, right? It's just a bunch of friends going to a concert, and fuck me for wanting to have some fun before I die. At least Nicole's having a good time."* He sighed and looked back at the horizon just as the sun almost finished setting completely. *"Nah, it's fine. This is normal. Just me and some friends having some fun on our day off."*

He would have figured he was allowed at least one break, and after everything else, he figured he might as well collect it now. For all he knew an opportunity like this wouldn't turn up again. And he felt that Nicole deserved the experience. So he'd just enjoy the night and then go back to the daily grind of fighting a mad tyrant tomorrow.

"Chao?" He felt one of Virgil's limbs press into Sorun cheek, which caused the teen to reach a hand up to rub at the Chao's forehead while continuing to face forwards.

It wasn't that difficult to keep track of where Nicole was going amongst the crowds. Her lynx body was distinct even compared to all the other Mobians around, and Sorun would be disappointed in himself if he couldn't find that purple dress she always wore. Eventually she stopped in front of a pair of Mobians, one who Sorun

recognized immediately from the fact their body was blue. The human managed to stop just as Nicole began conversing with Sonic, Sally standing right besides the hedgehog.

"- I just have never experienced such an event myself, and thus far I've been enjoying it immensely," Nicole explained, Sorun only having caught the tail end of the discussion. "I have Sorun to thank for having brought me all the way here and giving me a Power Ring to maintain this body long enough."

Sally, for her part, was practically beaming. "I'm so happy you managed to make it!"

The two continued to converse among themselves while Sorun watched on. He took note of a blur passing by him along with a gust of wind that hit his face right after, and then took note of something jabbing into his side. Sorun looked towards the right to see Sonic jamming his ribs with his elbow, smug look on his face.

"I totally called you were gonna use the Power Ring to bring Nicole to the concert," he claimed, arms crossed and smug grin somehow growing even more smug.

Sorun, mouth turned downwards in a light frown, rolled his eyes. "You didn't call jack squat," he retorted. "And anyways I just wanted her to be here with the rest of us. Since she's part of the team."

"Yeah, Sorun, sure."

He didn't like the way Sonic said that, and in return he looked towards Nicole and Sally. "You came here with Sally, huh?" he noticed, eyes turning back to Sonic. "What a coinkydink that is."

The amount of satisfaction Sorun got from seeing Sonic turning flustered was immense. "That isn't- we aren't, well, we- it's complicated, Sorun,"

"Yeah, Sonic, sure," Sorun said, mirroring Sonic's earlier words. The hedgehog just pouted at that. "I just wanted to take my friend out to a concert to hang out with us. There seriously something wrong with that?"

"Come on, man, I wasn't being serious. I was just having some fun," Sonic promised, nodding his head in agreement to Sorun's question. "How come she gets to be a friend though and not me?"

"Because she doesn't suck at video games. And you do," Sorun flatly answered.

Sonic shook his head in denial. "No, I'm great at video games. You and Nicole are masters with them because she's an AI and you just happen to be as perfect with them as physically possible."

"You keep telling yourself that to make yourself feel better. You'll still never beat me at a video game."

"You're just happy to have one thing you're better at over me, huh, Sorun?" Sonic ground out, teeth grit in an otherwise competitive smile.

Sorun shrugged in response. "I'll take what I can get." He heard the rapid thumps of something hovering close by over the chatter of the nearby crowds, and turned towards the sound just in time to see a two-tailed fox land besides him and Sonic. "Oh, hey Tails."

"Hey, Sorun! Sonic!" The young Mobian waved to the pair and then stepped towards Sonic's side. "I didn't miss the concert yet, did I?"

"Nah, buddy, you're just in time," Sonic said as he reached forwards to rub Tails on top of his head. "C'mon, let's go find a good spot!"

Hanging back a bit, Sorun watched as Sonic with Tails in tow met back up with Sally, who had just finished her conversation with Nicole. They exchanged a few more words before they departed, leaving Nicole behind as she waved goodbye to them. Sorun

continued watching the display for a bit, and then stepped up to Nicole.

"So," the human began, his word's drawing Nicole's attention as he stopped next to her, "how're you feeling about all this?"

"It's all so very stimulating," Nicole admitted to him, wringing her hands together while still holding that happy smile. "The sight and sound of all these people, walking around and interacting with all our friends in the open like this. It's... I've never experienced anything like this before. I can't even properly describe the sensations I'm experiencing at the moment."

"Chao-chao!" Sorun actually had to lean his head back with a grimace when he heard Virgil chirp so happily and loudly right next to his ear.

Nicole's smile widened at the sight, and she attempted to hide it with her hand when Sorun cast an annoyed glance at her as a result. "It seems Virgil is enjoying himself as well," Nicole noted.

"Well, I don't think he's ever experienced a concert, either. It's a new experience for all of us." As Sorun rubbed at his ear, he looked to the side past the crowds and caught sight of a body of red fur being lead by a lighter red body. Sorun almost laughed out loud when he saw that Knuckles looked almost as miserable as Sorun felt all the time, which was a high contrast to how much enjoyment Julie-Su looked to be having. "Yeah, a new experience for a lot more than us," he murmured.

"Yes, I can see," Nicole agreed with a nod. "Sorun-"

"Hey, you two!"

Having been cut off by the cheerful voice cutting Nicole off, the holo-lynx, human, and the Chao all turned towards the voice. Sorun and Nicole's eyes lit up in recognition when they saw Amy standing

besides them, hands clasped behind her back while happily grinning towards the two.

"Hi, Amy," Sorun greeted with a wave. Virgil mimicked the action and did the same, gaining a giggle from the pink hedgehog. "Glad to see you made it. Seriously, thanks a million for the Power Ring."

"Oh, don't even worry about it. I'm happy to help out." Amy's gaze shifted from Sorun to Nicole. "I'm even more happy to see you put it to good use. It's great to see you out and about, Nicole!"

"Thank you, Amy. It's good to be here with the rest of you."

While listening in on the conversation, Sorun tilted his head downwards towards Amy's red and white dress. A dress that looked startlingly similar to the dress he always saw her in. Which was odd, as he could have sworn he heard her say she'd bought a new outfit just for the occasion. In fact, he'd carried such an outfit back to her home. And now that he looked closer, her outfit as a whole was largely the exact same with the exception of a fuzzy pair of pink earmuffs over her ears.

"Hey, uh, Amy?" Sorun asked, drawing the attention of her and Nicole. "Weren't you gonna wear something different for the concert?"

After hearing Sorun's question, Amy nodded her head. "Ah-huh. I did. This is my new outfit," she said, gesturing to her lower body with her hands.

"... It looks the same as what you usually wear," Sorun noted with a strained voice.

"Nu-uh, this outfit's from a completely different seasonal line," Amy denied with a shake of her head. "It's not about how the outfit looks. It's about keeping up with the current fashion trend while having just enough outfits to provide me with a bit of variety."

Sorun felt a vein on his forehead begin to throb. "Could you explain to me how having a bunch of outfits that look the same is *variety* ...?"

Amy's response was just to scoff while turning her head away. "Just because they all look similar doesn't mean they're all the same, but I don't blame you for making that assumption. It's a common mistake."

Sorun had to breath in heavily just to calm himself, but even still a few blue, spectral feathers managed to appear behind his back and fall to the ground. He reached a hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose, and then grumbled under his breath as he refocused on Amy. "So what's up with the earmuffs, then?"

"Hm? Oh, it's just a bit chilly out so I thought I'd wear it," she answered. "Hey, when's the concert supposed to start, anyways? Isn't it around eight?"

"I believe they're beginning right at this moment," Nicole informed them, pointing ahead towards the front of the plaza.

Where Nicole was pointing, with its back to the trees behind it, was a large, makeshift stage that had been set up just for the occasion. By now almost all of the Mobians who had attended had crowed up to be as close to the stage as possible. A few Mobians were up on stage holding various instruments, though any and all chatter in the crowd died down instantly when a certain Mobian among those on stage began walking towards the front where a microphone was.

Sorun, having settled into somewhere in the middle of the crowd alongside Nicole and Amy, couldn't help but to quietly whistle when he saw the hundreds of Mobians all around instantly quiet down when Mina walked up in front of the microphone. Not just because of how her mere presence made everybody quiet down, but from the way her entire demeanor changed from when he'd seen her earlier today. When he'd crashed into the yellow mongoose he got the impression of a shy and timid girl who he could hardly believe could go perform on stage.

This Mina, though, was completely different from the one he saw then. The clothing and face was the same, but the only emotion Sorun could think to describe how she looked was confident. Confidence mixed in with just a little bit of excitement as she took hold of the microphone. She tapped on it once, reeled her head back a bit when the feedback sounded out, and then cleared her throat as she leaned into the microphone.

She proceeded to shout right into the thing.

"Hello, Knothole!" Her voice reverberated right outside the giant sets of speakers stacked behind her and was amplified out to the crowd in front of her. The entire crowd cheered as a result, which only served to make Mina shout even louder into the microphone. "I hope you're ready, because... because we..."

Mina trailed off, her words going completely silent as she began to slowly rock on her feet. The band members behind her even began to become visibly drowsy, and before anybody could say anything, the entire band, Mina included, collapsed right there on stage.

Naturally Sorun assumed that panic would ensue due to the fact Knothole's favorite singer just collapsed onstage. He himself was starting to panic from the sight. That didn't happen. In fact, there was barely any reaction from anybody at all. Even more worryingly was that the Mobians all around started dropping to the ground in droves. Not even a minute had passed before seemingly every single Mobian in attendance to the concert fell motionless onto the ground right then and there.

There were only four exceptions to everybody dropping: Nicole and Amy, who were both glancing around at the fallen field of Mobians with terrified looks on their faces, Virgil, who just looked confused as he hung off Sorun's shoulders, and Sorun himself, who was so bewildered by what he was seeing that he didn't know what expression to make.

"... Huh? Egh..." Sorun winced and held a hand up to his head. There was a mild, dull throb in his head causing him mild discomfort, and beyond that he could faintly hear a sound. A low, buzzing sound that was so quiet that he could barely hear it. *"What the... what is this?"*

"W-what's going on...?" Amy stammered, taking a step back from the visage set in front of her. Nicole, by contrast, immediately crouched down to examine the nearest fallen Mobian. "Why... why are they all...?"

"They're fine," Nicole quickly informed her, fingers pressed against a fallen Mobian's wrist. "I'm detecting life signs. They were all... rendered unconscious?" she mumbled, face scrunched up in confusion.

Sorun, still standing nearby, felt some small relief at the words; he'd been fearing the worst the moment he saw people beginning to drop. But even the knowledge that they were all just asleep did little to put him at ease, as there was a still a couple hundred unconscious Mobians laying around them.

And there was still that incessant buzzing in his ear.

"Is anybody else hearing that sound?" Sorun asked, going as far as to dig a finger in his ear as if trying to root something out. "It's really... this noise is really bugging me."

"Sound? What-?" Nicole looked up from the body she was examining to affix Sorun with a questioning look, but then froze mid-way. Her ears perked up, and for some reason, she turned her head towards the stage. "Now that you've said it, I'm detecting an odd frequency, though I cannot determine exactly what it is." She pointed towards the stage. "But I can tell it's coming from there."

"The stage?" Sorun followed the direction Nicole was pointing to look at the band's stage. At first, nothing seemed to look out of the ordinary. On a second glance, when he looked closer, he saw that

there was indeed something amiss. One of the large, black, rectangular speakers in the back was moving. The circular speaker part of the speaker was oscillating back and forth, as if it was playing sound.

Sorun found himself frowning. A mysterious sound he was hearing, a speaker that was seemingly outputting something, and a whole field of knocked-out Mobians. With how this world worked there was no way it was a coincidence.

"... You still have your computer body on you, right, Nicole?" Sorun asked, glancing towards the lynx while still keeping his body faced towards the speaker.

Nicole nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Mm." He turned his head a bit more to face both Nicole and Amy. "Alright, I'm gonna go check that speaker out. Might cut it if it turns out to be too weird. You two just hang back, alright?"

"Are you sure you don't want me to tag along?" Amy asked.

Sorun shook his head. "I think I can handle a single speaker. Just... just stay with Nicole and look out for anything weird, alright? I'll be back in a bit." He paused, and then reached up to remove the Chao from his shoulder. "Look after him for a bit, too," Sorun added as he handed Virgil off to Amy, who took him without complaint. Virgil seemed to squirm in her grasp and reach out towards Sorun, but this went ignored by the human as he faced forwards.

He took off without another word, not bothering to look back at the three as he stomped his way towards the stage. He wasn't too worried about leaving them behind, not with Amy among them, and at the moment his focus was more on finding out whatever this sound was and getting it to stop. And right now, he strongly suspected that the sound was coming from that speaker.

"We finally catch a break and this happens," Sorun bitterly lamented as he began climbing up the edge of the stage. *"Pisses me the hell off. Everybody was looking forward to this- hell,* I *was looking forward to this. It was Nicole's first concert, too..."*

Taking steps towards the back of the stage, he came upon the large, rectangular speaker that was a bit more than twice as tall as he was settled against the rightmost wall of the stage, still oscillating back and forth as if playing something. *"Nicole said this thing is pumping out a sound frequency. Is this what knocked everybody out? But if that's true, then how come Amy, Virgil and I didn't get hit? Nicole probably got away with it for being an AI or something, but... ah, I don't know."* He squinted and looked closer at it. *"It just looks like an ordinary speaker to me. I should probably still cut it up anyways, just to be- hey, wait a sec..."*

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that there was something off on the upper right corner of the black speaker. There was a small, thumb-sized sticker of an acorn stuck to that spot, but the adhesive seemed worn out in the way the corner of the sticker was sagging off of the sticker. Intrigued, Sorun reached up towards the sticker, grabbed the loose end of it, and quickly pulled the sticker off from the speaker.

His eyes nearly bugged out from his head when he saw Eggman's red logo, seemingly grinning down at Sorun, under the sticker and etched right into the speaker's case.

"Red flag, red flag!" Sorun's left hand unconsciously gripped the sheathed katana that manifested in his grasp. Right before he could even so much as pull the sword out, however, something new with the speaker happened. At the top of the speaker, at the center, a metallic lens opened up. There was a bright, red flash, and in the next instance Sorun saw a solid red light bleeding out from the freshly-opened aperture that was seemingly staring down at the teen. *"RED EYE!"*

He would have cut the speaker in half right there with the Yamato. He made the motion to do so, too, but before he could the speaker blared out. The resulting soundwave hit Sorun before he could do anything, and as a result he was blasted right off of the stage.

The sensation of his back hitting ground barely registered in Sorun after a couple of seconds of flight, but at the moment he felt his senses were under assault. His ears were intensely ringing from being knocked back by a large blast of sound, and even his vision was blurred and spinning. He felt an intense wave of nausea, and very faintly, at the corner of his hearing past all the ringing, he could hear two voices call out his name.

That was about as far as he was able to get before falling unconscious.

Waking up from falling unconscious was always an unpleasant affair for Sorun. It wasn't a pleasant rising, like one would experience from falling asleep. There was a lot more grogginess involved, and as sensations began to return to him vague pains of soreness in his back and head began to rise as well. Through that all, he could still faintly hear two voices speaking to each other, and that was enough to prompt him to get up.

Groaning, Sorun sat upwards as began to rub at his forehead. The surroundings were dark, but there was just enough light for him to make out the wooden walls, shelves, and fixtures spread about. From a first glance, it seemed like he was sitting on the floor of a small shop. He was clueless as to why he had woken up here of all places, though, as the last thing he remembered was being knocked unconscious from a speaker.

"Chao! Chao!"

"Sorun!" Past the fading ringing in his ears, he heard somebody call out his name. He turned his head towards the voice, and then widened his eyes slightly when he saw two figures crouched near

the door. Even in the dark he could instantly make out Amy's bright pink fur against the dark background, with Virgil's blue and yellow body resting on her head. Nicole, whom Sorun only now realized had been the one to call out his name, was a bit harder to see, though the purple dress and green eyes were clear enough for him to make out.

Silently, he watched as both of them made their way from the shop's door to just in front of him. Both had concerned looks on their faces, Virgil looking equally concerned, which at any other time he would have been touched by if the intense feelings of worry over everybody and the absolute rage flowing in him for having been knocked out by a *speaker* of all things wasn't flowing through him. But as it was, they were. And he was not happy about it.

"Sorun? Are you okay?" Amy was the first one to speak out in concern over his wellbeing, and then reached a hand out to grasp his shoulder. "Y-you got knocked back by that thing, and you wouldn't wake up so-"

"I'm fine," Sorun interrupted, brushing her hand off of his shoulder while rubbing at his forehead with the other hand. "How long was I out? And what happened?"

"You were only unconscious for just under ten minutes," Nicole supplied from besides Amy. The barest hint of worry had gone from her face along with Amy at hearing Sorun speak, though her overall expression was still set in a deep frown as she glanced back at the shop's door. "You were unresponsive after getting knocked off the stage from that sonic blast. We were forced to take cover when that arrived shortly after, so we carried you to the nearest structure we could find."

Sorun followed Nicole's gaze towards the door, and then slowly got up to his feet. He was still disoriented just enough that he stumbled the slightest amount upon getting up, but he managed to catch himself just fine and then walked towards the door. He crouched

down near its side, and then peeked out through the glass window at the top to get a view of the situation.

He could see the plaza and stage right outside of the window, and indeed all the Mobians that had been gathered for the concert were still passed out and lying about. That damnable Eggman speaker was still up on stage, too, and even from here Sorun could see that singular, red, mechanical eye-like light near its top. He suddenly had a very great desire to destroy it right there and now.

What he didn't remember being there was a large, floating ship parked just to the side of the concert area. A black and red, angular ship that was about the size of a large bus that had Eggman's logo stenciled on its side. Right in front of it he could see around ten of the red-painted Egg Pawns moving in and out of the ship, carrying large, egg-shaped metal pods out from a ramp leading into the ship's interior.

And just outside of the ship, seemingly directing the Egg Pawns, was him. Not in person, of course- there was a small, egg-shaped white drone floating around and projecting a mere holographic image of him that was floating just above the drone, but it was him. Even from a distance where Sorun could just barely make him out, he could clearly see that it was Eggman. And the mere sight of even just his holographic image was setting Sorun off on new heights of anger he didn't even know existed.

"Of course. Of course this is his doing. It's always his doing," Sorun thought to himself, hand roughly pressing against the door's wooden frame as his fingers began to angrily drum across them. *"His robots attacking people, his schemes ruining people's lives, his goddamn speaker ruining the freakin' concert-!"*

"Sorun." The calming voice voice from just behind him served to snap Sorun out from his thoughts, causing him to glance behind him. Nicole was there, standing behind him and reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder to get him to focus on her. "I know this situation is distressing, but please calm down."

He wanted so badly to just ignore her and storm right outside the door to confront Eggman's hologram and his robots right now, but Nicole's calming presence helped put his mind in a better place and helped him realize that perhaps this wasn't a time to be making brash actions. So with a reluctant nod, he stepped away from the door and settled in a kneeling position right next to Amy with Nicole moving just besides him.

"Alright, alright. So I think it's pretty safe to infer Eggman did something to sabotage the concert, 'cause I saw a big ol' Eggman logo on that weird speaker," Sorun began as he stuck a thumb out towards the door. "Saving the question of 'why' for later, why don't we figure out what we're gonna do about this?"

"I took some time to analyze the odd frequency we encountered earlier while you were unconscious," Nicole said right after Sorun finished. "This is just an educated guess based on what little rudimentary data I managed to gather, but based on the composition of the frequency and from what evidence we've seen, it's possible that anybody exposed to that sound frequency were forced into a state of suspension, though I'm unsure as to how exactly Dr. Robotnik accomplished this. I believe we can conclude, however, the source of this frequency is coming from that speaker."

Amy rose a hand up to gain the attention of the two. "I'm not complaining that we weren't knocked out, but, uh... how come we weren't knocked out?"

"Well, Nicole's an AI with a computer body, so she doesn't have organic ears or a brain or whatever that signals can mess with like organics," Sorun reasoned as he glanced back at the door. "And I dunno, maybe whatever he did only works with Mobians. I'm pretty sure I still heard that thing, but I didn't drop to sleep like everybody else, so that would explain me and Virgil. And you, uh..." Sorun turned back to Amy, looked up at her head, and then gave her a shrug. "Maybe... your earmuffs?"

"Her earmuffs?" Nicole repeated while giving Sorun an unconvinced look. "I admit it's odd that Amy was unaffected in the same way we were unaffected, but I highly doubt-"

"Actually, I had Honey make me these earmuffs along with the rest of my new clothes," Amy interjected with a small grin, gaining both of the others' attention. "And, well, loud music can be really harsh on my ears, you know, so I asked her to put in some extra padding to help soundproof them so I could enjoy the concert better."

At hearing the explanation, Sorun shot Nicole a look along with a slightly smug smirk. Nicole seemed to have caught it and did her best to ignore it by continuing to face Amy, though Sorun still saw one of her ears flick in irritation. He huffed out an amused snort through his nose, and then looked back towards Amy. "Alright, mystery solved. Now what are-?"

"Snrrkrkrk..."

All three heads perked up in shock at hearing what could best be described as a snore. The trio of Freedom Fighters glanced at each other, and then slowly traced their heads towards the source of the noise: the counter behind them, where they could now clearly hear sounds of snoring coming out from behind it. They all shot questioning looks towards one another, ending with Sorun sighing and standing up so he could maneuver around to look behind the counter.

After stepping past Amy and Nicole, Sorun reached the end of the counter. His hands grabbed onto its edge, and slowly he tilted his head around the corner so he could see who it was that was back there and snoring. The very first thing he noticed when he looked around was the color green- a lot of green. And that the body hosting all of that green was abnormally large and covered in scales. Fortunately, though, Sorun recognized him at first glance, though it didn't stop him from palming his face.

"Oh, for the- it's Vector," Sorun announced as he moved behind the counter and began to move towards the sleeping crocodile.

"Vector?" he heard Amy repeat from the other side of the counter. "What's he doing here?"

Sorun didn't answer. Instead, he stopped right above the sleeping crocodile while curiously looking down at his face. He was unconscious like the rest of the Mobians outside, though he didn't remember seeing anybody so... animated while they were under. They'd all been relatively still for the most part, whereas Vector was snoring and even mumbling a bit in his sleep.

A thought came to him, and Sorun peeked his head over the counter. "Hey, Nicole. That signal that knocked everybody out. Are you picking it up in here?"

In response, Nicole closed her eyes for a moment, and then opened them back up while shaking her head. "It's extremely faint, but I doubt it'd be enough to have the same effect on anybody as it does out there in direct proximity to that speaker."

"That so...?" Sorun crouched back down behind the counter and moved right next to Vector's side. "What are you doin' here, big guy? You just decide to take a nap back here?" He reached forwards and began shaking Vector's shoulder. "Hey, Vector. Vector, c'mon, wake up. Dude."

It seemed that Sorun's shaking did little in rousing the crocodile up from his sleep, though he did manage to elicit a incomprehensible murmur from Vector followed by him unconsciously swatting the human's hand away. This caused Sorun to frown.

"I ain't got time for this." Sorun's right Bringer Claw manifested over his shoulder. And then, without any fanfare, the spectral claw whipped forwards and smacked the green croc right across the face. A loud *slap!* resonated throughout the shop as a result, ending with Vector's eyes snapping wide open as a red, hand-shaped mark

began forming on the side of his snout. "Wake up, you useless alligator."

"It's crocodile!" Vector growled in response, sitting upwards while rubbing at the red spot Sorun had just smacked. "What's the big idea, Sorun!? I was just takin' a nap!"

"Town's being attacked, idiot," Sorun flatly responded, causing Vector's mouth to snap shut. "Eggman used a speaker to knock everybody out during the concert."

The initial reaction that played over Vector's face was shock and disbelief, as was to be expected. He searched Sorun's features to ensure that the human was telling the truth, and then, bizarrely, he set his features in a straight expression and replied in a completely even voice, "Alright, go it."

"The fact you're taking this so easy- agh, whatever," Sorun mumbled with a shake of his head. "Dude, what are you doing sleeping in some random shop? Shouldn't you have been at that concert?"

"Eh, no disrespect to Mina, but her brand of hard rock music don't really speak to me, ya dig?" Vector explained with a shrug of his shoulders. "Never could get behind rock n' roll. Rap was always more my speed. So while everybody was out there I just, er, found a place to sneak away to when Espio and Charmy weren't looking. Thought I'd just catch some Zs in the meantime."

"... Dude, seriously?" Sorun's jaw dropped a slight amount as he gave Vector a disbelieving look. "You went through all that trouble to avoid a concert? You couldn't have just stayed in the HQ or something?"

"Those two knuckleheads were insistent I come!" Vector complained while shooting his hands up towards the ceiling. "They wouldn't let me catch a single break! 'Oh, Vector, it's nice to be supportive of the local talent and to help spread hope to all the people', well how is my

mug showing up gonna cheer everyone up any more when the princess and Sonic and everybody else were gonna be there too!?"

"Is your aversion to rock so strong that you would have rather broke into some guy's place rather than sit through an hour of Mina's band playing?"

"It's barely breaking in when the door was already unlocked, and the guy said he was cool with me-"

"WE HAVE MORE IMPORTANT THINGS TO BE WORRYING ABOUT!" Amy screamed, causing both males to immediately go silent and look up. The pink hedgehog was leaning over the top of the counter, her face fuming as she stared down at the both of them. Virgil, still situated at the top of Amy's head, was positively shaking in fright from the girl's volume of voice.

Vector had shut up immediately, nodding his head fiercely while also standing upwards to move around to the other side of the counter. Sorun's reaction was much more controlled, the human staring impassively at Amy's face before slowly looking upwards. "You scared my Chao," he muttered in an annoyed voice as he reached up to take Virgil off of her head.

"Well sorry, Sorun, but we really need to get it in gear and do something before Eggman does whatever he's planning on doing to all our friends and the poor townspeople outside!" Amy yelled in a hurried voice, green eyes trailing Sorun as he stepped around the counter along with Vector, hand petting the top of Virgil's head in an attempt to sooth him.

"Normally I'd say you're not allowed to watch Virgil ever again after that, but I'll look over it considering the situation," the human muttered as he placed Virgil on the ground next to where he sat down. Nicole, not having moved from her spot, sat across from him while Vector had sat down nearby. "So an AI, a human with Chaos powers, A hedgehog with a hammer, a crocodile with a bad taste in

music-" he chose to ignore the scoff Vector sent his way, "- and a Chao versus... all of that out there. What's the plan?"

Admittedly, Amy had a point. Everybody outside was vulnerable and in danger, and they had to do something about it. And as it happened, one of the smartest people in the Freedom Fighters was sitting right there across from him. Vector and Amy seemed to get the same idea, too, as they turned their heads in the same direction as him. Even Virgil seemed to be looking expectantly up at Nicole. The AI, of course, noticed all of these looks and, after a tense moment, looked out towards the door leading to the plaza.

"Ideally, we will need to find a way to interrupt the signal and wake everybody up," Nicole explained to them as she looked back to the group.

Sorun nodded in understanding. "Easy enough, I'll just stab it."

"Wasn't 'stab it' the plan you had before you got blasted off stage?" Amy asked, the pink hedgehog leaning against the counter while looking down at Sorun.

Sorun's blue eyes flicked up to Amy's green, his lips pressed into a thin line. "I won't let that happen again."

"I think Amy's correct, Sorun." His eyes widening in shock, Sorun turned his head back down to Nicole, who was shaking her head. "And besides, even as we speak Eggman is attempting to do something with the citizens outside. Their safety and wellbeing takes precedence over everything else first."

In response, Sorun groaned and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Then just have Amy deal with the robots while I deal with the speaker. She smashes them, I stab the speaker, everybody's saved and wakes up, all's good."

"We don't know the capabilities of that machine, Sorun."

The black-haired teen sent the lynx a flat look. "It's a speaker. It's a big rectangle."

"No. It's a *Badnik* ," Nicole corrected, casting a sharp glare at Sorun who immediately withered under the look. "You know that nothing the Doctor creates is by any means conventional. You were already defeated once by it. I don't want any of us encountering such an unknown until the situation is better in hand. In fact I would prefer to get everybody up first so we can all properly deal with it."

Sorun breathed out in slight anger, crossing his arms while angrily tapping at his shoulders. "I was not *defeated* by a *speaker* ." He glanced up towards Nicole, who was still sending that same glare his way. He breathed out again, and then looked to the side so he didn't have to see her stern face. "What do you suggest?" he begrudgingly muttered.

"Hey, that thing's makin' a sound that's puttin' everybody to sleep, right?" Vector asked, gaining the attention of everybody present. "Couldn't we, you know, play another sound? Something to drown the noise out?"

Nicole looked in Vector's direction, a thoughtful look crossing her face. "Theoretically speaking, a second, harmless frequency overpowering the one affecting everybody outside would disrupt the frequency and cancel out the effect. Do you have an idea, Vector?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." With a wide, tooth-filled smirk, Vector reached into the cuff of his glove and pulled out, much to Sorun's confusion, a disk. "This is my personal mix I carry around with me for good luck. I know the soundboard Mina and her pals use for their songs. Gimme a minute up there and I'll be playing some serious tunes that'll drown out all those sour notes no problem. Sorun and Amy can just deal with Eggman and his chrome cronies meanwhile."

"You're not gonna be able to get in ten feet of that thing without being knocked out," Sorun reminded him. An idea came to him, and he shifted his eyes towards Amy. "Hey, Amy, give him your earmuffs."

Right after Sorun finished speaking his sentence, Amy's hands defensively went up to the earmuffs protecting her ears. "Hey, come on! I don't want-"

"Amy, *literally* hundreds of lives are on the line here," Sorun impatiently ground out.

"Fine, okay, I get it." Conceding to Sorun's point, Amy removed the pink, fuzzy earmuffs from her head and gave them to Vector, who reluctantly accepted them from Amy. "Please be gentle with them, okay? They're brand new."

"Er, sure," Vector agreed with a nod as he hesitantly looked down at the earmuffs. "You sure I gotta wear these, 'cause pink ain't really-"

A barely-subdued growl sounded in the back of Sorun's throat, and at the same time a handful of blue, spectral feathers appeared falling down his shoulders. "Vector..."

Wordlessly, Vector gulped and immediately placed the earmuffs over his head. Sorun watched him intensely as he donned the earmuffs, and then sent an exasperated glare at the ceiling before calming down and looking back towards Nicole. The AI gave him a knowing look, and then focused back on Vector.

"Without any protection from the frequency, Amy will have to remain here until that situation is dealt with," Nicole continued, causing the crocodile to nod while causing Amy to frown. "That being said, I'm unsure to the amplitude that the Badnik speaker is outputting that frequency. Since it's of Robotnik's make, it's likely that the frequency it produces is of a higher magnitude than that of the normal speakers connected to the soundboard you plan on using."

"So? Any ideas?" Vector asked.

"Well... with a sufficiently high power source, you could temporarily boost-"

"Hey, you're not thinking of using the Power Ring, are you?" Sorun interrupted. "Nicole, come on, without that your body-"

"My body is right here," Nicole corrected him, reaching back to hold up the handheld computer before placing it down on the ground. "The safety of Knothole is more important than me maintaining this form."

Sorun stared down at the computer, and then looked back towards Nicole. "I know, but-"

"Sorun. I understand you have reservations about this. But it's okay." Sorun looked ready to argue the point, but stopped immediately when Nicole sent him a confident, reassuring smile. "There will be other opportunities for me to produce this body. There will be other concerts. But saving the lives of our friends is paramount to all else."

For a long moment, Sorun just continued staring into Nicole eyes, internally hoping that she would change her mind and suggest something else. As useless as it likely was at this point, he didn't want her to give up her lynx form prematurely. He wanted to suggest that maybe he could just go destroy the speaker, or do something else that didn't require taking the Power Ring out of her computer body.

But he knew she wouldn't go for it, and not only did he not want to argue the point with her, but he trusted any plan she made more than something he could think up. And he would concede that she had a point, and that this was more important than her holding her Mobian body any longer. So, after slowly breathing outwards, he shakily nodded.

"I really don't like this plan. But you're right." He reached forwards and hesitantly grabbed the handheld computer. He brought it close to him, and then looked back up to Nicole while his hand gripped the Power Ring. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." The holo-lynx gave him a nod, maintaining that reassuring smile of hers that greatly helped to put Sorun as ease. "It will all be fine, Sorun. There's no need to worry."

"... Right." And with that, he took in a deep breath and disconnected the Power Ring from the computer. Nicole's form briefly flickered, and then disappeared entirely in a shower of dark cubes. He stared at the spot where Nicole had been sitting, and then turned towards Vector. He extended his hand and offered the ring to the crocodile, though when he leaned forwards and grabbed it, Sorun snatched at the scaled Mobian's wrist with his now free hand. "Vector, so help me if you screw this up and I pulled her ring for nothing..."

"I'm not gonna mess it up, sheesh!" Vector grumbled as he pulled his wrist free from Sorun's grip. "You just worry about yourself and try not to get KO'd while you're out there."

"Yeah, I'll do that," Sorun muttered in a dry voice. He exhaled again, and stood up to his feet. "Alright, so the plan is I go out there and deal with the robots, Vector takes the Power Ring that he *better not lose* and deals with the signal, and Amy, you stay here with Nicole and Virgil until the signal's dealt with. Come out and help when you hear tasteless rap music blasting through the air, I guess."

From behind him, Vector opened his mouth to argue when he heard Sorun say the word "tasteless". He was stopped when Amy elbowed him in the side while shaking her head in a negatory fashion. From besides them Virgil began walking towards Sorun while reaching his small arms out towards Sorun.

The one-winged Chao stopped when Sorun, who had made it to the door to the shop, turned his head around to glare down at the Chao.

"You're staying here with Nicole and Amy." He tore the door open, his glare intense enough to stop the Chao from voicing any protest. "I'm not in the mood to argue this, Virgil. You can't fight. Stay here."

He waited for the Chao's reaction, eye's unblinking as he looked down at the Chao. Eventually, Virgil reluctantly nodded his teardrop-shaped head and turned around to trudge back towards Amy, who was looking down sadly at the Chao. Sorun took a moment to notice the yellow swirl symbol that had formed above the Chao's head, and tried his best to ignore the image as he exited the shop. He looked ahead, sighed, and began moving forwards.

On the outside he appeared as calm as could be. His face set in stone and his composure seemingly completely calm as he walked over to where that ship was parked, where the robots and Eggman's hologram was.

On the inside, Sorun was seething with rage.

He couldn't even count how many things were making him so upset he could barely see straight. All the unconscious bodies littered around him. Having to participate in foiling yet another insane scheme of Eggman's. Having to see even the visage of the man who was responsible for everything wrong with the world. The concert. Nicole having to give her body up prematurely.

The frustration was just too immeasurable for him. He didn't like that seemingly every single day he had to deal with this man. He didn't like that everybody else had to have been dealing with him for a lot longer than Sorun, and every day he was reminded again and again of how amazed he was at everybody's mental fortitude at remaining sane through it all. And right next to that was the image of that Power Ring that he was forced to pry out from Nicole's handheld body.

All that time spent getting that ring off Amy. Working up the nerve to even bring Nicole to the concert in the first place. All of that was gone now because of Eggman. She'd looked so happy during it, too. More joyful than Sorun had ever seen her, at least. And even he'd been enjoying himself.

But no. Eggman had to go and pull something. It was always Eggman. His plans and evil schemes. His evil machinations that

brought the world to the edge of ruin and made a bunch of resistance fighters so desperate they had to follow the prophecy of same strange wooden tablet and abduct a teenager from an alternate universe just for a shred of hope at beating him. It was always his fault.

Sorun was so sick of looking at his face.

Near the edge of the plaza and to the side of the stage, where the Eggman-marked ship was parked, was a small stretch of land that was relatively clear of Mobian bodies compared to the rest of the place. It was here that the small squad of Egg Pawns were setting up large, egg-shape pods they were carrying in from the ship, having set them up in an orderly row. From the side was the small floating drone that displayed the hologram of Eggman, who, for the most part, looked extremely bored.

"Hurry it up, would you? I'd like to wrap this show up before sunup," the bald man grumbled, his form slumped and head resting against an open palm. "I know for a fact your motor servos can move faster than that. I'm the one that designed them. So shake a leg and get moving before I recall you lot back to the factory you were built in!"

The Doctor's threat actually did serve to make the robots move along at a faster rate, as they began moving nearly twice as fast. It was only a momentary change, though, since a giant, blue spectral fist shot in from out of nowhere and collided right into one of the Egg Pawns. The robot crumpled completely on contact with the fist, and was pushed forwards into one of the egg-shaped pods which met a similar fate as the Egg Pawn. The blue fist smashed right through the pod and went all the way to the ship, where it opened its clawed fingers, grabbed onto the front end of the ship, and then lifted it into the air only to crush the segment it had in its grasp while at the same time slamming it back into the ground. The spectral hand disappeared right after, leaving a twisted, sparking hunk of metal that had once been in a ship.

The surviving Egg Pawns looked on towards the ship in shock, while Eggman's image had turned towards the wreckage with a look of mild interest appearing across his features. From the corner of the hologram's vision, he saw dozens of blue swords appear in the air over all of the Egg Pawns and the egg-shaped pods. Within the next second, they all rained down and skewered robots and pods alike, rendering them all inactive and completely destroyed after the swords disappeared as well.

Eggman's entire reaction to the scene was to simply sigh, drum his fingers along his head, and have his hologram turn around to the other side. He sat up a little bit when he saw a pale human standing nearby, right hand tucked in his pocket while the left one held a sheathed katana resting over his shoulder, but otherwise he showed almost no reaction.

"Don't you just hate it?" Sorun asked, the searing anger in his blue eyes betraying his otherwise calm demeanor and even voice. "When a giant fist comes in outta nowhere and wrecks your robots?"

"An irritating inconvenience, to be sure," Eggman drawled out as his head turned towards the stage. "Confound it, I knew something slipped my mind while I was programming the amplitudes on that speaker. So the frequency I used to put all the Mobians here to sleep doesn't work on humans, eh?"

"Evidently not," Sorun remarked. "Don't tell me that body of yours is already goin' senile, Doctor. Forgettin' stuff's a bad sign."

"I think I should be the one concerned over your health." Eggman turned his hologram back towards Sorun's direction, and then moved his hand to readjust the round, blue glasses over his eyes. "Sorun, my dear boy! You look awful! Have you been getting enough sleep these days?"

The pale teen huffed a lock of black hair from his face to reveal the grimace that had settled over his features. "I got the crazy guy sending robots around to terrorize everybody to blame for that."

Grabbing the handle of the sheathed katana, Sorun removed it from his shoulder and pointed its blunt tip at Eggman's hologram. "You know how many missions I've been running because of you? This was the first break I've had in I don't even know how long, and then you come along and screw it all up. You know how terrible your timing is!? You can't just get a hobby or something instead of messing with people's lives all the time!?"

"This is my hobby."

The completely blank, no-nonsense answer given by Eggman caused Sorun to angrily huff out of his nose and lower the sheathed sword. "Then get better hobbies," he grumbled under his breath. "Or at the very least pick a better time then during a concert."

Eggman widely grinned at that remark. "Oh, but Sorun, my timing couldn't have been better!" He spread his long arms out to the sides. "This was all by design, you utter fool!"

"... Huh?" Sorun mumbled out with a tilt of his head.

"Oh, come now. You don't think all those little, insignificant skirmishes you've been having with my forces all these past weeks actually had any meaning past this, did you? A robot patrol here to harass a village, a scout bot there? You seriously thought I wanted to sabotage Knothole's hydroelectric system using a single Badnik whose design I based on a daydream I had that one time?"

"It did all seem kinda petty, even for you," Sorun admitted. "So, what, this was all some elaborate 'lull them into a false sense of security' plan so you could get the Freedom Fighters and a bunch of people together in one place and knock 'em out in one move?" He clicked his tongue, looked back at all the unconscious Mobians, and then looked back at Eggman. "I'll give you props for the plan, but the execution leaves a lot to be desired. You know there's easier, less convoluted ways of going about this, right?"

"Of course I do." Suddenly, Eggman's face became almost as weary as Sorun felt these days, and his hologram slumped forwards onto something out of picture from the hologram. Even his ginger mustache seemed to slightly droop. "This was all just because I found a shell-like artifact while raiding and destroying some lost, ancient civilization I found in a hidden valley in down the way in the lower continent. Inhabitants seemed like a cheerful bunch. I put them all in Egg Grapes and harvested their life energy for fuel before destroying their home and putting an oil refinery there."

Sorun inhaled sharply, and his grip on Yamato's handle tightened. At the same time, dark blue energy began to faintly roil down the length of the black sheath as Sorun continued to listen to the explanation.

"Anyways, this shell was a vaunted artifact or some such, yadda yadda yadda, I stopped paying attention when listening to all that screaming became too tiresome," Eggman continued, sounding almost bored at his own story. "It had some unique properties when introduced to certain sound frequencies, so I thought, why not, make a sonic weapon out of it. Was going for a whole ironic edge there: use sonic to beat Sonic." He sighed and flipped one of his palms up in the air. "But did I have to go out of my way to smuggle the speaker into Knothole and replace it with that singing harpy's equipment so it could be activated in a concert I'd been subtly guiding all you ruffians towards, only to then have a small detachment of Egg Pawns set up a bunch of Egg Teleporters to take all my new captives back to New Megaopolis?" He shrugged. "No. I could have constructed something with enough range that I could have just blasted all of Knothole from a distance, and then just use a teleportation beam to transport everybody here in five minutes. Would have been laughably easy, really."

"Oh, but you don't like easy, do ya?" Sorun asked, his voice a low hiss. His Bringer Claws had appeared folded over his shoulders, the spectral feathers on the wings almost bristling in rage as the talons resting on him kneaded angrily into his shoulders. "You're in it for the

kicks and thrills, not a cheap victory, right? What's the point in conquering the whole world if you don't do it in style?"

Eggman, who had been tapping one of his fingers on whatever object he was leaning over, lifted his hand and pointed towards the teen. "You know what I like about you, Sorun? You pick things up quick and get to the point. And you're not a total bore to exchange jabs with, either. Not like that blue rodent," he grumbled as he looked away. "Always the same thing with him. The same childish nicknames and same jokes over and over. If it wasn't for the fact he always somehow manages to thwart my creations I would have lost interest ages ago. But at least you bring some fresh class to the table."

Sorun scoffed, and glanced his eyes back into the crowd where he knew Sonic's sleeping form was somewhere. "Yeah, well... tell you the truth, guy even irritates me sometimes." He glanced back at Eggman. "But don't hold it against him. It's probably hard thinking up new lines when you have to deal with all the stress he and the rest of the Freedom Fighters have been under practically their whole lives 'cause of you and the last Robotnik."

"Oh, that's no excuse. The second he and the rest of those furry miscreants start getting worn out and sloppy is the second I stop being amused and end all of this in an instant," Eggman threatened as he sat back up to his full height. His wide, manic grin returned, aimed right down at Sorun. "Oh, but you've been keeping things a bit interesting, haven't you, Sorun? Gotten a new power or two since the last time we spoke?" When the teen refused to answer, Eggman shook his head while making a light shrug. "Well, you've helped keep things mildly entertaining enough that I haven't ended the game just yet, I'll admit that much. You and the rest of those Freedom Fighters. And chances are you're going to foil this little scheme of mine, Sonic and his little friends will foil more schemes here and there, and then, soon enough, we're going to roll right back into same old, dull routine we were deadlocked in before you came around. But don't worry,

Sorun. Rest assured I'll end my game with as much dramatic flair as possible so the end isn't quite as boring as the road getting there."

"Mm-hm, sure." Having tuned out Eggman's inane ramblings halfway through, Sorun turned his body towards the black speaker with the red eye resting on the stage. "I'm gonna go destroy your evil speaker now."

"Of course, by all means. Go for it," Eggman replied, almost agreeing with Sorun's intent. "One, ah, one second, though. Just gotta press this button here first."

Upon hearing the sound of a small *click!* , Sorun swiveled his head back towards Eggman with a raised eyebrow. He saw the Doctor's finger was extended and pressing a button on a small remote control he'd pulled out from somewhere, the grin on his round head still wide and manic. He was tempted to ask just what it was he'd done before he heard something else from behind him. The sound of metal plates shifting and parts turning.

When he looked back to the stage towards a speaker, what he saw had little resemblance of a speaker. What had once been little more than a black rectangle was in the process of transforming, its metal shell segmenting and shifting as its shape realigned itself. Mechanical parts resembling limbs extended out from the speaker's innards, only to be soon covered by the black plates. The speaker itself was folded inside of the shifting monstrosity's body as segments of metal resembling a maw formed over the circular part.

By the time it finished transforming, Sorun was no longer looking at a speaker. What he was looking at was a giant, mechanical beast in the shape of a quadruped wolf covered in black plates of metal. It scratched its long, metal claws along the wooden stage, its angular head pointed straight at Sorun with that same, single red eye still shining in the center of its forehead. And inside of its mouth, filled with rows of metal, dagger-like teeth, he could just faintly see the speaker at the back of its throat.

"... Okay, Nicole. I'll give you that one," Sorun thought to himself as he took a step back, eyes widened in shock at the sight of the Badnik. Eggman seemed amused at the sight, going as far as to bark off a single laugh at Sorun expense.

"What, you didn't think I'd only go as far as to make a simple speaker, did you?" Eggman rhetorically asked a stunned Sorun. At hearing no reaction from the teen, Eggman leaned back in his seat and tapped a few buttons on an unseen console. "Well, anyways, I'm going to send another detachment of Badniks to round up my new prisoners while you're being torn apart by that. In the meantime, I think I'm just going to sit back and watch-"

A Summoned Sword flew through the air and rammed right through the white drone, destroying it in an instant and causing Eggman's hologram to blink out of existence mid-sentence. Sorun watched the smoking drone fall dead to the ground, and then scoffed as he turned his head back to the giant, mechanical wolf.

"If you wanted a show, you shoulda showed up in person like everybody else," Sorun said, flipping the Yamato around so that his left hand was holding the sheath. From out of the corner of his eyes, near the other side of the plaza past the crowd of passed-out Mobians, he could faintly make out someone peeking their head over a stack of wooden crates. Vector's green head, adorned with Amy's pink earmuffs, was easily recognizable even from this distance, the crocodile seemingly biting his gloved nails as he looked up on the stage.

The black Badnik wolf didn't seem to take notice, however, as its large form jumped off from the stage and began to seemingly stalk sideways, its singular red eye still trained on Sorun. It suited the pale teen just fine- the more it focused on him the less Vector had to worry.

"Alright, pooch. I'll play with ya." Sorun's right hand gripped the sword's hilt and slowly slid it out of the sheath. "Either I stall you long

enough that Vector disrupts the signal or I cut you to bits. It's your loss no matter what."

As willing as he was, though, he severely hoped that Vector would be fast enough to get rid of that signal so that he could get some help with this. He was confident enough with his powers by now, but the giant robot wolf staring down Sorun was not making him feel very good about the situation. The look alone was intimidating Sorun, nevermind the metal claws and teeth.

Unfortunately, it seemed that the Badnik wolf took him unsheathing his sword as a sign that he was ready to fight. The wolf dug its metallic claws into the ground, however, and instead of charging head-on reared its head backwards. Sorun, seeing what it was attempting to do, rose the katana's blade defensively over his form.

Right after Sorun rose his blade up, the wolf howled at him in a horrendous mockery of a wolf's howl masked in a mechanical flange. Waves of sound raced towards Sorun, distorting the air around it in a circular stream. In response, blue energy began coalescing around the katana's blade right as the sound hit.

Despite being hit dead-on by the soundwaves, Sorun remained rooted in place and relatively fine, his clothes and hair flapping uncontrollably from the force hitting him. By contrast, the soundwaves seemed to be broken apart upon making contact with the glowing katana, harmlessly fragmenting and dissipating away from the teen. The wolf seemed to take notice of how its howls were ineffective, stopping in its sonic assault soon after and tilting its head to the side in curiosity.

"You're gonna need better tricks than that! Yamato can just separate the soundwaves." Sorun lowered Yamato, and at the same time his right Bringer Claw lifted up from his shoulder and flew towards the mechanical wolf. The spectral claw grabbed right onto one of the dark wolf's haunches, and it was Sorun's intention to lift the robot right up into the air and flip it down onto its back.

That was the intention, at least. What Sorun didn't expect was for the wolf to snap its head down towards the Bringer Claw and clamp its metallic jaws down on the spectral hand's wrist. And he really didn't expect for its teeth to compress down hard enough that it went all the way through, causing the entire Bringer Claw to dissipate in a puff of blue energy.

"What the-!" That was the only thought Sorun managed to get out before the wolf lunged towards him, claws extended and metal teeth bared. The teen's eyes widened in panic, his remaining Bringer Claw beating down on the ground and pushing him away just as the Badnik swiped at the air when he'd been standing previously.

His boots skidding across the ground, Sorun spun towards the wolf with narrowed eyes. The black wolf respectively turned its head towards the human just as a barrage of Summoned Swords flew towards its face. Unfortunately, the robotic wolf howled again just as the swords neared, the soundwaves deflecting and blasting away all of the swords. One sword in particular flew dangerously past Sorun's head, and to the teen's shock he saw a few strands of black hair fall down away from his face, having been cut by the sword passing by him.

"Alright..." Trying for the Summoned Swords again, Sorun willed eight swords to begin spinning around in a circle around the wolf Badnik. This proved to be in vain, though, as the wolf simply swiped its claws around to shatter the Storm Swords surrounding it. During this, Sorun's left Bringer Claw had clamped onto the wolf's side, the spectral arm contracting and pulling Sorun towards it. As it did with the first one, the wolf chomped down and destroyed the Bringer Claw gripping on to it, though by that point Sorun's momentum was too great to stop. He flew right past the wolf, Yamato's edge dragging across its side and leaving a deep gash in its metal plates.

Sorun landed on the ground behind the wolf with a small grunt and, upon hearing the sound of machinery shift behind him, immediately sheathed the sword and held it out in front of him. This was done just in the nick of time, as the moment he'd turned around the wolf's

clawed appendage lashed out towards him. The metal claws dragged along the katana's length, drawing white sparks and causing Sorun to be tossed back from the sheer force of the hit.

Flying back a good ten meters from the blocked hit, Sorun's body rolled over and over until coming to a full stop, the teen ending up on his back. He breathed out while looking up into the night sky, and then groaned as he began to sit upwards. *"And as always, the super robot is kicking my ass,"* Sorun thought as he managed to rise into a sitting position. To his dismay, despite the sparking gash now present in its side, the Badnik wolf still looked as active as ever. *"I wish Vector would hurry the hell up here..."*

"Oh man of man oh man..."

Beyond his peripheral vision, Vector could see the fight transpiring between Sorun and a monster of a Badnik if he ever saw one. And unfortunately, it seemed to him that Sorun was losing. Bad. At least in a way that the human was dealing minimal damage while doing his best to just try and avoid getting hit by that thing.

Well, that was fine. Or it would be, at least. Because his job wasn't to fight the giant robot monster that looked like it was made of knives. Oh no. His job in this little mission was support. It was to get this Power Ring he was clutching in his hands up on stage and get the music flowing so Sorun wouldn't have to tackle that thing alone and get help from people whose job it was to deal with things like that.

This knowledge did nothing to subside the panic coursing through the crocodile, as he was so afraid that at some point that giant *thing* Sorun was fighting against would turn its head and notice him that he'd all but forgotten hiding and went for a dead sprint towards the stage.

On the upside, he didn't think the monster Badnik saw him. Right now it was too busy biting down on Sorun's katana and thrashing it and the teen holding it back and forth like a chew toy.

Still in a panic, Vector scrambled up the side of the stage and made his way right to the band's soundboard, which was still connected to the normal, non-evil speakers stacked up against the stage. He heard a startled yell out of the edge of his hearing, and looked up just in time to see Sorun tossed clear towards the other side of the plaza, the wolf Badnik right on his heels. Vector winced at the sight and went back to the soundboard.

"Hang in there, pal, just a few more seconds..." Vector hurriedly mumbled to himself as he began fiddling with the controls to the soundboard. "Okay, volume control, sound selection... yeah, now we're talkin'!"

While familiarizing himself with the controls he found a small disk tray sticking out of a music player connected to the soundboard. He quickly placed his personal disk inside and all but slammed the tray shut, taking some small satisfaction when he saw lights on the player light up. He eyed various knobs and sound adjustment switches, slowly turning them all up on max.

"Alright, check, check, that looks good, oh yeah..." Everything seemed to be working in his eyes. And so, with everything set up, all he had to worry about was actually powering this thing.

The crocodile's yellow eyes dipped downwards to a small cable that was leading from the soundboard towards the back of the stage. He quickly moved backwards, following the cable and moving past the stage's curtain to pass towards the back end of the stage. From there, he found what he was looking for: a small generator with multiple cords leading towards the soundboard and the speakers it was connected to.

Crouching down next to the generator, Vector examined the device and, grinning a wide-toothed grin at his success, pulled out a extendable jumper cable from an open panel near the back. Gulping, he reached behind him and held up the ring-like object he'd carried with him all this way. The Power Ring's golden light reflected harshly

off the croc's face, but even through all that light he could see his nervous eyes through the reflection on the ring's surface.

"Well..." Vector gulped, compressing the jumper cable open and leading it towards the Power Ring, "no time like the present. Sure hope this works..."

And then, wincing slightly in apprehension, he clamped the jumper cable down on the ring.

Once more, Sorun found his body rolling against the ground as he was once again thrown back. Coughing from both the soreness coursing through his body and from the exertion he was being put through, Sorun stabbed Yamato into the ground and used it as a crutch to shakily get up to his feet, huffing out an exhausted breath as he looked up at the Badnik wolf.

So far, the damage he'd manage to inflict on the thing was minimal at best. He'd manage to create a few more gashes along its body, and while they seemed grievous, they certainly weren't affecting the robot's performance. Because it hadn't slowed down in the least since beginning the fight with Sorun.

As for Sorun himself, he wasn't holding up nearly as well as the Badnik was. Other from being battered due to being tossed around so much, he'd managed to avoid any serious damage, though there were multiple cuts and scratches along his clothes from where he'd narrowly avoided being slashed. But, unlike a machine, Sorun had limited stamina. And even worse his stamina pool was far from in top condition.

With the rate this was going, Sorun didn't see the fight going in his favor any time soon. And that was making him very worried for his own life and scared for the people's lives behind him.

He stopped dwelling on these thoughts when a curious sound pulsed through the air. The high-pitched, whining sound of audio feedback

which made Sorun wince slightly. The robot wolf seemed to have an even stronger reaction, as its head actually stuttered almost in pain while causing it to look towards the stage. Sorun followed the wolf's lead and gazed towards the stage, where it was with no small amount of relief he saw Vector up there. The crocodile was standing behind a soundboard, one hand up and holding the pink earmuffs against his head while the other one was giving Sorun a thumbs-up. And then, promptly right after Sorun saw the gesture, Vector slammed his hand down to hit an unseen button.

What followed next was a cacophony of noise had blasted through the speakers on stage, filling the entire area with noise. A noise of random beats and deep bass that Sorun supposed could have been construed as music, but he'd be hard pressed to make that distinction easily. He wasn't even sure he could call what he was hearing rap, or even basic hip-hop. It was... it was something. Something new and unpleasant.

The wolf seemed to hate it, though, based on the way it was violently shaking, so that was probably a good sign.

"God, Vector, you call this music?" Sorun thought to himself, grimacing in annoyance. The grimace was wiped away immediately when he saw the wolf spin right towards Vector, an electronic growl escaping from the speaker embedded in its throat as it lowered its form.

In the next instant, it made an attempt to run towards the stage where Vector was in an attempt to get at him and the speakers. It only made it a few steps, though, as a spectral hand had reached out and grabbed one of its hind legs. With a grunt of exertion, Sorun willed the Bringer Claw to throw the black-plated Badnik backwards. The robot wolf rolled to an upright position on a dime, metallic claws digging into the ground as it slid to a stop while its eye was continually locked onto Sorun.

"You wanna get to him? Gotta get through me," Sorun announced, spinning the sword in his hand around once before sheathing it and

holding it ready at his side. Whether the wolf even understood Sorun's provocation or not was unknown to the teen, but the fact it was lowering its form while scratching at the ground was not lost to him. *"Great, now I get to be murdered to the sound of this trash playing in the background. Just what I wanted."*

Without any further notice, the robot wolf charged forwards towards Sorun. The teen sighed out in exhaustion, and then hopped backwards as his two Bringer Claws shot forwards towards the wolf. The hope had been for the Badnik to only focus on one of the spectral arms while the other one got a hold on it, but to Sorun's frustration, the machine jumped from one side to another and managed to dodge *both* arms heading towards it.

Cursing under his breath, Sorun tried his best to dodge to the side when the wolf swiped at him with its claws. It was a sluggish dodge, and because of it a majority of the hood that hanged off the back of his sleeveless hoodie was ripped away. It swiped again, and while Sorun had tried blocking it with the Yamato, the force proved to be too great and the sword was batted completely out of his hand. The teen's eyes trailed the sword spinning through the air the instant it was knocked away, and because of that, he wasn't able to see the metal paw crashing down on him from the front.

He felt a heavy weight smash into his chest, and then cried out in pain when he was slammed right onto his back and onto the ground. Through eyes squinted in pain he saw the wolf's mechanical face and its one red eye almost leering down at him, its dagger-filled maw halfway opened as it got ready to bite him. Sorun looked from that to the metal paw pinning him down, flinging his Bringer Claws onto it in a panic to try and lift it off of him so he could move. This proved to be in vain, though, as the wolf immediately chomped down on the spectral arms and forced them to dissipate. The wisps of power that had made up the Bringer Claws didn't even have time to disappear fully before the wolf's maw chomped down towards Sorun's head.

It never made it close enough to bite Sorun in half. A large hammer had flown in from out of view and had smashed into the wolf's face

hard enough that the entire thing's body was sent flying backwards. With the weight pinning him down suddenly lifted off his chest, Sorun sat up immediately and began gasping out heavy breaths of air, holding a hand up to his sore chest.

From the corner of his vision, he saw a gloved hand appear open and outstretched to him. He blinked down at the hand, and then looked up towards its owner. He couldn't hold in the sigh that left him when he saw a pink hedgehog in a red dress standing over him, smile on her face and large hammer slung over her shoulder with one hand while the other one was offered to Sorun.

"That speaker's really giving you some trouble tonight, huh, Sorun?" Amy asked, teasing grin playing across her features despite the severity of the situation. "Today just really isn't your day, is it?"

Scoffing in disbelief, Sorun shook his head and slapped his own hand down on the one being offered to him. "Would you drop it already?" he asked, clenching the hand he grasped. He was pulled up to his feet immediately by Amy, who patted him on the shoulder while giving him a nod.

"Mmm, maybe I will." A beat passed, and her expression instantly morphed into a serious frown as she turned into the direction of where she'd bashed the wolf to. "So that's the problem?"

Sorun followed her gaze, his own serious scowl forming. The Badnik had been knocked all the way to the other side of the plaza, and while there was a noticeable dent displayed on its face, its smooth movements suggested it was no worse for wear. It had quickly gotten back onto its feet and was staring down both the hedgehog and human with its singular red eye.

"Yeah. It's a tough one," Sorun said as Yamato reappeared in his left hand. "Nicole and Virgil?"

"Still in the shop," Amy answered. "I saw you having trouble out here, so when I heard the music start playing I left them behind and

rushed out. They should be safe."

"Alright." The two started to separate, slowly walking in opposite directions with their eyes still trained on the wolf. "I guess the signal interference must be working if you're able to be this close to it. I was hoping that meant that everybody would automatically wake up, but it doesn't look like that's the case. So we're on our own here." He held up his right hand and snapped his fingers. "Here. Have some Spiral Swords as thanks for saving me."

In a flash of blue, eight Summoned Swords pointing outwards began spinning around Amy in a circle. She looked down at the swords surrounding her, tilting her head in curiosity before turning towards Sorun. "Thank you very much. Could you change their color, though? The blue kinda clashes too harshly with my dress."

"Isn't the guy you're chasing...?" One of Sorun's eyes twitched in irritation as he looked back towards Amy. When she saw the look, her gaze refocused on the robotic wolf, causing him to sigh and do the same. "You're so high maintenance, Amy, I swear..."

The conversation between the two was dropped right there. Their focus was solely focused on the enemy Badnik, who was in turn staring them down with that hateful red eye. The instrumental notes playing in the background had settled down to a low, steady beat as the two sides stared the other down, Sorun tightly clenching his katana while Amy hefted her hammer in front of her. The wolf, in response, began to slowly dig its metal claws across the ground. Vector, who had chosen to remain out of the fight, watched the display from behind the soundboard.

The beat of the music suddenly dropped, and it was when the tempo began to rapidly pick up did they begin their approach. Sorun ran along the right side, ripping the Yamato out of its sheath with his right hand and holding it out to his side as he sprinted towards the robot. Amy kept to the left side, hammer held down to her side as she made a similar approach to the machine with the eight blue swords still rotating around her. The wolf Badnik decided to keep a center

approach, its claws tearing up the ground as it sprinted closer and closer.

Amy, being leagues faster and more agile than Sorun even in his prime, had of course reached the wolf Badnik before the human even got close. The wolf swiped its claws at her, though the metal blades at the end of its paws only managed to swipe at empty air as Amy had leapt far above the paw, the swords spinning around her briefly scraping across the robot's chassis. She swung her hammer in a wide arc, hitting the wolf right in the fact and causing it to stumble back slightly. It tried swiping at her again, but once more missed when Amy rolled forwards through the aie past the swipe and, using the momentum gathered by her roll, brought her hammer down straight on top of the wolf's head. It slammed right into the ground as a result, its four limbs splayed out to its sides and face dug into the ground.

With a mechanical growl, the wolf tore its face out of the ground, its red eye flashing as it noticed movement to the side. Sorun was still approaching with his katana held out to his side, and in anticipation, the wolf opened its mouth to try and howl at him. Right before it could, though, twenty Summoned Swords appeared over it and began raining down and impaling themselves into the robot's backside.

While this was happening, Sorun kept up his approach, noticing with some interest the wolf was jittering in place and struggling to open its mouth to try and howl at him as it was pelted with swords. *"Huh."* He aimed the tip of the katana forwards, and with a running start plunged the sword through the robot's body all the way up to the hilt.

It was right when the last sword fell onto the wolf's body that the katana was pierced right into it. An angered, electronic howl left the wolf as it shot up to its feet and began shaking its body in an attempt to dislodge Sorun from its side. It proved to be a success, as soon the sword was shaken free from its side and Sorun, Yamato in hand, was sent sailing backwards, though he managed to right himself in

the air when his Bringer Claws appeared and flapped outwards to keep his body aloft.

The Badnik seemed to take this opportunity to try and howl at Sorun, as it had opened its mouth to do so. Right before it could, however, Amy had appeared at its underside with her hammer in hand, and with a mighty swung hammered its underside straight upwards. The force was sufficient enough that the robot wolf was sent careening right up into the air, where a spectral fist soon shot forwards and collided with the dented side of its head, causing it to crash back down towards the ground. Amy, waiting with her hammer held at the ready, reared back and swung just before the Badnik collided with the ground, causing the robot to mechanically cry out as it was sent flying forwards.

Despite the heavy amount of damage it had sustained thus far, showing from the way the Badnik's frame was severely deformed and cut in various places, the wolf was still going on strong from the way it deftly managed to catch itself on all four feet and slide against the ground. Not missing a beat, it opened its mouth and howled in Amy's direction the second its body came to a full halt. The pink hedgehog widened her eyes and held her hammer in front of her in a vain attempt at shielding herself from the oncoming soundwave, but to her surprise the eight swords swirling around her reformed and cross their blades in front of her, forming a shield. The shield of Summoned Swords took the brunt of the sonic attack, Amy being largely unaffected save for her short, pink quills being blown back from the force.

Up above, Sorun had flown right above the wolf and had begun to drop down when his Bringer Claws clasped their talons together into a singular fist. The Badnik, too busy ineffectively howling at Amy, could do nothing as the clasped-together spectral hands hammered its head right into the ground, interrupting its howl and causing it to flatten yet again. Sorun landed in a half-crouch and, not done just yet, willed one Bringer Claw to grab the wolf by its neck and hold it up while the other Bringer Claw curled into a fist and began to rapidly

punch it in the face over and over. The dark wolf jerked its body every single time it was struck, its face plates denting further inwards with each hit. When Sorun was satisfied with the damage, he punched the black-plated wolf in the face one more time and then willed the Bringer Claw holding its neck to toss it towards the center of area, between himself and Amy.

By now the wolf's face was dented enough that it was practically unrecognizable, and the rest of its body was in a similar state. But even so, it still managed to rise up to its legs, even with the electrical sparks and oil pouring out from its wounds. And then, suddenly, its single red eye flared so brightly that both Sorun and Amy were momentarily blinded, and with that motion the wolf reared its head straight towards the broken moon hanging in the sky and howled.

This particular howl was more intense on an extreme scale compared to the previous howls. Despite the distance Sorun had from the wolf, and despite him guarding his body with Yamato's blade, he was still slid backwards from the force of the howl alone. Amy was more unfortunate, the Summoned Swords protecting her all finally breaking from the strain. She was sent straight onto her backside from the sonic assault, her hammer being flung right out of her grasp.

Hissing through clenched teeth, Sorun lowered the katana and looked out towards Amy and the wolf. Much to his panic, he saw the black wolf slowly stalking towards Amy. He expected the pink hedgehog to move or attack at any moment, but when he looked towards her, he nearly felt his irises shrink in fear when he saw her sitting up but seemingly dazed, her eyes spinning around in their sockets. She didn't even have her hammer in her grasp, the weapon having been knocked a fair distance away from her.

Rather expectantly, the wolf decided to capitalize on this opportunity and barreled right towards Amy. For a single moment Sorun continued watching the display, hoping that Amy would regain her senses and dive out of the way or do *something* to try and avoid the

wolf. But even from here he could see it was no good. That sound attack from the wolf's howl had just rattled her too much.

Sorun, in turn, tried bolting forwards in an effort to try and intercept the Badnik before it reached Amy. He knew it was a useless move from the second he began moving his feet, though. Amy was around a good twenty meters away from his position. The wolf was already upon her, raising up its left foreleg in an effort to swipe its metal claws through her body. Not even his Summoned Swords or Bringer Claws would be able to reach the wolf in time to stop it from hurting Amy.

"Don't." Sorun's irises shrunk down to pinpricks, and a new wave of exhaustion hit his body. A single bead of blood began to run down his nose as blue energy began to coalesce around Yamato's edge. *"You're not touching her!"*

Having dropped the scabbard to grip onto the sword's handle with both hands, he slashed Yamato out in a single arc. It was an instinctual move he had barely even thought on. A thoughtless movement fueled purely by the urge to protect the pink hedgehog that was about to be butchered by the robotic wolf.

By all means, the katana shouldn't have hit anything, and indeed, it didn't. Sorun was still tens of meters away from the wolf, after all, so when he'd swung the Yamato, he'd swung at nothing but air. The slash had still been aimed at the wolf, however: specifically, at the mechanical foreleg risen up to be brought down on Amy. And in the exact same moment Sorun had slashed the sword in the air, a thin, blue line had appeared on the risen foreleg of the wolf.

And then, just like that, the leg cleanly flew off the wolf. It had flown off from the blue line, a seam created from the Yamato's power cutting through the Badnik's limb. The leg flew harmlessly away from Amy, while at the same time the wolf crashed down on its side from a sudden loss of balance.

Sorun, of course, had seen the entire thing. He looked at the sight in disbelief, and then slowly exhaled as he looked down at Yamato's silver blade. *"Did I... that's how you do the long-distance...? Agh!"* A sudden headache assaulted him, causing him to hold his head with his left hand as a spurt of blood gushed out from his nose. *"I'm pushing myself too far here, but... yeah, no, that makes sense, you just separate the distance... alright, yeah..."*

He removed his hand from his head, wiping off the blood on his face with the back of his hand as the sheath reappeared in his grasp. He knew from the games that long-distance cuts like that with the Yamato were possible, but he'd never quite sussed out how to tease that particular ability out of his Chaos-created Yamato. A lot of the sword's abilities still eluded him still, and while it was still a shock to him, he was overly happy at having at least discovered one new thing. It figured that it would take one of his friends almost dying for him to finally figure it out.

It wasn't a full-on Judgement Cut. But it was a step closer.

Breathing outwards, Sorun shook his head free of the grogginess that had formed and began walking forwards towards the fallen wolf. He saw from the corner of his vision Amy had managed to shake off being stunned from the earlier howl, though she was still sitting still and staring wide-eyed at the struggling Badnik. Her eyes flashed over to Sorun as he continued approaching the wolf, which prompted her to rise to her own feet, quickly run over to her hammer, and pick it up before following Sorun's approach.

Eventually, the two ended up standing next to each others' sides, weapons clenched in their hands as they looked down at the large robot. With its missing forelimb it was unable to rise back up to its feet, though its remaining limbs continued to pump back and forth, albeit at a slow rate. Even its mechanical growls were becoming garbled and distorted, and the red eye atop its head was noticeably dimmer than it had been before at the start of the fight.

Amy huffed out an exhausted breath, still looking down at the Badnik. Her eyes traveled from the wolf towards the katana gripped in Sorun's hand, and then up towards the human's face. "Did... did you do that?" she asked, gaining the other teen's attention. "How did you manage to cut it from all the way over there?"

Blinking at the question, Sorun rose the katana up for Amy to see. "The Yamato can do a lot," he simply answered, lowering it back down to his side as he returned to facing the wolf.

Seemingly accepting the short answer, Amy shrugged and turned back to the wolf. "Well, we did it. What now?"

"Hmmm..." After a few moments of contemplative humming, Sorun willed the Bringer Claws into existence. One of the spectral hands floated in front of Amy, holding its palm out towards her. "May I please have your hammer for one moment?" he respectfully requested.

She looked a bit startled at the request at first, looking up at Sorun's eyes and becoming even more surprised when she saw the serious look on his face. She looked back down at the spectral arm, and then began to savagely grin at the implication. "Why, of course. Since you asked so nicely," she said as she placed he red hammer into the Bringer Claw's grasp. "Just please be gentle with her."

"Oh, I would never dream of scratching your dear hammer, Amy." The Bringer Claw's talons curled around the hammer, with the second Bringer Claw grasping the hammer's handle right below the first. Slowly exhaling, Sorun willed the arms to bring the hammer upwards above both him and Amy, eyeing down the fallen Badnik wolf with complete contempt in his eyes.

And then, in a show of speed and power that surprised even Amy, the hammer was brought down right on the robot wolf. Metal pieces and electronics went flying, and the wolf cried out in a garbled, electronic howl as a whole chunk of its body was hammered right off

of it. Sorun didn't even hesitate before bringing the hammer up and smashing it down on the robot again.

All of his frustration over how tonight had went. All of his anger over how everybody's plans, and his own plans, had been ruin. His complete fury at almost having seen Amy cut to shreds. All of the hatred he harbored over Eggman and the situation he found himself in. In those moments, all of those negative feelings seemed to fuel the Bringer Claws as they slammed the hammer down onto the wolf over and over again. It was enough that in those moments Sorun almost didn't even feel the exhaustion wracking his body, allowing him to not slow down even once as he pounded the Badnik over and over.

By the end of his relentless assault, what was left couldn't even be called a robot anymore. It was less machine and more a useless hunk of unrecognizable scrap metal and electronics, so horribly bent and twisted it didn't even have a definable shape. The wolf's head was about the only thing even remotely intact, though somewhere along Sorun's intense hammering the garbled whines had ceased completely and the red eye had completely dimmed.

Panting just the slightest amount through his nose, Sorun's Bringer Claws slowly offered the hammer back to Amy, who had watched the entire display with a continually flinching gaze. "Yeah, I don't know. I don't think hammers are really my thing. I'll just stick with swords," Sorun mumbled out. "Thanks, weapon buddy."

With an amused giggle, Amy took the hammer out from the offered claw, and in a puff of smoke it disappeared from her grasp. "You're welcome, weapon buddy. So is that it, then?"

"Almost." A Bringer Claw reached forwards past the still wolf's mouth, tearing past the speaker in its throat and reaching towards its innards. It grabbed onto something, and then yanked it out of the head and held it up for both Sorun and Amy to see.

The object that had been taken out from the wolf appeared to be a shell. A round, white thing covered in intricate carvings with multiple metal cables jammed and forced inside of it, with even more cables spilling out of the opening at the end. Sorun sighed sadly at the sight, the Bringer Claw's talons softly rubbing over its surface.

"Eggman said he destroyed some lost civilization for this thing. Mentioned grapes or something. It's what he used to make his sonic weapon," Sorun morosely intoned. "I don't really know what to feel knowing that the last legacy of a bunch of people I didn't even know existed until recently was used to almost wipe everybody here out." He tiredly sighed. "I'm just really angry and sad."

"I know. That sounds terrible," Amy agreed, softly nodded her head with a downcast look on her face. "What are you going to do with it?"

"... I kind of just want to save it since... since this is all that's left of whoever those people were. But I don't want another situation like this ever happening again." Regretfully, he willed the spectral hand's talons to curl around the shell. "I'm gonna break it."

It was a true shame, and he didn't want to do it, but at the same time he felt more strongly that it was too dangerous to be around considering all the damage Eggman had done with it this time around. He even waited to see if Amy would voice any objections, but when he glanced at her face, he saw that it was set in silent acceptance. That was all the confirmation he needed, so before he had the opportunity to change his mind, he willed the Bringer Claw to squeeze down.

The shell hadn't really broken in an overly showy affair. It had simply cracked and crumbled under the pressure the Bringer Claw exerted on it, the fragments spilling out in piles of shards, white dust, and electronic cables from between the hand's talons. The remainder of it dropped to the ground, prompting Sorun to finally dismiss the Bringer Claws with a short exhale.

"Well, that's that." Staring down at the white pile for a few more moments, Sorun glanced back towards the fallen crowd of Mobians behind them. To his relief he saw that a large amount of them were beginning to stir awake and move slightly. "Eggman said that he was sending more robots here," he continued, turning back to face Amy who had grown an alarmed look, "but it looks like everybody's starting to wake up. We should be fine once they're all up and moving."

"Oh. That's good," Amy said, breathing out in relief. "So that was... that was really crazy, huh?"

"Yeah, it was," Sorun agreed, sliding Yamato back into its sheath. "It's almost over, though. Which means someone can stop playing that terrible music!" Sorun screamed out towards the stage.

At his words, the musical beats spilling out from the speakers cut out. At the same time, a rather vexed-looking Vector peeked his head up from over the soundboard and shouted towards Sorun, "You got no taste, Sorun!"

"You're the one with no taste!" Sorun shouted back, shaking his head before turning back to Amy. "Anyways, yeah. Thanks for, uh... for bailing me out there. I wasn't really doing too good against that thing."

"Oh, no problem. That's what friends are for, right?"

Instead of responding immediately, Sorun continually stared at Amy. After a few moments, he mumbled something unintelligible under his breath and turned away from her, which caused the pink hedgehog to frown slightly. "Sure."

He became instantly startled and almost lost his balance when he felt a weight press against him. Breathing out in surprise, he snapped his head downwards and tightly gripped the sheathed katana still grasped in his left hand. He relaxed immediately when he

saw it was just Amy, who for whatever reason had chosen to give him a light hug.

"Hey, thanks for saving me back there and helping to save everyone here," she told him, smiling widely while looking into his eyes. "I know it still must be a struggle for you, but you're doing really great. I just wanted you to know that."

Sorun almost went as far to open his mouth and refute her, but he had neither the physical nor mental energy to commit to the action, and he just plain didn't feel like denying her. After a few moments, though, he did go and gently brush her arms off of him. "Alright, alright. Get off," he mumbled, taking a few steps back from her. "I'm gonna go wake someone up." He turned around and took a few steps forwards, and then stopped and turned his head back to Amy. "... I appreciate the... ugh, never mind, you get it."

He didn't turn his head around fast enough to avoid the beaming smile Amy sent his way. Grumbling under his breath, Sorun began stomping forwards into the crowd, intent on getting as far away from her as possible and waking somebody up as quick as possible so they could begin the process of getting everybody up before the robot reinforcements arrived.

Fortunately, from the amount of stirring he saw from the people he was passing it wouldn't take much to wake them up. There were even a few individuals he could make out that were already steadily making their way up to their feet. He wasn't too concerned about that, which made him feel a bit more at ease. He felt even more at ease when he came across the sleeping form of a blue hedgehog, sprawled out on the ground right in front of him.

That was about as far as Sorun got before he fell down flat on his front, too tired from the earlier fight to move on much further. The Yamato had dropped from his grasp and immediately disappeared as well.

Sighing, Sorun turned his head against the ground to face Sonic. Much to his chagrin, it seemed like the hedgehog was still sleeping, and was even mumbling in his sleep a small amount. Rolling his eyes, Sorun managed to bring his index up to his face with a moderate amount of effort and, not hesitating in the slightest, popped the finger into his mouth. He held it there for a few moments, and then removed the wet digit from his mouth. He then positioned the moist finger right above one of Sonic's ears, and without missing beat plunged the finger straight into his ear.

The reaction was immediate. Sonic had woken straight up into a sitting position with a startled scream, his hand automatically going to his ear. Sorun managed a small chuckle at the sight.

"G-gah! What the heck was that for, Sorun!?" Sonic yelled, rubbing at his ear with an annoyed expression. That look on his face was immediately replaced with shock and wide eyes when he looked around at all the fallen Mobians surrounding him. "Wait, what the...? What happened to everybody?" He looked down at Sorun, his eyes widening even further when he saw the state the human's clothes was in. "What happened to *you* , Sorun!?"

"Sonic. So glad to see you finally woke up to join the rest of us," Sorun blandly replied, rolling onto his back so that his face was facing the night sky. "Eggman sabotaged the concert. Replaced one of Mina's speakers with a Badnik that put everybody to sleep. Nicole, Amy, and Vector took care of it. I helped out a little," he explained.

A few moments passed where Sonic absorbed all the new information offered to him. After this, his expression turned serious as he nodded down towards Sorun. "Alright, makes enough sense. So everybody's gonna be fine?"

"They should wake up, yeah," Sorun confirmed in a weary tone. "That being said Eggman's sending some extra robot since he thinks you all are still asleep, so you might wanna hustle and get everybody up before they get here."

"Alright, got it," Sonic said with a nod, rising up to his feet. "You helpin' out?"

In answer to Sonic's question, Sorun just barely managed to shake his head. "Naaah... I'm tappin' out," he murmured. "You go ahead and save everybody. I'm... I'm just gonna stay here forever."

Sonic rolled his eyes at the answer, though a playful smirk had still made its way onto his features. "I told you this would happen if you started skipping out on endurance training. It's fine, though. Hang tight here, we'll take care of the rest."

Sorun had already fallen asleep before Sonic even finished.

It'd been easy enough to wake everybody up who had gone to the concert and fallen down due to the Badnik speaker machine. With the multiplicative process of one person waking another up, turning to two waking two up, and with one of those people being a supersonic hedgehog who could wake up rows of people in a single breath, it had taken no time at all to rouse everybody back awake. In fact, in just under five minutes the two hundred Mobians who had been knocked out had all been successfully awakened.

The reinforcements of Badniks had arrived soon after. The number itself was laughably small: It was just a single small ship that at max could only fit around fifty Egg Pawns and an equal amount of the egg-shaped teleporter pods, and at the head of that ship was a small egg-shaped drone displaying a hologram of Dr. Eggman. The detachment force, of course, had been so small due to the Doctor having half-expected to arrive in a field of unconscious Mobians ready and waiting for processing.

What he got was a field of very-awake Mobians, the entirety of the Freedom Fighters included in the mix and a blue-furred hedgehog standing ahead of the crowd with his arms crossed.

"... So Sorun beat my latest creation, huh?" The hologram of Dr. Eggman floated down from the low-floating ship, stopping right in front of the irate-looking hedgehog who was tapping his foot rapidly at the man's sight. "A predictable outcome, but a small part of me still held out hope he wouldn't destroy that Badnik. It had some unique, one-of-a-kind parts in it. He's beginning to become as annoying as you are, rodent."

"Well, not sorry to be the one to tell you this, Egghead, but your plan of abducting a whole concert's a no-go."

A loud sigh escaped from Eggman, and his shoulders slumped. "You know what's never going to make Sorun more annoying than you? That." He leaned to the side and propped his head on his fist. "How long have we been fighting, rodent, only for you to resort to the same tiresome insults over and over? At least he puts some thought into the banter."

Sonic rolled his eyes. "Save it for somebody who cares, Eggb-"

"Eggbreath, yes, you've used that one a hundred times already." His look completely unimpressed, Eggman began drumming his fingers across his head while gesturing to Sonic with the other. "See? This is what I'm talking about. It's all gotten old, hedgehog. You, your nicknames, and the rest of your paltry little resistance. I'm not surprised you had to resort to kidnapping people from whole other zones just to keeps things going."

At that, Sonic's foot instantly stopped tapping. His eyes narrowed just the slightest amount, and in the crowd in the background some of the Freedom Fighters bristled at the remark. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Is there really anything to understand past that? I'd argue the hypocrisy of you all calling yourselves Freedom Fighters after taking that boy's freedom from him, but I imagine you already got enough of that from him. I'm surprised he still chose to ingratiate himself with your lot, but fools will be fools, and he's kept things just a tad more

interesting, so I won't complain. Much. He could really do to watch his language, you know. All that cursing he does cheapens the banter."

"Sorun doesn't swear," Sonic denied.

"Not around you, maybe," Eggman scoffed. "Suppose I can't really blame him. He has to live around a group of mangy animals that stole his life."

By the last word Sonic had become fed up with the Doctor's words. He uncrossed his arms, slowly stepping forwards with a disgruntled expression on his face. "Say whatever you want, Eggman. He's one of us and is helping to dismantle your empire one bot at a time." Behind him, some of the other Freedom Fighters smirked proudly at the claim. Eggman, meanwhile, rolled his eyes from behind his glasses.

"The empire you've made little to no progress in stopping after all this time? That one? Right, of course." Eggman's wide smile grew on his lips when he saw Sonic's frown deepen even further. "I'll be straight with you, Sonic. Coming all the way out here and having this whole scheme of mine fail was worth it just to see that look on your face. So congratulations! You bought yourselves a bit more time before I get bored." He waved his hand in the air. "Well, what are you waiting for? Go on, get to it. I got a whole platoon of Badniks back there programmed to destroy you. And while you're wasting time doing that, I've got dinner ready and waiting."

The hologram cut out. Sonic, in a fit of irritation, briefly spun through the air and cut right through the small drone that had been displaying his hologram. He landed on his feet, glaring up at the ship full of Badniks with the rest of the Freedom Fighters right behind him.

Suffice to say it had been a short and uneventful fight.

It had been the crack of dawn by the time Sorun had finally woken up. Nobody had bothered to move him from the ground, but somebody had at least put a blanket over him. That had been nice. Waking up to a bunch of dirt in his hair hadn't nearly been as nice, but he was beyond the point of caring by now. He'd just take a shower later on. And then purposely use all the hot water just to mess with Sonic.

He'd woken up to the sounds of loud celebration. When he'd sat up, he'd seen an Eggman ship burning to the ground in the background, with decimated robots scattered all around. Despite the dreary visage, everybody seemed really excited. All the Mobians who had come to the concert were all gathered around, and it was with some amusement he saw that they were holding Amy and Vector up into the air while cheering their names. Vector actually looked bashful at the attention, while Amy was practically basking in it. He saw that she was blowing kisses towards a blue figure in the crowd, too, and he couldn't help but chuckle when he saw the blue form disappear in a speed blur.

So, with little else to do, he'd walked all the way towards the concert stage, pulled himself up, and sat down on the edge while looking forwards at the proceedings. He felt a little upset that he wasn't included in the celebrations in the distance, but he didn't care all too much. He was happy enough seeing the dismantled heap of metal that had once been that wolf Badnik and the remains of all the other robots scattered around.

He couldn't get over the fact he'd almost died to that wolf out of his mind, though. The embarrassment from having to have been saved by Amy was trumped by his own self-loathing of his own weakness. Even after three Emeralds it still wasn't enough. He needed more Emeralds and more powers. The problem he was running into was that his health was starting to become negatively affected by these things, and the sunk cost fallacy of health over powers was already slowly catching up to him. Even so, he couldn't do anything to protect anybody with how he was right now.

"Power... I need more power..."

He'd just power through it if that really did become a problem. For now, though, it wasn't important. The important thing was that he was fine at the moment. Even more importantly, everybody was fine from the looks of it. That's what he cared about most over everything else.

"~They will see, we'll fight until eternity... come with me, we'll stand and fight together...~" He looked back towards the crowd of Mobians in the distance, still celebrating amidst the charred corpses of robots as a small wave of serenity hit him. "~Through our strength, we'll make a better day tomorrow... we, shall never surrender...~"

"Where's that from?"

Sorun's teeth made a loud *clack!* sound when his jaw snapped shut. Muttering curses under his breath, he turned his head to the side just enough to catch an eyeful of yellow fur wrapped in rocker's clothing, with another brown-furred form behind the first wearing blue boots and a vest. He grumbled some more when he saw Mina and Sally hop up on stage and sit next to him.

"Just a song. From where I'm from," he quietly muttered, slumping forwards and looking back ahead. "Sorry about your concert getting abruptly cancelled by a killer speaker. Rough luck."

From besides him, he heard Mina sigh. "It's not the end of the world. It's just so... frustrating this always has to happen to good people because of Eggman, but... but at least we have Freedom Fighters out there looking out for us. Freedom Fighters like you." He heard the slight rustle of clothes and felt Mina's eyes on him. "You don't have a half-bad singing voice, you know."

"Could you forget you heard that?" Sorun asked, cheeks slightly tinged in embarrassment. "What do you want?"

"I just heard we have you to thank for, well, helping all of us and I just wanted to see how you were doing," Mina answered. "How come you're not over there with all the others?"

"I'm content with just sitting here," Sorun answered in response. "Are you going to be fine now?"

He saw Mina nod from the corner of his vision. "Yes, we will, thank you. Nobody was hurt, thank goodness, so once everybody's nerves are settled and some time has passed, maybe we could try this again."

That was good to hear. He breathed out at hearing the mongoose's words. "... Well... I still haven't heard you sing, so maybe I'll go to that concert. Maybe," Sorun answered after a long beat of silence passed. "It'd be nice if you could tell me beforehand if that ever happens. For planning purposes."

He heard Mina giggle from besides him and could practically feel the smile she gave him. "I promise you'll be the first one to know. It's the least I can do. And maybe you could share that song you were singing with me sometimes?"

A smirk formed along Sorun's mouth along with a scoff leaving his nose. "Mm, not a chance. I don't think you'd like the first half of that song. It's real violent."

"Oh. Well, alright." Mina slid off of the stage and waved goodbye to Sorun. "I gotta get back back to my friends, now. Seeya, Sorun!"

He watched the mongoose walk off after saying her farewell, Sorun giving his own two-fingered salute as a farewell in response. *"Well, at least she's doing well. Seems like this whole thing didn't faze her too much, so that's good. Hearing her sing songs from those games, though... pfft, right, I'll give her the lyrics to 'Devils Never Cry' and see how well she reacts to it. Not."* That would be a disaster in the making. A fun disaster, but he had enough things to deal with without having to add that on top of everything else.

At hearing a voice clear their throat, he looked to the side to see Sally still sitting in the same spot and staring expectantly at him. He sighed, almost having forgotten she was even there in the first place, and then looked back forwards.

"So did you guys just finish holding Eggman off?" he asked, gesturing to the destroyed robots in the background.

Sally looked towards where he was pointing, and then shook her head. "Oh, no. We beat all of them hours ago. A few people just decided to hold a celebration for our victory and to make up for the concert, and everybody decided to go along with it."

"And you all decided to just leave me sleeping on the cold, hard ground throughout all that. I'm touched."

Pouting her lips in slight indignation, Sally rolled her eyes in response to the other teen. "You seemed like you needed your sleep, and nobody wanted to move you. Amy went and got you a blanket all the way from her house, and Vector made sure nobody bugged you while you were sleeping."

"They did, huh...?" Sorun muttered, eyes going towards where the two Mobians were as a slightly warm feeling grew in his chest. "That was nice of them."

"Yeah, it was," Sally agreed with a nod. "It's still kind of frightening, how Eggman managed to incapacitate all of us so easily. Amy said you took care of that problem, though." She scooted closer to Sorun and leaned her head a bit forwards so she was forced into his view. "You did really good, you know. There were a lot of Mobians at this concert, us included."

"Nicole's the one that thought the plan up. Amy and Vector did all the work. All I did was get smacked around by a monster wolf until Amy came and saved me," Sorun mumbled, blowing a lock of hair out of his face. "I didn't really do all that much."

"Ah-huh, so saving Amy's life wasn't all that much?" Sorun's head perked up in surprise, and he turned towards Sally who was giving him a smug look with her arms crossed. "You're too modest for your own good, Sorun. A few of the others could stand to learn a bit of that from you."

"Is one of those others blue and really spiky?"

Sally laughed out loud at that, sighing out in mirth while slowly nodding her head. "Perhaps," she agreed. "But seriously. Nice job."

"... I'm just doing what you all would have done for me. It's not a big deal." That was where a majority of the modesty came from. That and not having to feel the embarrassment from all the praise he'd receive, despite how good it would feel. He just didn't think he had the mental fortitude to handle that.

That and it made the narrative he'd weaved for himself about not considering everybody around him his friend fall apart. The narrative that had basically crumbled completely at this point that everybody saw through. The one he wasn't even sure he was bothering to hold up anymore.

Giving him a knowing smile, Sally began reaching into the inner pockets of her vest. "Sure it isn't. Anyways, here." She took out two items and placed them onto the space between herself and Sorun. One was Nicole's handheld, which served to brighten Sorun's mood up immediately. The other, much to his shock, was a brightly-glowing Power Ring. "I figured you two deserved something after what you did," Sally answered when Sorun slowly glanced up at her with a baffled look. "Don't worry about your Chao. Amy's looking after him."

"B-but..." Sorun stammered, looking back down at the ring and computer.

"It's fine. Just be sure to get Nicole back to me at some point." And with that, Sally slid off of the stage and began walking towards the

celebrating crowd in the distance. "Oh, and no missions for you two today, so feel free to relax and do whatever you want."

The human teen watched Sally's back as she left, mouth hanging agape in complete shock. It seemed too good to be true, and he had to blink multiple times to ensure he was really seeing the handheld computer and ring sitting next to him. And, indeed, they were sitting there.

Feelings of intense gratitude towards Sally washed over Sorun, and he wasted no time in grabbing the Power Ring and inserting it into Nicole's handheld. The AI didn't even need a verbal cue from Sorun to begin forming her body, as almost the same second he'd put the ring in he'd seen dark cubes begin swirling around in the effort of forming Nicole's body.

Sorun felt himself put at ease when he saw Nicole's body finally finish forming, an easy smile uncontrollably forming across his face as his entire form relaxed. Nicole blinked once, and then turned her head towards Sorun as a similar smile formed on her face.

The smile lowered a significant amount when she saw the state of Sorun's clothing.

"Oh, Sorun..." she quietly muttered, moving right next to Sorun's side while worryingly examining his form. "Are you alright?"

"Y-yeah, I'm fine," he stuttered. He found himself torn between looking away in embarrassment and still looking towards Nicole, and chose to continue facing her as he tugged at the top portion of his blue hoodie. "I don't even want to know what Honey's gonna say to me when she sees this. She absolutely hates it when I get her clothes wrecked in the field. 'Sets a bad image for the quality of the material,' she says," Sorun informed Nicole, making air quotes with his fingers.

"Well, that sounds like a problem she will have to deal with on her own," Nicole said, actually looking a bit upset at Sorun's words. She

reached forwards and brushed a hand over the spot on his abdomen where he'd been slashed at by the wolf Badnik's claws. "Are you completely sure you are unhurt?"

He felt his fingers involuntarily twitch at the contact, and felt the areas she was touching grow warm. Sorun, feeling uncomfortable at the contact, immediately moved back away from Nicole as a result, ignoring his battered body's protest as he resettled in his new position. "It's just a lot of bruises, I'm fine," he assured her, his voice cracking just the slightest amount. "Are you okay?"

Nicole moved her hand back to the side, giving Sorun a perplexed look with her eyes at the question. "Why would I be unwell?" she asked.

"Because of the concert," Sorun sighed out, his eyes slowly dipping downwards in shame. "I-I just wanted... we always do what I want, so I wanted to do something you would like for a change, and-and it was your first concert and everything but it got *ruined* and I- I just feel like an utter failure because the *one time* I try doing something for you I screw it up and-"

"Sorun. Look at me."

The utter inadequacy he felt over himself had caused Sorun to go off on a regret-filled tangent, though Nicole's words had brought him out of it. Despite the intense feelings of shame he felt, he managed to look up. He gasped out softly when he saw her staring right at him, a smile on her face. He couldn't fathom what she could possibly be smiling at right now.

"You had nothing to do with this. In fact, it is quite the opposite: you took active steps to ensure nobody was hurt." The smile lowered a bit when she looked at Sorun's clothes. "Almost nobody, at least. I wish you would be more careful with yourself and take less risks, but I accept you do so for the sake of others. And I deeply appreciate you having listened to me back in that shop. You looked ready to

storm out there, sword in hand and ready to confront Eggman right then and there."

"I wasn't gonna... c'mon, give me a little credit here..." Sorun turned his head to the side, abashed smile covering his face that he desperately tried to hide by brushing his hair in front of his face. He heard Nicole laugh again at the sight, though even the happy feeling that gave him didn't stop the intense, apologetic urge still coursing through him. "I'm... I'm really sorry your night got ruined-"

"And I already told you that you have nothing to apologize for. Unless you've been colluding with the Doctor behind all of our backs, in which case I will be expecting a full written confession and terms of your surrender."

Sorun's head snapped back towards Nicole, though when he saw her still smiling towards him, his shook his head in amusement and began rubbing at his head. "Yeah, I'll be sure to get on it," he jokingly replied with a small chuckle.

Nicole reciprocated Sorun's chuckle, still gazing towards his face. "You do realize it was not just my night?"

"Well, yeah, sure, it was everybody's night, but it was special for you since this was your first-"

"Was this not your fist concert, too? By all means it was just as much your night as mine." The lynx's words made Sorun go speechless, and when he said nothing in response, Nicole continued. "And while it is unfortunate this happened, as I said, there will be other opportunities to experience such things. Beyond that, do not say we only ever do what you want to. I rather enjoy the time we spend together, regardless of what it is we are doing. And I happen to enjoy games just as much as you."

" *Just* as much as me? I can contest that," Sorun said.

"I'm sure you could," Nicole replied. "Nevertheless, no matter what it is we are doing, I greatly value our time together, and I am truly thankful you wanted to 'mix things up', as it were. The fact this attack happened in conjunction with that was little more than an unfortunate coincidence. So don't blame yourself for it going wrong, and just know I am still thankful for what you tried to do."

He didn't know how it was she was able to make him feel better with just words alone, but somehow, Nicole managed it. All the negative thoughts that had been assaulting him from earlier were all but gone at this point thanks to her, and he felt immensely better knowing she wasn't upset in the slightest at him. It helped make him feel lighter, and almost made him forget about his bruises.

Almost. His body was still screaming at him in soreness.

"Um, uh, that-that's..." Sorun sighed, and turned his body towards the edge of the stage. "Can we- can we just go? Go back to the HQ?"

"You do not wish to go celebrate with the others?" Nicole asked, though she mimicked Sorun's movements and slid off of the stage with him and onto the ground, making sure to grab her computer body along the way.

Sorun shook his head in a negative response. "We can do that later, and I'm not feeling up to it right now. I just want to relax." And he only had a limited amount of time before Nicole's new Power Ring would exhaust itself. They could wait. She couldn't.

Fortunately, Nicole seemed to accept his answer and gave him a nod. "Very well. I assume you want to play something, then?"

"Actually, can we... you think we can just talk?" Sorun shyly asked, turning his head away from her. "You know, about... I don't know, something. My old home or something else if you want. Can we just do that?"

When he heard Nicole pause, he began to grow slightly worried and looked over towards her direction fearing the worst. But when he looked back over at her, he just saw her eyeing him silently before once more giving him a nod, her lips upturning into a smile. "Of course we can, Sorun. I would be more than happy to."

"'Kay." Having been leaning against the stage, Sorun pushed off of it and attempted to walk forwards. He failed immediately, as another wave of soreness swept through his body and caused him to fall backwards. He gasped out in surprise and blindly reached out for something to grab onto before he fell down completely.

He ended up grabbing onto Nicole's shoulder, who had quickly stepped behind him to catch Sorun mid-fall. He felt that burning, nervous sensation return from the touch and tried scrambling to get away from her, but when he looked up and saw the frown on her face he stopped cold.

"You said your injuries were minor," she said, voice completely flat and eyes narrowed in an accusing manner.

"Eh-heh, minor is, er... subjective?" Sorun tried, doing his best to flash a grin. This only ended up causing another wave of pain to lance through his body, causing him to grimace.

She didn't look amused at all by his words, and after seeing him grimace, she shook her head in disapproval. "You're obviously too injured to be moving around on your own. I suppose I will have to carry you back myself."

What little color was in Sorun's face drained when he heard her say that. He didn't want that. "Aw, come on, Nicole, don't," he quietly plead, "that's too embarrassing. I'd rather you drag me than have everybody see that."

Nicole looked ready to argue the point, but stopped herself when she saw the pleading, nervous look on Sorun's face. She narrowed her eyes again at the look, and then closed them fully as a sign of

conceding. "At the very least lean against me so I can help you reach our destination."

"Sure." Awkwardly, Sorun was repositioned so that his left arm was slung over Nicole's shoulder while his torso leaned its weight against hers. He still felt embarrassment over the actions, but he'd take this over having to be carried by her. He didn't think he'd survive something like that.

He was thankful she had offered to assist him in walking, as it was only when they began moving did he realize how battered he really was. Battered to the point he didn't even know if he would make it all the way back to the HQ even with Nicole's help. The fear of people seeing him being carried pushed him on, though, even if he wasn't confident that would be enough to carry him through. He at least wanted to get far enough to where nobody would see him if he did collapse.

"You know, ah, this... this reminds me a lot about that one time I went car surfing," Sorun murmured to Nicole as they inched their way along.

Nicole, keeping a firm hold on Sorun's arm in order to keep him on his feet, flashed Sorun with an a questioning yet amused look. "Car surfing? Dare I even ask what that is?"

"It's where you balance on top of a moving car and try to set records based on how long you stay on the car and how fast it goes. It was Dave's idea. Went about as well as you'd think," Sorun explained, letting out a pained chuckle halfway through. "There was this one junkyard we and a few others sometimes hung out in, and one day there was this junker of a car that was scheduled to be crushed but still worked, so Dave had this bright idea..."

Chapter 30

Recursion Error

Episode 30- Ring-around

"... You're a cruel person. You know that?"

"Yes, I'm the absolute worst for giving you a simple delivery job you don't even have to leave Knothole for. How could I possible by so absent of morals as to give you such an easy assignment?"

The human laying on the couch responded with a low, deep sigh, and then rose up one of his arms to drape it across his eyes while saying, "It's bad enough you limited my fix of the things. You gotta dangle 'em in front of my face and taunt me with them now?"

"Sorun, I'm just asking you to deliver a few Power Rings to people that need them. I'm not taunting you with anything."

"Ugh..." The human settled deeper into the couch. "Do I have to, Sally? I'm tired. I don't want to."

Sally, who stood in front of the couch the human was laying on, rubbed at the space between her eyes in slight frustration. She'd seen Sorun go through a lot of change since he'd become a Freedom Fighter, most of it good, some of it bad. She didn't remember laziness being one of the bad traits that had formed over time, though, even if it was in line with a lot of his habits.

It still amazed her how he'd gone from being the weak, timid human who was so reluctant to do anything involved with fighting to the person she was looking at right now. Excluding times like right now, he was a model Freedom Fighter if such a standard existed: he was powerful now due to the Chaos Emeralds, but more importantly he had the heart to help others and save people at his own risk. He

never acted like he did. Sally couldn't even recall the last time she saw him give a genuine smile, and he still tended to avoid most people more often than approach them, though this behaviour had been lessening to some degree as of late. He never gave the impression of being a Freedom Fighter, but he acted like one.

Of course, his negatives shined through fairly clearly, and while Sally often found herself rolling her eyes at that side of Sorun's personality, she oddly found it comforting that Sorun wore those bad qualities on his sleeve as opposed to hiding them, as it made it easy to read him. She suspected he was the inverse of most people, actually: that he displayed all of his bad traits while actively hiding his good traits and generous heart. And she *knew* he was a good person, as he had just done too much to say otherwise. And furthermore she suspected he just lived this way because he suffered from overbearing shyness and couldn't handle friendliness from other people. She'd seen the signs, like the way he grew all flustered whenever Bunnie or Antoine acted friendly around him or how he would flounder around simple things like somebody giving him a friendly hug or even just a pat on the back. But he was trying. She couldn't fault him for that. And she was rather proud of how far he'd grown into being a Freedom Fighter.

But laziness? Sorun was a lot of things. Sarcastic to an exhaustive point. A bit more blunt and tactless than she would have liked. Perhaps a little too apathetic. But she'd never seen him outright refuse to do something she would ask of him just because he didn't want to. He always complained, as was to be expected, but he never said no.

Sally placed a hand on her waist, the other clutching a small, brown backpack. Its top open to reveal a small amount of golden rings nestled inside of it. "Can I ask why you're refusing to do this?" Sally asked, her voice slightly stern.

Sighing again, Sorun sat up on the HQ's couch to look Sally right in her eyes. "It's not a refusal. I'm telling you I am physically too

exhausted to accomplish the task." He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. "Sorry, Sally, I'm just... I'm not feeling it today."

She opened her mouth to refute this. She wanted to say that Sorun was being ridiculous and that he was just using exhaustion as an excuse to get out of doing a bit of work. But then she got a better look at his face, and she clamped her mouth shut immediately.

Sorun looked awful.

Having seen other humans in the past from Station Square, Sally had a fair idea what they were supposed to look like. Sorun always had a bit paler shade of skin than she'd ever seen on humans, but when Sorun had explained away and said that it was due to a lack of sunlight in his earlier life, she'd accepted the explanation. But his color looked slightly different now. It wasn't the clean kind of lightness she'd known him for, but a milkier, almost pallid look. She was fairly certain those dark circles around his eyes weren't supposed to be there, either. His disposition as a whole just looked haggard.

"Sorun, are you... are you okay?" Sally asked, concern growing in her face as she leaned closer towards him. "You're not sick, are you?" She hoped he wasn't sick. She didn't know how close human illnesses translated to Mobian illnesses, and while she would have liked Mobian medicines to work on humans, she wasn't an expert in this kind of field.

For some reason his facial features twitched at the question, followed by him shaking his head. "No, I just haven't been getting a lot of sleep."

"You have been getting kind of sluggish lately," Sally noted, her features creasing in worry. "How come you haven't been getting much sleep?"

"Just haven't," Sorun vaguely answered, turning his head towards the side to avoid Sally's gaze.

The chipmunk found herself frowning at Sorun's action. "Sorun, I can't take an answer like that. You're a vital part of the team, which means your health concerns are my health concerns." She felt the stern look drop off immediately when she saw Sorun's flinching face and conflicted eyes, her voice softening completely when she then asked, "Are you still upset at your hom-?"

"Jesus, gimme the bag. I'll do it," he grumbled out, his hand snatching forwards and grabbing the backpack out from Sally's grasp. "So who am I dropping these things off to?"

The stern look returned to Sally's face, not having appreciated the sudden turn Sorun had taken. "Sorun-"

"So how have you been?"

"Sorun, come on, that wasn't even a good attempt," Sally chastised with a shake of her head.

Looking up from the bag in his hand at the princess, Sorun watched the serious expression that had grown on her face for all of two seconds before sighing and going limp the couch. "It's not that, alright? I've been getting better with that. It's... I don't know, the whole-"

The human was cut off when a pained grimace lanced across his face. Much to Sally's confusion, he sat forwards on the couch while holding a hand up to his chest, around where his heart was. He coughed a couple of time, and then held a hand towards his back while giving a very concerned Sally a reassuring look.

"Uh, sorry about that. Crick in my back, this couch is horrible for laying on, you know?" Sorun apologized, letting off a dry chuckle that quickly tapered off into a withering sigh.

His assurances did nothing to quell the uneasy look Sally still had on her voice, her concern for the other teen still dwelling in her. "How badly has this been affecting you?"

"Hn, Sally, just drop it. I've been working on it," Sorun responded with a low groan. "Between home and fighting all the time and other stuff it's been a lot. But like I said, I'm getting better. Talking with Nicole helps, and believe it or not I'm actually getting used to going around fighting robots. It's kind of becoming, I don't know, routine for me? Which I think is good? But at the same it's like, is this a healthy thing for me to grow numb to? Because I don't... agh, it's weird." He lowered his shaking head and cradled it in his hand. "I know it doesn't really mean much to somebody like you since you've been doing this almost your whole life, but for me it's still..."

"No, no, I completely get it," Sally assured him, stepping a bit closer to Sorun. "Honestly, there's not a lot of people I would have expected to adapt to this kind of lifestyle while juggling, well, everything else you're having to deal with, so by all means you're doing really well!"

She'd thought he'd been doing spectacularly, actually, right before she found him in this state. She'd been happy he'd been talking over his issues with somebody in the effort of working through them. Seeing him like this still had her mildly concerned, but she could understand. She and everybody else had practically their whole lives to get used to the lifestyle of resisting Robotnik. Sorun barely had two months. If anything, the progress he'd shown so far was astounding. He'd even been becoming more and more active in missions, going as far as to even volunteer sometimes, which she attributed to his lack of sleep.

"Maybe you should be slowing down a little," Sally suggested to him. "You've been doing a lot lately, and I know with all the swords and the wings and whatnot you're good in the field, but you can't keep going forever."

An odd, dissatisfied look crossed Sorun's face. "Sonic acts like he does," he argued in a quiet voice.

"Well he's... special, in his own way. He acts like that because he can, but even he has his own limits." A frown creased her features as she looked to the side. "Even if he doesn't act like it sometimes..."

"Yeah, I get it." That dissatisfied look was still on Sorun's face, though it slowly disappeared when he let a calming breath out. "Right, well... other than that, I'm doing good," he said, giving her what she assumed was his best attempt at a reassuring smile. It didn't come out great, as it only half-formed and he'd darted his eyes to the side to avoid looking into her eyes. "By the end of this I, uh... I won't really have to worry about fighting anymore anyways, so... so yeah."

Sally nodded in understanding. "See, that's the spirit. This isn't going to last forever."

"Boy, don't I know it," Sorun mumbled under his breath. He sighed, and then looked towards Sally's eyes. "Hey, you didn't answer me when I asked how you were doing."

She found herself blinking in surprise. "I thought you just said that as a poor attempt at deflecting my question."

"I sort of did, yeah, but I was still serious."

"Really now?" Sally found herself crossing her arms, the amused smile she found forming on her face hiding the inquisitive look in her eyes. "I didn't realize you cared. You never seem like you do, especially after that once conversation we had after that thing with the first Emerald." She said this mostly just to tease him, of course. She knew at some level he cared about those around him, even if he refused to admit or show it. But it was still a bit of fun seeing the look on his face whenever she teased him like this.

The look like the one he was displaying right now. The semi-embarrassed, and a little to her surprise, slightly regretful look on his face. "I'm not allowed to be concerned over the wellbeing of another Freedom Fighter?" he airily asked, rubbing at the side of his face. "Geez, you're making me sound real shallow here."

Sally laughed a bit at that, and then chose to sit down on the couch next to him. "Oh, alright. I've been doing fine. As fine as can be

expected these days, at least."

"So same old, same old?"

"About that, yeah," Sally agreed with a nod. "I... still worry a lot, about how the war against Eggman has been going," she silently admitted, followed by her beginning to wring her hands together. "We've been doing everything we can, but we still haven't been making any progress towards defeating him. If anything, we're just barely surviving here while helping out everybody we can."

It was a point of great frustration for her, as well as the rest of the Freedom Fighters. In the past whenever they'd thwarted his plots, it'd felt like they were making an actual, tangible difference. Tiny, minute differences, but she still saw them as taking steps forwards towards freedom. But nowadays, it didn't feel anything like that. It just felt like they were all struggling to stay up on their feet as opposed to slowly but surely winning.

"Even after all the trouble you went through with that tablet, we're still on a losing front, huh?" Sorun's words brought Sally out from her thoughts, causing her to look towards the human. "Man. What a bummer."

"I-I didn't mean to say... Sorun, you know we all know you've been doing good work out there-" She cut herself off when she saw a the small smirk beginning to grow on Sorun's face. She huffed out, and then turned her head to the side. "That dry humor of yours is unbecoming of you."

"Dry humor's all I got going for me," Sorun shot back, grin still on his face. "You said it yourself. War won't last forever, right? 'Sides, I got a feeling it'll end well."

"And what makes you think that?" Sally asked, turning her head back towards Sorun.

The human shrugged. "Eh, just a feeling I got. But going forwards thinking we're gonna lose isn't really conducive towards performance, and I try to keep a positive mindset." He leaned forwards a bit, breathing lightly through his nose. "I mean, I always fail, but I think the idea that I at least try more than makes up for it."

"The self-depreciating humor isn't really becoming of you, either," Sally quipped, shaking her head at the human's words. "But I agree that keeping a positive attitude is important, especially these days. I'm a little surprise to hear you say something like that, though. No offense, but you never pegged me as a... optimistic person, Sorun."

"I'm usually not. But this feeling I have seems pretty spot-on. Just trust me." He held up the backpack containing the Power Rings to Sally's view. "Alright, enough of that. So who am I delivering these things to?"

The sudden shift in the conversation caught Sally off guard, but the question made her realize she'd almost forgotten why she'd sought Sorun out in the first place. She needed him to deliver those Power Rings. "Oh! Let me think..." Sally tipped her head up towards the ceiling, clicking her tongue in thought. "Rotor and Sonic's uncle, Chuck, were asking for a ring to run some experiments of theirs, and Tails' uncle Merlin asked for one, too."

"..." Sorun had been nodding along to the names rattled off, though his eyebrows lifted up a slight amount at the last name. "Tails has an uncle named Merlin?" A wry grin grew on his face. "Does he wear a robe and pointy hat and cast spells?"

"I've never seen him in a hat, but he does practice wizardry arts, yes." The completely innocent answer from Sally caused Sorun's expression to fall completely flat for some reason. "I think he lives in a hut near Tails' home. You might try asking around for it if you get lost."

"... World's messing with me at this point," she heard Sorun mumble under his breath as he stood up to his feet. "Okay, I'm heading out.

Not really feeling up to it, but I'll do what I can."

Sally felt a playful smirk form on her lips. "Oh, I'm sure Sorun the Great Deliverer can handle a simple delivery job like this easily enough."

"I dunno. Last time that guy did a job a train got derailed," Sorun dryly remarked. "Is Rotor in the lab or at home?"

"The lab, I believe."

"Then I'm headin' there first." With that, he began walking towards the lab, twisting around just briefly to meet Sally's eyes. "Don't worry too much about Eggman. Remember, feeling."

"Feeling, sure," Sally demurred, watching as Sorun walked off towards the lab. "If gut feelings were all it took to win wars we would have been done with Eggman a dozen times over by now..."

"Yo, Rotor. Got a special delivery for you."

He'd been in the middle of a very delicate procedure when he heard that voice sound off behind him. That lethargic voice tinged with just a bit of mischief that he'd grown accustomed to hearing all throughout the owner's stay in Knothole. Putting down the small, tweezer-like tools he'd been holding in his claws, Rotor swiftly inhaled through his nose and turned his head around.

As expected, the purple walrus immediately saw the human leaning against the open door frame to the lab, holding a small backpack in his grasp while looking towards Rotor.

"Delivery, huh?" Rotor repeated, spinning around in the stool he sat on to fully face the human. "What is it?"

"Just a Power Ring Sally said you asked for. She's having me go on a delivery run," Sorun explained, pushing off of the frame and

walking into the lab. "Beats getting smacked around by robots, so I thought why not? Anyways, here."

Sorun dug into the bag for a brief moment after stopping in front of Rotor, and then pulled out a shining, golden ring before offering it to Rotor. The walrus took the ring immediately, giving it an appraising look for a brief moment and then nodding. "Thanks," he said, setting the ring down on a nearby table. "Is this your way of making up for taking rings out of my stash that one time?"

"Ah, come on, man, I said I was sorry about that," Sorun said, rolling his eyes while beginning to lean against a table.

Rotor gave him a skeptical look. "Were you really sorry?"

He wasn't surprised at all when Sorun shook his head. "No, not at all, but I wanted to be polite about it."

The response had been an expected one, but it still caused Rotor to let out a light scoff as he turned back towards his work. He couldn't really hold it against Sorun whenever he did things like that; he didn't want to say the human's unfortunate circumstances gave him a free pass to freely be an annoyance, but he'd go as far as to admit it got him some leeway whenever he did something less than virtuous. Like stealing Power Rings from his stash of equipment so he could play video games with the resident AI.

At the very least, Sorun knew to reign it in and never go as far as to genuinely make somebody upset with his antics. Rotor personally thought his cold sarcasm was a bit much at times, but he at least never took it as far as to be demeaning or offensive to anybody. And he knew he and Sonic had a habit of playing small jokes and pranks on each other, but with how long Rotor had known the hedgehog, he was surprised the human hadn't been driven insane living with him. So he figured a small prank here and there was actually pretty tame all things considered.

He didn't really have many bad things to say about Sorun other than that. He wasn't even that upset about the Power Rings, as quite honestly, he couldn't be bothered be to upset at loosing what basically amounted to a renewable resource. Rotor wouldn't say he had a lot of good things to say about him, either.

Rotor reached for his tools again, and then paused. No, that wasn't right. Sorun was a... he was a good person in Rotor's opinion. He made some mistakes, but so did everybody. He was a fellow Freedom Fighter who saved people's lives and fought alongside the rest of them, so he couldn't say there weren't *any* good things to be said about the human. It was just that the two had never really connected on a personal level.

It wasn't for a lack of trying. The two had been on some scarce missions together, though usually they were done with an unusual amount of silence on both their parts unless necessary. They'd exchanged some words in passing during their free time, but most of these were just short conversations or just passing greetings if anything. Rotor suspected that it was just due to a lack of commonalities between the pair. Rotor was a tech junkie who loved nothing more than working with machinery, he'd freely admit that, and Sorun... well, Rotor didn't know much about what he liked. Video games. Sleeping and wasting time in random places. Those sodas that he seemed to hoard at times for whatever reason. That was about it. Outside of training he rarely hung out with many people, too, though on occasion it did happen. More frequently, too, now that he thought on it.

They simply just didn't have any interests that coincided. Rotor was fine with that, and he was fine with Sorun. He honestly would have liked if the human was a bit more open and socialized a bit more, then maybe he and Rotor could have something beyond a professional relationship, but he was keenly aware Sorun still held some hesitancy over this due to his out-of-zone situation and his thoughts on the Freedom Fighters' part in that. So he accepted it for what it was and chose just to roll with it.

The light, hissing sound of soldering soon appeared as Rotor got back to work on his project: a small, disassembled wrist communicator laying on the table in front of him and disassembled, with Rotor's tools rooting around in its electronic guts. Through his work, he noticed a pair of eyes looking at him, and when he turned his head just the barest amount he saw that the human was still leaning in the same spot while looking right at Rotor.

"Whatcha doin'?" Sorun asked.

"Just doing some repair work on some of the team's wrist communicators," Rotor replied as he turned back to his work. "This one is Knuckles'. I'm thinking of outfitting it with something to make it more shock-absorbent, because I swear it's always his I'm having to fix the most out of everyone else's. His and Mighty's. I think it's all that punching they do with that insane strength of theirs."

"I hear that," Sorun agreed. The human teen decided to finally remove himself from the table, and then stepped up directly behind Rotor to look over his shoulder. "So you're a big tech guy, right?"

"That's one way of putting it, I guess," Rotor responded. "I probably specialize into it more than anybody else. Tails and Nicole are probably the only ones that even compare. Oh, and Chuck."

"Cool," Sorun said from behind him. "So, uh... just out of curiosity, are you, um... are you the one that programmed Nicole?" he heard him ask. "You or Tails? 'Cause I don't really know where she came from."

Rotor felt his eye ridges raise at the question. With how much time he spent around Nicole, he would have figured he would have already asked her this question himself. Or Sally, since she was the one who had Nicole on her person at almost all times. He paused in his work and turned towards Sorun.

"Why are you asking me?" he asked the human.

"You mentioned Nicole, and it just came up in my head," Sorun answered with a shrug. "So did you?"

"We actually don't know where she came from," Rotor admitted to the other teen, which caused his eyes to widen slightly in surprise. "Yeah, way early on when we formed the Freedom Fighters she just kinda... showed up. Dropped in from the sky in a little pod and everything. She doesn't have any memories of it, either, so she's just as clueless to her origins as we are. We have a small betting pool to what the truth is. I threw five mobiums in on her being sent from the future by one of us."

They were strange circumstances to be sure, but by now everybody had stopped questioning it and had just accepted that what happened had happened and that Nicole was one of them. The why of it never seemed important compared to the now and all that. Sorun seemed completely mystified by the explanation, though, as his entire demeanor had went rigid, and for whatever reason a nervous looked formed on his face. "The future, huh?" he muttered. "So have you all, uh... ever had to deal with time shenanigans or anything like that?"

"Not... really, no. I think?" He paused to think, and then shook his head. "Yeah, no," Rotor denied with a shake of his head. "Why?"

"Ah, it's... it's nothing. It's just some things not adding up here and there I've noticed. I don't think it's anything, though." Sorun shook his head and waved a hand to the side. "Probably just me being a bit paranoid is all. Eh-heh." He exhaled, and then looked off in a random direction. "You guys really lucked out with getting Nicole just like that."

"Oh, don't I know it," Rotor agreed with a nod, a small smile forming on his face. "Can't even tell you how many situations she's gotten us out of and just how useful she is. She's a really great friend."

"Yeah," said Sorun, slowly and with a nod. "Yeah, she... she really is." He flicked his eyes back towards Rotor. "Really amazing how

she evolved a real personality and everything."

"She wasn't always like that," Rotor told him as he spun back towards the disassembled wrist communicator. "Back when she first got to us I could barely tell her apart from a Badnik from the way she spoke. She just kinda... got that way on her own over time." He began soldering at the communicator's internals again. "I'm happy for her. It's nice that she was able to get the ability to have her own feelings. Really helped transition her into being her own person."

From behind him, Sorun gave a small hum of agreement, shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

"What was that hum supposed to mean?" Rotor questioned, turning his head to face Sorun again. "You don't think she's real?"

"I have a very biased view on AI and their status as real people due to my voracious consumption of various entertainment media, Rotor," Sorun answered as he walked back to the previous table only to once again lean on it.

Rotor, not understanding a word of what he just heard, gave the human a confused look. "Huh?"

Sorun blinked at the look, and then shook his head with a sigh. "Real is relative to the personal interpretation of the person asking the question of what is real and what isn't. In terms of Nicole's status as a real person, yes, I do honestly think she is one. Though that doesn't really mean much coming from me."

Rotor blinked in surprise at the statement, more at Sorun's actual words than his statement, though he did feel relief that Sorun shared his opinion. "That's... unusually deep, coming from you."

"I have my moments," Sorun defended.

"Apparently," chuckled Rotor. "I didn't know you could string together thoughts into words like that."

"Yeah, some old habits of mine have been slipping back into place." With a sigh, Sorun began rubbing at the back of his neck. "Kind of annoying, but it's whatever, you know?"

"Not really," Rotor denied with a shake of his head. "Well, whatever the case, I'm glad you agree with me about Nicole. Guess I kinda expected it, though. You spend a lot of time with her," he noted.

Sorun paused at Rotor's words, blinking once before sighing and letting his hand flop to his side. "Yeah. I think it's beginning to become a problem," he quietly admitted, almost low enough that Rotor almost hadn't heard it. He had, however, heard it.

"Why would it be a problem?" the walrus asked in genuine curiosity.

"... It's nothing," Sorun said, shaking his head as he turned back to Rotor. "I never really could get into the tech stuff. I *kinda* had an interest as a kid and did a little research into it here and there, but to be honest with you the most technical I ever got was when I built a computer. I never really did anything past that. Stuff never stuck with me."

A part of Rotor wanted to return to the earlier subject, though this new one Sorun had brought up about building a computer made all of his interest instantly shift towards that. He eyed the human with surprise, having all but forgotten his soldering tools as he once again fully turned to face the human. "You built a computer?" he asked, a bit of incredulity in his voice.

Sorun shrugged. "Well, if by 'built' you mean 'I bought a bunch of parts, slapped them together in a case, and then loaded a pre-programmed OS into the thing', then yeah, I built one. Coulda just bought a whole one already built, but I liked having a custom rig."

Any feelings of being impressed of the human's exploits dropped right there for Rotor, causing him to smirk in the other teen's direction. "Oh, so you didn't actually build and program a computer. You just put one together."

Having sensed the teasing tone in the walrus' voice, Sorun rolled his eyes. "Whatever, man, it totally counts. I couldn't program a computer to save my life, anyways. I only ever took the one programming class, and it was an introductory course at best."

"Oh, so you have some experience?"

"Eh, I could tell you the difference between a boolean and an if-then-else variable, but otherwise I kinda forget a majority of the stuff it's been so long."

"Ahh." Rotor gave the human a nod of understanding. "I getcha. So how'd your rig perform?"

"Decently enough," Sorun answered. "Parts weren't premium grade or anything like that, the cost of some of those CPU chips were a flippin' racket, but it ran smooth enough for my purposes." Sorun stopped to take a breath, and then groaned slightly as a thought came to him. "I'm really gonna miss that computer, man. I put my heart and soul into making it. I mean, not a huge amount and I had David help, but she was a thing of beauty."

"David?"

"Yeah, real great pal of mine from back on Earth. He's actually the one that convinced me to go ahead and build my own rig, said something like 'a true man builds his own machine' or something like that. Guy, uh... guy was kinda weird like that sometimes. Hope he comes through with that pact we made in the event one of us goes missing and deletes that unnamed folder I had on there." Sorun looked expectantly towards Rotor, mouth open and waiting for him to respond. When Rotor just stared at him blankly, he sighed out and shook his head. "'S just a stupid joke, I never... anyways, yeah, he was a great dude."

Rotor honestly didn't have a clue what it was Sorun was talking about, but he quickly found himself losing interest as he turned back

towards the communicator. "I don't really get it, but I hope that works out for you. Whatever 'that' is, anyway."

"There's nothing to work out, I was kidd- ugh, nevermind."

"Ookay." Rotor reached towards his tool. "Well, I know you've probably heard this a lot, but for what it's worth I'm sorry about you losing your friend. And computer."

"Mm." Rotor only managed to pick up his soldering tools for a few seconds before he heard Sorun ask, "Hey, by the way, I've been wondering. Power Rings. Why do you all use rings as a power source?"

Keeping his focus on the electronics he was working on, Rotor answered with, "They're a clean, renewable source of energy. Why wouldn't we use them?"

"Yeah, I got that, but... but why are they rings? And also what are they?"

"Oh, right, we never told him about Power Rings, did we?" It was often that Rotor and the others forget about things like that. Things that seemed so commonplace to them due to having been exposed to it their whole lives being completely alien to Sorun, as, well, he was technically an alien that had never encountered these kinds of things in his own world. They of course always made time to clarify things to him if he ever grew confused, and usually Sorun just accepted any explanation without too much questioning. Even if he did seem to somewhat wither almost every time for some reason.

Well, whatever the case, Power Rings were an important aspect of their world. He supposed he'd take it upon himself to explain it to Sorun.

"Power Rings are a byproduct of the planet being saturated in so much Chaos energy from the Chaos Emeralds," Rotor explained. "Think of them like Chaos Emeralds. They're conduits for Chaos

energy, but unlike the Emeralds they have a limited lifespan. They basically 'burn out', for lack of a better term. Why they look like golden rings, though, I couldn't tell ya. They just do."

"Oh, okay." A pause from Sorun. "How come they spawn out of a lake?"

"The Ring Forge." A few moments passed, and when all Rotor heard was silence on Sorun's part he realized he wouldn't know what that was. "It's an invention from this Overlander we knew. Nate Morgan," the walrus clarified. "He made a machine capable of creating Power Rings. Guy was a... he was a real genius, to tell you the truth. Some circumstances lead to his invention winding up in the lake, so now it just pumps out Power Rings. I've heard they *can* appear in the wild on their own, though apparently that's exceptionally rare."

"An Overlander, huh?" Sorun voiced from behind him, sounding more interested than Rotor had probably ever heard him. "You really liked him?"

"Sure. Everybody liked him," Rotor answered. "He even taught at the school we had set up for a bit that one time before we all had to get back into Freedom Fighting, around when the first Robotnik was defeated. He was, uh..." He had to take a deep breath to steady his suddenly shaking hands. "He was a really great person. Always tried his best to help people."

"... I'm guessing from the fact I haven't seen him around and your heavy use of past-tense that Nate isn't around with us anymore," Sorun quietly said.

Rotor shook his head. "No. He isn't."

"Oh. That's too bad. He sounded like a solid dude."

"The solidest," Rotor agreed.

A whole minute of silence passed. "... You think I could get powers out of Power Rings?" Sorun suddenly asked. "I mean if it's just Chaos energy like the Emeralds-"

"Yeah, but the Emeralds are unlimited wells of Chaos energy since they don't wear out. Rings do," Rotor denied with a shake of his head. "It *is* possible to channel some power out of them. If you really know what you're doing you can temporarily enhance your natural abilities with one."

A loud scoff was heard from Sorun. "Natural abilities? Right, and what 'natural ability' of mine is a Power Ring supposed to enhance? Snark?"

Rotor laughed a little at that. "Knowing you, probably." The light grin that had form settled into a contemplative frown. "I don't know, Sorun. *Maybe* if you rounded enough up together you could get something out of them, but I don't know. Sonic's more of an expert on using them than I am. He's gotten more mileage out of those things than anybody else I know."

"Really, now? What do you mean?"

"Well, he had this one kind of transformation he used to go into a lot when he wrangled together seven Chaos Emeralds from back when they were all separated and fifty Power Rings. Past that, uh... there was that thing that happened when he gathered a billion of them."

A loud crash was heard. Rotor, startled by the noise, immediately set his tools down and whirled around in his seat in concern at the sound. The sight he was greeted to was Sorun, sprawled out on the ground with a wide, disbelieving look in his eyes.

Any other time and Rotor would have made a joke about Sorun being so amazed he evidently fell off his feet. But right now he was just a bit worried in that wide-eyed look Sorun had.

"Billion? With a 'b' billion?" Sorun uttered in a disbelieving tone. When Rotor nodded his head in an affirmative, Sorun outwardly groaned out. "What in the... where did he find the time to gather a *billion* of those rings...?"

At that, Rotor shrugged. Honestly, he didn't rightly know where Sonic had found them all, either. Just around on his journeys around the world, he supposed. He'd never cared enough to ask. "I don't know. He was always gathering the things for power boosts to use against Robotnik, and when he absorbed his billionth one he... well, he got tough. Like, real tough. I don't think I've ever seen anything hurt him ever since he got that billionth Power Ring," he told Sorun. "But, that's Sonic for you. He's always been weirdly drawn to Chaos stuff. Just the way he is, I guess."

"... Yeah, of course he's special like that. Explains a lot, actually," Sorun finally said after a few moments of contemplative silence. A small, envious look, unseen by Rotor, briefly flashed over his features, though it quickly disappeared as Sorun settled into a neutral expression. "So. Seven Emeralds and fifty rings for a... a what, transformation?"

"Yeah. Hard to say if he could ever do it again since you're carrying around a few of the Emeralds in you, but yeah, he used to have this really cool transformation. Called it Super Sonic."

"'Super Sonic'." An amused scoff sounded from Sorun. "Lemme guess, his quills stand up on end and his fur turns gold. Pfft, yeah, that'd be the day..."

"Actually, that's pretty much how it looked. How'd you know?"

The moment Rotor confirmed Sorun's guess, the human's face went through a myriad of shifts. He froze at first, his features slowly turning into one of bafflement and utter shock before morphing into disbelief as he sent a glare towards the walrus. "C'mon, Rotor, get serious. There's no way."

Confused, Rotor turned his head to the side while squinting in Sorun's direction. "What do you mean? I am serious. That's what he looked like whenever he went Super."

Sorun continued to scrutinize the walrus' face for what felt like an eternity, trying to discern any hint of a lie in the Mobian's features. He wouldn't find any, however, as Rotor was being completely honest with the human. He seemed to realize this, too, and for reasons beyond Rotor's knowledge Sorun slowly lowered his head and cradled it into his hand. Rotor almost found himself asking if Sorun was alright, but stopped when Sorun began laughing while shaking his head in his hand. A low, bitter laugh that lacked any and all amusement.

"You know, sometimes I wonder if all of this is just a crazy fever dream as a result of me being put in a coma after getting hit by a truck or something after leaving that grocery store," Sorun confessed to the walrus, raising his head back up to look the purple Mobian in the eyes. "Like, am I just the Azathoth to my own insane fantasy world my drug-addled brain thought up after the doctors pumped me full of who knows what trying to save my life? Is all of this gonna disappear when I wake up to the sound of a flatline? It'd help explain all this Chaos insanity. It'd explain everything, actually."

Rotor quite frankly didn't have a single clue what it was Sorun was talking about. He felt himself become slightly disturbed at some of the things he did manage to understand, though. Mainly the coma bit. "Sorun, I can tell you for a fact I've been alive for a long time. Long before I ever met you. Pretty sure this isn't a dream."

The pale human sighed. "Yeah, I know. It's easy to live in denial though. I'm still waiting for it to turn into 'Bloodborne'. I'm gonna start accruing unknowable knowledge and suddenly I start seeing eldritch horrors hanging off the sides of buildings." Rubbing a hand along his face, Sorun turned towards the backpack he'd set down earlier, bending down to pick it up and sling it over his shoulder. "Christ, nobody told me Super Saiyans were part of the deal," Rotor heard the human murmur under his breath.

Much of what Sorun said still confused Rotor, who only continued to stare on in uncertainty at the human. He chose not to pursue it any further, though, as Sorun looked rather exhausted and he himself just wanted to get back to repairing the communicators. He sighed a bit in relief when Sorun stopped in front of him, and then gave Rotor a small two-fingered wave.

"Well, Rotor, it's been enlightening. I'm gonna go now," Sorun said. "Gotta get these rings to a couple other people. Have a good rest of your day."

"Well, alright. Same to you, Sorun." He watched as the human left the lab, waited a few seconds after the door closed behind him, and then let out a soundless breath of relief as he went back to fixing the communicators.

"Super Saiyan hedgehogs. Sure. Why not?" If there was one single good thing he would say about this world, it was that Sorun was impressed with how it consistently kept surprising him around every single turn. Rotor's little history lesson about Power Rings had been... it'd been something. The whole "billion rings" bit still had him reeling. The Super thing even more. Along with everything else going on in his life at the moment, all culminating into whatever the rest of his very short life was now.

He was on his way to Merlin's place, another subject that was throwing Sorun for a loop. Wizards were a thing apparently. So he supposed it was safe to assume magic was as well, but maybe that was to be expected. Most of the things he encountered in this world were practically magical. Sonic and anybody else with powers may as well have been magic. His own abilities were magic. This thing Aurora attached to him that kept giving him heart attacks was magic. Chaos. Magic Chaos. Was there even a difference? He didn't know, he didn't care, and he just wanted to deliver these rings and be done with the day.

So Merlin's place. He'd asked around. Got pointed to a small hut down the way in Knothole. He was walking there now.

"Ugh, man, it's-it's all coming back again." Sorun felt himself begin to rub at the bridge of his nose in an effort to quell all the negative emotions that began to roil in him. *"I- why do I even bother talking with people? I can't- I don't know how much longer I can do this. All the-the lying, and pretending that everything's okay when nothing is okay and I don't, I can't, fuck, why am I like this...?"*

It was a paradox that kept tearing him in half every single day. On one hand, he liked talking to everybody. He was beginning to like socializing and becoming what basically amounted to a normal person. It calmed him down and made him feel at ease.

He also absolutely hated it because he had to keep lying to people about himself and his impending death. He hated having to keep pretending to be okay when it felt like every single day he was falling apart at the seams and was on the verge of breaking down and snapping into a state of insanity. He wasn't okay. 'Okay' wasn't his body failing on him. 'Okay' wasn't feeling absolutely loathsome about himself and being in a perpetual state of self-suffering.

Some days were easier to deal with, which was good, because if days like today were a continuously repeating thing he was dead certain he wouldn't have made it this far. That one day where he'd been able to air at least *some* of his thoughts to that deer person helped a little, but that hadn't lasted. Days where he was able to distract himself doing missions or something else passed the time and took his mind off things since he could just shut those thoughts away for a time and focus on more pressing matters, which more often than not was surviving a fight. And wasn't that messed up? He was finding himself starting to actually *want* to go on dangerous missions, because risking his life doing something for the Freedom Fighters was a better alternative than stewing with his own abysmal thoughts.

Then there was Nicole. Sorun almost forgot all of his problems whenever he was with her. He was practically a drowning man at this point clinging to her like she was a life raft in the middle of an ocean actively trying to drown him, and he was completely disgusted with himself over the fact. He tried limiting his time with her, even tried avoiding her, but the emphasis was on the word 'try'. Because not once did he ever succeed. He'd try, and then cave in to his own desires to just feel normal if only for an hour or two. And after seeking her out and hanging out with her for a bit the high of escaping from his problems for just a little bit wore off and he'd find himself hating himself even more for giving in. So that was that loop.

And, of course, there were days like this. Days where he'd be reminded of it all talking with people, or some other random occurrences would just force it all to catch up to him at once. Days where he just crumbled and needed to find somewhere to just deal with it without anybody noticing because if anybody ever saw him in this state it would raise questions he couldn't answer and concerns that would inhibit his mission. In this case he was huddled up in an alley behind some random person's house after losing control of his emotions halfway to Merlin's hut.

"God, I'm so fucking pathetic." The backpack holding the remaining two rings was all but forgotten, discarded to the side on the ground next to him. His hands were busy cradling his head, his entire body shaking against the house he was leaning against. *"A terrible person lying to all his friends because he wants to save their lives. It's so goddamn hard sometimes. I, I don't, I don't know how much longer- but I have to. I have to keep doing this until I die- I don't want to die, why did it have to be me, why the fuck did I have to be so weak and give into attaching myself to them when I should have kept my distance so they wouldn't care when I die? Why do I have to die, why does, I can't, this isn't-"*

He grew aware of the fact that his breathing was beginning to pick up at an uncomfortable pace. His heart was hammering in his chest, and his shaking increased more and more as feelings of intense fear

and anxiety began to assault him. Fear over dying, hatred over himself and his actions, the sinking, helpless feeling of despair that kept running through him-

In a flash of blue, Yamato appeared in Sorun's grasp. He immediately pulled down his shirt and hoodie, and then turned it around and stabbed it into his shoulder.

A cry of pain left Sorun when he felt the blade's edge dig into his body. A few beads of blood began to leak out of the wound and intermix with the cold sweat drenching his body, but it wasn't too deep a wound. Just good enough for his purposes. He watched blue energy run up the length of the blade, and with another cry of pain that was halfway to being a sob he removed the tip of the sword out of his shoulder. He dropped down into a sitting position right after, his legs utterly failing him in that moment. He panted heavily, wet eyes staring out towards the tip of the sword that was smeared in blood and a clear fluid.

Norepinephrine. His norepinephrine.

He still remembered those conversations he'd have with his mother. Occasions where Sorun would be curious and ask her things, or she'd just tell him random medical facts as parts of conversations they would have. He remembered quite vividly about one talk she'd had with him about a patient she'd been attending to who suffered from constant panic attacks due to a genetic abnormality they had that caused them to overproduce a certain hormone that induced panic. A chemical imbalance, she'd described. One she'd eventually solved by prescribing that patient a bunch of medicines to balance the chemicals in their brains. His mother told him that patient had gone on to become very productive in their life afterwards. He was happy for them. Happy for that patient getting their life back together through medicine and happy for his mother for looking so happy over having helped saved somebody's life.

He missed her so much.

Well, from what he remembered, that specific chemical that had been causing that patient so many problems was a neurotransmitter called norepinephrine. A chemical that induced panic in flight-or-fight responses. Probably good for surviving in the wild. Not very good for a teenager being crushed under an ungodly amount of stress every single day. And some days, like today, he simply just wasn't strong enough to deal with it and got beaten. And then this would happen. The terrible thoughts and the panic attacks.

They were a problem, because he couldn't control them and he kept fearing somebody would one day find him in this state, and hell if he knew how he was supposed to solve *that* problem. And more than that, he didn't want his friends worrying even more than they needed to. He didn't even want to think about the faces they would make, all at his expense. So he sought out a solution to control these episodes of his, and came to the same solution he had for almost all problems: just stab it.

So that's what he started doing: using Yamato's power of separation to separate the norepinephrine from his body whenever his levels were too high because life decided to take him to the back yard and beat him over the head with a rusty lead pipe. It worked for the most part. He'd immediately feel the edge be taken off of him once the chemical left his body, and he'd feel just a little bit better about himself. It wasn't permanent, as he wasn't removing the actual glands in his body that produced the substance. He'd entertained the idea of removing the amygdala from his brain for a little bit before deciding lobotomizing himself with a magic sword probably wasn't the best idea, and this method worked well enough when he needed it to. He wasn't so sure he liked the fact he almost looked forward to him separating norepinephrine from his body. To get that warm feeling of wellness wash over his body that made him feel better. That same feeling he got whenever he was with Nicole. The feeling of just escaping for a bit.

It wasn't what he would call a long-term solution, as he was sure there was probably some medical problem he was overlooking here

with regards to ripping hormones straight out of his body, and even if there wasn't he was almost certain stabbing himself over and over was *not* a good answer to his problems. Fortunately, he didn't need long-term solutions. Because he wasn't going to have a long-term life. So if this is what it took to keep himself going until the end, then so be it. It was all for their sake.

"Fuck was I doing? Rings?" Rubbing a clammy hand over his face, Sorun groaned and dismissed the Yamato before looking out for the bag he'd dropped. *"Y-yeah, I gotta... drop them off, yeah... Merlin's place? Yeah."*

Shakily, he'd gotten up to his feet and scooped up the bag off the ground. He made sure to wipe the excess tears from his face and cover his wound up with his shirt to make himself look at least halfway presentable, and then set off out of the alleyway and back onto the main street.

He finally found the place after a bit of searching. Merlin's hut wasn't terribly out of the way of Knothole, but at the same time, it wasn't exactly easy to find, either. He found it, though, which was all he cared about.

For now he was stable, so at least there was that. Anxiety for now was gone and he felt his thoughts beginning to normalize again. He hoped it would stay that way, but he knew they wouldn't. Right now he just wanted to drop the rest of these rings off and end the day.

"Tails' uncle, huh? Merlin. Mr. Wizard Extraordinaire," Sorun sarcastically thought as he made it to the hut's front door. *"Fuckin' hell, what's next? A shapeshifter? Wait, that already happened. Eesh..."*

Shaking his head, Sorun reached forwards and knocked on the hut's door. He heard footsteps immediately approach from the other side, and before he could even begin to wonder what Merlin would look like, the door opened. Sorun would admit he was somewhat

surprised to see a shorter fox Mobian with two tails standing on the other side.

Merlin was either a dead ringer for his nephew or it was Tails. Sorun hedged his bet on the latter.

"Tails?" Sorun asked, looking down into the young Mobian's eyes. "That you?"

"Sorun?" If the looks didn't give it away, the voice did. It was assuredly Tails. "What are you doing here?"

Holding up the bag of Power Rings, Sorun said, "Your uncle asked for a Power Ring, so I came here to give him one. He around?"

"Oh!" Tails' eyes lit up in recognition, after which he turned back into the hut while gesturing Sorun to follow. "Yeah, he's just inside. Uncle! You have a visitor!"

Deciding to follow Tails, Sorun stepped into the hut right behind him while taking a look around. It was about the size of most Mobian homes, maybe a bit smaller. Brightly lit despite the lack of windows and filled with shelves full of strange objects he couldn't quite place. Various colorful plants and oddly-shaped knick knacks. He even saw a crystal ball on a pedestal near the back.

"Yup," Sorun thought, *"total wizard dweeb."*

"I was just visiting my uncle to help out with some things. He's been having some trouble with the water line to his house and he asked me to take a look," Tails explained to Sorun as the human looked around the home. Sorun made a wordless hum in response, continuing to circle around and observe the place. He stopped when he heard Tails say, "Oh, uncle, there you are!"

Glancing down to where Tails was looking, Sorun followed the young fox's gaze to the other end of the house. There was another fox Mobian of similar eye and fur color to Tails standing there. Taller, and

draped in brown robes and a hood. Otherwise he looked pretty average to Sorun for being called a wizard.

He was giving Sorun a kind of odd look, though. He couldn't really place it. Half-lidded eyes and a barely-suppressed grimace. Something that almost looked remorseful if anything. For the life of him, Sorun couldn't place why the wizard was looking at him with that look. Maybe he was having an allergic reaction to a bad potion or something.

"Ah, hello there." Merlin seemed to have tried his best to wipe that look off his face, but Sorun could still see vestiges of the expression as he bowed slightly towards the human. "You must be Sorun, the Freedom Fighter my nephew has been telling me all about."

"Yeah, something like that," Sorun confirmed with a half nod. He reached into his bag, and then pulled out a golden ring. "Here. Sally said you asked for one."

The Power Ring was lightly tossed through the air towards Merlin, who deftly caught it in his grasp. He gave the ring a single look-over, and then nodded in satisfaction and set it down on a nearby table. "Thank you kindly, Sorun," Merlin thanked with a small nod of his head. "Tails, were you not saying you needed to go retrieve some of your tools in the effort of fixing that pipe?"

Tails' face lit up with realization. "Oh, right! I almost forgot!" His twin tails immediately started spinning up, lifting his body up into the air. "I'll go back to my workshop and get my toolbox real quick! I'll be back soon!"

He took off towards the doorway before either of the other two could get a word in edgewise. Sorun stared after the young fox, simply blinking when he saw his flying body leave the open doorway so fast he hadn't even bothered closing it behind him. *"I'm still never going to get used to the fact he uses his tails like a helicopter rotor. How does that even work? Are the bones jointed really weirdly so they can rotate, or... eh, I don't really care enough to think about it."*

Well, he at least got that second ring delivered, so that was two-thirds of his mission done. All that was left was to get this final one to Chuck and he'd be done, and afterwards... Sorun didn't quite know what he was going to do for the rest of his day. Maybe just sleep in early or go for something to eat, he didn't think he'd had anything yet all day and he was feeling kind of hung-

"Er, young man, a moment please?"

Sorun had gotten one foot out the door before he heard Merlin call out to him. He stopped right where he was, and turned around backwards to face the wizard again. He had that same look on his face from earlier. That uneasy, almost remorseful-looking face that Sorun just quite couldn't place.

"Uh... Merlin, I'd like to stay and chat, but I'm real busy..." Sorun said, trailing off while leaning towards the doorway.

"I'm aware," Merlin assured him, "but I just wanted to have a quick word with you."

Sorun's eyes flicked to the open door, and then back to the fox. "I don't want to be rude, man, but I got stuff to do."

"Just... please, Sorun."

The confusion settling on Sorun's face was about equal to the amount of confusion he was feeling. He wanted to decline, but something about Merlin's expression stayed Sorun's words. *"I guess Chuck can wait a few more minutes,"* Sorun finally reasoned with himself, shrugging and stepping back into the hut.

Merlin's eyes widened in almost surprise when Sorun decided to retreat back into his home. Sorun was almost surprised with himself, too, though this was overshadowed by the utter confusion he had over what Merlin, someone who he had just met a couple minutes ago, had to say to him. He supposed he would find out soon.

"Well, I have some time to spare," Sorun said, stepping near to where Merlin was and then leaning on a nearby shelf. "So what did you need me for?"

"I didn't need you for anything. I just wanted to speak to you." Merlin chose to remain near the back end of the hut, still facing Sorun and not standing near anything else. He gulped and twisted his hooded head to the side. "How have you been?"

Sorun found himself quirking an eyebrow. He knew Mobians were friendly, but didn't think total strangers asking stuff like that to each other was a normal thing. "I, uh... I'm fine?" he lied, sounding unsure of himself while shrugging.

Merlin turned his head back towards Sorun just the slightest amount, frowning slightly. "No, you aren't."

"... I'm sorry, but what is this?" Sorun asked, twisting his index finger around in a circle while pointing downwards. "Did Tails put you up to this? This some kinda weird 'get me to confess my true feelings to a random stranger' roundabout scheme, because if it is, he's let me down. That sounds like an awful plan."

"That can be construed as admittance that you are hiding your true feelings, you know."

"..." A twinge of annoyance flashed through Sorun when he realized that he was right. He scoffed, and then pushed himself off the shelf. "You know what, I got better things to be doing. I'm out of here. Tell Tails to mind his own business."

"Tails did not put me up to this." Sorun didn't even make it a single step away before Merlin began speaking again. "This is all of my own volition."

Inhaling deeply, Sorun turned back towards the old fox. "Okay, then riddle me this. Why is some random dude so interested in finding out how I'm feeling-?"

"I'm aware of what Aurora did to you and what you are going through."

It was a statement so unexpected and absurd that Sorun's mind went completely blank after hearing it. He'd just barely registered his jaw dropping open in surprise, and the rest of his body would have fell to the floor immediately if his feet weren't rooted to the ground.

His thoughts began to catch up with him after a time, and with them came a myriad of emotions. Absolute bafflement and confusion being at the forefront, with a great amount of suspicion right behind that. Because as far as he knew *nobody* was supposed to know that, and very great efforts had been taken to ensure nobody would ever find out. Sorun couldn't tell anybody even if he wanted to, and he'd tried when he did.

Yet, somehow, Merlin just said a single sentence that let Sorun know that he knew. A sentence that should have been impossible for him to say. He'd said her name. The name of that ethereal fiend that had cursed him was a name he never uttered aloud to anybody, but Merlin knew it. Sorun didn't know how, but he was gonna find out. Because past all of the suspicion and confusion he was feeling over that statement, there was the barest spark of hope that maybe the magic wizard he just met could do something to help him.

"What... I, how do... *what* ?" Sorun stammered, shaking his head while looking towards Merlin with wide eyes. "What do you mean you know? What exactly do you know?"

Merlin sighed, lowering his hooded head just the smallest amount and looking almost regretful over his words. "I know that your body is having a negative reaction towards the Chaos energy you have been infusing into yourself. I know that Aurora... inhibited you from revealing this truth to anybody else."

"How could you *possibly* know any of that...?" Sorun whispered, having grabbed onto the nearby shelf to support himself and stop from falling down.

The fox Mobian took in a deep breath before answering. "There were once beings that watched over the cosmos of this zone. Beings elevated to a higher plane of being due to intense exposure to Chaos energy and a strong connection to the Chaos Force. Certain... events lead to their demise, though before they died, they left three individuals as their successors. Two of the individuals the Watchers chose were-"

"Athair and Aurora, yeah, I head them mention the name Neo-Walkers." Sorun blinked, and his eyes began narrowing at Merlin. "Oh, don't tell me. You're the third one?"

"... Yes," Merlin confirmed with a nod. "I am the third Neo-Walker."

"Ohhh, I see." Sorun's voice grew an edge to it. The suspicion from earlier had all but evaporated from his senses, along with the confusion. That spark of hope was beginning to flicker away, too. In their wake was a sense of clarity and something else that was beginning to build up in him. "So. Mr. Prower the Neo-Walker. Why don't you tell me why you're bothering to go through the trouble of doing this?"

"Because this was the first moment we've had together," Merlin explained, "and I wanted to ensure that your mental state-"

"Mental state? I'll tell you about my mental state: It's pretty terrible," Sorun hissed out, pushing himself off of the shelf he'd been holding. "You know, it's funny, you say you're the third Neo-Walker, but I don't remember seeing you up there with those two echidna."

"We keep in contact with one another," Merlin clarified. "Athair and Aurora have been elevated to their current status. I am... still part of the mortal coil, as it were, and not quite as close to the Chaos Force as they are yet."

"Ah, well, depending on how this conversation goes I might be able to help you along with that 'mortal coil' bit."

At hearing that, Merlin froze and stared towards Sorun. The teen's form had gone completely rigid, eyes boring straight into the fox with his face set in a rigid, cautious expression. Down by his sides his hands were twitching.

"Merlin," Sorun began, attempting to keep his voice even but failing in the way some of his anger came through, "if you're going to stand there and say you told me all of this just to 'check up on me' and not offer any possible solutions out of my predicament, then we're gonna have some problems."

Pursing his lips tightly, Merlin sighed out through his nose. "There are no solutions to the stresses your body is being put through due to the Emeralds. Please don't take this the wrong way, Sorun, I know the burden that has been placed on you is great, -" Sorun's shoulders tensed, and his eyes flared wider, "- which is why I just wanted to ensure that you were getting along well enough, as it were. The bleary future we Neo-Watchers have been able to foretell hinges on-"

"Is this your way of saying you agree with what was done with me?" Sorun asked, voice so strained in anger it was barely above a whisper.

Merlin, slumping his shoulders, said, "Sorun, I... yes, when we discussed the matter I agreed with their actions, but you must understand that none of us *wanted* -!"

Like that, the teen turned right around and began stomping towards the door to the hut. Merlin reached out towards him, but otherwise did nothing as the human reached the front door. He dipped his head downwards in slight shame, anticipating Sorun to angrily storm out of the hut to get as far away from him as possible.

What instead happened was that Sorun closed the door, sealing them off from the outside world. And, rather worryingly, he remained planted to the spot facing the door with his hand on the handle.

"Don't kill him. Don't kill him. Tails is coming back. You won't get away with it. Don't kill him." It was a mantra Sorun had to repeat over and over in his head, because as it stood, there was precious little stopping Sorun from turning around and skewering Merlin with a shower of Summoned Swords. He felt disappointed in himself for believing there was actually a bit of hope in somebody being able to help him, but more than that, the amount of raw fury coursing through him was so intense that he could barely even see straight, and his hand resting on the door handle was shaking hard enough it threatened to break off.

He tried forgetting it. Tried putting it in the back of his mind so he could move on, and it never worked, but he *tried* . And now here was Merlin, reminding him of everything all over again and trying to justify what had been done to him. That was what really set him off- him trying to say what was done to him was right. It was the same incomprehensible anger and unbearable frustration he felt when he first talked to Athair and Aurora, when they'd explained everything to him. He was experiencing it all over again, and it was making his heart race and his blood boil.

Except Aurora and Athair were intangible Chaos beings when he'd talked to them. And Merlin was a living, flesh and blood being, and Sorun was desperately trying to hold himself back from killing him.

"You know, Merlin..." When Sorun turned away from the door to face him, the fox had taken a step back in shock. His eyes were wide and manic, and the anger and stress on his facial muscles were so intense the corners of his mouth were lifted in a crooked, furious smile. "You really gotta learn to pick your words better for these types of things." He began to slowly walk towards the aged fox. "Anyways, you've got my undivided fucking attention now."

To his credit, Merlin stood his ground and didn't budge an inch when Sorun stopped right in front of him. He kept up a steely expression even under the manic look Sorun was giving him, though the human did notice him fidget the smallest amount. It did nothing to lessen the rage inside of him.

"Listen. Your Tails' uncle. And Tails? I like the little guy," Sorun said, his voice cracking slightly from the anger he felt. "I pretend I don't, but I really do. Killing his uncle would hurt him, and I wouldn't like that. But I like you even less than that right now. My problem is that, if I did kill you, and it got traced back to me, which it would, that would do nothing but cause me problems. So I'm not gonna kill you, Merlin. But you should know that there is nothing besides that one singular fact stopping me from cutting you down where you stand, because as far as I'm concerned, you're complicit in what the Neo-Walkers did to me."

An understanding sigh left Merlin, though he gave Sorun a hard glare. "Sorun. You are no killer."

"Really?" A humorless, dry chuckle left the teen. "That's what you people conditioned me for. Killing Eggman, right? Ain't that the whole reason you forced me into all this?"

"Nobody forced you to do anything," Merlin denied.

"Oh, yeah, 'cause the alternative is so much better," Sorun scoffed.

"It is because that alternative future exists that we were forced to act this way upon you!" Merlin cried out. "The fate of the whole world is dependent on-!"

"'The fate of the whole world', fuck you, you're not the one dying over this." Inhaling sharply, Sorun crossed his arms and leaned back on a nearby shelf. "Just tell me why in the hell you bothered bringing this up so I can leave. Basking in the presence of a real-life wizard has lost its appeal pretty damn quick."

Giving a stiff nod, Merlin breathed out heavily before speaking. "I am aware this is difficult for you. Aurora periodically keeps watch of you to keep track of your progress. She was sent in quite a panic when you left Knothole, and she almost forced me to come after you."

"Mm, good thing you didn't. I really would have killed you back then if you tried."

Merlin's face twitched in a grimace before continuing. "We know you've been struggling internally with all of this. We're incredibly grateful you've decided to do the right thing-" He paused when Sorun violently flinched, choosing to reword himself and say, "- that you've... endeavored to give yourself for the sake of the planet. With that and everything that has transpired with you due to our actions, we simply... we just wanted to offer you any help we could possibly give."

"... You three feel bad, so you want to do something for me to make yourselves feel better. That about sum it up?" Sorun asked, eyes full of spite.

"Sorun-"

"You know what pisses me off the most? You people don't regret a single thing," Sorun interrupted, his harsh tone making Merlin clam right up. "You can all say what you did is horrible all you want, but you'd still do it at the end of the day since it's 'for the greater good' or some tripe like that. What's the life of some random guy not even from this zone compared to the lives of everybody else? You people don't care about me. You care that I'll get the job done and save everybody. You're trying to absolve yourselves of as much guilt as possible with the shit you're pulling right now."

The silence following Sorun's claim was the only answer he needed. It was transparent enough that even somebody like him could see it. Trying to help to try and "make up" for what the Neo-Walkers did to him, possibly help ease him further into the idea. Maybe even go so far as to get him to agree with them that this was for the best, that one person sacrificing themselves for the sake of a whole planet was a noble cause and that he should be happy to have been given the opportunity.

Maybe such a thing was noble, and maybe he was willing to freely do that at this point, but it didn't change them slapping a metaphorical collar on him and putting him in a hopeless situation where he had little choice *but* to sacrifice himself. If they admitted to him what they had done was wrong, then *maybe* he could find some forgiveness. But they wouldn't. So he didn't care how "bad" they felt over him. He didn't care how much they thought they were in the right. He didn't think they were, and he refused to give them any sense of satisfaction over the act. He'd spite them to the very end.

"Sorun..." Merlin's voice came out sad and cracked, and all it did was infuriate Sorun even further. "We just... we just want to help you have some peace before you, well..."

"You're failing to a miserable degree in that regard," Sorun retorted. "Ugh... you wanna help? Tell Tails when we talked I seemed like a normal person. Make it seem like I'm doing better so he and the others stop worrying about me so much."

"You're asking me to lie to my nephew-" Merlin cut himself off and shook his head in denial. "Sorun, it is quite obvious you need some help-"

"Zip it, dumbass." Sorun groaned out in frustration and rubbed at his face. "You think I don't know I'm cracking to pieces here the longer this goes on? I'm fucking aware I'm going mental here, but them knowing that isn't going to help anybody, especially since Aurora made sure I can't even tell them what the problem is. You know what happens then? All the Freedom Fighters get worried over me, possibly hold me back until I'm alright again which I will *never be* , and then suddenly saving the world becomes harder than it needs to be since they're not letting me out to go get the Emeralds," Sorun ground out, glowering at Merlin all the meanwhile. "So yes. I'm asking you to lie to your nephew about my mental state so I can keep this fucking masquerade up and get to the end of this as smoothly as possible. Don't see what the problem is. Telling a white lie should be easy compared to literally damning me. And it's all for the sake of the planet, *isn't it* ?"

His last words were hissed out with so much venom that Merlin visibly recoiled from him. Afterwards, though, he did give a nod, as small as it was. He didn't look the least bit happy about it, which Sorun didn't much care about. "Very well. If that's what you want, then... then I'll do it."

"Great," the human remarked, voice layered in sarcasm. "Look, I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because I don't have a better alternative and I've grown to actually like everybody here. So I'll do your dirty work, end Eggman, and save the world at the cost of my own life. But Merlin? If I get that seventh Chaos Emerald, and if I manage to kill Eggman and have some time to spare before I die, I'm coming straight back here to kill you."

The threat hung in the air between the two, Sorun's eyes betraying the seriousness of his claim while Merlin looked on with widened, shaking eyes. Outside of that, the fox said nothing and just hung his hooded head down once again in order to avoid the glaring look Sorun was giving him. The human scoffed, straightening up his back and turning away to walk out towards the door.

"If there was a better alternative, Sorun, we would have taken it." The human teen heard Merlin, but didn't so much as turn around to address him as he maintained his walk towards the door. "As limited as it was, the future we glimpsed into showed no other way. We simply love this planet and all that live on it too much for it to fall into the hands of that madman. I'm... I'm sorry that there was nothing else to be done, Sorun. We're sorry that we've done this to you."

Sorun stopped at the door, hand hovering over the door handle as he listened to Merlin's words. At the end, he inhaled a deeply and gripped the handle. "No you're not," he said, just loud enough for Merlin to hear. He twisted the door handle, and then tore the door right open.

It had taken some doing, but fortunately enough Tails hadn't encountered too much trouble locating the tools he needed. And so,

walking along with a large box of tools in hand, the young fox had finally made it back to his uncle's home. And so, taking care not to drop the toolbox, Tails had slowly reached his free hand out towards the front door.

The door was flung wide open right before he managed to touch it.

Leaping back a bit in shock, tools rustling in the box he held, Tails looked up at the person who was on the other side of the now-open door. He immediately saw it was Sorun, who was looking down at Tails with widened, surprised eyes.

"Oh, hey, Tails!" Sorun greeted, clearing his throat while giving the fox a small wave. "You're uh, you're back already, huh? You get what you need?"

"Mm-hm!" Nodding, Tails lifted up the toolbox for Sorun to see, who gave a nod of his own in response. "I think I should be able to fix the water system now. From what I saw it has something to do with the water pressure, but I'll know more once I actually get in there. Oh, speaking of which, did you talk with my uncle?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah," Sorun said with another, more rapid, nod. "Cool, um, cool dude, your uncle. Really knows his stuff."

A tinge of happiness flashed through Tails, causing him to beam a smile up at the human. "Oh, that's great! Maybe we could all do something later on to get to know each other better!"

Sorun's face twitched. It was a small, imperceptible twitch that went unnoticed by Tails, after which he shook his head. "I don't know, your uncle seems like a really busy guy. I wouldn't want to get in his way or anything like that." He snapped his fingers and pointed at Tails. "Tell ya what, though, I gotta go drop this last Power Ring off to Sonic's uncle, but after I'm done with that and you're done with your water thing here we could do something."

Tails' ears had drooped the slightest amount when Sorun had shot down the idea getting to know his uncle better, but upon offering to do something with him his tails began to slowly and inquisitively swish in the air behind him. He cupped his chin in thought for a moment, and then looked up towards Sorun. "Well... there is this problem I've been having with the Tornado's engine. It's really deep in there, too, so I can't reach it without disassembling the whole engine. But if you could use your Bringer Arms to help out, it would really save me the time of having to take the whole thing apart just to get to the problem."

"Trouble with the plane, huh? I'm not really much of a mechanic, but if you're there to help guide me I guess it shouldn't be a problem." With that, Sorun shrugged. "Yeah, sure. I can do that. You need much time to deal with things on your end here?"

"No, it shouldn't take me that long," Tails said with a shake of his head. "Would an hour from now be okay for you?"

"Works for me." Sorun walked out of the doorway, passing by Tails while giving him a small wave. "Alright, I gotta go. See you later, Tails."

"Bye, Sorun!" As the older teen began to walk off, Tails waved after him in parting. In response, Sorun had reached his hand up over his head and gave Tails a two-fingered salute while continuing to walk forwards. Tails watched him until the human had walked out of sight, and then turned back to the hut.

"That was really nice of him, offering to help out like that. And it's nice that he's starting to open up a bit to other people, too. It's really looking like he's getting better. I'm glad for him." He was happy that it seemed that Sorun was starting to adjust more and more to life here, as well as becoming less standoffish towards others. He resembled less and less like the person he and the rest of the Freedom Fighters met the day he arrived on Mobius and more... normal. Easier to be around.

It made Tails feel better, knowing Sorun was adapting to living in Knothole. It was a hopeful sign that, maybe someday, he could learn to like living here and eventually start to even be happy with himself. Tails felt it was the least the human deserved, especially after everything that had happened to him and for everything he'd done for them. He just wanted the best for Sorun, and just knowing the possibility of Sorun finally learning to live a happy life here was enough for the fox to feel better over having been the one to build that machine and drag Sorun onto Mobius.

Perhaps one day he could even forgive himself fully for what he'd done. When Sorun was finally settled.

He was confident it would happen one day. Sorun's progress towards getting better was a slow- very slow, actually- process, but Tails could see it. Everybody could. He really was getting better the longer this went on, and if he was being truthful with himself, that alone was enough. But for now he was content on waiting to see what the future held for him, along with the rest of them.

Clutching the toolbox in his hand, Tails walked into his uncle's home with a small smile on his face. He only needed to look around for a second to see his uncle standing on the other end of the main room he'd entered. Merlin had been looking off towards the side, vacant look in his eyes, though his expression had brightened up immediately upon seeing Tails.

"Ah, there you are, dear nephew." A warm smile spread across the old fox's face as Tails approached him. "I trust you managed to procure your tools without issue?"

"Yep! I'm all set!" Tails confirmed. "How did it go with Sorun?"

The smile that had been on Merlin's face lessened to a degree, though he managed to hide it from his nephew by coughing into the sleeves of his robe. "A-ah, Sorun. Yes, he... seemed like a fine young man. Honestly, after all the fussing you've been doing over

him I expected much worse, but if he truly is the same person you've been describing then he seems to be getting along fairly well."

"That's good." Turning around from his uncle, Tails began making his way down a nearby hallway. "Now I think I know what the issue is, so I'm gonna go take a look at some of the piping I was looking at earlier."

"Yes, of course. Lead on." Merlin turned to follow his nephew down the hall, making sure to keep to the younger fox's back. His face had morphed into a pained grimace in the meanwhile, the change of expression having gone entirely unnoticed by Tails as he began to happily hum under his breath.

"Hey, how much longer are you going to take with this, unc?"

"As long as I need to. Science isn't exactly an exact process, Sonic."

"Isn't that what science is supposed to be, though? The process of figuring out exactly how something works or something like that?"

There was a chuckle from the other hedgehog. "Life would be so simple if science was as easy as that, sonny boy. No, science is a grueling, arduous process that takes more patience than I care to describe in order to get the results you're seeking."

"Ah, right. Patience. One of my stronger traits," Sonic sarcastically remarked, turning towards a nearby stool and setting himself down in it.

His uncle said nothing in response, instead choosing to continue to mess around with the wires connected to the mechanical whatever-that-was sitting on the workbench in front of him. He didn't want to say he regretted coming all the way out to his uncle's workshop, because saying he regretted seeing a beloved family member was a terrible thing to say, but that wouldn't stop him from admitting that he

was bored out of his mind watching his uncle work on that scrap heap in front of him.

He didn't know where they got the patience for this kind of monotonous work. His uncle and Tails and Rotor. Maybe it was because they were all geniuses in their respective fields and that *somehow* gave them the ability to actually enjoy sitting through this tedium. He'd never deny the results, but he could understand how they could walk the road there. He supposed that it was something only mechanical savants like his uncle would ever understand.

Well, Sonic was good with the fact he'd never understand what they saw in it. He'd just stick to running, thank you very much.

The hedgehog was knocked out of his thoughts when the garage door to Chuck's workshop opened up. He swiveled his head over to see who was opening the door, whereas Chuck merely flicked his eyes up from his work to observe who it was entering. Sonic found himself quirking an eye ridge up in surprise, immediately recognizing the figure coming through the door and approaching Chuck and his workbench as Sorun.

"Yo, got a package from the royal bank of..." The human cut himself off with a loud yawn, reaching a hand up and rubbing at his eyes as he mumbled something under his breath. "Man, I don't have the energy for this bit. Chuck, I got your Power Ring."

"Really, now?" Chuck picked his head up from his work just as Sorun stepped besides the workbench. He reached into the small backpack he was carrying and unveiled a Power Ring from its interior, which Sorun then proceeded to hand off to the older hedgehog. "I thought I asked Sally for this," Chuck said as he placed the ring down on a small space besides him.

"She asked me to deliver the rings to a bunch of people that asked for them," Sorun answered, settling to lean against a nearby support beam. "Don't know why she couldn't just do it herself, but I didn't ask and just went with it. 'Cause I'm a nice guy like that."

Sonic saw his uncle give Sorun a single lookover, and then heard him scoff as he returned to his work. "You've never really given me the impression you're one to help others out of the kindness of your heart," he said.

Sorun, hearing this, winced slightly and turned his head to the side. "Come on, man, that was a long time ago." When Chuck said nothing to this, he sighed, pushed off the support beam, and then walked past the hedgehog while digging into his pocket. "Well, think what you want, but here. Got this for you," he said as he removed a small bag from his pocket and tossed it on the workbench.

Once the bag hit the workbench, Chuck eyed it briefly before turning his eyes towards Sorun. The human teen locked eyes with him for the barest of moments, and then turned towards where Sonic was sitting as he made his way towards another stool that was on the right side of Sonic. Chuck watched him walk off, turned back towards the bag, and then reached for it and opened it. He let out a small hum of surprise when he gazed inside to see what was in it.

"Are these mobiums?" Chuck asked, turning his head up towards Sorun again.

"Yep. Twenty of 'em," Sorun answered as he sat down in the stool. "I owed you for that, that-that thing from, you know, back then. That thing."

"... Oh, right." A look of recognition flashed through Chuck's face. "You stiffed me for a chili dog. I believe it was only two mobiums you owed me, though."

The knowledge that Sorun had done such a thing was new to Sonic, and for a brief moment he felt a spike of irritation go through him as he turned towards Sorun. He almost went through with telling Sorun off for doing something like that to his uncle, but then he saw that look on Sorun's face. A remorseful look.

Sonic wasn't sure he'd ever seen Sorun look remorseful over anything before.

"Call it interest or something," Sorun muttered, waving an arm to the side. "I felt bad about it, alright? I'd rather not leave bad memories of me with people."

Blinking with an unreadable expression on his face, Chuck slowly pocketed the bag of mobiums while still looking towards Sorun. "Well... perhaps I was a bit harsh on you," the older hedgehog admitted, smiling lightly while rubbing the backside of his head. "I know Sonic has been singing praises about you up and down about your contributions to the Freedom Fighters."

"Have you? Have you now?" Sonic looked to the right towards Sorun, where he saw the human glancing towards him with a lazy expression. "You made sure to just tell him all the cool stuff, right?"

Feeling mischievous, Sonic shook his head. "Nah, it's mostly the embarrassing stuff. Like when you fell asleep during that mission in that swamp and woke up waist-deep in muck." It was still a funny memory for him, the teenage hedgehog laughing at the mental image. At having found Sorun angrily grumbling to himself as his spectral arms pulled his body out of the muck and how he'd had that indignant look of anger on his face for the whole rest of the mission. He'd warned Sorun things like this would happen if he kept neglecting his exercise, but despite the human looking more tired than ever, he just kept on ignoring Sonic. He figured it was probably a human thing. Or Sorun just being lazy.

"I'm never going in a swamp again, dude. Half the things that lived there tried eating me alive," Sorun mumbled, one of his eyes twitching at the amused smirk Sonic had. "And anyways," he continued as he turned back towards Chuck, "I... had a change of perspective, I guess you could say. Been having a lot of those lately." He sighed, and then crossed his arms while leaning back in the stool. "Don't look too deep into it. I'm just settling some affairs. That's all."

"Alright, if you say so." With that, Chuck turned back towards the mechanical bits on his workbench, small smile still on his face. "For what it's worth, I'm glad to see you changed your mind about your stance on being a Freedom Fighter. It looks to me like it's doing you some real good."

A small breath escaped Sorun, and he lowered his head as what Sonic assumed was a bashful look crossed his face. "Good. Right..." he murmured under his breath, almost too quiet for Sonic to hear.

Some time passed, mostly in silence save for the small mechanical clicks and whirs of the machinery Chuck was working on. Sorun seemed to be spending the time thinking to himself, arms still crossed with his head bowed down towards the floor. And Sonic was looking at the human from the side, smug smile on his face as he leaned back in his own stool. The look being sent towards him was not lost on Sorun, who deeply sighed as his eyes slowly drifted towards Sonic.

"What are you doing, smirking like that over there...?" Sorun quietly asked, not even bothering to move his head. When Sonic responded by sending him a pointed look while the smirk widened, he sighed again and dipped his head lower. "Don't you dare say what I think you're thinking..."

Well, with a request like that, Sonic just couldn't resist. "You know, I could have sworn I heard you complain about always being low on scratch, oh, I dunno, about a million times? Twenty mobiums is a lotta money to be spending for a guy as broke as you always say you are."

Sorun didn't say anything in response, choosing to remain quiet instead. It was more than enough for Sonic, though. Going out of his way to say sorry to a fellow Freedom Fighter after making a mistake was one thing, but from what Sonic knew he and his uncle weren't that close. Add that with the fact he evidently massively overpaid the debt he had with his uncle, and Sonic had to conclude that Sorun had just gone out of his way to be exceptionally nice to him.

It was this and all the other little things Sonic had been noticing coming up with Sorun. The way he was slowly becoming more approachable with the others, or the way he'd been volunteering towards some of the more dangerous missions more and more. But being remorseful over somebody he interacted with very little like Chuck was what did it for Sonic. That and the story Mighty had told him about Sorun having entertained a bunch of children during a mission he'd had with him.

He was changing, and for the better. Sure, he would always try to deny it whenever Sonic brought it up. But the cold, uncaring persona Sorun had been wearing all this time was cracking more and more, and at this point Sonic wondered if the human was even putting in the effort to keep it up and maintain it. What confused Sonic was that Sorun wasn't dropping that mask. He was happy, beyond happy, at the change Sorun was going through, but the fact he still held on to that aloof mask of his both confused and frustrated him.

"You know, Sorun, one of these days you're gonna have to learn to drop the act and just act normally around everyone," Sonic said, choosing to confront the matter directly. "You're just trying to go for the cool look, ain'tcha? Just admit it. You like us."

"No, I don't," Sorun denied.

Sonic rolled his eyes. "You're not even trying to hide it anymore. What's even the point?"

"I got no idea what you're talkin' about." Sorun lifted his head up and turned his eyes up towards the ceiling. "All I see when I look around me is a buncha desperate Freedom Fighters that pulled me into this zany world. The fact I'm sympathetic guy who likes doing nice things from time to time has nothing to do with that."

"Ah-huh, yeah." Crossing one leg over the other, Sonic looked up at the ceiling along with Sorun while asking, "So what are you gonna do when we finally beat Eggman and you don't have the excuse of focusing on fighting for freedom to hide behind?"

"This seriously the conversation you wanna have now? The future convo? We could talk about anything else, but this is what you settle on?" A scoff left Sorun. "Do *you* even know what you're gonna do when this is all over?"

Sonic shrugged. "Eh, I don't let things like that tie me down. Whatever happens in the future happens, and I'll just roll along with it."

"Pfft. That's so you." From the corner of his vision, Sonic saw Sorun's eyes, still affixed towards the ceiling, become half-lidded as a low, shaky breath left him. "I don't like thinking about what happens at the end of the road."

"'End of the road'?" Sonic repeated.

"Yeah, you know, end of the road of the war, Eggman's end of the roa- end of all the fighting," Sorun clarified with a frustrated huff. "There's nothing for me anyways."

The hedgehog's head turned towards Sorun, surprised look growing on his features. "That's not true at all. What makes you say that?"

"What makes me say that? What exactly is there for me here past the Freedom Fighters?" The human flung his arms up, and then let them limply fall to his side. "Fight in the war, sure. That's a straightforward enough goal. After that, though? What do I got after that?"

"A whole city of accepting folk? A group of friends?" The tone Sonic had adopted was one of utter bafflement, and light frustration at the train of logic Sorun was choosing to ride. The more he spoke, the less he understood why it was Sorun was thinking the way he was despite all of the obvious answers, and it made Sonic frustrated seeing it. He knew Sorun wasn't that blind. So what was it? Was he just ignoring what was sitting right there in front of him?

None of it made any sense. Things rarely did with Sorun.

"A city full of a bunch of random people and a group of *comrades* -" Sorun emphasized, glaring at Sonic from the corner of his eye, "- that took me away from my home, yeah, real great. The opportunities are endless," he retorted.

"You already said you don't hold that against us, so why do you keep bringing it up!?" Sonic asked, voice growing a bit heated at Sorun's logic. "You *know* we wouldn't have done that if we knew, you admitted it yourself, so that isn't the reason! So what is it!?"

"Have you ever considered I just don't like any of you?" Sorun asked. His voice remained level, though the cold, clipped tone it had betrayed his anger. "Do you really think that I'm over it yet?"

Sonic nodding his head must not have been the reaction Sorun had been expected, as his eyes widened the barest amount when he saw it. "Yeah. I do. I think you really do like us and you just won't admit it to yourself."

"Name one example-"

"You're friends with Nicole. You said it right to my face."

Sorun's body went completely straight, and he inhaled deeply through his nose. "Mention her again," he said, voice low, "and I leave."

Undeterred, Sonic continued listing off examples. "Alright, fine, then what about the fact you've been helping out with people more and more, or that you're talking to some of the others so frequently, the money thing with Chuck, the lack of angry outbursts you used to have all the time, the fact your cold shoulder's practically melted?" Every single fact said by him was accentuated by counting off his fingers, and he could see that every single thing he said made Sorun visibly more upset.

After he finished, the two teens full turned towards one another. Sonic's face was settled in a deep frown as he affixed Sorun with a

accusing glare. Sorun just looked visibly bothered to an extreme degree: his hands were shaking, his eyes were wide, and he seemed to be breathing heavier than normal. It was a heavy enough reaction that Sonic's own anger was dialed back just a bit, and he was even getting ready to ask if Sorun was alright before he spoke first.

"Fine. I might have grown to like *some* of you. And *maybe* I'm mostly over all that." After saying this, Sorun's eyes took on a more conflicted shape, causing Sonic to sit back a bit in surprise. "I'm still figuring things out, alright?" he said, rising up off his stool. "Can we just leave it there?"

He didn't want to, but considering the words he heard Sorun say was more than he'd almost ever gotten out of the human, he was willing to leave it there. And that strange, mildly panicked look on Sorun's face had him a bit worried that he may have pushed him a bit too far, even if he didn't have a clue on how such a thing was possible with such innocent questioning. So he relented and gave Sorun a nod.

Sorun blinked at the nod, almost in relief, and then immediately turned away and made his way towards the garage's open door. "I gotta go. I promised Tails I'd help him out with the plane," Sorun said as he walked past Sonic.

As he passed him, another smug grin grew on Sonic's face. "Oh, hey, look at you helping out Tails like that. Sounds like something a friend would do, doesn't it?"

Not even bothering to turn back around to address Sonic, Sorun exited through to the other side of the garage door. Sonic's words did seem to anger Sorun somewhat, however, as he actually growled out in frustration as one of his Bringer Claws manifested, reached up to the garage door, and slammed it closed hard enough that the noise jostled both Sonic and Chuck.

"Ah, man." An exhausted sigh left Sonic as he ran a hand through his quills. "I swear, I can never figure out that guy's deal."

"Nor can I, but if I could give you some advice, sonny?" The younger hedgehog looked over to his older nephew, who looked at Sonic from the side with his hands still messing around with whatever he was working on. "I don't think Sorun likes it when you continue to bring this up with him, so maybe leave the matter alone and let the boy figure things out himself."

Sonic tilted his head to the side at his uncle's words, unsure of them. "I'm only trying to figure him out so I can help him, Chuck. Sorun, he just... *confuses* me so much, and I- agh!" He gripped his quills tightly as a frustrated grunt left him. "You know how hard it is trying to help somebody like Sorun when he acts like that all the time!? All-all... that!?" he asked, gesturing wildly towards the garage door.

It was *only* whenever they talked about things like this, too. The jokes Sonic played on him didn't bother him nearly as much, and sometimes Sorun would even fire back on him. Any other time it was normal conversations, and he still acted a bit cold, but he was otherwise calm and...

Sonic blinked in surprise. "You know, he only ever does get mad when we talk... huh." He saw the smirk that formed on Chuck's face, huffing and resting his head against one of his palms. "Fine, I get it. It's not like I'm trying to antagonize him or anything, though."

"You just want to understand him, I know," Chuck finished for him. "I get where you're coming from, but ask yourself this: who would know Sorun best?"

"Tch. A genie?" Sonic remarked with a roll of his eyes. "There's nobody that gets that guy except himself."

"Exactly." Chuck's simple response caused Sonic's eyes to drift back towards him after widening slightly. "Nobody would know Sorun better than Sorun himself, especially with the way he acts towards others. If everything you said is true, though, it does seem he's making strides towards figuring himself out. So you want my advice? Let him be," Chuck instructed him. "Let him figure things out for

himself. I know sitting around and waiting isn't really your style, but you'd be surprised in how exercising some patience can get great results."

"I ain't exactly popular with the wait-and-see approach, unc, you know that. But... but I guess, you know, with how Sorun has been... I guess that's probably a good idea." The progress was there after all. Nobody, not even Sorun, could refute it, though the human certainly did try his hardest. And that was mostly on his own, with some time mixed in. He hated waiting when it came to helping friends, but what was he to do when it seemed like waiting for Sorun to set himself straight was the only thing that worked?

"Okay, Sorun. Go ahead and keep your act up." A self-satisfied smirk settled on Sonic's face as he reclined back in the stool and interlocked his fingers through his quills. *"We're both seeing how you're turning out. You can try to keep it up for the rest of your life if you want, but there's no way you're gonna make it that long. Not even close."*

Unfortunately, it seemed that reclining back in a stool that lacked anything in the way of back support was a mistake, as Sonic had accidently fallen off of the stool amidst his thoughts. His uncle had chuckled heartily at the sight, while Sonic himself remained still on the ground with a defeated sigh being his only reaction to the tumble.

A/N- This chapter's the bane of my existence, and I'll tell you why.

First and foremost there were some times near the end there I couldn't even log onto the site. The boys behind the curtain were doing some server maintenance work or something, I don't know, and if I'm being honest it wasn't really that big a deal since it only interrupted the editing process. A tiny inconvenience that didn't really matter. Still happened, though.

Then there was the face my decades-old, hand-me-down laptop went and bit it. Wifi adapter wouldn't work and the thing ran slower than something really slow, so I had to get that sorted and get a new one. Happy to say this new one runs like a dream and it's refreshing to not work with something that takes a whole thirty seconds to load in a page and has a battery life longer than an hour. But yeah, there was a whole week there I couldn't actually do anything. I tried doing it from my phone.

Here's some advice for anybody trying to use the fanfic site to write/edit chapters through a phone: don't do it. It don't feel good. Unless it's an emergency, don't do it.

Third, eh... I don't really like how this chapter turned out. Felt really repetitive in some parts. To be honest when I planned this arc out I structured it in a way where there's the chapters that advance the plot with character development and the introduction of various things and Emeralds and whatnot, and then there's intermission chapters like this one where that mainly serve as a status check on Sorun's mental state which has been slowly declining over the course of the story. I try to avoid making straight filler, though, so I try putting important things in this chapter beyond just more time with the characters, Sorun learning about the Power Rings and the whole "Sonic got a billion rings and got a permanent defense buff" the main takeaway among other things. But yeah. I'm subtle with some things and about as blunt with a hammer with other things, and I feel like here specifically I kinda went a bit too hard on some things. But eh, it's fine.

Anyway, that's all I got. Seeya in the next one.

Chapter 31

A/N- I got some stuff to say before we begin this one.

So originally this was supposed to be the "Sorun goes to Angel Island so we can establish all that stuff" chapter. Here's my opinion on literally anything related to the echidna that the comics did: it's a convoluted mess.

It just always seemed like such a disjointed, overly-complex plot you needed a graph to figure out for what basically amounted to a side story, and to be honest, I never liked it. But like it or not it's a part of the universe I chose to write in, it exists, so I have to deal with it. But right before I began writing this chapter I did a quick glance-over in the comic just so I could get some facts straight, and when I did I realized, "oh... OH, no, we can't have Sorun and the gang go there yet and meet those characters, that's way too soon." It's kind of a shame, I had a whole bit where Sorun was gonna go around confusing a bunch of echidna for Knuckles, but yeah, can't happen.

I put in a few hints earlier on, but for clarity's sake since the beginning of this story to now in terms of where this takes place in the comic timeline is between #173 and #174. It didn't progress past that due to Rubrum killing Feist, nabbing the Emeralds, and giving them to Eggman, which essentially "stalled" the comic story and moved it forwards months ahead of time while still technically being in the same place, which is how I explain away things like Team Dark being in G.U.N. is a thing even though at this point in the comics is wasn't. Or maybe Shadow was, I dunno, it's not really clear on that.

You know, that's another thing I wanna point out- the inconsistencies this whole comic has. From everybody's proportions changing practically every new comic because they

tossed around the artists like no tomorrow I guess to stuff just being straight-up wrong sometimes. I've seen panels where somebody forgot Bunnie has a robot arm so they drew her with two normal ones. It's the same thing with Julie-Su's arm, I keep going, "is it a robot arm, is it just a sleeve, I don't know they really make it look like a robot arm and it's consistent with her backstory but there's panels in completely different art styles where she takes it off and there's a normal arm underneath and they never address it!" I even scoured the whole wiki just so I could get an answer of if it's supposed to be a robot arm or a pneumatic power sleeve or just a fashion accessory, I don't know, but I got *nothing* out of that endeavor. And the moon! The dang moon's intact in the comics! I had a heart attack when I saw that because I thought it was shattered because of the whole SA2 thing! The way the comics handled that was literally "just go play SA2 to get the story here", and in the story the moon got shot so I figured, "oh, alright, moon's broke, sure, I can do something fun with that." Nope! Turns out the moon in the comics is all fine 'cause *reasons* I guess, so now I got that plot hole to deal with. For all intents and purposes the moon in this story is a little broken, alright? It doesn't really change anything anyways, so it's fine.

... Perhaps I've gotten off topic. Point is a lot of time passed without anything actually happening, which froze some things and moved other things forwards. And at this point in time Dr. Finitevus and Scourge are up there doing their thing, and if Sorun met them this early that'd be bad plot-wise.

So it's cut. Chapter's cut and we're moving on to the next one. All that stuff's still gonna happen, it's too important to just ignore, but's it's gonna happen at a more appropriate time when I can integrate all that stuff more fluidly. It's probably for the best, anyways, because of all the chapters I planned I was looking forwards to this one the least and believe me when I say writing something when your heart's not in it is way harder and takes way longer than it needs to, the time it took me to write

out Monochromatic Ideals can attest to that. So yeah, Angel Island's on the backburner for later. Right now we're skipping ahead to this chapter.

Recursion Error

Episode 31- The underwater adventure

"Huh. This is cool." Sorun's hand reached forwards, his index finger extending and pressing against the glass covering that separated him from the outside world. The finger slowly trailed down the glass, eliciting a quiet squeaking noise as Sorun looked on.

He'd always been curious about what being under the sea would be like. Mostly from all those marine life documentaries he'd seen, some movies and games that had underwater segments, those types of things. There was always something calming about those scenes he watched, which had eventually grown into a full-blown desire to go to the bottom of the ocean. Seeing it for himself was a different thing entirely.

It seemed like an entirely different world here at the bottom of the ocean. The whole scenery constantly shifting and wavering as well as being covered in a deep, blue film. The rays of sunlight piercing through the surface of the water overhead and helping to illuminate the depths around them. The colorful coral reefs they drove past and the schools of various types of fish that occasionally swam by them. There was something hypnotic about it all that had Sorun sitting back and staring in wonder at it all.

Of course when they crested a small bank, and when Sorun saw a giant, metal structure off in the distance with Eggman's logo painted on its front, he went from being in speechless wonder to silently seething in anger.

Quietly scoffing, Sorun sat back in his seat and looked off to his left. Where he was currently was inside of a small sidecar-like seat sealed in by a glass dome. The seat itself was attached to a larger, one-seated submarine-like vehicle, and past the dome covering to that vehicle he could just barely make out Tails' form past the panes of glass and shimmering ocean dividing them.

"Still can't believe he has his own submarine. And that he called it the Sea Fox," Sorun thought to himself as he leaned back in his seat. *"I swear, he gets his own plane, he gets his own submarine, this guy gets everything."* He sighed, steepled his fingers together in front of him, and looked out towards the facility they were driving towards. *"These Emeralds sure wind up in the wackiest places, huh...?"*

He'd nearly jumped out of his seat this morning when they'd gotten word of another Chaos Emerald being discovered. It wasn't inside of the northern continent, though, as it wasn't one of the Chaos sensors the Freedom Fighters had set up that informaed them of its location. Because this one happened to be located in the dead-center of the ocean somewhere, far, far away from those sensors. They'd only even gotten word about because, to Sorun's bafflement, there was apparently an aquatic team of Freedom Fighters Tails was personally associated with that had tipped him off about Eggman building some kind of facility under the ocean, along with them hearing the word "Chaos" over and over again when they'd been monitoring the airwaves.

Their curiosity had been peaked, so Tails had gotten a Chaos sensor, loaded it into the plane, and had then flown off with Sally's permission towards the ocean to confirm their suspicions. Sorun had decided to ride along with him, as he had a personal investment in locating the Chaos Emeralds and he hadn't been doing anything else at the time.

So they'd arrived around in the general location, and waiting there right in the middle of the water to guide them had been a whale. Not even an anthropomorphized, Mobian whale, but a normal whale that

could talk to Tails through the plane via some communication thingamajig he'd rigged up, and they'd been lead towards where the suspicious facility was being built.

Go figure. Tails was friends with a talking whale. And a bunch of other talking sea animals in that particular group if his word was to be trusted.

Well, eventually Tails' sensor had picked up a positive reading, confirming their suspicions. He'd said his thanks to the whale, Sorun silently observing the entire exchange for the most part, and they'd flown all the way back to Freedom HQ to formulate a plan. It was decided that, since Tails had the submarine and it could, at most, fit three people via its pilot seat and two sidecars, a three-man team would be sent in to retrieve that Emerald. Tails, since it was his submarine and he was the best person to pilot it, Rotor, since he was the only Freedom Fighter they had who could deal well with aquatic environments and was tech savvy, and Sorun, because he heavily insisted on being there to collect the Emerald.

Thus, they were here. Driving towards a giant underwater facility to fight a bunch of robots, steal a gem of unlimited power, and then take a submarine home.

Sorun hardly believed there was a time in his life he would have found that really cool. Now he just felt tense but otherwise indifferent over the mission. The ocean still looked cool, though, so there was that.

The facility itself was a large, circular complex. The entire thing was held aloft over a giant trench, anchored into the top of the trench wall by six gigantic support struts. On its underside, near its front, was a small, circular opening whose surface lead to a room. A basic moonpool that Tails piloted the submarine up through.

Through the surface of the moonpool, the Sea Fox emerged, and then settled into a stationary position. The three domes on the main sub and the two sidecars lifted up, the three occupants emerging

and hopping out from the center of the moonpool to the metal flooring surrounding it. Sorun had hopped out on one side all alone while Tails and Rotor had hopped out on the opposite side.

Taking a glance around the large, circular room, Sorun couldn't help but notice how oddly clean the place looked. The flooring was a sterling steel color whereas the metal walls were painted to be an immaculate white. The lights were bright, too, making it rather easy for him to see all around. And from what he saw, other than the moonpool and a door at one end of the room, the place was oddly empty.

"This place looks cleaner than a hospital room. I get it's brand new, but man... If it weren't for the giant Eggman logo out front I'd have to question if he was the one that really built this place," Sorun thought to himself. He'd seen the way Eggman constructed structures before. They usually leaned towards being more utilitarian than visually appealing. Structures and machines that served no purpose past their functions, unless he styled them after his own face just to taunt his enemies. All his creations, buildings or robots, were always soulless in that regard. Bland and a weird fusion of looking industrial and futuristic at the same time.

Not this place, though. It was too clean, too warm to stand in. Almost too inviting.

"You think it's weird that there wasn't a locked door or anything on that moonpool we just came out of?" As if voicing Sorun's own suspicions, Rotor's voice sounded out from the other side of the room as Sorun continued looking around. "I would have expected, you know, a fleet of water drones to attack us outside or a door we'd have to get through or something. That's his usual style."

"Yeah," Tails agreed in an unsure tone, "and why is he bothering to pump oxygen down here? He has to be since we're able to breath, but the only things that should be down here are robots." A contemplative hum followed the fox's statement. "You guys think this is a trap?"

"Oh, it's definitely a trap," Sorun voiced, drawing the attention of the two Mobians on the other side of the moonpool. "When has it ever been so easy walking into a place of his? I'll give him some credit though, because guess what, the trap works." Sorun spun around and pointed towards the sole door in the room. "Trap or no trap, I'm going for that Emerald."

When he glanced to the side, he saw both Rotor and Tails giving him frowns. "Are you sure this is the smartest move?" Tails asked, twin appendages slowly swishing in the air behind him.

"Pfft, not at all," Sorun scoffed with a shake of his head. He began walking towards the door, remarking, "But when have I ever been known for doing the smart thing?"

"Sorun, he's right. This is a risky move." This came from Rotor, who stepped away from the sub floating in the moonpool and towards Sorun while shaking his head and crossing his arms. "This is way too fishy to call safe. We should fall back and think up another plan."

"What is there to plan for?" Sorun asked. "We only have the one sub that fits three people, so unless you wanna go back to Knothole to wrangle up some scuba gear so we can *all* get caught in the massive trap behind that door, I say we just bite the bullet and go forwards." When Rotor continued to give him an unapproving look, the human sighed and crossed his arms. "Look, it's either we go get it now or leave a Chaos Emerald here. Eggman's already got it anyways, so it's not like he's gonna give it up without a fight. At least this way we see it coming."

The logic caused Rotor's hard features to soften into a thinking look. He sighed out loud, his tusks lowering to the ground along with his jaw as he ran a hand over his face. "You're seriously willing to freely walk into one of Eggman's traps just for a Chaos Emerald, Sorun?"

In truth, he really didn't want to. But he also desperately needed that Chaos Emerald for more power. To have every single advantage he could get against Eggman so he'd have a solid shot at killing him

before he died. Even at the cost of his health for what little time he had left, even at the cost of his life, he was ending that man for everything he'd done and so everybody on this world could finally be free of him. That was the whole reason he was even here, after all.

But to do that he needed power. More power than what he had right now. He needed that Emerald, no matter what he had to go through to get it.

"I'm aware of the danger. I'm still going," Sorun said, addressing both Rotor and Tails. "I'm not asking you two to come with. If you wanna fall back, then fine. I'll go myself."

He really did mean it, too. Not in a way that was insulting to them for not committing, but just as a way of letting them know he was going in there with or without them while subtly implying he'd rather they avoid any potential danger. That was the intent of his wording, at least, but much to his surprise they both glanced at each other and then began chuckling in amusement. "Well, if there's no talking you out of it, I guess our hands are tied," Rotor said, giving Sorun a small grin when he turned back to see a look of surprise on the pale teen's face. "What, did you seriously think we were gonna strand you in the middle of the ocean?"

"Well, no..." He'd in fact just forgotten the important fact that they'd arrived here on a submarine and that is was his only ride out, but he didn't want to admit to them he'd forgotten this detail. "So are we going?"

"Actually, Tails, you mind hanging back with the sub?" Rotor asked, turning towards the fox. "You know, in case something happens and we need to beat a hasty retreat. Get what I mean?"

"Oh. Yeah, sure, I can do that." Tails' ears lowered the barest amount at being asked to stay back, but he still gave Rotor an understanding nod as he turned around and walked back towards the sub. "Try not to take too long, you guys!" he called out as he flew up over the moonpool. "I don't wanna stay here any longer than we need to!"

"No worries!" Rotor called back. "We'll get that Emerald and get back here as fast as possible!"

Sorun remained silent during the exchange, choosing to silently observe the pair from a distance. It was only after Tails retreated back to the sub and Rotor approached him did he choose to finally speak. "So, Rote, just you and I on this one. Sorun and Rotor. Rotor and, er..." When he saw the walrus give him an odd look, he coughed to the side and looked towards the door. "Yeah, let's just, let's, let's go."

"Um, yeah," Rotor agreed, quirking an eye ridge upwards in confusion when he saw Sorun walk towards the door. He said nothing else, and then proceeded to follow him.

The pair stopped in front of the door, Sorun staring unblinkingly at it while Rotor let out a contemplative hum. It was a metallic, white door so integrated into the wall it would have been practically invisible if it wasn't for the rectangular seam that was its border. There was no handle, though there was a small button lit up in a green color right next to it. Sorun took the initiative and reached forwards to press it, though when he did the green button flashed red and the door remained shut.

There was a scoff from Sorun. "Come on, he already knows somebody's coming to get this thing. He can't at least leave the door unlocked?"

"Ah, you know Eggman. Not one to make it easy for us," Rotor commented. He stepped past Sorun and kneeled down towards the button, squinting all the while. "Well, time to see if you were paying attention about your door hacking lessons," he said, claws brushing against the toolbelt he had strapped to his waist. "Wires should be just behind-"

Slash! Slash!

The walrus winced upon hearing two quiet, almost inaudible slashes reach his ears, and then winced again when what was once the door loudly collapsed onto the ground in four metallic pieces. He looked down at the remains of the door, and then slowly looked up at Sorun who was currently holding his katana in his hands. He met Rotor's stare with a blank look of his own.

"Yeah, I'm partial to a different type of 'hacking', Rotor," Sorun said, holding Yamato up for him to see. "Can we move on?"

Clicking his tongue, Rotor stood back up to his full height while pulling at the collar of his brown jacket. "All that time I put into teaching you that. Wasted. You're just like Sonic or Knuckles whenever they see a locked door."

"Hey, that ain't true at all. This is just way faster," Sorun denied as he sheathed Yamato. "Are you sure you're gonna be good here? I always figured you were more inclined towards the... technical aspects of things than the physical."

"Eh, maybe, but I can still hold my own in a fight. Probably not as well as anybody else, but I'm not a Freedom Fighter for nothing." Rotor walked through the open doorway, taking care to step over the pieces of the door Sorun had cut away. "You coming?"

Sorun stared after the Mobian, looked down at his sword, and then began following his back. "Yeah, comin'."

Going inside of the facility, Sorun immediately noticed that, as a whole, the place was constructed rather tightly. It was somewhat of a surprise seeing as the place looked a lot bigger on the outside, but so far all he and Rotor had encountered was tight corridors and hallways. There were some patrolling Egg Pawns that they occasionally had to duck out of the way of and hide from, too, but other than those small, occasional stalls it was mainly them just traversing through hallways.

Granted, there were a lot of those hallways. So many branching pathways, in fact, that Sorun was pretty sure that the two of them were lost and reduced to blindly wandering at this point. Which, now that he thought about it, was actually their only option as neither even knew the layout. But apparently Rotor was keeping track of the hallways they kept going down, or at least pretended to as he maintained that confident air about him whenever Sorun complained about them being lost.

He really hoped Rotor had been keeping track of where they'd been going, at least, because Sorun agreed with Tails sentiment in that he didn't want them to be in this place any longer than they needed to. This mainly stemmed from the feeling Sorun kept getting whenever he glanced at Rotor, which was worry. He didn't doubt the purple walrus had some combat ability, he was a Freedom Fighter, but at the same time Sorun knew this unequivocal truth: guy was primarily a nerd, not a fighter. And sure, Sorun was there, but he didn't want to have to divide his attention between looking after himself and Rotor in the middle of a fight. And Tails was all the way back at the submarine.

Strange feeling, being worried about another Freedom Fighter. Usually he was supposed to be the weakest one that needed to be looked after, but ever since he'd acquired Yamato things had been different. Like he'd been elevated to a slightly more equal level to everybody else, failing body notwithstanding. A good sign of him becoming stronger, he supposed, but those niggling thoughts in the back of his mind telling him his body was just going to get weaker with this Emerald were still present. He tried ignoring them. It didn't work.

The fact this whole thing reeked of "trap" wasn't lost on him, either. Odds were, a fight against something was going to happen. Sorun didn't have any illusions against that- there wasn't a single time he'd ever acquired one of these Chaos Emeralds without having to fight something. It was just the way it went. It made him all the more worried, and... something else. Not exactly excitement. Just a slight

anticipation at an opportunity to fight something and forget about the rest of his problems for a little bit. Practically half the reason he went on these dangerous missions anymore was for those moments.

"Hey. Hey, Sorun," Rotor whispered, drawing the teen's attention. "Take a look at this."

Jolted from his thoughts, Sorun looked over towards Rotor, currently leaning against an opening in the hallway while peeking around the corner. He crept up to the Mobian's side, peering past the corner into the first actual room they'd encountered in this place that wasn't the moonpool room they'd emerged it. A wide, open room that was vacant of anything save the numerous amount of doors lining the walls and a smaller, booth-like room near the end.

Both teens glanced at each other, nodded, and began making their way towards the small booth in the back while keeping close to the wall. The booth itself seemed to be a completely enclosed space except for an open doorway on its side which they both leaned up against on either side of. Poking his head around the corner, Sorun saw a small room occupied by two Egg Pawns who were standing at a long computer console that spanned the entire front side of the room, faced forwards and typing away at keyboards as they stared at multiple monitors in front of them.

"I think that's some kind of security room," Rotor whispered to the human as they leaned away from the opening and looked at each other. "A security room or control center or something like that. Either way it's good for us."

"Yeah, man. Totally." Sorun slowly nodded in agreement, pointed towards Rotor and continuing with, "And that's important because..." he trailed off, waiting for the other to finish.

Rotor gave him a flat look. "Because maybe I can get into the systems from those computers and get us a map or a layout of the place so we can stop wandering around blindly," he whispered back in a clipped tone.

"Great plan. Solid plan. I say we go for it." Sorun glanced back into the room. "Want me to take care of those two?"

"No, it's fine. I got it." Rotor crouch down to a lower stance- which, given his stature, looked really awkward to Sorun- and began creeping into the room. "Just stay here and keep watch while I deal with this."

"Uh, sure." Trusting Rotor's judgement, Sorun decided to lay his back flat against the wall, staring forwards while still clutching the katana in his hands.

It didn't take long for the sounds of a struggle to reach his ears. It mainly comprised the sound of a lot of shuffling around, metal clanking, and the occasional grunt of effort from Rotor. Sorun merely continued to stare ahead, still leaning against the side of the doorway with one leg crossed over the other. Tens of seconds passed without the struggling noises relenting, Sorun coughing to the side but otherwise still calmly remaining in place. At one point he'd brought the Yamato up to his face and began fiddling with the blue cord wrapped on the sword's scabbard to pass the time, occasionally sending a glance towards the doorway he was besides.

After what felt like a full minute, he decided to check up on Rotor. "You sure you don't need a hand, man?" Sorun asked, raising his voice over the sounds of the struggling.

There was a loud, metallic bang. "Y-yeah, I'm- ergh!- I'm all good in here!" Rotor shouted back.

"If you say so..."

And so the fighting noises continued. Sorun had begun to idly tap his fingers against the sword's handle, humming under his breath and he continued waiting for Rotor to finish. He hadn't been keeping track of the actual time, but when it felt like another minute passed he called out to Rotor again, saying, "It'll just take me, like, two seconds if you let me-"

"Sorun, I got it!"

"Alright, sheesh. Just tryin' to help." More loud, metallic bangs and crashing sounds were heard inside of the room. Sorun took in a heavy breath, exhaled it, and waited a few more seconds despite his quickly thinning patience. When he heard no end to the sounds he heard inside the room, he groaned in frustration and pushed off the wall. "Oh my god, Rotor, just let me-!"

He stopped himself when he made it to the doorway's entrance, freezing when he saw the sight ahead of him. The two Badniks he'd spied when they'd first came upon the room were on the ground, lights completely out and bodies motionless. Rotor stood triumphantly over the two robot bodies, lightly panting while looking towards Sorun.

"What?" Rotor asked. Sorun was quick to wipe the surprised look off his face and replace it with a timid grin as he shrugged towards Rotor, who rolled his eyes and turned to the computer console at the end of the room. "Alright, well, give me a minute to get in here and see what I can get."

Turning away from Sorun, Rotor approached the front of the computer console and immediately began typing away at the keyboard, his eyes glued to one of the computer monitors. Sorun, remaining near the doorway, glanced at the monitors, saw lines of computer jargon he couldn't make out, and then looked towards Rotor's back. "So any luck?" he asked.

"Eh, getting there," Rotor answered. "It looks like this is some kind of security station. I'm trying to see if I can pull up a map from here, but the security system here is-"

A loud, ringing alarm blared through the air, cutting Rotor off mid-sentence and making Sorun wince and snap his head to the side. The alarm lasted around five seconds until Rotor hit a button, followed by him letting out a loud sigh.

"- Kinda strong..." he finished out. He then turned his head back towards Sorun, an awkward, apologetic look on his face. "So... my bad, but... how mad would you be if I said I accidentally may have tripped a, er, security protocol?"

"I don't think I'd hold it against you," Sorun coolly replied, lazily tilting his head out of the doorway towards the open room in front of the security booth. "You didn't get locked out, did you?"

"No, I managed to avoid that, but..." Rotor paused to look at one of the screens. "We still have a patrol of Badniks coming to check out what we just did. I'm seeing twenty here."

Sorun's ears perked up. He hummed, looked down at Yamato, and began running a finger along the sheath's edge. "Twenty ain't too bad. I'll deal with them, Rotor. Just get that map out of there so we can get this over with."

"Alright. Be careful."

"Ah-huh, careful. Sure..." Sorun stepped out from the doorway, walking towards the front of the windowless booth while stretching his neck back and forth. At the same time, he saw some of the doors at the other end of the room open, red Egg Pawns wielding lances pouring in right through them. Sorun watched on with focused eyes.

Just as Rotor had said, it was a group of twenty lance-wielding Badniks all standing in front of Sorun, eyes and smiling mouths resembling Eggman all aimed right towards him. Sorun's right hand stroked the handle of Yamato, fingers slowly but firmly gripping around it as Sorun watched on. Without another word he began speedily walking towards the nearest Egg Pawn, which took the opportunity to move in on Sorun.

"Oh, that movement, huh? That means... you'll stab in this direction." As Sorun thought this, he eyed the way the Egg Pawn right in front of him was moving. The position it put its feet and arms in, the direction its joints moved, the way it held the lance and the direction

it was pointed in. The exact same movement he'd seen on so many other Egg Pawns. So, when it stabbed forwards, Sorun merely sidestepped the lance while keeping up his forward gait. At the same time, he tore Yamato out from its sheath and cleaved right through the robot's midsection. He'd continued walking past the Egg Pawn long before its two halves hit the ground.

He saw another one rushing towards him from the right corner of his eye. Not even pausing, Sorun willed four Summoned Swords to appear and consecutively swing upwards, the swords lifting the robot up into the air. It was helpless when a fifth Summoned Sword appeared over its head, thrusting downwards right through its face while also carrying its body back down to the ground.

That was the thing with fighting these Egg Pawns over and over again. Even if their AI had some rudimentary form of intelligence in the way of basic problem solving, they were still just basic, mass produced AI inside of mass produced bodies. They didn't have the capability to innovate and differentiate their attacks to a serviceable degree. They didn't adapt and learn. Their hardware and software just didn't allow them that.

Because of that, Sorun had been noticing the patterns. They didn't exactly have something as base as a limited amount of attacks, they had *that much* going for them, at least, but there was a certain... bias programmed into them. A bias that lead them to more often than not to commit to the same attacks over and over again. And Sorun, having fought these things for so long, started seeing those same movements and patterns they would default to. And after seeing them so many times he started memorizing them.

"It's doing that, so dodge this way. That one means it's going to swing to the side. These things never learn..." Sorun still continued to briskly walk right towards the Badniks, changing directions to just narrowly avoid being hit by a lance in the effort of walking past an Egg Pawn only to cut through it with a quick flick of his sword. *"It's just like memorizing all those attack animations from those games back then. That's about what these things amount to anyways."* The

fourth Egg Pawn he approached thrusted forwards. Sorun's right Bringer Claw manifested, grabbed the lance, and then diverted it to the side. *"They're nothing like Nicole."* He thrusted his katana right through its face. *"Nothing but bargain bin, copy-pasted AI. Useless fodder."*

Sorun tore his sword out from the robot and watched it fall down to the ground in front of him. Stepping over the corpse, Sorun noticed that some of the remaining Egg Pawns were actually beginning to back up away from him, though they still continually pointed their lances at him. Unabated, Sorun continued walking forwards towards them.

He still didn't like fighting. Never did, and he never wanted to grow to like it. He hated fighting these things and anything else just as much as he did from the first time he fought a Badnik, embarrassing display aside. But there was no denying the feelings he'd been getting recently whenever he got into one of these battles with Eggman's robots, or rather lack thereof. Everything that plagued his thoughts always seemed to disappear in these fights.

The endless dread of his coming death, the frustration over his failing body and his own weakness, his self loathing at the way he treated his friends. None of that was there in these fights. All of those feelings were buried under the intense focus of Sorun attempting to survive these fights, as well as the endless rage he felt due to the Egg Pawns' visage reminding him of Eggman. Washed away by the adrenaline coursing through him. It was another way for him to escape, if just for a little bit.

Another robot charged towards Sorun. A Summoned Sword manifested in front of Sorun and fired forwards, the spectral blade sliced right through one of the robot's legs and causing it to fall face-first onto the ground. It slid right in front of Sorun, who only glanced down at it for a second before the grip on his sword tightened. He brought the entire blade's edge down on its body, cleaving through it completely before lifting the sword up and bringing it down again. Over and over he savagely hacked at the robot's body with his

katana, and it was only when it stopped twitching did he finally stab its tip into its body. He dragged the blade forwards, carving right through its body all the way towards the other end.

The blade exited the Badnik's body in a wide, upward swing. The force of it, combined with the preexisting damage done from Sorun's earlier swings, caused the Egg Pawn's body to fly apart in pieces. Black oil flew forwards, splashing against Sorun's body. He looked up at the remaining Badniks with manic eyes, black fluid dripping down from the side of his face that had been splashed with oil. The Egg Pawns, with the most basic level of fear programmed into them by Eggman, did something Sorun did not expect: they ran away. They all turned right around and began to try and run away from him towards the doors.

They didn't make it. Blue, spectral swords rained down on all the door exits, blocking their paths. Two Bringer Claws reached out and grabbed two of the Egg Pawns, dragging them backwards towards Sorun who had his sword at the ready.

"Not yet. Not just yet." The electronic screaming coming out of one of the Egg Pawn's speakers was lost on Sorun as he cleanly cut through its head with Yamato. *"Just a little bit longer."*

No, he hated fighting. But he liked the catharsis cutting down Badniks afforded him, though. And he liked being able to momentarily forget how terrible his life was.

"Okay, aaaaand... there!" Quick as a could, Rotor pressed down on a button on a keyboard as soon as he saw the progress bar he'd been eyeing complete loading. Upon pressing the button, the bar on the screen was replaced with a 3-D rendering of the underwater facility, which Rotor proceeded to intently stare at. He scanned the entire screen, memorizing as much as the layout as he could as quickly as possible.

The sense of urgency Rotor had held had begun to subside when the sounds of Sorun fighting outside died down just seconds ago, though, all things considered, he was still in a hurry to get this mission done with quickly. He didn't need to spend much effort memorizing the facility's layout, though- despite all the hallways he and Sorun had traversed, the general layout of the place was fairy simple and uniform. He'd managed to memorize everything he needed in a short amount of time, and then moved away from the computer console and towards the door.

"Alright, got that all set. Now I just gotta go get Sorun," the walrus muttered to himself as he moved towards the booth's door opening. "I'm not hearing anything else so hopefully... he... what the...?"

With how proficient Sorun had become at dismantling Badniks as of late, what he'd expected to walk out into was a room full of destroyed Badniks with Sorun standing among them. And, to be fair, that is what he bore sight to once Rotor left the small room. Twenty destroyed Badniks, with Sorun standing up in the middle of them.

What he didn't expect was the state that the Egg Pawns were in. They were cut apart in an extremely excessive manner: there were barely any parts lying around that Rotor could properly identify due to them having been cut apart in so extravagantly. There was black oil staining the floor, walls, and even the ceiling almost everywhere, as well as a small amount of puncture marks and slashes all around the metallic surfaces.

Rotor was forced to pause fully, however, when he saw Sorun standing right in the middle of the carnage. His form was overly relaxed, Yamato and its sheath loosely held in his hands as he stared down at one of the destroyed and unrecognizable Badniks. His clothes and face were splattered in black fluid, though what Rotor couldn't help but look towards was his face. He was staring wide-eyed down at the dead robot, his irises heavily constricted to pinpricks and shaking. The muscles in his mouth were so strained that it was upturned into a small, crooked smile.

"Sorun?" Rotor hesitantly called out, slowly approaching the human while taking care to step over a torn-apart Badnik's corpse. "Sorun, you, er... you okay there?"

The sudden shift in Sorun's demeanor was so swift that Rotor found himself being startled. The grip on Sorun's sword and sheath tightened, while his posture went tense and straight. He snapped his head towards Rotor, irises dilating back to a normal size as his face eased into a neutral, lazy expression.

"Oh, Rotor. Hey," the other teen nonchalantly greeted, nodding towards Rotor. "You get the map?"

"Uh... yeah..." Rotor responded, slowly nodding towards Sorun while surveying the area around them. "Sorun, what happened here?"

Taking a quick glance around, Sorun shrugged and refocused on Rotor. "I guess I got a little overzealous. Sorry about that," he apologized as he sheathed the katana. "Anyways, robots are taken care of, so are we good to go?"

"I'd say they're a bit more than taken care of, but yeah. We're set," Rotor confirmed with another slow nod. Seeing Sorun in that momentary state, if just for a single moment, had him a bit worried, but seeing the dark-haired human speak so normally now made a majority of the worry Rotor had leave him. He seemed fine enough as he was, so he dropped the matter for more pressing issues. "I saw a map of this place and memorized the layout. Couldn't tell where it was the Emerald is stashed, but it looks like this place is mostly comprised of hallways and other smaller rooms, probably maintenance areas. There was one thing I saw that really stood out from everything else, though. A really, really big room at the end of the facility."

Sorun hummed at the new information. "The shiny, important item is usually in the biggest, most important-looking room. We're gonna scour every inch of this place until we find that Emerald, so we might as well start with the most obvious place," he reasoned, turning

around to leave. He walked two steps, stopped, and then turned back towards Rotor. "Right, yeah, you're the one who actually knows where we're goin'. Lead on."

"It's this way." Rotor gestured towards one of the open doorways in front of them, and then began walking towards it. He heard Sorun begin to walk in step right behind him, and continued with, "from what I saw, we already managed to stumble halfway through this place already. It shouldn't take us too long to reach that room."

"Sounds great," he heard Sorun say from behind him. "Hey, Rotor?"

"Yeah?" Responded the Mobian, craning his head backwards to address Sorun.

"Where'd all this black stuff come from?" He saw that Sorun was eyeing the black splotches of oil that had been splattered on him from the robots, and that a slight bit of irritation formed on his face when he tried rubbing a spot off of his chest to no avail. "Seriously, what is this stuff? Smells awful."

Rotor's walking slowly down a considerable amount, and he turned his head further towards the teen. "It's... it's oil. From all the Badniks you took out," Rotor slowly explained, gesturing one of his hands towards the pile of cut-apart robots behind them.

Sorun's gaze followed Rotor's gesture towards the fallen Badniks, choosing to stare over at them for a few silent seconds. A look of realization soon lit up in his eyes. "Ohhh, yeah, I guess I didn't notice. Weird, I'm usually really good at not getting splashed by this stuff." He grimaced when he sniffed at a black smear on his arm, shaking his head and lowering it to his side. "This stuff's a pain to wash out, too. Ugh."

"I, uh... I hear that," Rotor replied, head still slightly turned towards Sorun's direction. *"Okay, that's weird, but... eh, he's... he's Sorun. He's always kind of strange like that."* Shrugging, Rotor turned back

towards the doorway and sped up his walking speed. "Okay. Let's go check out that room."

It'd taken a bit of doing to get to their destination. More sneaking around hallways on their part, but with Rotor having gained knowledge of this place's layout they at least were able to progress forwards in an expedient manner.

He kept glancing towards him, though. Rotor. Sorun hadn't noticed it at first, but every so often as they kept advancing forwards past all the halls and doors the walrus kept sneaking glances at him from the side, a puzzled look crossing his features. That look became less and less noticeable as time went on, as if whatever it was that was on Rotor's mind was slowly fading, but it still made Sorun question just what exactly was on the Mobian's mind to begin with that made him continually give Sorun those looks.

Maybe the smell of all this oil splashed on him was bothering him. It still annoyed him that so much managed to get on him; usually his Bringer Claws or Summoned Swords dealt with robots at a good enough distance that any stray oil splashes missed him, or his Yamato cut so cleanly and quickly that there wasn't a huge amount of splash back. And sure, more often than not there was *some* that got on him, it was pretty much unavoidable in this line of work, but he never got drenched to this kind of degree before.

Perhaps he'd gone a little too hard on those Egg Pawns. He hadn't been able to help himself, as much as he hated to acknowledge it. He'd have to dial it back and avoid doing that in the future if what he did back there was what was causing Rotor to give him those looks. At least if he was with others.

One more door was passed by the two Freedom Fighters before they came to an area that was wholly different from anywhere else they'd traversed in this place thus far. They emerged from the end of a long, rectangular room that looked more like an atrium than anything else. There was more bright lighting from the ceiling lights

and white, metal walls, too, and to add to the extravagancy of the room was multiple windows on either side of the room's walls viewing out to the ocean outside and the marine life swimming around in it.

Both Rotor and Sorun were less focused on the scenery and more focused on what was lying right at the end of the gigantic room: a glowing, purple gem sitting plainly on a small pedestal, without so much as a single robot guarding it.

"Yeah, I ain't buyin' it," Sorun began, slowly stepping through the atrium with Rotor right behind him. He began to slowly spin around, too, spreading his arms out towards either side while looking up. "He goes through all the effort of making this big, fancy room only to put the Emerald smack-dab at the end there with nothing between us and it?" He shook his head, arms going limp to his side as he made his way towards the Emerald. "Dude's a comic villain through and through. I'd say the fact he's been toying with us this whole time just to make it more interesting for himself is working in our favor, but I'll hold my tongue 'til we actually have the thing back at base. Where I'll then proceed to eat it for a super power."

"I can't exactly call it classic Eggman, but yeah, it's looking real obvious now," Rotor agreed. "You know, it's times like this I actually miss fighting the old Robotnik. He wasn't so... what's a word for something being so overly showy?"

"Ostentatious," Sorun supplied.

"Osten- wow, good word," Rotor complimented with an approving look. "Yeah, those days it was back and forth between us and he had to put in effort to get one in over the Freedom Fighters. But this Robotnik, he... it feels like he never takes us seriously, but he's still winning the war. It just feels insulting."

"Ah, not to worry, Rotor, we'll hoist him by his own petard yet."

He received an odd look from Rotor. "Hoist him by his own what?"

"It's from Haml... ah, I guess you wouldn't know what that is, huh?" Sorun mumbled to himself, and then turned his head around to face Rotor. "It basically means a guy like him with an overwhelming amount of hubris can only get so far before we exploit enough of his carelessness to beat him. Y'know, like that one story with the turtle that won that race because the other guy was so overconfident."

Rotor nodded in understanding. "Oh, Sonic told you about Tommy, huh?"

"Who?" They both stopped, Sorun affixing Rotor with a questioning glare while Rotor responded with a confused look. A few seconds passed, and then Sorun shrugged and turned back around. "Well, anyways," he said, "looks like we got what we came for. Now all that's left is surviving whatever happens next."

The Chaos Emerald Sorun's eyes were locked onto became more distinguishable the closer he and Rotor got to it. Cut in the same diamond shape as all the rest of the Emeralds he'd seen so far. Colored a deep purple color and constantly glowing and radiating in power. All perched up on a metal pedestal without so much as a glass casing covering it, or seemingly no other security measures Sorun saw as he glanced around the area. It truly was just sitting there for the taking. Seemingly, at least.

"Jackpot," Sorun mumbled, stopping right in front of the pedestal to admire the Emerald. "Oooh, Rotor, look," he commented as he turned his head around at the walrus. "It's purple just like you."

"Yeah, har har." Rotor sighed out of his nose and shook his head. "So what do you think's gonna happen once you take it off?"

"When *you* take it off. I'm not touching it 'til we're safe at HQ," Sorun corrected, and then hummed as he looked closer at the pedestal. "Well, it's sitting right on a pressure plate of some kind," he observed, eyeing the off-colored and slightly raised platform on the pedestal the Emerald was sitting on. "And," he continued, looking up towards the ceiling, "I'm pretty sure a TV or something with

Eggman's face on it is gonna come out of those openings over there. I can see the lines where the metal plates shift and everything."

"Oh. Huh, yeah, I see it, too." Rotor looked up towards the ceiling where Sorun was looking, and then looked down towards the Emerald. "Okay, guess I'll grab it, then. Get ready for anything."

His arms slowly reached out towards the Emerald, with the Mobian gulping as his digits reached closer towards it. He stopped centimeters away from it, nodded while muttering something silently to himself, and then quickly snatched the Emerald off of the pedestal. He backpedaled away from the pedestal immediately afterwards, staring at the small, discolored platform that the Emerald sat on with apprehension while Sorun looked on in boredom. As Sorun had predicted, the platform began lowering down into the pedestal.

There was a loud, banging sound that startled both teens and caused them to whirl around. Metal plates began to slam down in front of all the windows lining the sides of the room, while at the same time the lights on the ceiling seemed to increase in intensity in conjunction with a single, blaring alarm sounding out. Up above on the ceiling, the seams Sorun had pointed out earlier began to separate to reveal a hollow space in the ceiling, where a large, rectangular monitor attached to a mechanical arm-

"Called it, I called it!" Sorun shouted, pointing towards the monitor.

- began lowering down from the newly-revealed space in the ceiling. The robot arm positioned the gigantic monitor so it faced down towards the two, where static proceeded to fill the entire screen. An image began flickering repeatedly on the screen, becoming clearer with each occurrence, until finally the screen solidified into a singular image: Eggman, sitting in a chair in a dark, metal-lined room and maniacally smiling towards the camera.

Rotor's face hardened into a steely expression, his body tensing up upon seeing Eggman on the large monitor above them. Sorun's

reaction was much more subdued, the human silently exhaling, rolling his eyes at the ceiling, and slowly readjusting his grip on the sheathed katana in his grasp.

"Well, well, well..." Eggman's voice came out from an unseen speaker on the TV, sounding just as malicious to Sorun as ever. He steepled his hands in front of him while leaning in closer towards the camera, the Doctor's grin widening. "If it isn't the meddlesome... hey, wait a minute." The grin immediately dropped off of Eggman's face, followed by one of his hands reaching up to adjust the blue spectacles that hid his eyes. "Sorun? You're not that miserable hedgehog."

"Thank god for that," Sorun airily replied, spinning Yamato around in his grasp and resting it on his shoulder as he looked up at the monitor. "Don't tell me you were expecting him."

"Of course I was! I thought if anything would could drag that blue pincushion into my sights, it'd be a Chaos Emerald! Though I suppose it's not all that surprising to see you were drawn here in his stead. The allure of an Emerald's power must be irresistibly captivating to somebody like you." Eggman leaned back in his seat, propping his head against one of his closed fists. "Goodness' sake... all this preparation for the the wrong Freedom Fighter."

A fake, shocked expression lit up on Sorun's face as he looked around. "Wait, this was all a trap? I can't believe- I can't even fake it." Sorun's face dropped back to his normal expression as he looked back up at Eggman. "Look, we knew it was a trap, like, five seconds in, so can you just spring whatever you have set up so we can get on with the rest of our day?"

A sigh left Eggman. "You're really taking all the fun out of this, Sorun. Agh, fine, fine. The suspense is already ruined, just, where's the...?" The Doctor began grumbling under his breath as he began looking around for something on his end of the screen, his head picking up a bit when he found what he was looking for, followed by him reaching forwards and pressing it.

From the middle of the room, a large, circular hatch in the floor previously unseen by the two Freedom Fighters began to open up. They both looked towards the opening as a loud, grinding sound was heard, not unlike the sound of a mechanical lift raising something up. At the same time, something began to poke its head up from below the newly opened hatch as Eggman began speaking from the monitor again.

"You know, I had this whole speech planned out from the moment I conceived this trap. While Sonic was floundering over the fact this underwater facility was a deathtrap, I was gonna go over the new model of Egg Pawn with a dramatic flourish mixed in." As Eggman spoke, the thing being lifted up through the open hatch made it up halfway. From what Sorun observed, it appeared to be a Egg Pawn. A very big Egg Pawn, if the current size he saw said anything. It was painted differently, too. Primarily a dark purple color with red highlights here and there. "It was going to be this whole thing, but *nooo* , you wanted to get to the point, so here you are. Presenting the brand-spanking new enforcer to the Eggman Empire, blah blah blah, armored with the latest in specially-treated, composite titanium armor plating, details, details, I can't believe I put so much effort into this just for the likes of you."

The lift bringing the Badnik up finally reached its limit, and settled right into the floor with a loud, mechanical *clank!* Standing menacingly across from both Sorun and Rotor, grinning down at him with green lights for eyes and a sharp-toothed smile etched in Eggman's likeness, with four spikes sticking out of the rim of each of the hammer's heads for that added, menacing flair.

"Introducing, dah-dah-dah-dah, the Egg Hammer. Hurrah," Eggman introduced, sounding unenthused and almost upset. "Fresh off the assembly line and ready to pound you into oblivion."

Sorun looked the giant Badnik standing across from him up and down, finally ending with a rather unimpressed expression. "Wow, you... made an Egg Pawn bigger and gave it a hammer instead of a lance." A single Summoned Sword spawned next to Sorun. "Yeah,

not really feeling the inspiration behind this one. For cryin' out loud, that hammer's just a shoddy copy of Amy's."

The Summoned Sword fired off towards the Egg Hammer's face. The Badnik, for its part, stood completely still and didn't so much as flinch when the spectral sword impacted its face. It continued to stand unflinching even as the sword shattered harmlessly against it, not leaving so much as a scratch.

Sorun blinked in surprise. "Oh, I see."

"No inspiration, eh?" Eggman said, leering down at Sorun from the monitor held above him and Rotor. "The armor plating on that bad boy is seconded only to the armor I placed on Metal Sonic. Good luck getting through that." He made a "hmph" sound while adjusting his blue spectacles. "And I'll have you know that just because that pink reprobate uses a hammer doesn't mean that she has a monopoly on the entire hammer market."

"Ah-huh." Sorun only paid half-attention to the mad Doctor as he slowly began to unsheathe Yamato. "Yeah, that's real interesting."

"What is that? That katana you keep carrying around?" A disbelieving scoff left Eggman alongside a mocking laugh. "You can't be serious! What makes you think that a flimsy little piece of forgotten eastern culture-"

A blue line appeared over the front half of the Egg Hammer's torso. Eggman stopped talking entirely, his focus shifting towards the Badnik. At the same time Sorun, holding Yamato with blue energy coursing down its blade, swung the katana through the air over and over again in the Badnik's direction. With each swing another blue line would appear somewhere on the Egg Hammer's body, and it was only when ten lines formed on its body did Sorun choose to stop and slide the Yamato back into its sheath; a small *clink!* was heard upon the hilt connecting to the bottom of the sheath. At the same time of the sword being fully sheathed, the Egg Hammer fell apart to

pieces from the slices made throughout its entire body, the pieces clattering down onto the ground.

"Uninspired. Trash," Sorun drawled out, turning upwards towards Eggman who was gawking at the remains of the cut-apart Badnik. "You nailed it with the menacing color scheme, and the spikes were a nice touch, but man did that thing not perform well. Didn't even get a single swing in."

"What the- but- how did...?" Floundered, Eggman's face on the monitor looked back and forth between the fallen Egg Hammer and Sorun. His cheeks were slightly tinged in red, though whether it was from anger or embarrassment was unknown to Sorun, as he was too busy enjoying the look on Robotnik's face. He made an angered hum as he settled his gaze on Sorun, his head turning down slightly towards the Yamato. "So that sword of yours is no ordinary katana then..."

"I see why they call you a genius," Sorun responded. "If that's all there is, then we're taking the Emerald and leaving."

The large frown that had settled on Eggman's face deepened. He continued looking down at Sorun's sword for a few moments, and then rose his head back up towards the teen holding it. "Well, what sort of evil genius would I be without a backup plan? I wanted to reserve this for sending Sonic to a watery grave, but you and the walrus will do just as well." He reached over to the side and pressed a button just outside of the screen's view. "I'm blowing all the explosive charges I had set in the structural supports. Have fun sinking to your doom, boys!"

A sudden rumbling caused the floor Rotor and Sorun stood on to begin shaking, knocking both off balance and causing them to fall to their knees. Sorun managed to pick himself up in a kneeling position, looking up just in time to see Eggman cheekily grinning down at them and waving before the screen cut to black. He scoffed, and then looked to the side to see Rotor steadily get up to his feet.

"That maniac's trying to drop us into the trench the facility's hanging over!" the walrus exclaimed, running over to Sorun to help him up to his feet. "We got the Emerald, so we need to get back to Tails and the Sea Fox before all those support struts go!"

"I hear ya," Sorun grunted before getting tossed to the side again at the rumble of another distant explosion. He caught himself with another grunt, exhaling while standing upwards. "Times like these I really wish I figured out how to make portals with this thing..." he mumbled under his breath, thumb running across Yamato's sheath as he looked towards the back of the atrium. "Alright, we just gotta double back and- ah, of course..."

The doors to the back end of the atrium Rotor and Sorun had entered began opening, and pouring out from the small opening was a stream of dozens of Egg Pawns, all running towards the pair with their lances pointed forwards. Sorun clicked his teeth in frustration at the sight, pulling Yamato out from its sheath once more as blue energy began coalescing around the katana's blade. He swung the sword in a wide arc, a blue line running through the torsos of a number of Egg Pawns that had been in the front row of the group charging both him and Rotor. They fell down in their respective halves, Sorun turning back towards Rotor and yelling, "Rotor, c'mon, we gotta go!"

"Don't gotta tell me twice!"

Rotor and Sorun both took off in a run towards the group of Badniks approaching them, Sorun continually swinging his sword to cut them apart the closer they got. It was just when they reached the group that Sorun had cut apart the last Badnik, though when the pair of Freedom Fighters ran past the group another explosion rocked the facility and caused them to become off-balance. They caught themselves easily enough and dove past the doorway, and then pressed themselves against one of the hallway's walls as the floor beneath them, as well as the walls and ceiling, leaned a bit too far to the left before settling back into their proper position.

Keeping one hand on the wall while the other hand remained gripped around the Emerald, Rotor faced Sorun and asked, "Why weren't you doing that thing with your sword earlier!?"

"'Cause... 'cause that really takes a lot out of me," Sorun panted out. His entire form had become slightly hunched in exhaustion, making Rotor's eyes widen slightly in concern, though Sorun managed to find the energy to push off the wall and point down the hallway. "Let's go."

"Yeah." Rotor nodded in agreement, and with that they both turned down the hallway and began running forwards. "Hey, we don't have time to sneak around!" Rotor shouted over their running. "Are you gonna be good to fight anything else before we get back to Tails!?"

"I'll be fine!" Sorun shouted back. Left unsaid were the concerns Sorun had that he, in fact, wouldn't have the energy to cut down any Badniks in their way *and* make it all the way back to Tails, but the impending doom of sinking down to the bottom of an ocean chasm was keeping him going. For now, at least. He'd have to hope it was enough to make it to Tails. "Let's just focus on making it back, alright!?"

Little more was said between the two as they continued winding their way through the myriad hallways on their way back to Tails and the submarine. Rotor stayed ahead of Sorun and had been leading them down the facility, having still memorized the general layout from that computer he'd hacked earlier. Sorun had been forced to cut down any Badniks that had just happened to be in their way, and with every single time he used Yamato to dispatch a robot he felt his strength going weaker.

The doors were a problem, too. Whether it was a security measure due to the Emerald being taken or due to the self destruct sequence Eggman triggered, all the doors they'd previously passed that had been unlocked were now locked, or even worse giant bulkhead doors comprised of thick steel had slammed down from the ceiling in the middle of some hallways to block their way back to Tails.

Probably as a way to stall them or keep them trapped, but seeing as Sorun had the Yamato, they were able to simple cut their way past any and all doors. It was taking a heavier and heavier toll on Sorun every time, however, and he simply didn't know how much longer he could keep going at this pace.

He tried to stay at a constant pace behind Rotor between all the running, the robots, and the doors. The constant explosions heard in the distance and the floor beneath them shaking was a good motivator to keep going forwards, but even that was beginning to lose its effect. It was when he'd just cut a triangular hole through another bulkhead door that had slammed down in their way that he was really beginning to feel the fatigue beginning to wrack his body. Rotor had ran on ahead a little bit while Sorun had lagged behind, holding a hand against the wall for support as he walked forwards.

"Huh? Hey, Sorun!" Rotor, still a little bit ahead of Sorun, had turned around looked towards Sorun. Intense worry was written all across his face. "You doing okay!?"

"Y-yeah," he called back in a low voice, turning his head back towards the opposite end of the hallway when he felt two streams of warm fluid begin to run down his nose. "Just... just gimme a few-egh!"

Another explosion rocked through the facility, throwing Sorun off balance and making his entire side slam into the wall. No sooner had his body made contact with the cold metal did his ears pick up the sound of something extremely alarming: the sound of rushing water. He looked forwards towards the hole he'd cut through the door, his eyes widening when he saw a torrent of sea water rush in from down the hallway and towards him.

There hadn't been any time to dodge the water, and even if there had been, he wouldn't have had the energy to do so. He was washed right off his feet and carried down towards the end of the hallway where Rotor was, only stopping when he'd been carried right into another wall. Multiple spluttering sounds came from Sorun as he

spat out the seawater that had wound up in his mouth, who then proceeded to wipe away any excess water as he began to shakily stand up to his feet.

"Well, at least the oil problem's taken care of... mostly." Legs quavering in exhaustion, Sorun managed to make it halfway up towards a standing position despite the water rushing up against his ankles. He only made it that far, though, as his legs buckled right after and caused him to crash back down to the sitting position. *"Agh, gimme a break here..."*

He was about to make another attempt at getting up to his feet when he felt something roughly tug on his arm and pull him upwards. He managed to catch out from the corner of his eye that it was Rotor who, with some difficulty due to the height advantage he had over Sorun, slung the human's arm over his shoulder to support him.

"You're a real handful, you know that?" Rotor grunted as he and Sorun hobbled forwards, doing their best to push through the ankle-deep water that was rushing past them. "I didn't know your powers wore you out that bad."

"I haven't really had them long enough to acclimate to them," Sorun lied, speaking between heavy breaths as he and Rotor continued pushing forwards. While he was speaking, a random Egg Pawn had rounded a nearby corner and had turned right towards them. It fell down onto its back when a Summoned Sword found itself going through its face. "Just... just keep me going like this."

"Yeah. Yeah, don't worry. It's just a bit further," Rotor grunted out, pushing them both along further and further down the facility.

After that it had been more moving. More robots skewered by Summoned Swords and the occasional door that needed cutting. Sorun had seen it as a good sign when they passed that security room they'd ran into earlier, and eventually after that Sorun began to actually recognize some of the hallways they were passing through.

They were getting closer to Tails, which was a good thing. Not so good was the fact the water had risen from around Sorun's ankles to his knees. Even worse was that the edges of his vision was turning black from his waning strength. But they were almost there. Rotor made fit to keep reminding him and encouraging him, to help him fight through all the exhaustion until they made it back to Tails.

"Alright, Sorun. We're almost there." The both of them had passed another corner, and Sorun had groaned out in dismay when he saw yet another bulkhead door in their path. "I think I remember this hallway," Rotor continued as they stopped right in front of the door. "We just gotta cut through this last door and we're home free, okay?"

With a groan, Sorun removed himself from Rotor and took a few steps away from the walrus. Rotor looked towards him expectantly, though his features turned confused when he saw Sorun shaking his head. He immediately saw why when the human teen lifted up Yamato- half of the blade was gone while the remainder was completely cracked and crumbling away. "Yeah, about that..." Sorun mumbled out, dropping the sword as it finally disintegrated in a cloud of black and blue ash.

"Ugh! Okay, okay, it's not a problem." Rotor quickly patted Sorun on the shoulder, and then made his way towards the side of the bulkhead door. There was a small panel where Rotor had stopped in front of, which the walrus proceeded to crouch down in front of and begin removed using a tool procured from the belt wrapped around his waist. "Look, I'll get this thing open. Just watch our backs, okay?"

Sorun, lacking the energy to respond, simply turned around to the opposite end of the hallway to watch out for anything dangerous as Rotor got to to work. There was the occasional Egg Pawn that wandered into the hall, though it was quickly destroyed from a quickly-fired Summoned Sword from Sorun. He was having a hard time creating even those, though. Each new sword he manifested was more cracked and broken than the last, and he was finding it difficult to keep his eyes open just to stay awake.

"Hurry it up, Rotor," an exhausted Sorun thought as he mentally threw another Summoned Sword at an approaching Badnik, adding to the pile of fallen robots at the end of the hall. *"I don't have much more time here."*

He didn't think he could make any more Summoned Swords after that last one. He was barely standing on his feet as it was, and his thoughts were becoming muddled in the exhaustion. He felt his eyes widen just the barest amount when he heard a loud, clanking noise behind him, and turned around just in time to see the bulkhead door having risen up. It only went up about a quarter of the way, though, and he saw that Rotor had stepped away from the console he'd been messing with and turned towards Sorun.

"Sorun," he began, "the door's stuck on something. Think you can-?"

With a groan of sheer effort, Sorun manifested a barely-visible, flickering Bringer Claw that slowly reached forwards and gripped the underside of the door. It managed to raise it halfway up before Sorun's power gave out entirely, causing the spectral arm to disappear and Sorun to stumble forwards as he lost his footing. He was fortunately caught by Rotor, who was forced to all but drag Sorun under the door and through the hallway.

By that point Sorun had been fading in and out of consciousness from his weariness. He did manage to make out the doorway he'd cut out at the very beginning, when they'd first entered the facility. He managed to make out the wide, circular room with the moonpool in the middle, and to his eternal gratitude he saw that Tails' submarine and the fox himself was still there. Due to his exhaustion his vision was slightly blurred and it was difficult to make out any hard details, but he saw enough to tell the fox was there. Even his hearing was spotty, as he managed to hear Rotor and Tails shout at each other but hadn't managed to make out the words they said.

The distant explosions combined with whatever it was that Rotor had said must have made clear the urgency of the situation, though, as Sorun managed to make out Tails hopping into the submarine's main

body along with the distant-sounding hum of the Sea Fox starting to life. Rotor had helped Sorun into the sidecar-like vessel attached to the sub's side, the human being able to do nothing more than limply sit back as the glass dome closed in overhead and sealed Sorun inside the pod. He assumed Rotor had managed to get into his own sidecar as well, as not long after the submarine dipped below the surface of the moonpool.

Past the fogginess of his vison Sorun saw the whiteness of water foaming and rushing past the small vehicle he was sealed in before it soon gave away to the clear, dark blue surroundings of the deep ocean all around them. He saw the submarine immediately turn around and begin driving in the opposite direction of the facility, though Sorun found himself turning around in his seat for little more than an urge to see the facility he and Rotor had just narrowly avoided dying inside of.

It was still there when he turned around, albeit slowly shrinking away due to the growing distance between it and the Sea Fox. He saw one more explosion go off near its side, at the final support strut that hadn't been completely blown away from the previous explosions. That final strut being destroyed marked the end of it, as no sooner had the strut had given out than Sorun was forced to watch as the facility fell downwards into the deep sea trench below. He breathed out a sigh of both relief and exhaustion as he saw the metal facility disappear into the chasm's blackness, sitting back forwards towards the ocean view as Tails drove them away from the devastation.

He was only able to take in the grand sight of the ocean for a few seconds before finally passing out.

A/N- It's gag curse part deux, because this thing is proving to be a constant source of consternation for me.

I got asked if Sorun could use Yamato to separate himself from the gag curse. Short answer: yes, he could. He hasn't because of two reasons:

One- The gag curse is less of a restriction at this point and more like a safety net in case Sorun messes up and says something he isn't supposed to. Even though he's completely on board with the whole thing he still slips up every now and then, as evidenced last chapter when he was talking with Sally. He hates it more for the principle of what it represents over its actual function.

Two- Sorun literally never thought to do it. I was gonna go into that, like, way later, but there.

To be honest there's... a lot Sorun's Yamato can do. Enough that I had to restrict almost all of its abilities behind Sorun not knowing how it works, because if I didn't and he got all of its abilities on the get-go the story would have ended right there. And not in a good way. So it's all locked behind Sorun's inability to figure out how it works, hence him slowly working it out over the course of the story.

As for the curse not working around Merlin, chalk it up to it not proccing near Neo-Watchers and Sorun's wording and intent not being specific enough to trigger it.

And lastly, regarding Silver, who I made a reference to in a previous A/N over Virgil's name, here is all the information I am willing to give on the subject matter of that specific character in regards to whether or not he has a presence in this story and to what that presence exactly entails:

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Chapter 32

Recursion Error

Episode 32- Trickster

Egg.

The very meaning of that one, singular word had changed a lot for Sorun over the course of his stay on Mobius. Before on his life on Earth it hadn't meant much to him. Personally, he never really liked the taste of the things. Baking with them was one thing, but eating them raw or scrambled or any other variation? He just couldn't do it. So his opinion on eggs was already low to begin with.

And then Mobius happened, and along with that came Eggman, and from then on the word was completely ruined for him. He couldn't even see an egg the same way ever again, internally cringing if he so much as caught sight of an egg while raiding Sonic's fridge. So that was two foods ruined for him forever: juice and eggs.

Breakfast would just never be the same.

But now he was here, sitting down on the Freedom HQ's couch with such a thing resting in his hands. An egg. Not a normal, garden-variety egg one would eat or bake with. No, this was a larger egg that just barely fit in Sorun's hands. A light blue egg with its tip being colored a yellow color.

Apparently this egg was Virgil.

It was right after the underwater mission, where Sorun and Rotor had acquired the fourth Chaos Emerald. Sorun had been asleep in the submarine for most of the ride back, only awaking when they'd made it to land and had to walk to Tails' plane to make it back to Knothole. The flight back, for the most part, had been uneventful.

They'd made it to Knothole's hangar, parked the plane, and the three had proceeded to make some idle chat as they walked back towards Freedom HQ, where Sorun planned on calmly sitting down, taking in the fourth Emerald, and then deal with whatever came next.

He walked into the Freedom HQ seeing Sonic with Virgil in egg form. Thus he was here.

"... I gave you one job." Sorun looked from the egg resting in his hands to the hedgehog sitting on the couch next to him. On any other day Sorun would have relished the extremely nervous smile Sonic had. The way the muscles around his mouth and eyes were tightened in worry and the way sweat was beading down his face and arms. But right now Sorun just couldn't find it in himself to look past the fact his pet had turned into an egg under Sonic's watch. "It was a simple thing. I left my pet Chao with you while I went on the big, scary mission under the sea, and when I came back I expected to find Virgil safe and sound. What I got was an egg." He lowered the egg into his lap, sighed, and affixed Sonic with a deadpan stare. "Dude. What happened?"

"So, uh, listen, Sorun," Sonic began, holding his hands up in an effort to try and placate Sorun, "Chao, they, they do this kind of thing all the time, you know? It's a natural part of their life cycle-"

"What the hedgehog is neglecting to mention is that he took his eyes off of your Chao for a time because he attempted to challenge me to a race out of boredom."

Slowly, Sorun's eyes drifted away from Sonic towards the far end of the wall of the HQ. He saw Shadow's black and red form leaning against the wall, arms crossed as he sent an admonishing glare towards the blue hedgehog. Sorun slowly looked back towards Sonic, who looked increasingly nervous under both Shadow's and Sorun's scrutiny.

"Is this true?" Sorun asked in a level tone.

"Well... yeah," Sonic hesitantly answered, giving Sorun a shaky nod, "but I was only gone a few minutes! How was I supposed to know I'd come back to an egg!? He was completely fine when I left him alone!"

Sorun listened closely to Sonic, and then took a slow, deep breath. He exhaled, eyes falling down to the egg in his lap, and without taking his eyes off of it he said, "Sonic, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do."

"It's fine, bud, it's a natural thing for Chao. Virgil'll just hatch and-"

"No, I mean with you," Sorun interrupted. "I don't know how I'm supposed to punish you for this."

"... You know this isn't actually my fault, right?"

"Yeah, but from where I'm sitting it really doesn't look like that." The human teen sighed and began to idly tap at the egg. "They do this when they reach the end of their lifespan so they can 'evolve' or something along those lines, right?"

"Something like that. I've only ever seen it happen once, back when me, Knux and Tails ran into that one Chao Garden," Sonic helpfully added as he shuffled closer to Sorun. "I think they do this thing where they evolve to be like whoever raises them, though. That's how it worked for us. They, er... the little fellas really like to emulate things."

"Hmm. So what you're saying is that you don't have a clue what's gonna happen."

Sonic started in his seat, and then gave Sorun a sheepish grin. "Sorry, pal, nobody really knows a whole lot about them. Didn't you say you checked a book or something out?"

"Yeah, but it didn't really- *oh my god I forgot to get that book back to the library* ," he whispered under his breath. He'd been so

preoccupied with everything else over all these weeks that it'd slipped his mind. Come to think of it he didn't even remember reading the full thing in its entirety now that he really thought about it. He hoped library late fees weren't a thing here. Or that the librarian would be too upset at him. He didn't even remember where he left that book, maybe somewhere in Sonic's room...

He shook those thoughts from his head. He was less concerned over an ornery librarian and more concerned over the egg that was sitting in his lap right now. Chao went through cycles like this all the time where they'd reach the end of a 'lifespan', turn into an egg, and hatch out from that egg. Sometimes it was the same Chao as last time, sometimes they evolved into a different and unique Chao, sometimes the egg turned gray and that marked their final life and permanent death.

Well, the egg hadn't turned gray, so there was at least one positive about this. Virgil wasn't dying, just... doing something else. The book and any other details he'd managed to get from people on the exact mechanics and functions of Chao evolution were rather vague. Sonic was right in that they did evolve in some semblance of whoever it was that cared for them since they were really emulative like that, but on the other hand there were apparently some cases of Chao evolving on their own without the need of a caretaker. And yet, in those same circumstances, they usually didn't evolve and just reincarnated as a normal Chao again. Or died.

In essence, the Chao did what they wanted. Maybe there were a myriad of other factors and variables Sorun and anybody else who made a study on the topic were neglecting concerning their evolution, but the fact was he had a Chao egg in his lap right now that was gonna hatch into something. Sonic personally attested to having a Chao evolve in his visage at one point, so he had that much to go off of. Maybe the same was going to happen to Virgil.

That still left the question of just *what* Virgil would evolve into, but Sorun would save those concerns until the actual hatching.

"Hey, guys." Sorun's attention shifted from the egg towards the side of the couch. He saw Tails and Rotor walk into his view, the former having been the one that addressed them while the latter was still holding onto the purple Emerald. "No change with Virgil, huh?" Tails asked, looking towards Sorun.

"Yes, Virgil's still an egg. No, Sonic's not getting out of me putting something weird in his gloves when he goes to sleep tonight." Sorun cast his eyes back on the egg, pretending not to notice the affronted look Sonic sent him. "You won't know which pair it'll be, either. You'll wake up one morning to put on a pair of gloves and then *bam* !"

"I think you're being way too serious about this," Sonic muttered under his breath.

Sorun's eyes flicked over to the hedgehog. "And I think the next time I ask you to look after Virgil while I'm gone getting stabbed at-"

The egg moved.

His mouth snapping shut, Sorun's head turned so quickly towards the egg that his neck had made a slight cracking sound. Everybody else leaned in closer as well as the egg jumped in Sorun's lap slightly, with some light cracks appearing on the shell afterwards. At one point Sorun had hesitantly raised a finger to poke at the egg, but then Sonic had reached over and slapped him on the shoulder while shaking his head, causing him to lower it back to his side.

And then something burst out of the side of the egg. A small, sharpened appendage of sorts that made Sonic, Tails, and Rotor recoil back in shock, caused Shadow to widen his eyes in slight surprise, and had Sorun tilting his head to the side in curiosity. The appendage continued to cut and slice away at the egg shell containing it, and slowly the small figure resting inside of the egg was revealed to those that were watching.

The thing that was inside of the egg had the same general shape as a Chao, but that was where the similarities ended. The blue coloring

had darkened from a light to a dark shade of blue, and the yellow tips on his hands and feet had completely darkened to a black color. And on the back of each of his small arm appendages was a black, blade-like claw that curved up the arm, the tip of the two blades extending past his shoulders.

The strangest change was with the Chao's head. Virgil had blinked his eyes open, deep blue eyes looking straight into Sorun's. His teeth had become sharpened, and the yellow dot and teardrop-shape on the top of his head was gone completely. In place of that was a... silver crest of sorts sitting on top of Virgil's head. A crest in the form of two cylindrical horns jutting out of his head, both with flat tops and pointed diagonally in opposite directions.

"... Huh." That was the only response Sorun could find in himself to say as he reached forwards and tapped Virgil on his face. To his surprise, the Chao actually scowled and tried batting his finger away, Sorun just barely moving his hand out of the way before one of his two bladed arms cut him. *"That weird silver horn-crest thing on his head... it's the same thing Vergil from the 'DMC' games had. His Devil Trigger had those horns,"* Sorun realized. *"How the hell did that happen? I get my powers came from my subconscious and memory, but... but how'd he...?"* He looked to one of his hands, and then back to the Chao. *"Man. Chao sure are freaky."*

He'd never even pretend to know how it was that Virgil's body managed to evolve to form into some kind of... mock imitation of his game counterpart's transformation. That book had said something about their species being natural conductors for Chaos energy, so Sorun suspected there was something there to that. Maybe being around Sorun and his powers had influenced it in some way? He didn't know at all. Nothing concerning Chaos energy was never straight.

Well, strange or not, he'd admit one thing: it was a good look for the Chao. Way better than how he previously looked in Sorun's opinion.

"Um..." That unsure hum had come from Sonic, which drew both Sorun's and Virgil's attention. The blue hedgehog was staring down at the Chao, eyes half-lidded and mouth held in a hesitant grimace. "Sorun, uh... don't you think that's kinda... too scary a transformation for a Chao...?"

"What are you talking about? He looks cool," Sorun defended. Sonic looked back towards Sorun in shock, and Virgil looked up at him with an almost... pleased expression on his face. "Look, he's got the two little swords on his arms and the cool silver horns. And... hey, look at that! His wings!"

He'd only noticed it when Virgil suddenly flexed the appendages on his back. The first thing Sorun noted was how they looked: where they were once small, pink, heart-shaped insect wings, now they were a solid blue appendage sharpened to look like a reptilian's wing, with a split near their tops to give the wings two tips. The second thing he noticed was that there were two wings on either side of his back, even the right side, which had previously lacked a wing due to Virgil's previous wound.

Virgil looked towards his back, his two split wings experimentally flapping. They beat down on Sorun's lap, the human chuckling slightly when the Chao's body was raised into the air where he then proceeded to float directly in front of the teen's face with a blank, almost bored expression.

"So your wing grew back when you evolved? Or it was replaced with the other one? Something like that?" Sorun guessed, tilting his head to the side a bit to get a better look at his back.

"Chao." Even Virgil's voice had changed. It was a noticeable few octaves deeper. Not too deeper- it was less the high-pitched voice it had been and now more a deeper, boyish voice, but it still hit differently for Sorun compared to how he used to sound. "Chao-chao."

"Oh. Huh." He still couldn't understand what he was saying, but he couldn't help but note how... dismissive the Chao's tone was now. Almost haughty in a way. "Well... I'm glad you got your wing back, buddy." He reached a single finger forwards to rub at the top of the floating Chao's head. Virgil stiffened up and flinched at the touch, but still allowed Sorun to rub at the spot between his silver horns.

He really was glad he had his flight back, too. It always bugged Sorun that Virgil had to live with a crippling injury and had to be carried around everywhere. Maybe now the little guy could finally get some freedom back, maybe even feed himself now, but really he was happy with Virgil's transformation as a whole. Sorun couldn't put a finger on why. It just... seemed fitting to him.

"Well, he looks kinda weird, but as long as he's happy with it I'm happy with it," Sonic voiced. He grinned a little at the floating Chao, and then leaned forwards while reaching a hand out towards him. "C'mere, Virgil, let me get some head rubs in, too."

Sonic's finger had made it within about an inch of Virgil before the Chao's head snapped down towards the appendage reaching towards him. Without a single sound, the Chao sliced one of his bladed arms in the direction of the finger before going to float over Sorun's shoulder. Sonic reflexively recoiled his hand at the strike, gripping his wrist while staring up at the Chao with shocked eyes.

"What the!?" He looked down at his finger, his eyes widening dramatically when he saw that the finger of the glove he'd extended towards Virgil had a long cut in it. The finger below was completely unharmed, but nevertheless the glove had been cut. "H-he cut me!" Sonic sputtered out as he pointed towards the Chao.

The Chao looked down towards Sonic, and then, in a seemingly disdainful tone of voice, said, "Chao."

Sorun, for his part, began to uncontrollably chuckle at the small feeling of pride going through him as he looked up at Virgil. "Oh, man, that was pretty good."

"Pretty good!? He picked up all your bad habits!" Sonic hotly claimed.

"You mean he picked up all my *good* habits," Sorun denied, reaching up to briefly rub the top of the Chao's head again. Sonic had an almost betrayed look on his face when he saw that the Chao let Sorun touch him without so much as raising an arm up in defense. "Good Chao. *Gooood* Chao..."

"Chao-chao." It seemed that Virgil reached the limit of how much embarrassment it was willing to endure, as he carefully batted Sorun's finger away with his arms while taking care not to cut him with the bladed ends. Sonic continued staring up at the Chao, and then began grumbling under his breath as he turned away to look at his cut glove. He noted from the corner of his eye that the Chao was seemingly smugly grinning down at him, which only made his angered mutters increase in volume.

"Well, I'm happy your pet Chao's all better now! Even he's a bit, well, spooky-looking." This came from Tails, who slowly began shuffling towards Sorun as he reached a hand out. "Hey, you think he would mind if I-?" He stopped when Virgil's head snapped towards him, the Chao's eyes narrowing as a frown settled on his face. Tails began to back up, nervously muttering, "O-okay, uh, nevermind. I'll just, er, be over here..."

Virgil huffed, his expression turning back to normal as he shifted his gaze from Tails to Rotor, who looked towards the Chao with an unsure look. He gave the purple walrus a dismissive look and then looked towards Shadow. The dark hedgehog met Virgil's gaze in a mostly calm, inquisitive manner, though he looked mildly surprised when the Chao gave him a small, barely-perceptible nod of respect in return. It came as such an unexpected motion to Shadow that he had no time to formulate a response before the Chao looked back forwards.

Sorun watched the entire display silently, chuckling under his breath after seeing the Chao nod at Shadow before finally settling to lean

back in the couch. "Well, I say this counts as a successful day. Virgil got a makeover and his wing back, and we survived another mission and certain doom yet again. And it's not even evening yet."

"Uh, yeah. Great day all around," Rotor said. "So do you want this Chaos Emerald we survived certain doom for, Sorun?"

Blue eyes snapping open, Sorun looked towards the taller Mobian, and then down at the gem in his hands. "Oh, yeah! Can't believe I almost forgot that. Yeah, give it here."

Shrugging, Rotor tossed the Emerald through the air and towards Sorun. The human caught the Emerald with both of his hands, wincing slightly when he felt the Emerald affix itself to his hands and sighing out deeply when he saw arcs of purple energy begin to crackle around his hands. He sat back in the couch, breathing out slowly to prepare himself for what was inevitably about to happen.

He continued to stare down at the purple Emerald for a bit, and then looked up at those surrounding him. Rotor and Tails were both giving him reassuring smiles, and when he looked to the side he saw that Sonic was doing the same thing, even going as far as to give him two thumbs-ups. Shadow, inversely, only continued to look at Sorun with that perpetual scowl of his, though he did afford the human a slight nod of encouragement.

A small scoff, followed by the barest of smiles, found its way onto Sorun's lips right before his entire body began convulsing. He felt his muscles cry out in pain and felt a deep pain lance through his body, but compared to the other three times he'd done this... this time was almost mild in comparison. He was even able to keep his eyes open and look down as the Emerald continued to run its power through his body, and instead of having a pained grimace on his face it was more of a curious, questioning look.

It must still have at least *looked* like it hurt, though, as from the corner of his eyes he saw almost everybody save for Shadow wincing towards him in sympathy. At this point seeing as the pain

was at a more than tolerable level, Sorun didn't feel it was necessary. It still felt nice, though, to be considered in such a way by them. And it made going through the whole process that much easier, even if it was already bearable.

He watched as the purple gem in his hand slowly began to dissolve and disintegrate into particles of purple energy that was soon enough siphoned off into his arms. He saw the veins on his limbs briefly glow purple, shift into a blue color, and then dim entirely. All the glowing and electricity arcing around him ended, and with a heavy breath Sorun slumped right into the couch.

A few moments passed where everybody stared towards Sorun's body with bated breath, Virgil in particular hovering close nearby while looking down towards him. Sorun's body suddenly twitched, startling everybody else and causing them to lean back slightly. The teen slowly groaned as he sat up a bit straighter, smoke still roiling off of his form as he began leaning his neck back and forth.

"Yeah, that'll wake you up in the morning. Or put you to sleep at night. Can't even tell anymore," Sorun mumbled under his breath as he began winding his left shoulder. "Man..."

"You okay, Sorun?" Sonic asked, blinking towards Sorun in concern.

"By some definition of the word, yeah." Wincing, Sorun stopped winding his shoulder and held his right hand out in front of his face.

Sonic's features relaxed slightly in relief. "Oh, great. So, uh... what'd ya get?"

"Well, I'm not feeling scaly, so I can tell you what I *didn't* get." He began flexing his hand as a disgruntled look crossed Sorun's face. "I swear, I ask for one specific power and they won't give it to me..."

"Um... what?" Sonic asked, face scrunching in confusion.

Sorun glanced up to the blue hedgehog, and then shook his head. "It's nothing. I was just wondering-"

He vanished mid-sentence.

It had happened so suddenly that there had been no reaction at first, as everybody watching needed to take a few seconds to process what had just happened: Sorun, right in the middle of talking, had completely disappeared in a small cloud of black and blue vapors that disappeared just as quickly. Sonic and Tails had actually jumped up in surprise when it finally registered that the human teen sitting on the couch in front of them had just vanished into thin air, while everyone else was staring at the spot with widened eyes.

A loud bang, followed by a quiet groan, was heard at the other end of the room. All eyes were drawn towards the source of the noise, where it was seen that Sorun was lying flat on the ground in front of a wall, holding both hands against his face. He slowly sat up in a sitting position, shaking his head while looking up at the wall.

"Tricking. I got Tricking," Sorun groaned out as he rubbed at his nose. "Slammed my face on the stupid-"

Once again, Sorun disappeared, only to then reappear slamming into another wall on the opposite side of the room. He groaned out loud as he slid down the wall, though he wasn't even able to hit the ground before disappearing and reappearing on another side of the room in the same instance.

Five sets of eyes slowly tracked Sorun as he teleported all around the room, slamming into a wall or the odd piece of furniture as he uncontrollably and sporadically appeared all over. A chair and a nearby lamp had been toppled over in his relentless teleporting, and at one point he'd teleported all the way up to the ceiling, yelling out as his body spun uncontrollably in its fall only to impact the ground. He finally ended it by teleporting once again, sliding face-first against the ground right at Shadow's feet.

The darkened hedgehog looked downwards, giving the downward-facing human a blank look while also taking a step back. Sorun, feeling multiple pains across his body from the multiple times he impacted against some surface, groaned out, "Shadow, how does this work?"

"You're asking me?" Shadow asked, face morphing into one of incredulity. "You're usually able to figure these things out fine enough on your own."

"No, dude, you don't understand. This is really hard." Sorun slowly got up onto his knees, grimacing slightly while holding a hand to his side. "Like, like I just keep zipping around everywhere and I- ah!" He teleported again, though this time he remained in the same position on his knees while only having teleported a few inches forwards. "Okay, I... I think I'm gettin' it down... man, that's a weird feeling."

"Are you okay to stand?"

"Er... yeah..." He sounded unsure of himself, though nonetheless Sorun managed to get up onto his feet, stumbling slightly but managing to catch himself before falling fully. "You can teleport, right? Can you help me out with this?" Sorun asked, looking back up to Shadow. "'Cause this is kinda tricky to get the hang of, I can't... this's just so weird."

Shadow hummed, looking Sorun's body up and down with his eyes narrowed in concentration. The look was enough to get Sorun to wonder what it was he was thinking of, but before he had too much time to ponder on this Shadow nodded his head. "I suppose it can't be avoided. Not like anybody else here is a better instructor on the subject." He went as far as the glance to the side towards Sonic, who was still sitting on the couch in the center of the room. Sorun could have sworn he'd heard some edge of superiority edged in that last sentence that somehow went with that look he was sending Sonic.

The blue hedgehog's mature response was to stick his tongue out at Shadow, who scoffed and rolled his eyes at the ceiling at the sight. Sorun stared in confusion between the two, and from the side he could see both Tails and Rotor palming their faces at the sight of the two hedgehogs' antics. Virgil just continued to hover in place, looking just as confused as Sorun looked.

"Okay, uh... yeah." Shaking his head, Sorun turned towards Sonic. "Hey, so uh, I'm gonna go with Shadow to try and work this teleport thing out. That alright?"

Sonic waved a hand to the side, calling out, "Yeah, sure, if you're feeling alright after all that go ahead. Have fun hanging out with the grouch over there."

"Don't mind him. He's just upset that you keep turning to me for help with your powers since I'm the only one here qualified to do so," Shadow said, maintaining his glare towards Sonic who was doing the same. Sorun looked back and forth between the two again, and after a few moments of this behavior continuing he decided to step in.

"And I deeply appreciate you taking the time to do so, now can we please go?" Sorun asked, leaning his body between the two hedgehogs while looking towards Shadow.

"Hmph. Of course." Casting one final glance towards Sonic, Shadow huffed and turned towards the stairs. "We'll go to the usual spot."

"Sounds good." Sorun looked back and nodded his head towards Virgil, with the Chao immediately flying over to hover next to Sorun's left shoulder. Satisfied, Sorun turned back around towards Shadow's back and began following him to the stairs that lead up and out of the HQ.

For some reason, though, Shadow stopped right at the base of the stairs. Sorun had stopped right behind him and looked on in confusion, but when he looked towards the stairs he understood why

the hedgehog had stopped: somebody else was already coming down the stairs. And Sorun only needed a few seconds' glance at her legs to tell it was Sally.

"Hm? Oh, hey guys." Sally had stopped in surprise at seeing all the people in the HQ after descending the stairs, but then relaxed immediately upon seeing all their faces and even gave a small wave. Her eyes turned towards Sorun, at which point she lit up a bit and said, "Oh, Sorun, you and the others are back from that mission. I trust it went well?"

"About as well as it could have gone," Sorun answered with a nod. "Even managed to get an Emerald. Shadow's helping me out with some difficulties I have right now, but it's not an issue."

Sally nodded. "Alright, well I'm glad to... hear..." Her eyes slowly looked upwards, her voice trailing off when she saw the floating, split-winged and horned Chao hovering right next to him. She continued to silently stare at him, and then slowly lifted a finger up to point at Virgil. "Is that...?"

Sorun looked up to the Chao. "Oh, yeah, that's Virgil," he answered, turning back to Sally. "He did his weird egg-evolution thing and turned out like that. Guess his wing grew back, too."

"Ah, I understand. I'm happy to see he's all better now!" She sent a bright smile up at the Chao, and Sorun, with some amusement, noticed the way Virgil had crossed his short limbs while turning his head away, almost as if he was embarrassed at the attention. Sally giggled at the action and looked back towards Sorun. "Well, I won't stay in your hair any longer than needed. Oh, but one more thing."

"Mm?" Sorun gave her a questioning hum, but then instantly grew still when he saw her reaching into her vest.

"Nicole wasn't doing much and kept asking me when you'd be back from the mission you, Rotor, and Tails went on," she explained, brining out the handheld computer from a pocket inside of her vest.

"Getting a Chaos Emerald from Eggman is a big accomplishment, so I don't see any reason why you two can't take some time to-"

"Can't."

Sally froze at the interruption, and then gave Sorun a wide-eyed look when she realized what he'd just said. She was right in the middle of making the motion to hand him Nicole, too, though after hearing him speak she pulled her back a bit. "What?" she asked, almost as if to see if she'd heard right.

"Can't," Sorun repeated, eyes locked right on the handheld. "I'm doing the thing with Shadow right now."

"O... kay, but right after you can-"

"Can't." For some reason Sorun couldn't keep his eyes off of the computer that was being held in Sally's hand. Nicole's body. He'd felt his heart begin to beat heavily in his chest the moment he saw her, and in truth he desperately wanted to grab her from Sally. He couldn't, though. He just couldn't. "Shadow, let's go," Sorun quickly muttered, walking right past a stunned Sally and going straight for the stairs.

There wasn't anything said between any of the Mobians as they watched the human quickly storm up the stairs, his pet Chao following closely behind. Shadow had cast a single, curious glance towards Sally's way, but in the end this look had only lasted a second before he headed for the stairs following Sorun.

"Um..." It was the only response Sally, still staring up after where the human had gone up the stairs and out of sight, could form. She shook herself out of her stupor moments later, and then glanced down at the computer held in her hand. "Er, Nicole, I'm sure Sorun's just busy with something. Nicole?"

The computer didn't respond to her. In fact, the green screen on the top part of the handheld went completely dark, forcing Sally to sigh out and close the computer completely and then place it back into her vest. She then looked towards the other three in the room, who looked just as equally surprised and confused as she did.

"What was up with that?" Sonic was the first to speak, an eye ridge furrowed in confusion as he gestured towards the stairs. "Sorun always jumps at the opportunity to hang out with Nicole."

"I'm just as confused as you are, Sonic," Sally admitted with a shake of her head. Ever since they'd gotten to know one another Sorun never, ever turned down an opportunity to do something with Nicole, especially as of late. It went both ways, too; Sally couldn't recall a time where Nicole had said no to hanging out with Sorun without good reason whenever he asked, and being the good friend she was, of course she'd lent him Nicole whenever the time allowed it.

It was just supposed to be something to motivate Sorun at first. There was precious little else Sorun enjoyed doing, and sometimes it seemed like to Sally the mere prospect of doing something as simple as playing a game or talking with the AI was what got him out of bed. And she'd noticed he'd begun to become more proactive over time, probably as a result of it, so she'd been subtly shifting tasks around from time to time to make it so their free time lined up more and more with each others'.

For the most part, it had seemed to be a big success. Mentally speaking Sorun had been improving a considerable amount over time, especially after him accepting he was here to stay on Mobius and his continued sessions with Nicole. He'd even gone so far as to start volunteering for missions, which, if someone had told her the human would take on such initiative for the Freedom Fighters, she wouldn't have believed it. But he had, and he'd been getting good results. And these days she didn't even need to shift the schedules around anymore- Nicole made her own free time by moving her own work timetables around directly than Sally having to ask for her. Their interactions seemed to be doing them both some good,

because while it was almost too subtle for her to tell, Sally still noticed that in the last month Nicole had become somewhat more productive in her own personal tasks.

But beyond all that, more than just helping each other improve they seemed to both be happy with the arrangement they'd made between themselves. So seeing Sorun straight-out turn down Sally's offer to lend him Nicole for a bit like that had her floored. He never did that. By all logic he *shouldn't* have done that. His behavior just seemed bizarre to her.

"Sorun did... act kind of off during the mission." Rotor's voice drew the attention of everyone present, causing three sets of eyes to focus over in his direction. "He just... I don't want to say he spaced out, but... I don't know. He just acted a bit weird," the walrus clarified with a shake of his head.

"Maybe all these missions he's been going on is taking a toll on him," Sonic suggested, shrugging his shoulders. "He's been doing a ton of them lately, so it'd be no wonder if he's a bit worn out. Guy's bound to act a little wonky if that's the case."

Sally slowly nodded at the logic, though an unconvinced frown was still present on her face. "That... makes some amount of sense, but I don't see why Sorun-"

"Look, Sal, I gave up trying to understand the guy. A lot of what he does doesn't make a whole lot of sense." Sonic leaned back into the couch, kicking his feet up on one of the cushions while locking his fingers behind his head. "Maybe he really is just tired. He just absorbed another Chaos Emerald- you know he gets tired whenever he does that. I don't know, but I'm sure whatever that was will work itself out. I don't think it's anything to worry about."

"Maybe," Sally mumbled in agreement, her hand unconsciously brushing over where Nicole rested in her vest. "Hopefully you're right, Sonic..."

So. Teleporting. It was tricky.

Ever since getting the Summoned Swords and Bringer Claws Sorun assumed that all of the powers he would get would be as easy to master as those two. Yamato put that theory to bed immediately, but Sorun had chalked that up to the sword being a special case among his powers.

But then he'd gotten the ability to teleport- or Trick, as he referred to it in keeping up with the games' terminology- and he began to realize that, perhaps, they wouldn't all be that easy. He was currently working on getting a good amount of control of it with Shadow over in Crate Land, the name he'd given the small training area full of crates he and Shadow frequented, but it was proving to be a challenge to wrap his head around.

Tricking was... an exceptionally odd sensation. He felt a small sort of "jolt" in his body whenever he did it. Not jolt in the sense of an electrical shock, but more like he felt his entire body just... shift. Like the feeling one would get when they would move at a high speed, only to abruptly stop and feel all their organs shake as a result. It was like that, except for his whole body experiencing this feeling simultaneously for less than a second. Though it was less he was moving rapidly and more that his body was bending space and literally teleporting him from one point to another. Or something along those lines, at least. He wasn't entirely sure how it actually worked. Chaos something-or-other.

Controlling where he would teleport to and doing as little as initiating the act of Tricking had been a bit of a struggle. Shadow had given him some tips: telling him to focus on where he wanted to go when he Tricked so he would actually end up where he wanted to go, while admittedly probably a no-brainer of a suggestion, was still immensely helpful. One big piece of advice he'd been given was to mentally associate the act of Tricking with a mental keyword he could focus on to control his Tricking so he didn't just randomly teleport whenever his thoughts went idle; a mental switch of sorts. Of course,

Sorun had gone the simple route and went with the word "Trick" for his mental trigger phrase.

It hadn't exactly been an instant fix, but it was a long way away from where he started, which was randomly and uncontrollably Tricking everywhere. Shadow assured him it would get easier over time, and Sorun was inclined to agree with him. He had to have some faith that the guy who could teleport could teach somebody else how to teleport. But for now, Sorun had some degree of control over it. The disorientation from changing positions instantly was a hurdle he was slowly overcoming. He could at least initiate a Trick whenever he wanted to without it going off on its own.

Controlling where he actually went was a different matter.

"Agh!" Another unsuccessful Trick had landed him on the ground instead of on top of a pile of crates he'd been focusing on, causing his body to bounce off the ground and tumble in the complete opposite direction he wanted to go. "Egh-oof-ack-rrgh...!"

He finally stopped tumbling around when the momentum in his body finally ran out, causing him to roll onto his back and end up facing upwards. He huffed out an exhausted breath, his features soon settling into a scowl when he saw Shadow's face come into view as the hedgehog leaned over him. And the bastard looked smug.

"You look like you're having fun," Shadow commented. It was that superior tone of voice he had along with that smug smirk on his lips that made Sorun roll his eyes.

"Bite me." Sorun looked away from Shadow and towards a nearby crate. He focused intensely on that spot, thought the word "Trick", and before he knew it he'd ended up from laying on the ground to sitting on the crate. "See, I'm getting better."

"Any progress regardless of the rate you go still falls under the spectrum of 'progress', so yes, by technical terms you are improving."

"... You're not good at this whole sarcasm thing, are you? 'Cause that one fell really flat," Sorun said, shaking his hand from side-to-side in Shadow's direction. Shadow's smug grin instantly devolved into a frown, followed by a scoff as he trudged over to a crate right next to Sorun before sitting down on it. "You had the setup all right but you messed up on the delivery-"

"I don't need to take this from you," Shadow interrupted with a huff.

Sorun rolled his eyes in response, and then looked off to the other side. He saw Virgil hovering in the air besides him, and while he began to try and poke at the Chao as he dodged Sorun's finger, the human asked, "So did you have this much trouble when you were learning to teleport? Whenever that was?"

"Me? Have trouble honing my natural abilities?" Shadow opened his mouth to continue with this train of thought, but as he looked towards Sorun poking at his Chao he slowly closed his mouth and rethought his words. He opened his mouth to speak again, saying, "Admittedly... teleportation did give me some small amount of trouble in the beginning. I'm actually quite surprised how well you're adjusting to your... 'Tricking', as you call it."

"See, now that sarcastic jab from earlier really is worthless. You just obliterated your punchline by admitting I'm making good progress," Sorun said, turning back towards Shadow. "You're never gonna beat Sonic at wordplay at this rate."

Shadow's face actually scrunched up in mild disgust at hearing Sorun's words. He scoffed once again and crossed his arms. "As if I need to be better at telling meaningless *jokes* to be superior to him."

"It's not like you'd have to try very hard- guy's already worse than you. He just recycles the same one-liners over and over." A sad sigh left Sorun as he shook his head. "Always a shame to see such good opportunities for banter go to waste 'cause that guy just blows all his chances on petty, overused insults. It's freakin' frustrating doing missions with him."

"Because you don't approve of his witty remarks?" Shadow asked in an incredulous tone.

"That and other things. Y'know, just the way he does everything so easily, how he never seems to struggle and keeps that stupid grin on his face all the time." Sorun's hand snapped out and pressed down on the top of Virgil's head, the Chao flailing his arms as Sorun pushed him down slightly. "What's your deal with the guy, anyways?" he asked, easing up on the pressure so Virgil floated up only to push him back down again. "Every time you two are in the same room there's this real thick, competitive tension that fills the air and and I feel like I gotta swim out of the room just to get away from you two."

He felt a prick on his hand, and wincing slightly he reflexively pulled his hand away while also looking over towards Virgil. The small Chao, brandishing one of his bladed arms, simply gave Sorun a simple smirk as it floated closer to his side. Sorun snorted in amusement, and then he and Virgil both looked back towards Shadow.

The black and red hedgehog had a thoughtful look on his face, as if pondering the question Sorun had asked while at the same time picking his words out carefully. Finally, he sighed out loud and settled on saying, "We have a bit of history that lead up to where we are now. He thinks he's better than me, I know I'm better than him, and we've yet to definitively prove that I'm right and he's wrong."

"So it's like a rivalry?" Sorun asked.

"I suppose you could call it that, yes."

"Ohhh. Jeez, it's Dante and Vergil all over again, except the colors are reversed. Actually, that... that hits way too close to home. Egh." Sorun uncomfortably breathed out and shook his head. "So just because he's super fast and super tough and you got all your stuff that automatically means you have to keep trying to one-up each other?"

"It's more complicated than that. As I said, we've history," Shadow corrected him. "History I'd rather not get into."

Sorun blinked, looked towards Virgil who just shrugged at him, and then turned back to Shadow. "Fair enough," he said. "It's probably a good thing you don't rely on humor, anyways. Gives you your own style distinct from his. It's a thing you get to have that he can't, you know? This whole... sophisticated and overly-serious thing you got going on," he said, waving his hand in Shadow's direction.

Shadow's crimson eyes rolled away from Sorun, though his body straightened up just the smallest bit as if he was pleased with what he heard. "That's one way of looking at it," he said. A few moments passed, and he looked back to Sorun with an inquisitive look in his features. "What happened back there with the princess and the AI?" he asked.

"A little something I like to call 'none of your business'," Sorun answered, his sitting form going a big rigid as his eyes narrowed just the smallest amount. "Drop it, Shadow. I don't want to talk about this."

To his complete surprise, Shadow shook his head. "I told you about my struggles with learning to teleport and talked a bit about the Faker. You have to tell me what happened at the HQ now."

"What the- I never agreed to a quid-pro-quo convo with you," Sorun denied with a shake of his head. "Where's this coming from?"

Shadow sent Sorun a look mixed with confusion and annoyance. "This is how conversations transpire, is it not? A back and forth between individuals in order to progress the conversation?"

"I mean... yeah, but why do you care?" Sorun asked.

"I don't."

"... So why are you asking?"

"Because you seemed distressed and that can affect your performance," Shadow coolly answered. "The last thing we need is issues arising because of interpersonal problems. And you said you trusted me, did you not? I fail to see who else you would go to if not the AI if there truly is some issue."

"Her name's Nicole," Sorun snapped, but then closed his mouth when Shadow gave him a pointed look. He groaned a bit, and then turned to the side, only to then see Virgil giving him the same inquisitive look Shadow had, which caused him to groan some more. "You're the last person I would ever expect to care about this kind of thing. I'd sooner expect Eggman to walk in here asking about my feelings than you," Sorun mumbled, turning his eyes towards the ground. "Seriously, what gives?"

He would have believed Shadow was asking for purely pragmatic reasons if it wasn't for the fact he was pursuing the issue. Pursuing it meant interest, and Sorun had always thought Shadow considered himself above these kinds of things. That was always the air he gave off. So him coming in out of nowhere and asking this thing was left field for Sorun, and was making him confused. It didn't fit.

Shadow, seemingly sensing Sorun's distress and puzzlement, chose to answer. "I more concerned about the potential for this becoming a bigger issue than necessary more than anything else. If you really need a reason, though, then just call it payment for coming to me all the time for help with your powers."

A few seconds after Shadow's words reached his ears, Sorun's brows creased and he picked his head back up to Shadow. "How is that payment?"

"It gives me something to hold over the Faker. The fact you always come to me for help and not him gets under his skin, even if he won't openly admit it," Shadow answered, a ghost of a smirk playing across his lips. It vanished as soon as it arrived as he refocused on Sorun. "Why did you act so dismissive of Nicole?"

The small amount of appreciation Sorun felt over Shadow using Nicole's name was overshadowed by the urge to *not* tell Shadow why Sorun had done what he did. And he wasn't going to tell him. Even if... he did feel nice knowing Shadow was acknowledging the trust Sorun had said he'd put in him that one time, even if up until now he acted like he didn't. It was something, but not quite enough for Sorun to tell Shadow the truth on *that* certain matter.

Still, he felt he deserved something, so Sorun decided to go with what was on his mind to try and deflect the conversation.

"Shadow... sometimes in life it's easier to run away from your problems than face them head-on," Sorun said, form slumping slightly as his limbs went a bit limp. "This-this is essentially what I'm doing in regards to Nicole. I decided I'm just gonna do that forever now."

There were a few moments were Shadow continued to look impassively at Sorun's face, almost as if he'd not believed what Sorun had said or that he'd said some sort of jest. After some time passed, though, Shadow's face morphed into silent realization when he realized Sorun was completely serious, and right after his face set into a deep frown. "Sorun. That is completely moronic and ridiculous."

Sorun winced and turned away from Shadow. "You don't mince words, do ya?" he muttered.

"Chao."

The teen's eyes widened when he heard that tone of voice from Virgil, and when he looked to the Chao the small creature had his arms crossed and was glaring right towards Sorun, almost as if he was in agreement with Shadow's sentiment. This only caused Sorun's resolve to break even further.

"You shut up. I don't need this from you, too," Sorun hissed, turning back forwards to avoid both their glares. Despite him not having to

see their eyes, though, he still felt them looking at him, and looking away had helped him none. "Look, this doesn't concern you."

"I would argue that is false, but we both know you're aware of this, so I'll save my breath," Shadow responded. "What happened between you and Nicole?"

"Nothing happened, I just... I can't take a break from somebody?" Sorun groaned out loud, leaning back on the crate he sat on to look towards the sky. "Geez, man, I try to diversify by hanging out with people outside my normal circle of my singular friend and you give me the third degree?"

"That isn't a circle."

"..." Sorun blinked, and then looked back down to Shadow. "What?"

"You and your friend, in this case Nicole, would only make two points. You can't make a circle with only two points," Shadow clarified.

It wasn't said as a joke, as Shadow had said this with a completely deadpan expression and serious voice. Any other time Sorun would have laughed at what he'd just heard, but right now the anxiety coursing through him was making him hold off on any laughing. "Straight line, whatever, you get what I mean," Sorun sighed out. "I just wanted to hang out with someone else for a change. Is that good enough for you?"

"No. It isn't." Sorun's eyes widened in surprise at the answer, whereas Shadow's just narrowed. "We aren't friends, and Nicole and I are the only two in Knothole you openly trust. She's your only friend. And this has nothing to do with the fact you told me you're running away from a problem regarding her." The scowl on Shadow's face deepened, and he leaned forwards on the crate towards Sorun. "Now stop lying and tell me the truth."

The extremely forward approach Shadow was taking with Sorun caused two reactions within the teen: the first was complete shock. He never expected Shadow to ever put much effort into anything Sorun had considered so mundane for him, and for Sorun of all people no less. It was... almost touching in a weird way only Shadow could produce.

It was also making Sorun more cross than he would have liked, because he refused to budge from his position and he genuinely felt Shadow had no business prying this far into a matter he absolutely did not want to discuss.

"You want me to tell you some truth?" Sorun's tone had shifted towards a more terse one, and the change had elicited some surprise in Shadow from the way his head just slightly twitched. "Here's some truth: I'm not telling you," Sorun continued. "You wanna have a chat with me so we can talk about some random whatever, then sure, I'm fine with that. But every time I ever ask something personal about you it's always 'I don't wish to discuss that', or 'that is none of your concern', so you don't get to sit there actin' all Mr. Mysterious and expect anything from me, especially after I told you all that personal stuff about my powers. I never even told Nicole about that."

He was fully aware that what he was saying came off as completely hypocritical, especially considering everything he was hiding from everybody, Shadow included. But Shadow didn't know that, so there was no way he would be able to call Sorun out on it and turn the argument in his favor. More importantly, it gave Sorun an out. A way out of this topic so he could stop scraping for reasons to avoid talking about the issue and focus on something else, or better yet just leave.

And as it was, he actually did just feel like leaving. Both to escape from this conversation and because he was legitimately a bit frustrated at Shadow and his own brand of hypocrisy. And it seemed like something Sorun had said got through to Shadow, based on the way he'd gone from an angry scowl to a small, almost surprised

expression with thoughtful eyes. Either way, it was a chance Sorun was taking to get out of this mess.

"I think we're done here," Sorun said, standing up from his crate while keeping his eyes locked on Shadow.

"It would appear so," Shadow silently agreed with a small nod. "You're leaving, then?"

"Yeah. I gotta go clear my head." Sliding his hands into his pocket, Sorun nodded towards Virgil and then turned his back to Shadow. "Gonna go take a walk. I'll... talk to you later, I guess."

He began walking once Virgil floated to just over his shoulder, and as he walked he didn't hear Shadow say anything in response to Sorun's final words with him. He did feel the hedgehog's eyes on his back, but whatever face he was making was lost on Sorun as he refused to turn around and meet his gaze again. He just wanted to leave.

"Why does life here have to be so complicated?"

Maybe it was his fault. Going back and forth with people all the time while trying to maintain the cover that he was fine and that everything was fine when, no, everything was not fine and he never felt fine. But he accepted that as long as he maintained the illusion that everything was fine and tricked everybody else into thinking he was fine, that for long as he had that going, things would proceed smoothly and nobody would have to worry themselves into an early grave. That was his job. It wasn't something he took pride in, but seeing as how he'd given so much up already he figured it was his by right by now. So he just had to keep it up 'til he died.

But things always made his endeavors complicated. His wishy-washy relationship between the Freedom Fighters made it complicated. His thoughts on Nicole, oh, there were complexities aplenty there, but all he could do with those was hide from them and

hope they would go away. Which they probably wouldn't, but a chance was a chance. Even if it was miniscule. Abysmal. Practically nonexistent. And made him feel even more awful than usual.

He felt like this should've been way simpler than it needed to be. Go to a new world, get powers, kill robots, kill fat tyrant, die. Why couldn't it have been that simple?

"I don't know, it's just- it's this whole *thing* , you know?" Sorun mumbled out in an exasperated tone, throwing his arms out in front of him as he shook his head. "I feel like I'm going out of my mind here. I probably am going out of my mind, but it's like, it's, I'm not the bad guy here, am I?"

"Chao."

Sorun cast a weary glance at the Chao floating next to him. He didn't know if walking through the outer edges of Knothole talking to a floating creature with the same energy of a madman mumbling out insane ramblings was the greatest of ideas, but as it happened Virgil was a great listener. Sorun didn't have a clue what he actually said outside of his expressions and visual cues, and his strange... emotion dot thing disappearing with his transformation wasn't helping in translation much, but he got enough of a gist to understand what the Chao meant. Usually. And right now he was giving Sorun judgmental eyes.

"C'mon, gimme a break, I'm doing the best I can here," Sorun grumbled out as he rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "And no, I'm not telling you my personal issues, either. You'll just have to deal with it like everybody else."

Virgil rolled his eyes, and then gruffly muttered, "Chao-chao."

"Because I figured it doesn't matter how much I suffer as long as everybody else comes out alright in the end, so it doesn't matter how people see me, but it's like, it's like I grew to like them all and tried to pretend I didn't and that's falling apart more and more like water on

the daily. They probably see me as one part weirdo who can't make up his mind on what he wants and one part workaholic going on mission after mission, because somehow going out fighting robots to the death turned into a *break* for me." He sighed and let his hands drop to his side. "I don't even know why I care. 'Cause I care about them? Maybe. This is all... strange and confusing for me."

"Chaaoo...?" Virgil hedged, leaning in closer towards Sorun's face.

The human sighed and lightly pushed the Chao away. "No, I don't wanna talk about Nicole, just, just drop it. Don't wanna."

"Chao?"

"Because I don't want to, alright?"

"Chao," Virgil muttered, voice admonishing.

"I'm *aware* my solution's an awful one, but it's all I got. It's literally all I got! What else am I supposed to do, talk to her about it? Pfft. That ain't happening." Sorun sighed out and ran a ragged hand through his hair. "I mean, I could, but I don't know how that conversation would go and if the worst happened... ah, geez, this is all my fault. I shouldn't have gotten the ball rolling by avoiding her like that. Shoulda just kept the status quo up. Could have avoided this whole thing, but nah, I had to go and make it weird because I, because I didn't, I didn't want- rghh, I don't even know anymore." He frustratingly pulled at some of his hair, sighed, and pulled his hand away. "You get what I mean, right? Right? Virgil?"

When he didn't get a response from the Chao, Sorun looked to the side towards where he'd last seen Virgil floating. To his mild surprise he didn't find Virgil there, and after some light searching around, Sorun saw where the Chao had wandered off to: towards a tall tree near him, where the Chao was currently floating up to get at some of the apples hanging off the branches.

"I'm losin' my mind here," Sorun murmured to himself, shaking his head while rubbing at his eyes. "Guess that's what I get for trying to hold a conversation with a... hey now, what's this?"

He didn't think he'd find anybody out this far at the edge of Knothole, and yet Sorun did manage to spot a figure out in the distance up ahead. When he squinted his eyes and looked closer he realized it was Antoine, who was currently walking along while... talking to himself, for some reason. Sorun huffed out a breath at the sight, looked towards Vigil who was still going for the apples on the tree, and then looked back towards Antoine.

"... Screw it. I need a distraction." A mischievous grin formed on Sorun's face as an idea came to his head. *"I'm gonna mess with him."*

In that instant, his body disappeared only to then reappear right behind Antoine, who was none the wiser of the human teen suddenly appearing near him. Sorun's grin widened a large amount, and after mentally preparing himself he said, "Hey, Antoine."

He saw that the coyote's ears had perked up upon hearing his name be called out, though right before Antoine turned around Sorun had Tricked away out sight. As such, when Antoine had turned around all he saw behind him was empty air.

"Eh?" Antoine turned back around forwards, though when he still saw nothing his ears had flattened in confusion. "Strange... I could have sworn-ed I heard my name..."

"Antoine, behind ya."

Picking his head back up, Antoine whirled right back around towards where he heard the voice. But, yet again, there was nothing behind him.

"What in ze... Sorun, iz that you?" Antoine called out, turning his head left and right in search of the human. "Where are you?"

"Dude, right behind you. Been here the whole time."

"No, you have not!" Antoine hotly denied, turning towards the source of the voice yet again only to find absolutely nothing. He took in a deep breath, and then slowly lifted his hands up as a sign of surrender as a breathy chuckle left him. "Okay, Sorun, mon ami, I am having to admit I am not understanding how you are doing this, but can you please be stopping it?"

"Huh? What am I... oh, right." Once again Antoine turned towards the voice behind him, letting out a small sigh of frustration when he found nothing. "Yeah, I guess you wouldn't be able to see me-" continued Sorun's voice from behind him, "- seeing as I'm a ghost."

"Eh heh heh... heh... ghost?" Antoine repeated, trying in vain to turn around only to see the space behind him was empty. His shoulders seemed to reflexively hunch up in fear as he began glancing at the wooded area around him. "You are- you are being serious?" Antoine asked with a loud gulp.

"Yeah, in my zone people just turn into ghosts when they die. That not happen here?" By now Antoine had given up trying to find Sorun, though now his teeth were beginning to chatter as his eyes darted left and right at the sound of Sorun's voice. Sorun, still maintaining his position outside of Antoine's visual area, smirked at the reaction and continued with, "Sorry to break it to you this way, but it is what it is."

"S-S-S-Sorun, if this eez some kind of joke, I will tell you right now eet iz not very funny," Antoine stammered out, his whole body seemingly shaking in fright as he continued glancing around for Sorun. "You cannot seriously be ze ghostie type right now."

"Oh no I am. See?" And then, right after speaking, Sorun Tricked right in front of Antoine, his sudden appearance causing Antoine to completely freeze and his irises to shrink to pinpricks. "Boo."

The smile on Sorun's face increased to near-manic proportions when Antoine, upon seeing Sorun appear right before his eyes, let out a high-pitched shriek and fell over right onto his backside. Sorun couldn't contain his amusement and doubled over while laughing and pointing at Antoine. The Mobian's fright quickly began to subside upon hearing the human's laughter, and the scared look on his face turned into a heavy frown once he began to climb back to his feet. Sorun's laughter began to taper off considerably, though he was still making a few chuckles even after seeing Antoine stand across from him with that unamused expression.

"Tricked ya, Antoine~" Sorun softly called out, bending forwards slightly while still grinning at the coyote. He let a final sigh out and straightened up, running a hand through his hair. "Ahhh... yeah, I got a teleport power. Cool, huh?"

"Oui, oui, eet iz very 'cool' as you say. I am being very glad you have chose-ed to play a joke on me using it," Antoine remarked, brushing his hands against his jacket to discard any loose dirt.

"Yeah, ah agree." Sorun found himself frozen when he felt an iron-like grip clamp down on his left shoulder. And when he looked towards it, he saw that it was, in fact, a metal hand. Seeing that and hearing the feminine, Southern drawl behind him, Sorun didn't need to think too hard to guess who it was.

Thing was, Sorun hadn't expected that voice to be right behind him, or for that hand to suddenly appear right on his shoulder. And, due to his earlier actions, the word "Trick" had still been fresh in his mind. So as a consequence to all of this, when he realized it was Bunnie that was standing right behind him, Sorun had been startled enough that he'd accidentally Tricked away by a few feet.

Sorun had stumbled forwards a few steps from the unexpected teleportation, though he quickly caught himself from falling straight over. He would have sighed out from managing to catch himself, but then a strange sound reached his ears. An odd, electrical sparking

sound. And, much to his uneasiness, he began to realize there was still a weight on his left shoulder.

Slowly, Sorun turned his head to the side to looked down at his shoulder. To his growing horror, he found that there was still a mechanical hand attached to his shoulder. The arm, however, was not where it was supposed to be. It was currently dangling down on Sorun's back from where it was grabbing onto him, and when he looked behind him at Bunnie, he saw that she was standing in place a few feet behind while staring wide-eyed at her missing left arm.

"Ooooh, that's... yeah, that's my bad..." Sorun slowly hissed out at the emotional anguish that was beginning to settle in him as he, with some effort, removed the cybernetic arm from his shoulder. He Tricked right back in front of Bunnie, an extremely apologetic look on his face as he awkwardly offered the arm back to her. "I'm... I'm so sorry, Bunnie. I just got this power a couple of hours ago and I'm still learning how to use it. I didn't mean to do that."

He was worried she was going to yell at him for literally disarming her, or, even worse, that she'd give him a cold glare while snatching the arm out of his hand. He'd feared these things, at least, though he didn't find himself all that surprised when Bunnie just sighed and gingerly took the cybernetic arm from his grasp using her flesh and blood arm. "This actually happens a lot more than ya'd think," she mumbled to him, her green eyes glancing down at her metal shoulder socket and the few sparking wires sticking out of it. "It ain't no worry, Sorun. It goes back on easy enough. Might need tah go to Rotor fer some adjustments, though."

"That's... good," Sorun said, still warily eyeing the sparking shoulder. "So what are you and Antoine doing out here, anyways?"

"We were takin' a walk together," she answered, stepping around Sorun to go to Antoine's side. The teen couldn't help but wince when he saw Antoine glaring at him, his own eyes constantly switching from glaring at the human to looking worryingly at Bunnie's detached arm. "We were talkin' an' my darlin' Antoine got into tellin' another

one of his stories. Ah swear, his head got lost in the clouds, an' he plain just started walkin' the other way! I went to go lookin' for 'im when ah found ya messin' around with him."

"Non, zat iz not true at all!" Antoine denied, appearing to have completely forgotten Sorun as he turned to fully face Bunnie. "My head was perfectly on ze ground and not in ze sky!"

Bunnie sent him a flat look. "Antoine. You were walkin' off by yerself still talkin' while I was all the way behind ya."

Antoine sputtered in denial as a result, but Bunnie's look towards him remained unwavering. Realizing he wouldn't be convincing her, he just simply crossed his arms with a loud huff while turning his head to the side, a light blush on his cheeks. Sorun was mostly just glad that feeling of slight animosity he felt from Antoine seemed to have passed, and so he cleared his throat to gain Bunnie's attention back.

"Well, uh, glad you're okay," he said, voice quiet and still nervous. "You need any help, or...?"

Bunnie shook her head. "Not unless ya can use that fancy new power a yours to get us back to the HQ lickity-split."

His lips thinning, Sorun flicked his eyes back down to the detached arm and then looked back into Bunnie's eyes. "Yeah, I don't think it's a good idea to do that with people holding onto me. And I can't- I can't really go that far using it," he said to her. "Really helps with that mobility problem I have, but it's not really something I can use for travel. It's a short-range kind of thing, you know?"

"Ah. Alright." Bunnie nodded her head and stepped to Antoine's other side. She wrapped her remaining arm over the other Mobian's shoulder, hand still holding onto the artificial arm while a small grin formed on her face when she felt him shyly squirm under her grasp.

"Why do you insist on doing zis in front of him?" Antoine mumbled under his breath, looking so far away from Bunnie Sorun was surprised his neck hadn't snapped.

"Sorun ain't the only one that likes teasin' ya, Sugah..."

"And like that, I'm out." Sorun's hands were promptly shoved into his pockets, and he spun right around and began walking away when the two began acting like that. He was glad at the excuse to leave, too. The fact he'd accidentally torn Bunnie's arm off by Tricking wasn't something he was going to forget any time soon. *"I really gotta learn not to Trick like that on accident. Might end up hurting somebody if I don't.*

"Ah, but man, they sure seem happy together," Sorun thought to himself, going as far as to crane his neck over his shoulder to briefly glance at the couple before going back to looking forwards. *"Guess it's not so surprising. Looks really nice, two people bein'... together like that... gah, quit it."* He reached up to slap the side of his head, shaking it while incoherently mumbling under his breath. In the midst of his slapping, though, an unpleasant sensation shot through him. His footsteps stopped immediately, and before he knew it he began to uncontrollably cough.

He tried to contain the coughing, but that unpleasant sensation proved to be too great. His body began to uncontrollably shudder from the uncontrollable coughing, and after a bit he began gasping for breath when the coughing proved to be too intense for him to breath alongside it. He'd almost fallen over on the ground from the coughing, though fortunately it soon relented as that unpleasant feeling faded from his chest.

"Ack, ah... agh..." Bent over, Sorun was forced to take in a few heavy breaths to regain his bearings, after which he stood back up straight with a grunt of effort. Not long after, though, he felt something moist on his arms, and with his stomach dropping he looked down to examine his limbs.

He managed to ascertain what that wet feeling was in an instant when he saw specks of red dotting both of his forearms. He'd accidentally coughed blood onto himself.

"... Gonna have to wash this off in the river so nobody sees." Heavily sighing, Sorun re-pocketed his arms and continued walking forwards, trying his best to put the picture of his blood-stained arms out of his mind. "Guess I'll go do that then get Virgil. Hope he doesn't wander too far from that tree."

Chapter 33

Recursion Error

Episode 33- Bombs. Lies. More bombs.

By and large, the factory looked about the same as any factory Eggman constructed: a large, industrial complex with giant spires that constantly spewed toxic smog into the air and was devoid of any plant life all around. An absolute blight that polluted the land all around it. Patrols of robots constantly guarded the outside and inside of the factory around the clock, always aware and always searching for any possible threats.

One such robot, a common red Egg Pawn with a lance in hand, had been patrolling the chain-link fence that surrounded the factory's outer perimeter, near a large stack of shipping containers. It had walked past a space between two stacks of containers, but then stopped mid-step when it picked up something odd within its sensors. It planted its feet right onto the ground and, with its lance at the ready, turned to the space between the containers and looked down at the anomaly it detected.

The anomaly had been a box. An ordinary cardboard box.

The Egg Pawn stared motionlessly down at the box for a full ten seconds, and then lifted the point of its lance right back up to the sky as its posture straightened out. It turned its back to the cardboard box, and then began marching away.

It'd only gotten two steps in before the silver blade of a katana burst through its chest.

"Shh shh shhhh... sleep now and dream of electric sheep..." The lights of the Badnik's eyes and mouth went dark as the machine

died, its body tilting backwards as all control left it. A pair of blue, spectral arms caught its body right before it hit the ground, and then proceeded to drag its corpse into the hidden space between the shipping containers as the arms' user quickly pulled the katana out from the robot.

Safely hiding the Badik in the hiding spot, Sorun dispelled the Bringer Arms, sheathed Yamato, and then looked out towards the large factory that was right in front of him. The pale teen ran a hand through his chin-length black hair, and then sighed out loud as he looked up at the black smoke being pumped up into the darkened, orange sky. "It's always so jarring going from all the clean air in Knothole to places like this. Surprised I'm not catching anything from all this smog..." he mumbled under his breath as he turned away. *"Wouldn't really matter at this point, though, would it?"*

From the corner of his eye, he saw a spot of air shimmer against one of the shipping containers. The shimmer soon solidified into the transparent shape of a Mobian, and then color faded in to reveal a purple chameleon Mobian leaning against the container, his eyes trained on Sorun and his arms crossed.

"This is the third factory we've been sent out to bomb this month. Third one," Sorun groused. "Sally doesn't have anywhere better to be sending us?"

A small, playful smirk formed on Espio's mouth. "And here I was thinking you liked seeing Eggman's factories explode."

"Eh, the first time, yeah, but you see on giant factory blow up and you see 'em all blow up. It just lost its charm for me."

"Did somebody call my name?" Both the Mobian and the human turned their heads to the side, where they saw a small bee Mobian fly in from over one of the shipping containers and hover up the ground next to them.

"No, Charmy, nobody called your name," Espio denied with a shake of his head, "but since you're here we'll go over the plan one more time."

"Five mobiums says it's the exact same plan it was all the other times we've done this," Sorun muttered out as he walked into the space between the shipping crates.

Espio's eyes followed the human into the space, and with a sigh he reached down to grasp one of the two satchels slung across his torso. "We're to sneak into Robotnik's factory, where me and Sorun-"

"Sorun and I," Sorun corrected.

"... Sorun and I," Epsio repeated, eyes twitching in the direction the human walked down, "will place these high-yield explosives at strategic points along the factory's interior at locations-"

"Do we seriously have to go over where we're planting the things?" Sorun interrupted, poking his head out from the space he'd walked into to look at Espio. "These factories are all practically built the same. The dang Badnik patrols are practically the same; I memorized all their routes and patterns the second time in when I saw them doing the same thing from the first time." Felt like he was grinding out repeatable side quests in an RPG at this point for the amount of repetition he was suffering through, but he wouldn't complain about his job being made easier for him. He would complain about the tedium, though. Which this kind of mission was slowly becoming: tedious.

Apparently there were so many of these factories that Eggman didn't bother to design every single one personally to meet the specific requirements of that area and its quota of production. Why this was Sorun didn't know, because it seemed like the madman had more time on his hands than he needed. Maybe it was just to make it easier on them so he could stroke his ego further, but whatever the case these factories were all little more than cookie-cutter recreations of a master design with only slight variations between

each factory's construction. Same went for the Badniks, too. Always had similar numbers with routes, patterns and the such.

A slight, annoyed glare began to form in Espio's eyes. "Perhaps you would like to take over the mission briefing, Sorun?"

"You know what, maybe I do. You're always the one doing it." Clearing his throat, Sorun briefly stepped out from between the containers while pointing his thumb at himself. "Alright, Espio and I-" he gave the chameleon a look from the side of his eye, making Espio scoff and turn away, "- are gonna go place a bunch of bombs everywhere." He pointed to Charmy. "Meanwhile, Charmy goes and plugs Nicole into the factory's main computer. Like all the last times we did this. Simple enough?"

"Mm-hm!" Unlike Espio, who was scowling off to the side, Charmy was giving Sorun a bubbly nod while bouncing up and down. "I like Sorun's briefing way better than yours, Espio. His isn't boring and it's easy to understand."

"... My briefings aren't boring." An indignant, glum frown formed on Espio's face. "They're cool and professional," he quietly whispered.

Sorun, having heard the horned Mobian's whisper, snorted out a laugh and walked back into the space between the containers. "Keep tellin' yourself that, Espio. We'll head out in a sec, just lemme grab my box here."

As he crouched down in front of the cardboard box, he heard a disgruntled groan from Espio. "That box is not a viable tool for infiltration, Sorun," he heard Espio say from behind him.

"You're just mad because it works so well," Sorun countered as he picked the box up.

"It wouldn't hold up in a forest environment or anywhere else where a box would be out of place," Espio said, his tone slightly challenging.

Box in hand, Sorun turned around, exited the space, and gave the chameleon a look with a quirked eyebrow. "It's a good thing we're carrying this mission out in an industrial environment, then." He nodded his head towards the factory. "Y'know, where things like a box won't be out of place."

"A storage container or metal crate, yes, but I hardly think a *cardboard* box would be seen as normal in a Badnik factory."

"Nah, it totally works." Sorun flipped the box around to show Espio a crudely-drawn, red Eggman logo on the side of the box. "See, I drew a little Eggman symbol on it with a crayon. The Badniks just walk right past it, I swear."

"..." Taking a glance down at the symbol, Espio released a defeated sigh while reaching up to rub at his eyes. "Whatever works for you, Sorun."

"Ah-huh, yeah." Sending the chameleon a smug look, which the Mobian tried and failed to pretend to ignore which made Sorun's petty glee grow, he began to fold the box into a more compact shape as he turned his head to face Charmy. "You all good, Charmy?"

"Yep, me and Nicole are good to go!" The small Mobian held out Nicole's handheld in his right hand, Sorun's body stiffening at the sight of it. "It should be easy. All I gotta do is swoop in-" Charmy began making exaggerated movements with his arms, "- sneak into the computer room, take out any mean ol' Badniks along the way-"

Sorun silently watched the bee as he continued to bounce all around, now proceeding to flail his arms around wildly while acting out his words. The teen's eyes were drawn towards Charmy's right hand, which was currently clutching Nicole's handheld body. A body that Charmy was rapidly shaking around with his movements. Sorun's facial features began twitching when he saw this, and not even a second later he finally had enough and snatched Nicole out of Charmy's grasp.

"Could you not shake her!?" Sorun angrily growled out, shooting a glare towards Charmy. "She doesn't like being shaken."

"Okay, I won't!" Charmy had flown back a bit while raising his arms up, sending a pout towards Sorun's way all the while. After a bit he began looking between Sorun and the handheld he was holding, causing a thoughtful look to begin to form on the bee's face. "Hm... hey, why don't you just take Nicole instead?"

Sorun was fairly certain his heart skipped a beat there. "Huh?" He felt a sudden weight in his hand, and when he looked down he realized that Charmy had flown over and forcibly handed Sorun Nicole. "H-huh?"

"Yeah, since you keep complaining about all these missions being the same, we'll mix it up a bit!" Charmy proposed, a light smile on his face as he flew next to Espio. "I'm getting tired of doing the same job, too, so me and Espy can go and set all the bombs while you deal with the computers."

"Wait, hold on-" Sorun attempted to argue this new idea, though he was immediately interrupted when Espio handed one of the satchels he had to Charmy.

"Works for me," the chameleon said. Sorun couldn't tell if Espio was truly ignorant of the protest on his face, or if he was just ignoring it to spite Sorun, but either way it seemed his mind was made up. "Keep in contact. We'll meet back here when we're done."

And then, before Sorun could even get another word in edgewise, they were off. Charmy had shrunk down to a mere fraction of his size and carried himself and the satchel full of explosives out of sight. Espio had just turned invisible and disappeared entirely. All that was left was Sorun, holding a folded-up box in one hand and Nicole in the other.

The same Nicole he'd been completely avoiding for some time now. The same Nicole that he could have continued to avoid if he hadn't

opened his mouth and put the idea of switching roles for the mission out for Charmy to hear. The one he was currently holding. That Nicole.

"... I really fuckin' hate myself sometimes," Sorun thought to himself as he looked down at the handheld. He was almost tempted to throw the thing out of frustration, but he knew he'd never be able to bring himself to do that. Instead he aired out his frustrations in the form of a heavy sigh, and then tried speaking to the computer. "So, uh... looks like it's just us now, Nicole. Nicole? You there?"

She must have been there; the green screen on the top portion of her handheld was lit up. Even so, at first nothing had happened in response to Sorun's question. And then Sorun felt it- a moderate electrical jolt zapped right into Sorun's hand from the handheld. He felt the electricity jolt through his entire arm, causing Sorun to hiss out in pain and reflexively stiffen his arm before the muscles finally relaxed. He sighed out loud and looked back down at the handheld.

"Yeah, I... I think she might be mad at me." He couldn't think of any other reason why she'd be acting like this. And admittedly he hadn't been expecting any *good* reaction from her considering the distance he'd put between them, but the thing was he didn't know what to even expect at all. He didn't know what an upset Nicole was like. A serious and focused one, sure. Even a downcast one from that one unsanctioned mission. But an upset Nicole? Specifically one upset at him?

He didn't have a clue. Apparently in involved shocking. And he had to carry her around now in hostile enemy territory.

As if his nerves weren't strained enough.

"What a great day I'm having," Sorun bitterly thought to himself as he began stomping towards the factory.

He knew from the get-go, ever since that heist mission for the second Emerald, that Egg Pawns were *laughably* easy to sneak past. They all followed the same parameters and fell for the same tricks. They were all uniform in their movements and easy to predict. And the cardboard box practically made him invisible as long as he didn't move in their line of sight.

Seriously, the cardboard box was shockingly effective against sneaking past Badniks. He didn't know what it was about it. Maybe because they didn't pick up as a biological thing from the box for them to analyze with their sensors they didn't register the box as a threat, or maybe the shoddy Eggman symbol he'd drawn on it actually did work, or at least somewhat help. Maybe they were all just idiots, which wouldn't be something he'd expect as he didn't know Eggman to poorly program his own combat AI, but a lot of the logic in this world was wonky, so what did he know? He was still trying to wrap his head around how Espio's shoes and gloves turned invisible with him and how the satchel bag with explosives shrunk with Charmy.

"Maybe it's not that his skin - scales? - turn invisible, but he puts out some kinda short-range invisibility field or something," Sorun thought to himself. He was currently crouched down in his cardboard box, peeking out from the handle slot on the box's side and watching the metal legs of a patrol of Egg Pawns walk right past him. *"Just, like, some kinda field that only goes a few millimeters off his skin. That'd explain why his clothes turn invisible, too. So how the hell does Charmy's stuff shrink with him? Is it Chaos energy nonsense? It's probably Chaos energy nonsense."*

It made some amount of sense. Apparently every being in this world inherently had some kind of link to the Chaos Force, and he'd already seen people like Sonic with a strong enough link that they had powers. And his own powers proved that abilities powered by Chaos energy did... some pretty weird stuff sometimes. So powers like that weren't completely out there. Not when the Emeralds had

given him something like Yamato. Invisibility and shrinking were tame in comparison to that sword.

And yet, somehow, it still managed to freak him out sometimes.

"Alright, they're gone." Once the robots disappeared from sight, he waited for a few seconds until the sound of their footsteps disappeared before he began crouch-walking back up the hallway he'd been hiding in, box still over his form. *"I still can't believe how much I'm getting away with this box cheat,"* Sorun continued to think to himself. *"You'd think Eggman would patch this if it really is a programming error, but I don't even think they've caught onto the fact I'm using a damn box to bypass their everything. Maybe it's one of those it's-so-stupidly-obvious-they'd-never-use-it things, so he never bothered. Either way, I ain't complaining."* He stopped, and then raised his free hand up to tilt the box upwards slightly so he could look up through the handle slot. *"Okay, so left down here should be the control room."*

Another perk to all these factories being built to a uniform standard: the layout was often almost, if not completely, the same, so locating noteworthy areas, such as the control room, were trivial as all Sorun had to do was follow the exact same route that had worked for him the last times he'd done this. They even left the door open, too. Not that it would have mattered for him anyways, but it was still nice not to have to bother.

A lot of Eggman's facilities, not just the factories, always had this one central control room, i.e. the room with all the computers connected to the entire factory, all of its systems, and the network. That was apparently a thing: Eggman had his own personal network most if not all of his facilities, structures, and even robots were connected to. Helped with instantaneous messaging, data exchanging, orders, those kinds of things. It was more or less just convenient tool for instant communication that Eggman and all his machines used, though, so they were always less concerned about breaking into the network and more about getting into the local computer's systems to see what was on it.

Usually it wasn't anything good; most of the time it was mundane information, such as orders designated for that specific factory, production numbers and manifests, ect. Sometimes, though, just sometimes, there would be some bit of information there that was usable by the Freedom Fighters, though eight times out of ten it was just locations of interests for other places for them to sabotage. And, as these central computer rooms were still connected to the factory's internal systems, it still helped having control. So they always tried to bring Nicole in on these missions just for her to plug into these central systems, scrub the databanks for any useful information, and then help out with the rest of the mission by messing with the location's systems.

Made sense in hindsight why Sally kept bringing Nicole around with her everywhere.

Crouch-walking into the computer room, Sorun saw the typical sight: long computer console at the front of the room. Lots of monitors on the wall. Two Egg Pawns sitting in chars and manning the computers. He couldn't help but to roll his eyes as he stood up, tossed his cardboard box to the side, and then began approaching the two Egg Pawns.

"Gentlemen," he announced, though before they'd even turned around to Sorun a Summoned Sword had appeared over each of their heads and fell downwards, the blades going right through their heads. The robots went limp and promptly fell out of their chairs, Sorun shaking his head at the sight as he held up the handheld in his grasp. "Alright, Nicole, now we just-"

Zap!

Sorun deeply inhaled as he felt the muscles in his arm briefly spasm again. "... Can you please stop doing that?" He calmly requested, looking down at the handheld. He still received no reply from the AI, but she'd stopped shocking him, so he took that as a sign that he could proceed. So he stepped in front of the computer console, gently set Nicole down on top of it, and after hunting around for a bit

found a small cable with an attachment port, which he then plugged into Nicole.

Usually what would happen next was that Nicole's little face icon would appear somewhere on one of the computer monitors as a sign that she'd breached her way into the system and was good to go. That wasn't what happened. What happened was that a few seconds after Sorun plugged the handheld into the computer system a cloud of black and green pixels began to appear and congregate into a shape on the console. And then, before Sorun knew it, Nicole's holo-body just appeared. Sitting there.

If there was one thing that startled Sorun more than the holo-lynx's sudden appearance, it was the body language she was displaying. She was sitting right on the computer console, one leg crossed over the other with her arms crossed over her chest. But what stood out for Sorun was just that *look* on her face. None of the lynx's features seemed happy, from her mouth being set in a deep frown to her eyes being narrowed in Sorun's direction to even her ears being straightened and folded back in what almost looked like silent anger.

Yeah, no, she was definitely upset at him.

"... Alright, play it cool, Sorun." This was a conversation that could go any way possible, and frankly, Sorun didn't know how he was supposed to start it. He hadn't even expected or prepared for something like this. So he decided to just comment on Nicole's appearance and then play it by ear from there. "Um... are you sure you should be out and about like this without a Power Ring?" Sorun asked, pointing his index finger at Nicole.

"I'm drawing power from the factory's energy reservoir." She even sounded out of the norm. Her tone was mainly neutral with just a *hint* of something negative behind her words. "Thank you for taking me from Charmy. I know he means well, but he can often be too excitable."

"You're... welcome...?" His hand unconsciously rubbing the back of his head, Sorun began to turn his body away from Nicole. "I think I should go-"

"You've been avoiding me."

"Shieeeet..." Ah, so it was the one thing he'd been fearing. And now that he was looking back halfway at Nicole with one eye, he couldn't help but realize he had no idea what he was supposed to say. "No, I haven't," he tried.

That answer only drew Nicole's face into a deeper scowl. In a flash of pixels a small, hovering green screen appeared right in front of her. As Sorun turned around to fully face Nicole and the screen, he couldn't help but feel his mouth go dry. Because he recognized the image on that green screen as a recording. A recording of him talking to Sally inside of the Freedom HQ.

Sally's recording was the first to speak. *"Getting a Chaos Emerald from Eggman is a big accomplishment, so I don't see any reason why you two can't take some time to-"*

"Can't," came Sorun's response. The teen couldn't help but wince at how cold and detached his recorded self sounded.

"What?"

"Can't. I'm doing the thing with Shadow right now."

"O... kay, but right after you can-"

"Can't. Shadow, let's go." The video paused there, upon which Sorun looked up from the green screen to Nicole's green, narrowed eyes.

"... Man, I look like such a dick from a third-person perspective," Sorun thought, sighing at the sight of the video as he gave Nicole a half-shrug. "Nicole, look, that was right after the thing with the Emerald. I was tired. I don't see how a one-time-"

Sorun was interrupted when Nicole waved her hand behind the green screen, causing its image to shift and change. The new picture being shown was still of Sorun and Sally, though they were standing in a different location in the HQ. And it was with a sinking feeling that Sorun realized he recognized this recording.

"Hey, Sorun," Sally's recording began, *"is everything alright with you?"*

"... I suppose so," Sorun's recording answered. *"Why do you ask?"*

"Well, it's just... Nicole's been asking about you a lot. She says that it's been a week since you've even spoken with her."

"Ah. Yeah. That. I, err... there's just been a lot going on, you know? Haven't really had that much time for anything."

"Really? Doing what?"

"You know. Stuff." Sorun's recording slowly began to turn away from Sally. *"I should go."*

Sally's recording crossed her arms, and the real Sorun could see even past the green filter on the screen that Sally's face looked skeptical. *"You're off-mission right now. What do you have to go do?"*

"There's this library book I've been neglecting to return. Now seems like a good time." The recording of Sorun began to walk towards the HQ stairs. *"Seeya around, Sally."*

The recording ended right there. Sorun continued to stare down at it. He didn't even need to bother to look up. He could almost feel her glaring right at him with that same frown on her face.

"... In my defense, I really did have to return a book that day," Sorun said. "It was that Chao book."

Nicole didn't respond to Sorun at all. She instead just waved her hand behind the screen again as a new recording started.

This recording Sorun remembered all too well. It was of him laying down on the HQ's couch. Behind the couch was Nicole herself, resting her hands on the top of the couch while leaning over its top to look down at Sorun. They were both looking towards each other, Nicole's face questioning while Sorun had worn an empty, tired expression. The Sorun observing the recording remembered that, on the inside, he'd been leagues more anxious than how he'd appeared back then. Much like he felt right now watching these recordings.

"Sorun?" Nicole's recording asked. *"May we please talk?"*

"We're talkin' right now, Nicole," Sorun's recording dismissively replied.

"That is indeed correct," she said, *"but I wished to discuss why it is you've been so withdrawn from me as of late."*

"Withdrawn? I haven't been withdrawn from you."

"Then... perhaps you would like to play something with me? Or talk? Sally provided me with a Power Ring, so we have plenty of time." The face on Nicole's recording turned into a hopeful one, and even grew a small smile, which only went to hurt the real Sorun all the more when he heard what his recording said next.

"I would, Nicole, but, uh... can't." And then he just Tricked away. The couch instantly became vacant as Sorun teleported somewhere, the stairs if he remembered correctly, leaving a now downcast Nicole to stare at the empty spot he'd been occupying.

He just plainly hadn't had a good excuse to tell her, so he'd done the next best thing: he ran away. He didn't remember looking back to see Nicole's direction after he left. He'd just focused on getting away from her as quickly as possible, so seeing this recording of her shook something in him. She looked saddened that he'd left so abruptly like that.

Was this why Nicole was doing this? Because she was upset at the callous demeanor he'd grown seemingly out of nowhere? Because she was confused or even worried for him? He didn't know, and every single answer frightened him because here she was directly confronting him over the matter and he had no good answers to give her.

The green window closed and disappeared entirely. Sorun was left feeling extremely awkward and worried for what was to come in a few seconds, and when he looked back up at Nicole who'd re-crossed her arms while still frowning at him, he couldn't help but grimace. "Yeah, I got no excuse for that one," he finally admitted. "Do you record me every single time you're near me?"

"Those were not recordings. They're my memory files. Specifically memory files of you," she corrected. "I've been looking back at them frequently."

"Oh." Sorun blinked in surprise. He didn't know what to think of that. It made sense when he thought about it, but even still he was a bit off-put by it. "... That's kind of creepy, Nicole."

Seeing as that only seemed to make her mood worse, that probably hadn't been the right thing to say. "Do you find it 'creepy' when you look back at your memories of others?"

"I mean, no..." She had him there. He tried as hard as he could, but he couldn't find a good rebuttal to that. So instead, he just sighed out loud and trudged towards one of the previously-occupied chairs. "You got a good point," he conceded, sitting down in the chair and swiveling to Nicole's direction. "I take it you're upset."

"My friend has been actively ignoring and avoiding me at every single turn for reasons only known to him, as he refuses to discuss the matter," she poignantly stated. Her tone of voice caused Sorun to shrink back further into his seat, and he found it increasingly hard to maintain eye contact with her. "I only wish to know why you've adopted this behavior."

Sighing, Sorun leaned back deeper into his seat. "I get where you're coming from Nicole, but is *now* , right now, this specific time, the best time to be doing this?" he asked, and then gestured towards the door leading into the room. "We-we're in the middle of a Badnik factory. Espio and Charmy are running around planting bombs everywhere! I just- I really don't think this is the best time-"

"Then when is the best time?" Nicole asked, cutting Sorun off mid-sentence. "Every single other time I've tried to gain your attention has proved unsuccessful. The only opportunity I've had to discuss this with you is right now in the middle of a mission."

Sorun gestured his hand towards Nicole and opened his mouth, but when he tried to speak no words would come out. Fact was he just couldn't think of anything to say, and because of this all he managed to do was make a breathy sigh, lower his hand, and turn away from Nicole. The AI saw Sorun's reaction towards her words, her features softening just the slightest amount as her form slumped forwards slightly.

"I've missed our time together." Nicole's words shocked Sorun out of whatever self-absorbed trance he'd been in, causing him to shift his eyes back over to the lynx. "I've missed being with my friend. I... don't like what you've been doing, Sorun."

"You have other friends, you know," Sorun mumbled back.

"Yes, I know. Every single one of the Freedom Fighters is my friend. Sally is an... extraordinarily exceptional friend. But you're my friend, too. I enjoy playing those games with you. I always had an interest in games, but you're the only one I've ever managed to experience fun playing them with." Sorun's hands twitched when he heard that. "I like talking with you. I like that you put so much effort to manifest my Mobian form just so we can interact face-to-face instead of through a screen. And I have been unable to experience any of this because my friend has been acting so erratically."

Him acting erratic with people. It was almost enough to make him laugh. His inconsistency with how he handled his relationships with everybody was practically his own defining trait at this point for how deep he'd gone with it. Nicole had probably been the only person he'd been consistent with at all before he started doing this.

But this wasn't what he wanted. Her just writing him off and moving onto her own devices would have been ideal. Not this. Not her going so far just to ask him why her friend was avoiding him. Which he completely understood- hell, he'd probably do the same thing if he was in her shoes and one of his friends from Earth was acting this way. But he hadn't known she'd go this far. Maybe he was a fool for not seeing it. He didn't know.

"Is it me?" The question caused Sorun's head to snap upwards when he heard Nicole's question. "Did I do something to make you want to avoid me?" Her head dipped down a bit. "Is it... because I'm not real?"

"You are real. We've been over this." Sorun's tone came off as a bit snappish, as, for reasons unknown to him, he became almost angered that she'd insinuate he'd think such a thing. His response made Nicole look back towards him, too, her ears standing straight up in surprise. "You didn't do anything, Nicole. None of this is your fault. It's me. I'm..." Once again he failed to find the right words to say, and threw his hand up in frustration. "I... agh..."

He turned his chair towards the computer console, and then practically slammed his face down on it while also covering the top of his head with his arms. He couldn't even bear to look at her at this point from all the self-pity he was beginning to feel over his own, personal plight.

All he'd wanted to do was create as much distance between himself and Nicole as possible. To make it as easy on Nicole so that when he eventually died it wouldn't be so traumatic for her. And deep down he knew he already screwed this up. Screwed it up the moment he'd come back after leaving Knothole and accepted her as a friend. He'd

wanted to try, though. For her sake. Because he felt bad for using her mere existence as a crutch just so he could get through this easier. Because she didn't deserve a friend so messed up in the head Sorun couldn't even tell if he was sane anymore.

He didn't want to keep being her friend because he liked being around her just as much as she apparently liked being around him. And he wasn't an idiot. Even an emotional neanderthal like him could see how he kept reacting whenever he was around her, or whenever he just thought of her. The way he'd lose focus on everything else and the way his heart would speed up. He kept feeling *something* that was completely foreign to him whenever he was around her, and it *scared* him. He didn't know what it was and he didn't know what to do with it. He had an inkling to what it was, though. And that just frightened him even more. Somehow almost as much as dying.

And he couldn't tell her this. He couldn't tell anybody this. None of it. Even if he could he wouldn't. They couldn't know he was dying. They'd hold him back. They'd stop him from gaining power. They'd waste so much just to save what little life he had left. So he had to keep it up. He had to keep it up until he died. He had to keep it up until everybody was safe.

He had to lie his ass off just to get out of this situation.

Problem was he didn't know if he could.

"... What the fuck am I supposed to actually say here to get Nicole off my back?" Sorun silently wondered to himself, still buried beneath his arms. *"Go with the tired angle? Say all these missions are wearing me out and I just don't have the energy to hang out with her? My deteriorating condition backs it up, but that doesn't work for me in the long game. They might start putting me out on less missions. Can't have that. Say playing all those games with her makes me homesick and I just needed a break? Nah, she'd never go for something like that. She'd read my lie like a book."* He searched as deep as he could into his mind for as much information as possible so he could string together some half-believable lie that

would appease Nicole and end this conversation without telling her the truth, but try as he might, he couldn't find anything to use. *"I got nothing,"* Sorun realized as his arms slid off his head, allowing him to pick himself back up. *"There's nothing I can say to her that won't be detrimental in the long run or that she'd just see through. Nothing but the truth, but that isn't an option."*

When he looked back towards Nicole, he completely froze and felt his senses cry out in outrage. It was that look she was giving him. The way her features were married in sadness, just like what he was feeling. The way her ears were completely flattened against her head.

She looked genuinely miserable. Sorun felt even worse for being the one to cause this.

"Damn it all." He had to say something. Anything. He couldn't leave her in a state like this. He just couldn't. "It's a secret," he finally blurted out, and right after saying this he just barely managed to resist the urge to clamp his hands over his mouth.

Nicole's reaction was readily apparent. Her black and brown ears picked up halfway, almost in confusion, and her face matched this in the way she tilted her head to the side in question while her features scrunched in equal confusion. "A secret?" she repeated, almost in disbelief.

"Yeah, a secret," Sorun confirmed with a nod. "You know, like that big secret project you keep working on. Sort of," he continued as he spun his whole body in the direction of the computer console, scarcely believing the own words that seemed to be automatically flying out from his mouth. "Okay, it's not exactly like that, but... it's just something I don't want to talk about, alright?"

"... Nanites."

Of all the words she could have said, Sorun hadn't expected that one. In fact, that specific word was probably at the bottom of the list

of words he'd expected her to say. He didn't even know if that word was on the list of possible words, because it was a word so out of the blue he didn't even know what to make of it. So instead, he spun his head just enough to get Nicole into view of one of his eyes while muttering, "Huh-I-what-huh?"

"Nanites," Nicole repeated. "It's a surprise. For the Freedom Fighters, and for everybody else in Knothole. Admittedly it's something that's been ready for quite some time now, though I've lacked an adequate opportunity to finally set the wheels in motion, as it were. I've been going over all of my progress again and again in the meantime just to ensure it goes off without issue while making small tweaks every now and then." She leaned in closer towards Sorun, and he almost fell out of his seat when he saw the tiniest of smirks play on the edges of her mouth. "That is all that I am willing to divulge in the matter of my secret project. And I would sincerely appreciate you not mentioning this to any of the others, especially Sally. As I said, this is meant to be a surprise."

"Fuck, she wasn't supposed to give me any pull and make an excuse for me to spill! What does that even mean anyways!?" He knew what a nanite was from his vast source of fictional knowledge. What he didn't know was how the term "nanite" was pertinent to anything at all, and he didn't think Nicole would tell him. And he wasn't going to go and ask anybody else, either, for fear of breaking the massive amount of trust Nicole was putting on him on the spot. So instead he just silently gulped and asked, "So why... why are you telling me?"

"Because I realize that sometimes we keep secrets from others, and that the reason we keep these things are not always clear. What is clear is that these secrets are often kept for the sake of those we care for, such as with my project and what I assume whatever your secret is," Nicole answered. She slid off of the computer console and stepped in front of Sorun. "Am I incorrect in assuming this?" she asked him as she bent down to grab his arm, and then proceeded to pull him out of the chair to his feet.

Sorun felt his heart racing in his chest for two reasons. First was from the contact Nicole had on his arm, which he ended as soon as he could by gently but quickly pulling his arm from her grasp as soon as he was on his feet. The second reason was because her words resonated deep within him. The act of keeping secrets for the sake of others. He didn't know if that was *exactly* applicable to him, but it still felt somewhat right somehow. And Nicole understood that about him. It... made him feel warm. And also absolutely terrible knowing he was going to exploit what she just said as a way of getting out of this.

"Holy shit, is this actually happening? Is she giving me an out for free?" That'd be amazing if she was. It would let him circumvent this whole situation without creating a convoluted lie he had to juggle around with all the others. He decided to nod along with Nicole's question. "It's, well... I wouldn't exactly call my secret a surprise, er, well, guess it kinda will be, but... yeah, it's for everybody else's sake." He didn't even have to lie with that one.

Nicole's response was to fold her hands over her midsection and tip her head down slightly. Sorun could have sworn she almost looked relieved to hear him confirm her thoughts. "Then I won't pry into what you've been keeping secret from us."

"Aw, sweet-"

"On two conditions."

"SHIT." Clearing his throat, Sorun hesitantly tilted his head slightly to the side. "Uhhhh... sure. What are they?"

The holo-lynx lifted her head up just enough so that their eyes met. "First, I want you to promise me that at some point you'll tell me just what this secret of yours is. It doesn't have to be a specific date. You can take as much time as you need to tell me. But eventually I wish for you to tell me the truth."

Easy enough, he could just lie and never do it. "That's... okay, I can do that. It'll take a while, though. A long while."

"That's fine," Nicole said. "My second condition is that I want you to stop avoiding me so we can go back to the way things were before you started doing this. And I want to do something with you right after this mission is over."

"Well..." He clicked his teeth and began rubbing at the back of his neck. *"Don't agree to it. It undermines the whole reason you did this in the first place. Don't do it."* The hand rubbing his neck dropped to his side. "I, er..." His eyes flicked back and forth towards and away from Nicole's. *"Don't you fucking do it."* He sighed, looked Nicole right in the eyes, and nodded. "We can do that. Of course," he agreed, sighing right after. *"Sorun, you fucking coward."*

The look that had grown on Nicole's face was a stark contrast to how Sorun was feeling on the inside, even if he managed to keep up a mostly neutral expression on the outside. She was smiling at him, wide and brightly. "Thank you for listening to me, Sorun."

"Yep... yeah! D-don't worry about it, Nicole." A sudden beeping in Sorun's left ear caused his head to perk up, making him hold a hand up to make Nicole pause. "Uhp, hold on. Gettin' call here."

Nicole nodded immediately, turning back towards the computer console while Sorun stepped a few feet away. He held his hand up to his ear, pressing a small button on the ear piece attached to his ear. He heard a small burst of static, and after it ended he heard a high-pitched voice reach his ears.

"Er, guys? Charmy here. What, uh... what am I supposed to do if I run out of explosives to place?" came Charmy's voice from the device in Sorun's ear.

A noticeably deeper voice sounded from the earpiece in response to the bee's question. *"I've noticed that I'm short on explosives as well. Would you care to explain, Sorun?"*

The human shrugged. "Don't look at me. It was Charmy's turn in the rotation to pack the equipment," he said.

"Charmy?" came Espio's impatient voice.

"Hey, it's not my fault! The list you guys gave me said to pack six explosives in each satchel!"

"... You mean nine, correct?"

"Nine?" There was a pause from the other end of the comm. device. *"Ohhh...! I, uh, eh-heh... I think I may have... read that upside-down..."*

The loud slap of a hand impacting the owner's face was heard. *"Charmy...!"*

"It was just one number, Espio!"

"A number that's going to cost us the mission because we don't have the munitions necessary to blow this factory up!"

"Why do I have to deal with this?" Sorun asked himself, having taken his finger off the earpiece so the other two wouldn't hear him. He turned back towards Nicole whose attention had been drawn from the commotion, to which he explained, "Charmy misread something and shorthanded us on bombs. He read the number nine upside-down somehow."

"Yes, he does that sometimes. It's a bad habit of his."

"... Ngh..." He felt a massive throb in his brain when he heard that. He'd actually had to hold a hand to his forehead to soothe himself from the resulting headache. "... Okay, ignoring that, do we have any solutions? Aside from, you know, going all the way back to Knothole to restock." He ground his teeth and looked down at his right hand. *"It'd totally be an option if I figured out how Yamato could make portals already..."*

"One moment, please." Nicole closed her eyes, and behind her Sorun noticed that some of the computer monitors were beginning to flicker. The teen quirked an eyebrow when he saw this, but seconds later Nicole had opened her eyes back up and then turned towards the screens. "From what data I managed to gather, it seems this factory is primarily a production site for fuel cores used to power his Badniks. I'm displaying the storage depot."

She waved her hand in front of one of the computer monitors, causing it to shift to an image of what looked like the interior of a small warehouse. Sorun leaned in closer, noting that there at one of the ends of the warehouse were shelves containing seemingly hundreds of pallets, each stuffed to the brim in metal cylinders stamped with, as best as he could tell, caution symbols. He hummed in interest, and looked back at Nicole.

"So this is where they store the fuel thingies?" he asked, nodding to the screen.

"That is correct," she answered. "As is the case with most creations of Eggman's, those cores used to power his machines can often be volatile. One exploding is devastating enough, but if an entire storage unit of those cores were to go off at once the damage could prove to be catastrophic." She flashed a small smirk towards Sorun's way. "I would think that destruction of that magnitude would be sufficient in leveling the entire factory."

"Ahhh. Well, I don't have a better idea. We're going with it." He quickly gave Nicole a grateful thumbs-up, and then stepped away from the computer console and turned his back to Nicole too quickly to catch the smile she'd given him. He then put his fingers towards his earpiece and said, "Alright, you two, Nicole's got a plan. Apparently this factory makes whatever Eggman's using to power his robots, and there's a warehouse full of the things. Does anybody have any bombs left?"

"I have some I have yet to place, yes," Espio answered.

Sorun nodded. "Okay, that works. We're gonna use the bombs you have left to set off a chain reaction with all those fuel cores and the bombs we already have planted around. You think you can find the place alright?"

"I'm familiar with the layout of the facility from previous missions, and I seem to recall the general area of where the storage house was. I'll find my way there easily enough."

"Mhm, Charmy, do you think you can go to the control room and get Nicole? I'm gonna go to Espio in the depot."

"Yeah, no sweat!"

"Alright, cool. Espio, hang tight. Charmy, I swear if *you shake Nicole again* -"

"I'm not gonna! Geez!"

He didn't bother responding to Charmy. He simply removed his fingers from the earpiece and turned back to Nicole, who had been looking towards Sorun expectantly. "Alright, I'm gonna go to the depot place. Charmy'll swing by and get you. I told him not to shake you again, but if he does feel free to zap him a bunch like you did me, I guess." He paused and tilted his head at Nicole. "Why'd you do that, anyways?"

Nicole looked away from Sorun at hearing the question. Her eyes remained on the computer screens, and her left hand rose up to rub at her right arm in an almost nervous manner. "I was upset that you were ignoring me."

"So you couldn't have talked to me about it *before* you started shocking me?" Sorun incredulously replied.

"... I did what I wanted to. I'm not entirely sure myself why I did it." A blue, floating screen appeared next to her, which Nicole proceeded to tap at.

Sorun breathed out a laugh, rolling his eyes while turning towards his discarded box. "Maybe you're just a big teaser," he jokingly replied as he crouched down to fold the box.

"Teasing," Nicole quietly said, her tapping on the blue window slowing. "Perhaps that's it..."

"What's it?" Sorun asked, turning back towards the lynx.

"Nothing important to the mission," she quickly answered. "Sorun, I'm opening all the doors in your path to the storage depot while closing off all other routes to the patrolling Badniks. You and Espio should encounter relatively little resistance."

He blinked towards her, but then shrugged and tugged his cardboard box under his arm. "Alright. See you in, uh... I don't know, twenty minutes I guess?" Sorun stood up and walked towards the entrance to the control room, putting one foot out before turning to Nicole one last time. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "Yeah, seeya."

"Goodbye." Even after Sorun had left she continued to stare at the spot in the doorway he'd been standing. After a few moments passed Nicole blinked, looked down at her feet, and then shifted her attention to the blue screen as she continued to calmly tap on it.

"Oh, you're real smooth at this, Sorun. Real fuckin' smooth."

Anger. Frustration. Hopelessness. The usual suspects for bringing down Sorun's mood. Most of the time, though, he didn't have a face to pin all of this negativity on. And right now he couldn't decide whether he was supposed to put all the blame on Nicole or himself, and after a bit of thinking decided that, no, this was all his fault. Because when was it not?

At the very least, this mission was going better then most others. Nicole had been true to her word and made the way to the storage

depot relatively clear for Sorun. In fact, he'd only encountered a single Badnik on his way over there, which had quickly been cut down with Yamato. None of that was the problem, and frankly, he could barely even bring himself to think about the mission right now. Most of his thoughts were currently occupied with Nicole.

"We're right back on square goddamn one here. We were supposed to avoid her, not go right back to where we were." He rounded past a corner, continuing to think to himself while also beginning to cough into his closed fist. *"But what was I supposed to do? She had me boxed in, there was nothing I could have said. All things considered I got out of that pretty okay. More than okay, even. She won't worry about the secret I'm keeping, and all I have to do is keep hanging out with her. And that's not so bad, is it? It's not like you can lie to yourself and say you didn't miss her, either.*

"And... I like it when she smiles like that. Feels nice."

"Ack, hkc..." He had to stop and lean against a wall as he finished coughing into his hand. He quickly glanced around the hallway's ceiling, feeling a small bit of relief when he saw that there were no cameras watching him, and took a few seconds to let out a few wheezy breaths before pushing himself off the wall. He looked down at the hand he'd coughed on, and then began shaking his head as he wiped the blood he saw off on his pants.

"You're a goddamned fool, Sorun," he thought as he continued walking.

The storage depot was just that: a storage depot. A big warehouse connected to the factory that was mainly full of shelving units. Surprisingly, it was unguarded. At least it was when Sorun had arrived, as he came to the storage depot seeing the bodies of Badniks rent in half from something.

When he looked further towards the back of the warehouse, he saw the cause immediately in a wandering Badnik. One moment it had

been walking along on its own, and in the next moment a small, metal object whirled right through the Badnik and caused it to collapse in halves. The object stopped once it lodged itself into a nearby shelf, revealing to be a shuriken. A shuriken that was picked up once its owner materialized right next to it while also reclaiming the lodged weapon in one sooth motion.

It was Espio, then. Sorun liked Espio. He was calm, quiet, didn't speak all that much unless necessary and didn't ambush Sorun out of nowhere to ask him personal questions. Just the opposite, he kept to himself for the most part and on the rare occasion he did speak he usually wasn't too boring to talk with. So Sorun had grown to respect him, both for not being too chatty and for being so efficient at what he did best, which was sneak around and throw sharp metal things. And he always thought ninjas were kind of cool. So by extension Espio was kind of cool to him.

"Geez, how hard is he whipping those things for them to cut through whole robots?" Sorun silently wondered to himself. He watched as the chameleon briefly inspected the shuriken, only to the conceal the weapon in his gloves before turning towards a nearby shelf. Even from here Sorun recognized the massive metal tubes and the caution symbols printed on their sides. *"Guess those are the fuel whatevers. Espio beat me to it. Alright, guess I'll go and say hi."*

It was just when Espio had crouched down in front of the shelved canisters did Sorun choose to Trick on top of the shelf in a seated position. The chameleon's immediate reaction was to reach into his glove for a shuriken, but right when he pulled it out halfway he stilled upon seeing it was Sorun staring down at him. He sighed, and then replaced the shuriken while crouching back down.

"You would do well not to startle people like that," Espio said, placing the satchel of explosives down on the ground next to him. "I could have accidentally taken your head off right there."

Even knowing it was said as an honest warning still sent a slight chill down Sorun's spine. He tried his best to ignore it. "Oh come on.

You're telling me you never messed with anybody with your invisibility?"

"Perhaps on occasion," Espio answered as he reached into the satchel. "Since you're here could you help in arming these bombs?" he asked, pulling out one of the bombs and tossing it up towards Sorun.

The human caught the bomb easily enough, turning the device over in his hand. Bundles of wrapped explosives duct taped together and wired to a remote detonator. Standard homemade bomb. "Yeah, sure," he said, scooting over to a nearby canister and sticking the adhesive back of the bomb onto it. "Okay, so... flip this switch, make sure this wire's connected..." he mumbled under his breath, sticking his tongue out in concentration as he fiddled with the bomb's controls.

He didn't know why, but somehow it felt stranger knowing he could arm live explosives with ease now compared to having powers. Maybe it was because arming a bomb was knowledge he'd earned and now owned after being taught it as compared to just being handed it for "free" by a magic rock. And despite him earning it fairly it was still a skill he never imagined himself ever having in a normal life. Unless he'd ever taken a career in something like demolition. Or terrorism.

And all it took was a bunch of trial and error and blowing Antoine up with paint bombs a lot until he got it right.

"I'm surprised you volunteered to come help me with this," Espio said from below Sorun, the chameleon in the process of arming his own explosive. "I would have thought you'd just let Charmy do this while you took Nicole out of here."

"Yeah, well... to tell you the truth I just needed to get away from Nicole for a bit," Sorun admitted after a long pause.

"I see. I had noticed you've been withdrawn with her as of late-"

"That word again, withdrawn, geez..."

"- and it made me wonder if something happened."

Shaking his head, Sorun flipped the last switch on the bomb to activate the transceiver for the detonator. "Nothing happened. We patched things up, actually," he said, moving back to the edge of the shelf so he could sit down and stare down at Espio. "Yeah, it was... it was this whole stupid thing, don't worry about it."

Espio paused in his work, flashed his yellow eyes up at Sorun, and with a small shrug turned back to his own bomb. "If you say so. Glad to hear you worked through your issues."

"Wouldn't that be the day." Rolling his eyes, Sorun Tricked back down to ground level only to then sit down on a nearby crate. "Guess you could say that. How've you been, Espio?" Sorun suddenly asked. "I guess you must have been away from your own home for a while now being here with the rest of the Chaotix and away from..." Sorun trailed off as his eyebrows scrunched in confusion. "... Hey, where are you from, anyways? I never asked."

"... I'm from a community of chameleons that live up on Angel Island," Espio answered, keeping his spine-lined back to Sorun as he continued arming his bomb.

Sorun hummed in acknowledgement. "Ah, the infamous floating island. Y'know, I've actually heard very little about the place. I thought I heard Knuckles mention once that the echidna live there?"

"They do, but there were others as well. The chameleon community I mentioned was one such group."

"Ah, alright." The human teen nodded in understanding. "So how're they doing?"

"I'm unsure," Espio answered. "Things up on the island have been... difficult."

"So I've heard. What happened up there, anyways?"

"More than I could tell in the time we have," Espio bitterly mumbled to him. "A while back Eggman's forces had... occupied the island for a time. We managed to do what we could, dismantled a prison camp that had been set up, but by then the echidna population had already been decimated." As one hand continued to work on the bomb another hand reached upwards to rub across an exhausted Espio's face. "It doesn't help matters that there's an entire faction of the echidna that are having a civil war amidst each other alongside everything else going on."

Sorun grimaced. Knuckles and Julie-Su had always been tight-lipped on things up on the island, and after hearing that from Espio he could understand why. Their people evidently had problems. The mention of a prison camp alone briefly made his hands shudder in anger. When he heard about the civil war, though, he couldn't help but tilt his head in question.

"What do you mean a civil war?" he asked. "They seriously have the resources to waste time on a civil war with the whole Eggman thing going on?"

"Eggman's presence on the island was completely diminished when we and the Freedom Fighters liberated it from him, and situations on the island were always self-contained up there. And even before Echindaopolis - the city they'd occupied before Eggman came - fell, they had problems with the Dark Legion Knuckles and the rest of us Chaotix always had to deal with."

Sorun slowly nodded in understanding, but then paused halfway. "The Dark Legion? You can't be serio- you are serious my god that sounds lame..."

Espio flipped a final switch on the bomb, arming the receiver, and then turned towards Sorun while still in a crouching position. "They're group of echidna who have a near-radical reverence of technology. You'd be hard-pressed to find a member of the Dark Legion that

didn't undergo cybernetic augmentation of some kind, and they often clashed with the rest of the echidna civilization living on Angel Island due to differing beliefs over technology. Current events have made it so the group split off into two factions, a Flame and Frost Legion, and they've been at war with one-another since then. Otherwise they've kept to themselves for the most part."

"This is ridiculous." Sorun found himself pinching the bridge of his nose. "This is- this is actual nonsense I'm hearing. Doesn't even sound real. Dude, what *happened* up there to make things so dire?"

"As I said. Too much to explain," Espio said. "Between the warring Legions, the faction of dingoes that have been getting into constant skirmishes with the echidna, which is a separate situation entirely, and the loss of their city and massive portion of their population, all coupled with their isolation up on the island, it... things could be better. Much better." He closed his eyes and turned his head to the side. "And so... I'm unsure what became of the chameleon community up there amidst all that chaos, or any of the other Mobian communities that had resided up there for that matter. I don't imagine things ended well. Much was lost in all that fighting."

"Sounds like it." Even by Mobius standards what Sorun was hearing seemed a bit out there. Far outside of the normal brand of weirdness here he was used to dealing with. And it really sounded like there was some history that happened up there; lots and lots of history and fighting that happened way before Sorun ever got here. He was tempted to ask more, but another part of him dreaded hearing exactly how much there was to say on the island. "So the, er, normal echidna. The non-cyborgy ones. They're okay?"

"For however many of them remain, yes," Espio confirmed with a nod. "They've been holed up in a makeshift refugee camp ever since Eggman's occupation ended, though we've been out of touch with them since then. I'm unsure as to what their current state actually is."

"Knuckles doesn't keep in contact?"

"He... had a falling out of sorts. I shouldn't say more." Glancing back at the armed bomb, Espio nodded his head and stood up to his full height. "The bombs are ready to go. We should depart."

"Yeah." Nodding his head, Sorun put his finger up to his earpiece. "Charmy, we're all set. You and Nicole good?"

"We're already outside waiting for you," said Charmy's voice through the earpiece. *"Hurry up and get back so we can go home!"*

"I'll go extra slow just for you, Charmy." Sorun's finger was removed from the earpiece before he could hear a retort from the bee. He glanced towards Espio, the chameleon nodding back to him before his body phased into invisibility. Sorun stared at the spot the chameleon had been standing in before disappearing, rolled his eyes with a sigh, and then began unfolding his cardboard box once more.

"Any-takers-for-doing-the-honors-no-alright-I'm-hittin'-the-button."

This sentence was said in the same breath that Sorun pulled the detonator he'd been carrying out from his pocket. In the single second he'd blurted it out there was a moment where Charmy had reached for the remote in his hands, but before the bee had even gotten close Sorun's thumb had compressed down on the big, red button in the center of the device.

There was the sound of a small *beep!* , followed by a little red light on the upper right corner of the detonator lighting up. An instant later the ground beneath the group began to shake, and a large, deafening explosion was heard in the distance. From near the back of the factory they all stared at a large, orange fireball that broke through the roof and shot up towards the sky, the resulting shockwave rattling the entire building before causing it to collapse completely in on itself. Overall, the resulting complete destruction of the factory took less than ten seconds from the start of the explosion.

The ones responsible for this sabotage stood hidden in cover amongst the pile of shipping containers near the outer perimeter of the compound the previously-intact factory had occupied. Sorun and Espio both looked on towards the destruction with mainly impassive looks, while Charmy was pouting towards Sorun with his wings angrily buzzing behind him.

"I wanted to hit the button this time," Charmy grumbled out, crossing his arms and turning away in a small huff. Sorun had glanced back at him, shrugged, and then fully turned his body away from the smoldering remains of the factory.

"Maybe next time, Charmy," the human said. "Next time. Right now I just wanna go back to Knothole and away from here."

"As do we all," Espio agreed. "There were still a small number of Badniks patrolling outside the factory that will be searching the premises. Let's leave now while we're still in the clear."

With that said, Espio spun around and began walking in the opposite direction of the factory, towards where they'd parked the floating saucer vehicle they'd used to come here now hidden in the nearby woods. Charmy floated right behind him, still grumbling under his breath with his head hung low. Sorun stayed where he was, his eyes lingering on the handheld device held in Charmy's hand.

"... Man." He breathed out a small sigh, glancing back at the smoldering remains of the factory before turning back towards Charmy's back, and then looking down at the small computer again. *"What... a... day."* After turning his head to the side to let out a light cough, he calmly placed his hands into his pockets and began following the others.

Somewhere on the northern continent

"Man... gettin' bored here."

At one point this had been a factory. Before he came it was one of the bigger ones that churned out Badniks by the hundreds an hour, and when he arrived it had been home to thousands of the robots, all of varying size and weaponry.

Now he was surrounded by thousands of robotic corpses, with the factory being reduced to absolute rubble right behind him. In the middle of the graveyard of Badniks, their corpses packed so tightly together the ground was not visible, was a man in a red hood sitting on the corpse of a rather large Badnik. His claymore sword was stabbed right into the body of another robot right in front of him, his hands draped over the cross guard and his fingers tapping against the guard of the sword styled in the shape of a screaming skull.

"Egh... third one in the last hour. Wish the Freedom Fighters would hurry the hell up, but I guess it's good they're going at this pace. And while they're doing their thing I get to go around and hit the really big targets to pressure Eggman." His hooded head turned towards the remains of the destroyed factory. "... Should probably slow down, actually," he muttered to himself. "Can't let Eggman get too suspicious over all his factories blowin' up, and I can't tip the Freedom Fighters off that somebody's going around wrecking his shit. They gotta think everything's on them, and the big guy's gotta think the same."

With a small groan, he sat up from the robot while also pulling the large sword and its notched tip out from the robot's corpse. With one hand, he spun the sword around in a circle in a feat of inhuman strength before finally resting it on his shoulder.

"Pretty soon the tipping point for Eggman will get here, and that should prompt that whole mess to start. 'Til then, I gotta go and get my hands on a present for Eggman. 'Least I gotta get it before Sorun goes and eats it." He began to tip-toe his way down the hill of Badnik corpses, but then stopped midway. "Er, wait, don't I need two?"

Humming, Rubrum dug into the pocket of his cloak before bringing out a small piece of notebook paper. He flipped it over to read the

contents written on the front, and then made a small "ah" of understanding. "Ohh, alright, I keep one and- okay, yeah." He pocketed the paper, and then resumed his trek through the graveyard of Badniks.

"A little bit closer," Rubrum mumbled to himself. "Just a little bit closer to the end of all this madness..."

Chapter 34

A/N- So I've been told it's Neo-Walkers and not Neo-Watchers. And then I looked it up and it is, in fact, Neo-Walkers. So now I gotta go back and change that because of big whoops on my part. Sorry about that, guys.

Recursion Error

Episode 34- The melancholic pair

So apparently there was a giant robot stomping its way towards Knothole City.

As far as Sorun was concerned that was par for the course at this point.

The entire city had been alerted to it early in the morning on account of the seismic readings picked up by equipment in the HQ's lab. Tails doing a quick fly-by confirmed that the source of the readings was the aforementioned robot. A hundred-meter tall Badnik that was slowly making its way towards Knothole. At a very liberal pace, according to the fox.

So they had that to deal with now. It was an hour after the fact, and everybody was huddled up in the Freedom HQ's lab to talk strategy. Everybody had crowded around the computer monitors which was displaying a recording of the robot slowly approaching the city, with Sally at the head of the pack to give a rundown of the situation. There was one exception, however, and that was in Sorun. Sorun, who was sitting on the floor near the back of the lab and tracing shapes in the air in front of him using the tip of the Yamato.

"Hmm..." There was a bit of blue power glowing at the tip of the sword, and when he traced the sword downwards a thin, blue line of power was left floating in the air behind it. Sorun's brows were furrowed in concentration, but when the line dissipated he let out a frustrated sigh. *"Yeah, that's not it either,"* he thought. *"How the... what the hell, this should work. Why isn't this working?"*

Thus far his experimentation with Yamato had born little fruit. He mainly just wanted to figure out how to perform Judgement Cuts - and maybe, should he ever figure that out, something beyond even that -, but even more than that he wanted to figure out how to use the sword to make portals. Because he imagined instantaneous transport to literally anywhere on the planet had to have some use for the Freedom Fighters, and at the very least it would make getting around for him a hell of a lot easier.

But he'd made little progress in figuring it out. Cutting through things and long-distance cuts, yes. Portals? He... he felt like he was a little closer than he was when he first got the sword, but there was something missing. Like he was failing to grasp some crucial piece. He didn't know, but so far all he was able to do was make a bunch of pretty blue lines that float in the air.

Not even close to a portal. But progress was progress.

Sighing, he set the sword down on the ground next to him and craned his head over to the front of the lab, towards the computer monitors everybody was staring at. On display was the giant, hundred-meter tall Badnik slowly stomping its way towards Knothole. Bipedal and humanoid in shape, covered in blue and red metal plating. And to top it off was the head, which was little more than a giant ball shaped in the visage of Eggman's head. It even had a giant piece of jagged metal welded to its face to resemble his mustache.

"Pfft. Thing's a Gundam knockoff," Sorun thought. *"Surprisingly Eggman trying to flatten Knothole with a giant robot isn't one of his*

more 'out there' schemes. Which says a lot about him and his insanity. And me for not even flinching at this point."

He took one last glance at the image of the robot, and then turned his eyes downwards so he could continue to fiddle with his katana. Sally's words just barely managed to reach his ears, his focus mainly on his blade.

"- And as you can see, this thing is on a direct path towards Knothole," Sally said, pointing towards one of the computer monitors displaying the gargantuan Badnik. "As far as we can tell purely from observation, there doesn't appear to be any external weapons of any sort attached to it. For all intents and purposes, it appears that Dr. Robotnik intends for this Badnik to literally stomp out Knothole." She made a low, displeased sigh and crossed her arms. "And judging from its size, it wouldn't have that difficult of a time."

A red arm in the crowd was raised. "So how long until it reaches Knothole?" Knuckles asked.

"At the rate this thing is going at?" Sally glanced at the robot. "Rotor and I worked out the math earlier. It's around one-hundred miles away from Knothole, so about one week."

The reaction in the crowd was fairly mixed. Most people began glancing back and forth at each other and Sally, confused looks in their eyes. There were even a few nervous chuckles spread around, almost as if some took what the princess said as a joke, but when the grim look on her face refused to budge those nervous chuckles quickly died down into questioning murmurs.

The murmuring ceased when a blue form stepped up in front of the crowd. "A whole week?" Sonic asked in disbelief, a lopsided grin on his face that directly contrasted with the concern in his eyes. "You're serious?"

"Yeah, it's going pretty slow, Sonic." This voice came from Rotor, who was sitting in a chair next to Sally and tapping away at a

keyboard. He pushed himself away and spun around in his chair, affixing Sonic with a serious glare. "My best guess is that the power requirements for that thing are so huge that it needs to go that slow to conserve power. Or it's just Eggman taunting us. Either way, we got some time before that thing gets to Knothole, but if it does reach Knothole, then there's not much we're gonna be able to do. We might have to consider evacuation procedures if it comes to that."

"It's not gonna come to that," Sally denied with a shake of her head. "We're stopping that thing before it ever steps foot in Knothole."

"But how?" Sonic asked. "Are we just gonna walk up to the thing and shut it down from the inside?"

"That was the plan." Sally turned her head to Rotor and nodded at him. The walrus gave a nod in return, and then turned back to his keyboard and began typing away again. "Unfortunately, we hit a snag."

The screens displaying the colossal Badnik's image flickered, drawing everybody's attention. The view changed to the same image of the walking robot, in a slightly different location at a different time of day. What was immediately noticeable was the small biplane floating around the top of the robot, a yellow fox manning the pilot's seat. The plane had twisted in the air so that it was pointed right at the robot's face, and then from the front of the plane two yellow beams of light fired out and shot towards the robot.

The beams never hit the Badnik. Right before they impacted against its face, the two lasers collided with a patch of shimmery air just above the robot's chassis. That one disturbance caused the air all around the giant robot to shimmer, revealing a gigantic, transparent, dome-like force surrounding the walking titan of metal. The Tornado had swerved around and tried firing at the robot again and again to no avail, the transparent dome surrounding the Badnik protecting it from each attack.

With that, the footage paused, and all eyes were drawn back to Sally. "Tails attempted to probe the Badnik's defenses with the Tornado's weapons, but this proved to be futile. As best as we can figure, there's a... shield of some sorts surrounding the Badnik and protecting it from any outside attack. Tails reported that he tried to fly directly into it, but whatever that bubble surrounding the Badnik is wouldn't even let that in. He's fine," she explained, assuaging the concerned looks that had grown on the faces of some, "but the Tornado lost a wing as a result and Tails is working to fix that. In the meantime, until we find a way past that shield there isn't much we can do."

"C'est impossible!" This cry came from Antoine, standing in the middle of the gathering and who threw his arms up in outrage. "How are we suppose-ed to attack ze Badnik if we cannot touch ze Badnik!?"

"Dunno, Ant," Sonic answered with a shrug. "I mean if we had a way of teleporting past that shield or something that'd be one thing, but..." He suddenly trailed off, his eyes lighting up as an idea seemed to come to his mind. The others around him seemed to have come to the same realization, and in unison all of the gathered Mobians began to slowly spin around until their eyes rested on the sole human sitting on the other end of the lab.

Sorun, who had turned the Yamato the other way and was squinting at the tip of the sword, suddenly felt an entire room's worth of eyes on him. He blinked, and then turned his head to the side to find everybody staring at him. "Huh? What?" he asked, slowly putting the sword back down. "I didn't- I'm sorry, I didn't catch any of that. What's going on?"

The situation: simple. A giant Badnik was threatening all of Knothole and it needed to be deal with. The problem was that it had a shield that prevented anything from getting too close to it.

The solution: even simpler. There were two people within the Freedom Fighters that had teleportation capabilities: Sorun and Shadow. So they would slip past through the shield using their powers and deal with it.

What "deal with it" entailed Sorun didn't have a clue, because that was about the best everybody could think up before they shoved both him and Shadow in the Freedom Fighter Special to fly them out to the Badnik. They had to destroy the thing, that much was obvious to Sorun, but he didn't know how they were supposed to go about doing that. The thing was massive; the literal size of a building, probably even bigger.

To say Sorun was nervous was an understatement. He was sitting against the wall in the FF Special's cargo bay, nervously tapping at his knees as he thought about what was coming up. But when he looked towards Shadow, who was sitting at the opposite end of the cargo hold with one leg pulled up and an arm draped over his knee, he looked the very picture of calm. So calm that Sorun would think he was sleeping if it weren't for the fact his eyes were open, but even then he was unsure.

Funnily enough, Sorun had never once gone on a single mission with Shadow. In fact, he was the only person period he had yet to go on a mission with, and apparently, that wasn't outside the norm. He'd been told that the dark hedgehog preferred working alone. Always claimed that other people working with him would slow him down. Usually Sorun would roll his eyes at the claim and call him arrogant, but considering all the powers he'd seen the Mobian display, Sorun was inclined to believe him.

Which is why it came as such a surprise to Sorun that Shadow had agreed to come along with Sorun on this mission. No, even more than that, he'd *asked* . Said that the more numbers they had on the mission the better chance of success, and Sorun could see the logic in that considering there could only be a max of two people going in on this, and he was one of them. Though he still would have

expected Shadow to shoulder the mission all on his own instead of just doing it alongside Sorun. He definitely had the ability to do so.

Well, at the end of the day, it was more help for Sorun, and it meant he didn't have to take on a giant robot by himself. So he'd simply shrugged and went along with it.

"Shadow the Hedgehog... I can never figure this guy out." Sorun exhaled slowly through his nose as he continued to stare at the unflinching Mobian. *"He's like the exact opposite of what I'd expect a Mobian to be. Not... Infinite-level bad, but just... I don't know, kind of like me I guess. All distant from everybody and broody and never cracks a smile. He's got a lot of powers, too. Like, way more than anybody else. Because of that Chaos Control thing he can do? Something like that, I don't... he never went into detail with it."*

The hedgehog was quite simply an enigma to him. He'd act so distant from everybody, and yet once in a while he'd do something that would act completely contradictory to his usual nature. Like that one time...

"Hey, you mind helping me out with something?"

Of course he'd found Shadow training in Crate Land. If it wasn't sleeping, eating, helping Sorun train his powers, or on a mission somewhere, he was here training. The guy was razor-focused in honing his abilities, Sorun would give him that much. Even more than he was in trying to figure the Yamato out.

Usually he wouldn't have come all the way out here to disturb Shadow with such a mundane task, but this was a special case. Special in that he didn't want any of the others knowing he was going out of his way to do this, but didn't care if Shadow knew. Whether the hedgehog would actually agree to come help him was a different matter entirely, and honestly Sorun was doubting it, but he figured it was worth a try.

Shadow, who had been tossing his Chaos Spears at crates, lowered the hand that had been holding one of the crackling lances and willed it to disappear as he turned around towards the human. He looked slightly annoyed at having been interrupted, but still nodded towards Sorun in greeting. "What is it?" he asked.

"Right, so do you know Rosie?" When Shadow sent him a blank look, Sorun elaborated. "She's this old Mobian lady that lives in Knothole, looks after these three kids that got orphaned I guess from the whole... you know. I was walkin' around Knothole earlier and met them and it turns out one of the kids lost a doll or something like that, so..." Sorun exhaled and looked towards the side. "I... kind of got roped into looking for the thing. And I don't really want to spend all day on this, so, uh... mind lending a hand?"

A displeased exhale left Shadow's nose, followed by him crossing his arms. "You're hunting down lost toys now?"

"I mean... they're orphans, dude. It was kind of hard to say no. Plus it probably woulda hurt the Freedom Fighters' image if I said no, and I'm affiliated with them, so, you know..." He sighed and rubbed a hand across his forehead. "Listen, can you please help me with this? I don't want the others knowing I'm doing this."

"And why not?"

"'Cause it looks laaaame, man," Sorun ground out in an irritated tone. "Look, if it's the two of us it'll take, like, an hour. Max. Probably not even that much."

Shadow just scoffed. "And you don't think I have anything better to do than hunt down some lost child's things?"

"Oh, oh yeah, 'cause you standing around throwing Chaos Spears at stationary crates is such a productive use of your time," Sorun snarked with a roll of his eyes. "Look, man, I'm asking as a favor. Alright?"

He'd known going in that the odds of Shadow actually agreeing to such a thing was a long shot. What he figured would happen was that Shadow would snap at him for interrupting him, tell him off, and then he'd go back to mindlessly throwing his Chaos Spears back at boxes as Sorun went hunting around Knothole like an idiot looking for a doll. The only thing that'd drawn him to Shadow was the vague hope that he'd say yes to helping. Sorun hadn't actually expected it.

So when Shadow had closed his eyes in thought, let out a deep sigh, and then nodded, Sorun didn't know what to think. "Alright, let's go. Where was it last seen?"

"Uh..." Sorun had begun rapidly blinking in Shadow's direction, and his mouth had dropped slightly open from how surprised he was at hearing the hedgehog. "W-wait, for real?"

His reaction only seemed to make Shadow more annoyed. "Pick your jaw up off the ground already. I don't have all day and I'd like to get back to this as soon as possible." He walked forwards, shoving Sorun aside with his shoulder as he walked past him. "We'll go the site of the last sighting and work outwards from there. If we're efficient enough we'll find it within the hour."

"Yeeeah..." Sorun cleared his throat, and then began following directly behind Shadow. "I, uh, I think she mentioned something about the middle of town..."

Eventually they had found the doll. It'd been in a tree the kids had been climbing and playing around in, and as far as Sorun and Shadow could guess the child who'd lost the doll had just accidentally left it there. Shadow had been the one to spot it. How he did it Sorun hadn't a clue, he must have had amazing eyesight to pick the doll out amidst all those branches and leaves for how far they'd been standing away from the tree. All he knew was that if Shadow hadn't been there to spot it Sorun himself would have likely spent hours looking around for the thing.

Of course, after retrieving the doll they went back to Rosie and the three children she looked after to return the doll. There'd been a lot of gratitude and, much to the chagrin of both Sorun and Shadow, the children had hugged their legs. There'd actually been a moment where both he and Shadow had been glancing towards each other with the most uncomfortable looks on their faces imaginable, and in that moment they'd both teleported away from as far from the children as possible. Once they'd escaped they'd silently looked at each other once again, and without so much as passing a word between one another they agreed to never speak of that again and then went on with the rest of their day.

It was a bit comforting knowing there was at least one person out there who reacted appropriately to that kind of attention like he did. Somebody a bit more normal compared to all the other Mobians around them. He liked Shadow in that sense. It felt like he was around a regular person.

"Hey." Shadow's smooth voice suddenly calling out to him drew Sorun from his thoughts, causing him to look up towards the hedgehog sitting on the other side of the cargo hold. "We're going to be dropping onto the Badnik from above. Are you okay to make a jump that big?" he asked.

"Yeah, Tricking cancels out momentum and inertia," Sorun confirmed with a nod. "I tested it. I mean theoretically speaking I could probably survive any kind of fall as long as I Trick somewhere before hitting ground, so... yeah, I should be good." He coughed once and turned his head to the side. "Also I, uh... have wings."

"Right. Of course." Shadow gave him a brisk nod, and then turned his head towards the cargo bay door upon hearing a quiet, grinding sound. The door began to fold open, prompting him to stand up to his feet. "We must be approaching our destination," he said. "Get ready."

Sorun copied Shadow's movements, pulling himself up and making his way towards the opening of the cargo bay. He stopped right next

to Shadow, who was peering downwards with a scowl on his face. Sorun decided to look down with him.

The first thing his had to do was hold his hair back from whipping around everywhere from the intense wind blasting him in the face. Then there was the vertigo that hit him when he saw just how far up off the ground they were, though those feelings soon subsided when he saw what was just below them. The giant blue and red Badnik.

Even from all the way up here Sorun could see the giant footprints left behind by the robot making large indentations in the forest behind it. And it was going slowly. So slowly, in fact, that it felt like it took whole minutes just for it to raise and lower a single foot. When it did impact the ground with a foot, though, Sorun could have sworn he heard it. Despite the fact they were over a hundred meters off the ground and the engines of the FF Special were drowning out almost all sound, he still heard those giant footsteps. Almost *felt* them, even.

"This thing's gonna flatten Knothole if it makes it that far," Sorun thought to himself, slight dread filling his being when he looked down at the metal monstrosity below him. *"This thing's already flattening a bunch of trees wherever it's stepping. We gotta stop it right now."* He turned his head towards Shadow. "Hey, so what's the-!?"

Shadow had already jumped off of the lip of the cargo bay's opening and was falling right towards the giant Badnik. Sorun blew out a disbelieving gasp at the sight, roughly shook his head, and jumped right after him.

Falling from a deadly height like this didn't scare Sorun nearly as much as it should have. Maybe it was because he knew in the back of his mind he could just fly away should worst come to worst. Or teleport, even. He had so many ways of mitigating a deadly fall at this point that heights were practically meaningless to him. So as his body tore through the air, wind ripping past his face and clothes, he couldn't muster much more than an impassive expression as his eyes followed Shadow's body down towards the Badnik.

The robot itself was still giving Sorun some concern, as he still hadn't a clue on how they were supposed to take this thing out. But he trusted Shadow had some kind of plan for it. Or an idea at the very least.

Very faintly Sorun could make out the near-invisible force field spread out in a dome around the Badnik's body. Shadow, being much lower and closer to the Badnik, suddenly had bolts of greenish-yellow Chaos energy arcing around his body. Right before his form impacted with the faint shield, Shadow's body completely disappeared, and in the same instant Sorun saw a flash of green on the Badnik's left shoulder, followed by him just barely being able to make out the small dot that was Shadow's body.

Following his lead, Sorun simply Tricked away from where he was, appearing right next to Shadow on the shoulder. He'd stumbled just the slightest amount, the constant moving of the robot and the sudden reposition making Sorun just a tad off-balance, but soon enough he'd managed to catch his footing and find solid purchase on the metal surface he stood on. He sighed out, and then looked to the side towards Shadow. The hedgehog was looking closely at him, but soon enough gave Sorun an approving nod, making the teen sigh out again.

"Alright, so we made it!" Sorun called out, having to slightly raise his voice over the loud, mechanical clunking sounds of the robot and the high wind due to the altitude. "What are we actually doing to stop this thing!?"

"This Badnik will have a power source like any other machine of Robotnik's!" Shadow called back. "If we can get to the core of its power and destroy it, that should stop this thing for good!"

"Oh! Alright, that makes sense!" Sorun nodded towards Shadow, and then in a flash of blue the Yamato appeared in his left hand. "So I guess we're taking this thing out from the inside!?"

"That would be ideal, yes!"

"Works for me!" He didn't see any better alternative, and he wanted to get away from all this open air, even if it was into the innards of a giant robot. So he reached forwards and gripped the handle of Yamato with his right hand, pulling the sword from its sheath as he looked towards the machine's neck. Four straight cuts and a kick from Sorun later, and a square entrance had been cut into the side of the Badnik's neck. Sorun and Shadow glanced at each other, nodded, and then proceeded to walk their way through the hole.

Sorun hadn't known what to expect to find on the inside of a giant robot's neck. A lot of cramped space from tons of moving parts, he supposed, and to be fair there was a lot of that. The interior of the dimly-lit neck was host to all sorts of pistons and gears all around, working and moving in tandem with the motion of the Badnik while also filling the air with the sound of a soft, grinding noise.

Surprisingly, though, the neck wasn't completely stuffed with these metal contraptions. In fact, it was fairly spacious. They'd managed to crawl their way past all of the machinery easily enough, and after making their way past a pair of moving gears dropped down a few feet onto, of all things, a catwalk. A metal catwalk sitting right in the center of the robot's neck.

Sorun touched down on the catwalk with a soft grunt, with Shadow landing silently right behind him. Taking a glance around, it seemed that the neck was more of a hollow tube lined with pistons and gears than a crammed piece of machinery. Looking above all he saw was clusters of metal and wire, and when he looked over the side of the catwalk, down below, all he saw was a gigantic tube leading to darkness. Sorun made an uneasy hum and stepped away from the edge of the catwalk.

"This... isn't how I expected this place to look," Sorun mumbled as he turned towards Shadow. "And is it me or does it feel way bigger in here than it looked on the outside?"

"Perhaps. Eggman's always had a peculiar way of constructing his contraptions," Shadow replied in an even tone. "Regardless of what

the inside of this thing looks like, our objective remains the same."

"Right." Nodding uneasily, Sorun looked upwards. "So would that be in the head, or...?"

Shadow shook his head. "No, I imagine the only thing up there would be this Badnik's main processor. Our goal is likely elsewhere. The Doctor has a habit of placing the power sources of his machines in obvious places. In this case it's likely somewhere towards the center of its body."

"Wouldn't destroying the main processor do the same thing, though?" Sorun asked, turning his head back down to Shadow. "That'd basically be destroying its brain. Badnik dies either way, right?" Not to mention he didn't really know if he wanted to traverse deeper into this thing.

To his dismay, Shadow shook his head. "There's no telling how this Badnik will react if we do that," he explained. "Do you really want to know how much would be destroyed if a Badnik of this size were to go ballistic due to you cutting its brain out?"

Grimacing, Sorun shook his head. That did sound risky now that Shadow mentioned it. In all likelihood the thing would just fall down dead, but every once in a while Sorun had cut off an Egg Pawn's head and it would do something funny. Like run around grasping randomly at random things. Or explode. He didn't want to find out how much devastation a Badnik this big could create by self-destructing.

He shuddered. They were likely far enough away that Knothole and the Freedom HQ would be fine, but that was still possibly miles of forest that would be scorched if this thing just happened to blow up. And that wasn't even concerning both him and Shadow, who were inside of the thing. No, Shadow was right. They had to make sure this thing would die without a chance of blowing up. And that meant going directly for the power core.

Which, unfortunately, meant they had to go deeper.

"Well... you make a compelling argument." Sorun took a deep breath, and then peered over the edge of the catwalk again. "Guess the, uh, the power core would be... somewhere in the chest region or something."

"I'd wager that's a fair assessment." Shadow peered down into the darkness along with Sorun, making no visible reaction at the sight. He then glanced towards Sorun, frowning a bit when he saw the hesitant look on his face. He loudly snapped his fingers to draw the human's attention, Sorun letting out a startled gasp before turning his eyes to Shadow. "Stay focused, Sorun," he said, his voice calm but commanding.

Sorun gave a jerky nod. "I'm calm. Super calm." He let out a low groan as his Bringer Claws appeared folded over his shoulders. "Gah, man, I hope this works out..."

He jumped down before he could have any second thoughts, with Shadow dropping down right behind him. Dropping down the long, metal tunnel that was this thing's neck was less eventful and more nerve-wracking for Sorun, but every so often as he dropped he would look back upwards towards Shadow's face. He was managing to maintain his focused scowl throughout this entire thing. Sorun didn't even want to know what kind of face he'd been making thus far. Probably an incredibly nervous one. He might have been slightly embarrassed if it weren't for the fact he couldn't find it in himself to care so much at the moment.

They'd eventually passed the threshold that separated the neck from the top of the torso of the Badnik. Surprisingly, Sorun first noted that there was more light in here than the neck. Not much- it was still a dreary, dark gray, but at the very least there was enough light that there was useable visibility.

The second thing he'd noted, even as he and Shadow continued falling down, was that the inside of wherever they'd dropped down

into was unusually spacious. It was like they'd dropped down into a wide, open metallic chasm lined with moving pistons and gears, and right below them were several building-like platforms sticking up from the darkness that was deeper below into the giant Badnik's body. Platforms that were, oddly enough, all interconnected by what seemed to be metal railings.

"... Who designs something like this?" Sorun silently wondered to himself as his Bringer Claws beat down, slowing him down enough that he softly landed on one of the square roofs of the structures. Shadow dropped down right next to him, looking no worse for wear. *"Seriously, what... what kind of weirdo psycho-maniac builds stuff like this inside a giant robot? The same kinda guy that builds a giant robot, I guess..."*

Sorun had only taken a single tentative step forwards when something happened. Near the center of the roof-like structure he and Shadow stood on, something rose up. A small, tube-like pod had slid right up from the ground, and like a door the front of the tube opened up, prompting whatever was inside of it to step out.

It was a Badnik, that much was obvious. Sorun had almost mistaken it for an Egg Pawn, but there were some small differences he'd immediately noticed. This one was colored a bright gold color instead of the usual red, and in addition to the long lance it held in its right hand, it held a large, circular shield in its left hand that shined the same sheen of gold as its chassis.

"It appears we'll be encountering resistance on the way to our objective," Shadow noted, eyes narrowing in the direction of the Badnik. "This one's a rare type. Be on guard."

"Huh, the gold one's rare, who woulda guessed..." A small hum left Sorun as a Summoned Sword appeared right next to him. "Let's see how good that shield is."

The Summoned Sword shot forwards towards the golden Egg Pawn. Its blue eye-sensors seemed to flash, and right before the sword hit

it raised its shield up in defense. Sorun heard a displeased sound leave his own throat when he saw the sword harmlessly shatter off the surface of the shield, not even leaving a scratch on it.

"... Alright, it's pretty good." He made a hapless shrug, Bringer Claws disappearing from his back as Yamato manifested in his hands. "Guess this one needs a personal touch," he continued, pulling the katana out from its sheath.

Without another word, Sorun Tricked right in front of the Badnik. Whether his sudden appearance did anything to startle the robot or not was unclear to the teen, as he'd wasted no time in slashing forwards with the katana the instant he appeared in front of it. As expected, the blade cleaved the shield completely in half, with both halves falling away from the Badnik's hand. In the same motion he spun Yamato around in a reverse grip, slashing back in the opposite direction and through the Badnik's body. Electrical sparks began flying out of the quickly-made seam in its body, and in the next instant both halves fell down to the floor.

From behind, he heard the silent hissing sound of another one of the tubes rising up from the ground. He turned his head around just in time to see another golden Egg Pawn charging forwards out of the tube and towards him, but right before it had gotten too close Sorun had Tricked behind it. His katana burst right through the robot's midsection, and then glided upwards all the way through its head where Sorun pulled the sword free.

All around him, from the right side to the left side of his peripheral vision to ahead of him, Sorun saw more and more of the tubes popping up from all the platforms located around the spacious rooms. Dozens of Egg Pawns were exiting out from the pods, mostly the red ones with a golden one mixed in here and there. Near the back of the room, past all of the platforms now filled with Egg Pawns, a small section of the wall began to open. Two sections like doors began to open up from that wall in the back, a small amount of white light flooding in through the opening to reveal a small, enclosed

space occupied by ten Egg Pawns which shuffled out as soon as the doors opened.

"Well that looks important." A dark form blurred past Sorun, causing a few locks of his hair to brush past his face. Sorun himself remained motionless, his eyes trailing towards the blur to see Shadow skating forwards on his rocket shoes. He'd jumped forwards, and Sorun couldn't resist the scoff he made when he saw the hedgehog plant the bottom of his feet on one of the rails connecting to another platform and began to grind across it towards the waiting robots. *"What a showoff,"* he thought, turning his eyes towards a different platform full of robots.

He Tricked onto the next platform, right in front of one of the red Egg Pawns. It seemed startled by his sudden appearance from the way it jumped slightly, but before it had time to recover Sorun had stabbed the tip of his katana through its face. He cut through the side of its head to free the sword, looking ahead as two Egg Pawns began charging towards him. Eight Summoned Swords appeared at his sides, the swords rapidly and consecutively firing off to skewer the charging robots. The swords found their marks, four swords impaling themselves into each robot and causing them to fall down lifelessly.

There was a flash of metal in the corner of Sorun's right eye, and right before the lance stabbing towards him made contact his right Bringer Claw manifested and clamped down on the lance, stopping it mid-thrust. Sorun whirled towards the golden Egg Pawn, one slash of his sword disconnecting the arm holding the lance, and a quick, second slash separating its body into two halves. With that one dead, he looked ahead to the remaining six Badniks remaining on the platform, and then took a deep breath.

On his exhale, he'd Tricked directly behind one of the robots and quickly cut it down with his sword. In the same breath, he'd once again Tricked in front of another robot and cut it in half in the same move. In just over four seconds he'd Tricked to and cut down all six of the robots, the human having to take another heaving breath to

catch himself once finished. He sighed out in slight exhaustion, and then looked to the side at one of the distant platforms.

He saw that all of the robots that had been on the platform Shadow had been grinding towards all laid in a destroyed heap, with the hedgehog himself grinding on a rail towards the next platform. Sorun made the decision to go towards the same platform, the teen performing a Trick and appearing in the air right above the platform, held aloft by his Bringer Claws.

Looking downwards, Sorun spotted a normal Egg Pawn and a golden one looking up at him. He intensely frowned, and then willed his right Bringer Claw to reach out and grab the red Egg Pawn. It lifted the Badnik all the way up to Sorun's level, before promptly rearing backwards and throwing the Badnik's whole body towards the golden one. They collided, both bodies bouncing and skidding across the platform's ground before they both finally slid over the edge and fell down into the depths of the giant machine they fought in. A third Egg Pawn had stood its ground and watched the display, but was then thrown down to the ground when Sorun landed right on top of it with his sword stabbing right into its chest.

With a grunt of exertion, Sorun looked down at the robot he was crouching on top of and then pushed the sword downwards, plunging it even deeper into its body. When he saw its lights completely dim out, he sighed and prepared to pull the katana out from its body. He heard footsteps quickly approaching behind him, though, and with a flat face Sorun looked up and, without even looking behind him, willed his left Bringer Claw to clench its fist and backhand the Badnik that was approaching his back. The hit connected with the Egg Pawn's face, causing it to fly backwards off the edge of the platform.

There had been ten more Egg Pawns right in front of him, and as Sorun pulled Yamato out from the dead one below him he was more than ready to dispatch them. Before he could even make a move, though, a black and red spinning blur zoomed into view. The spinning ball of destruction cleanly and effortlessly cut through each robot in an instant, and in the time it took Sorun to blink all of them

were completely destroyed. The teen was still staring at the small field of destruction in complete surprise, and by the time he looked towards Shadow the dark Mobian had already jumped onto another rail, fiery sparks flying away under his shoes as he slid towards the last platform.

Breathing out an exasperated breath, Sorun Tricked to the end of the platform he stood on to look down at the final one. There were not many there; just a small clustering of six Egg Pawns. One flash of blue later and twenty spectral swords appeared hanging over four of them, the swords then dropping down and impaling those four robots. As their lights died and they lifelessly fell to the ground, Sorun Tricked in front of the fifth one and cut in in half with the Yamato, and then glanced towards the final sixth one and willed three Summoned Swords to fire right towards it. Right before the three swords hit, Shadow had skated right past the path of the swords, just barely moving past them as they flew past his back and pierced through the robot they were aimed at.

Jumping off the edge of the platform, Shadow glared down at the final ten Egg Pawns standing in front of the opening in the wall. Greenish energy began crackling around his right hand as a spear made of pure energy formed in his grasp and, glowering down at the robots in complete contempt, Shadow threw the Chaos Spear down at the group. The spear flew down and pierced right through the torso of one of the Egg Pawns, who stood completely still as arcs of Chaos energy flew all around it and the spear impaling its body. In the next second there was a great explosion from the spear, the force of it being sufficient to outright destroy six of the Badniks that had been standing close to it and blowing the other three off to the depths below.

In the quickly-clearing smoke, there was a flash of green and another flash of blue and black as Shadow and Sorun teleported right next to each other. They both took a quick glance around to either side of the metal outcropping they'd teleported onto, and when they saw there were no further threats, both visibly relaxed. Sorun

dispelled the Yamato and his Bringer Claws while Shadow's shoulders had grown just slightly less tense. They both began to slowly walk towards the opening in the wall, with Sorun in particular taking quick glances at Shadow's face.

"Man. The dude isn't even fazed by all of this." Shadow's expression was the very definition of collected. Completely calm and stone-faced despite the fact they'd just run through a miniature gauntlet of robots while *inside* of a giant robot. Even his walk was full of confidence and purpose, whereas Sorun was exhausted enough that he was having trouble staying on his feet. *"I swear, he's just... he's too good."*

They'd entered the small space the ten Badniks had exited from which, at a first glance, appeared to be a lift of some sort. Sorun walked towards the end of it, letting out a low sigh as he sat down against the back end of the lift, while Shadow walked towards a console that was attached to the back of said lift. He ran a single hand across its surface, humming as he examined its controls.

"So what do you think?" Sorun asked, lightly panting from the earlier exertion.

"They appear to be the controls to this lift," Shadow surmised, turning to adress Sorun and then looking back at the controls. "Constructing a massive Badnik such as this must have been quite the undertaking. I imagine this is a maintenance lift of sorts leftover from when they were building it." His hands made contact with the controls, and he began to fiddle with the buttons on the console. "I'm going to have it take us lower into the Badnik. My hope is that it will take us directly to the power core, or at least closer to it. We'll work further in from there."

"Sounds good, man." Sorun lifted a single hand up in agreement, letting it flop back down to his side as he saw the opening they walked through close. The lift suddenly shuddered, and before they knew it the lift began to slowly descend downwards.

Shadow nodded in satisfaction, and then stepped away from the console. Sorun watched as he looked around, settled on Sorun, and was then mildly surprised when the hedgehog walked over to him and slid down into a sitting position right besides him. The human said nothing in response to this, though he did keep his eyes affixed to Shadow before finally sighing and looking forwards.

"Are you doing okay?" It had only been a few seconds after Sorun looked away before he heard Shadow's voice address him. He looked back to the Mobian and caught both of his crimson eyes staring at him. "You're breathing a bit heavily," he noted.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Sorun assured him, waving a hand off to the side. "Just a bit tired, that's all."

Shadow continued looking at him, and then let out a light scoff and looked forwards along with Sorun. "You've been slacking in your exercises."

"Eh, yeah, maybe a little. I'm still good to go, though."

"Hmph."

That was the end of that, as neither Sorun nor Shadow said anything past that. They just continued to sit in silence, watching the walls move past them as the lift they rode on slowly carried them downwards. Sorun had shuffled in place at the uncomfortable silence, clicking his tongue as he looked left, right, and then back center.

"Slow ride," Sorun said.

"Yes, it is," Shadow replied.

More silence ensued, and with it came an almost awkward feeling that began to slowly settle in Sorun the longer this went on. He wanted to say something just so that they wouldn't be stuck in utter silence, and from the rate this elevator was going it felt like it was

going to be minutes of this, but for the life of him he couldn't think up a single thing to say. A few more moments passed and Sorun was about to call it quits and say whatever was on his mind just so they didn't have to spend the trip in perpetual silence.

By some miracle, Shadow decided to start the conversation first.

"You did good back there," Shadow said, eyes flicking back towards Sorun. "You've been making acceptable progress towards becoming a better fighter."

"Wow. That almost sounds like praise coming from you," Sorun said, turning his head towards Shadow.

"It *was* praise," Shadow ground out in an irritated voice, turning his head fully to meet Sorun. "You've come so far compared to how you were when you first arrived that I hardly recognize you. And I approve of this version of you much more than the previous one."

Sorun blew a lock of hair out of his face. "Oh yeah, I remember. You pretty much hated me when I first got here."

"Well, that human was useless. The one sitting next to me isn't."

"You're not wrong there," Sorun mumbled out in agreement. "I can't really take all the credit. Most of the work is coming from the powers. Kind of like you, really," he said. "You and your Chaos... everything. I swear, you really lucked out in the power department compared to everybody else."

Shadow blinked. "It was less luck and more by design," he said.

"Huh?" Sorun tilted his head and shot the hedgehog a questioning glare. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means..." Shadow hesitated in speaking further. He looked down briefly, and then looked back up to Sorun's eyes. The teen couldn't really tell what the expression that had grown on his face was. Some

form of resignation, maybe, but Sorun couldn't even say for sure it was that. He was so used to just seeing Shadow scowl all the time he didn't even know what many other emotions looked like on his face, so he couldn't place this one. "It means that... I've thought about what you said. About trust. You've confided a number of things with me, and I've yet to reciprocate any of that trust." He sighed out, and then looked forwards at the slowly sliding walls. "Evidently we have time," he continued, "so I will tell you the origin of my powers. As a... way of repaying the trust you've put in me."

It was Sorun's turn to blink, this time in mild shock at Shadow's claim. He felt something mix in with all that surprise he was feeling, an air of appreciation, and from that he realized he'd never actually heard Shadow ever share anything personal. Not just to him, but to anybody, actually. Not even Rouge despite the fact that they were partners on the same team.

Now that he really thought about it, Sorun probably actually *was* the one that spent the most time with him out of anybody else, during those small training sessions they had from time to time. Which was really strange to him considering he was the least social guy in all of Knothole right next to Sorun, but then again, maybe Shadow beat him in that regard. He had to if *Sorun* was the one he interacted with the most. That alone said a lot. So him going out and saying this to Sorun made him feel... honored, he supposed. Honored and strangely happy. And also a bit weirded out that Shadow was taking something like this so seriously.

"Er, uh... okay..." Sorun let out a little chuckle and scratched at the side of his head as he kept his eyes locked on Shadow. "You're, um, you're really making this out to be some big thing."

"It is a big thing," Shadow droned out.

"What, your super-secret origin?" Sorun said with a light scoff at the end of his sentence. "Does anybody else know?"

"Rouge and my colleagues at G.U.N., of course. And the Faker and his friends," Shadow informed him, and there was a slight edge to his voice in that latter sentence. "They know more because of circumstance than anything else, and I count it as a small miracle they never told you. They have some standards, at least. But that's in the past. With you, I'd rather you hear it from me."

The small chuckling from Sorun continued. "Geez, you're making this sound really serious." He rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. "What, is this the part where you tell me your mom was an alien or something and you're actually half Mobian and half alien?"

It was absurd thought. So absurd that it made Sorun's small chuckling progress into light laughter. What was even more absurd was the fact that Shadow was giving Sorun a deathly serious look with his mouth set in a thin line, and the longer Shadow maintained that look the quieter and more broken Sorun's laughter became.

"Ah-hah, hah, yeah, 'cause... 'cause that'd be just the craziest..." The laughter died out completely when Sorun realized just how serious Shadow was right now, and slowly he began to bring his palm up to his face when he began to realize why Shadow looked so serious. "Oh my- dude, I was *joking* ..." Sorun gasped out in an exasperated breath.

"You're only half right."

"Oh thank goodness, 'cause I was about to say-"

"I am half alien, but technically speaking I didn't have a mother. I was artificially created."

" *Hoooo* and there it is." In a single breath Sorun's entire form seemed to deflate, followed by him vigorously rubbing at his face as he deeply sighed out. "Again with the aliens. Why does it always come back to aliens in this world?" His hand fell away from his face, and with a defeated look gracing his features Sorun nodded towards Shadow. "Alright. Let's hear it."

Shadow gave a slight nod. "It all began on Space Colony ARK-"

"Wait, hold on, I gotta get comfortable for this one." Sorun's interruption caused an annoyed twitch in Shadow's eyes, who couldn't hold the impatient hum he'd made as he watched Sorun settle into a more relaxed position against the lift's railing. After a few moments, the human finally settled himself and then gave Shadow two thumbs-ups. "Okay, take it from the top."

Eyes slightly narrowed in the teen's direction, Shadow nodded and then began to speak. "Perhaps I should go back a bit further. It was fifty years ago- interrupt me again and we spend the rest of the trip in silence," Shadow threatened upon seeing Sorun open his mouth again. Then teen paused, slowly closed his mouth, and nodded towards Shadow to prompt him to continue. "... Fifty years ago the Overlanders established an orbital space station in the effort of scientific research," Shadow began. "The head scientist of this station, a Dr. Gerald, had endeavored to create an artificial lifeform for use in his research. It was around the same time he'd made a deal with an alien lifeform who had made contact with him." Shadow cut himself off when he saw Sorun raise his hand in question. "Yes?"

"So, like, an alien just... randomly called Gerald out of the blue? Some random science guy on random space station orbiting a random planet?" Sorun asked. "That... that seems kind of out there." Incredibly unlikely more accurately, but he'd allow Shadow to try and explain just how something like that managed to happen.

"From what I know the Black Arms have been planning an invasion of Mobius," Shadow explained, causing Sorun to freeze. He didn't like Shadow's use of present-tense in that sentence. "They're a species who sustains themselves by going from planet to planet to consume all life. They've had their sights on Mobius for some time now, but according to Sonic, he witnessed the Black Arms having a war with the Xorda. So they've been holed up for some time in invading."

"... The Xorda," Sorun repeated in a low voice. "The same aliens that originally gene bombed this Earth and turned it into Mobius?"

"The very same," Shadow confirmed with a nod.

"How come they're fighting?"

"Because the Xorda still want to exterminate all life on this planet, and the Black Arms want to eat everything on this planet," Shadow curtly replied, causing Sorun's pale face to pale even further. "They're essentially fighting because the Black Arms violated a military blockade erected by the Xorda in the effort of invading Mobius. This is all on Sonic's word, who saw the current war between them during his visit to space. One of them, anyways."

Sorun's eyes scrunched in confusion. "There was more than one?"

"Apparently," Shadow said.

"Oh, okay." Breathing heavily through his nose, Sorun looked down at his knees. "So... is that something we have to worry about?" he asked, voice a bit quiet as he flicked his eyes back to Shadow. "An alien invasion from these Black Arms guys?"

This was *not* a prospect he liked. Dealing with Eggman was enough of a problem. He only had enough life to deal with Eggman and his nephew. He couldn't throw another villain into the mix, let alone the whole alien invasion that Shadow was implying. The Neo-Walkers had told him that the limited future they read only concerned Eggman, though, but even so he took everything they said with a grain of salt. He couldn't help but be worried.

To much his relief, Shadow shook his head. "The Faker said that the war was on a stalemate due to an even level of power between the two forces. They're essentially fighting themselves into a deadlock, and I don't see either giving in to the other. The most likely scenario is that they'll fight each other until their numbers dwindle to a point that they are no longer an issue." He looked deeper into Sorun's

eyes, and even with his mouth set in a small frown he still managed to look at least a little reassuring. "They're not an issue, Sorun. Neither the Xorda nor the Black Arms. Eggman is our only concern."

"Alright. Alright, if you say so." He'd trust Shadow on that since he seemed to know a fair bit about this. And Shadow wasn't one to ignore threats for the sake of convenience and ease of mind, far from it. So if he said they weren't an issue, Sorun felt he could breath easy knowing that was the truth. "So the Black Arms contacted Gerald," he said, "for... what exactly?"

"Even all the way back then they were planning to invade Mobius. Their entire species resides inside of a comet, and it was on a course for Mobius," Shadow explained. "Black Arms are natural users of Chaos energy, more so than Mobians by a large margin, so when the leader of their species, Black Doom-" Shadow's eyes narrowed in Sorun's direction when he heard a barely-contained snicker from the human, "- contacted Dr. Gerald, he'd used his powers to transport a sample of his DNA to the doctor. The deal made between them was that Dr. Gerald was allowed to use his DNA in his experiments to create an artificial lifeform, and in exchange, in fifty years when the comet home to the Black Arms finally reached Mobius, the creature born from his experiments would act as the vanguard for the Black Arms' invasion of the planet." Shadow's face scrunched in displeasure. "Gerald, for his own reasons, accepted the deal due to the opportunity being too great to pass up. It was for the sake of his research, but just because he accepted the DNA did not mean he would allow an alien force to have its way with the planet. He made preparations against the Black Arms for when they invaded. One such preparation was an orbital cannon of his design installed onto the ARK, though it's irrelevant now as the invasion will never reach the planet."

Nodding along to the story, Sorun's eyes began to widen in Shadow's direction when the implications began to become clear to him. "Then you're...?" he began, which only caused Shadow to nod.

"Yes. I'm the artificial lifeform created by Dr. Gerald. Shadow, the Ultimate Lifeform."

He'd stopped talking after fully introducing himself to Sorun. His crimson eyes bored deeply into the human, expectantly awaiting whatever response he would give upon finally learning the truth about him. His features locked and mind prepared for whatever reaction, no matter how horrible, would be thrown his way now that his true biological nature had fully been revealed.

He was put at a loss when the human suddenly started laughing and pointing at Shadow.

"Wow, dude, you're *old* !"

That was it. That was Sorun's reaction: a single, gleefully-said sentence and laughter. Not fear. Not horror or revulsion. Laughter. Shadow had been so caught off guard by it that he didn't know how to react, and could only stare at the human in utter bafflement and confusion as he continued laughing at him. But as the laughter continued, the dark hedgehog found it grating to his nerves, and when he found it to be too much he barked out, "I'm not fifty years old! I was cryogenically frozen for the better part of my whole life!"

"Same difference, it totally counts!" Sorun laughed out, having to hold a hand to his stomach. "Oh, man, no wonder you never want to talk about your age!"

"Hmph...!" With an indignant face Shadow crossed his arms roughly and turned away from Sorun. "I'll have you know one of the abilities afforded to me by my Black Arms DNA is immortality," he informed the human. "Whether I was frozen or not doesn't matter one way or the other as to how I look. I'm eternally youthful."

That had quieted Sorun down instantly. So instantly, in fact, that Shadow seemed slightly startled by the sudden quiet, causing him to quickly turn back towards Sorun. He was surprised once again when

he saw the human looking at him with large, almost pitying eyes, followed by Sorun softly humming at Shadow.

"Immortality, huh?" Sorun mumbled out in a sobering tone. "That sucks, man."

"... You don't think immortality is a good thing?" Shadow asked, surprise lacing his voice as he uncrossed his arms. "Why not?"

"Pfft. Who wants to live forever?" Maybe it was ironic coming from a dying man, but it's a sentiment Sorun had all the same. He'd seen enough character in games, shows, and movies to know it wasn't something worth having. And personally he just didn't like the concept. "Living on forever as everything you know dies around you until you're the last thing left standing? What's the point of living a life like that? Life's meant to be lived and passed on, not constantly existing for no other reason than to exist. That's not life. That's stagnation. And if that's what the Black Arms are all about, an immortal race of aliens who only live to take life from those living for the sake of a stagnant existence, then, well... can't say I approve of them living." He cast a sympathetic look towards the hedgehog. "My condolences."

"That's certainly one way to look at it," Shadow replied, voice quiet and contemplative at the human's words. "Nobody has ever expressed such an outlook to me before." He paused, and then looked down at his gloved hand. "Discounting my time on ice, I've had less time experiencing everything this planet has to offer me than anybody else in the Freedom Fighters. Immortality's toll... hasn't reared its head towards me quite yet. What my outlook when that time comes will depend on what kind of person I become, but until then... I've learned to live with it."

"I guess that's the best anybody could do under your situation," Sorun admitted with a shrug. "I can't think of a better way of lookin' at it, but then again I'm not immortal."

"Indeed you're not," Shadow agreed, dipping his head down slightly. "You... truly hate the Black Arms based on their mere description, don't you?"

"I'm supposed to *like* a race of aliens that want to come here and kill the world I'm working myself to death to save?"

"Fair point. It's a sentiment I share," Shadow said. "Just because I'm part of their race doesn't mean I agree with them. I won't have this planet destroyed just on their say, regardless of what I am, regardless of that *deal* made between my creator and Black Doom." He said the word "deal" with such contempt it almost came out as a snarl. "Though... admittedly I'm glad they'll never arrive here to begin with. It's one less headache."

"On that, we can both agree." Sorun slung one leg over the other, and then interlaced his fingers behind his head while still keeping his eyes on the half-Mobian sitting besides him. "But you're okay, Shadow. Y'know, for a weird half-hedgehog half-alien dude."

Shadow snorted, but whether it was in amusement or otherwise Sorun couldn't tell. "You're taking this remarkably well."

"Dude, after everything else I've seen here? Knowing you're a weird Mobian-alien hybrid isn't even the weirdest thing yet. This whole story of yours doesn't even breach the ceiling of weird my inner psyche created to cope with living in this world. I don't even know if I have a ceiling in there anymore."

The dark hedgehog rolled his eyes. "Understandable," he said. "Well, for the record, you're not too bad for a fragile human yourself."

"You got me there, Mr. Immortal." At that, they both paused and glanced at each others' eyes. What followed next was a small, humorless chuckle that left both of their mouth as the looked away from each other and back forwards to the crawling walls in front of them. The shared, dry laughter left as soon as it arrived, after which Sorun decided to continue speaking. "Kinda explains why you're the

most antisocial Mobian I've met yet," he said. "They teach you any people skills up there on that space station?"

There was a loud scoff from Shadow. "Like you're one to talk. You have more difficulty with the others than I do."

"Yeah, well, can you blame me?" Sorun sputtered and threw his hands in front of his body. "You've seen they way they act. Sonic and Tails and all the rest of 'em. All... overly friendly and supportive and all that. Honestly, it's exhausting."

"I know," Shadow agreed. "Every single one of them can be so obnoxious. Time and time again they'll persist in bugging me over the most inane things under the notion that we should all be 'friends'." He scoffed and rolled his head to the side. "Comrades in arms working together towards a greater good is one thing, but it seems like I always have to fight just to get some space to myself."

"I understand *exactly* what you mean." Sorun leaned to the side, lightly slapped Shadow on the shoulder to gain his attention, and then pointed at himself. "You and me? We're normal. Probably the only two normal guys in all of Knothole that don't act all, you know, *affectionate* around everybody and their mother. It's just weird."

"You've no idea how right you are." Shadow nodded towards him, and Sorun could have sworn he almost looked *appreciative* over the human's words. "They pester me on and on about socializing more, even Rouge. They just never seem to realize I like myself the way I am now."

"Man, you think I don't deal with it, too? I gotta live with Sonic. *Sonic* . You know how often he gets on my case about this kind of thing?"

Shadow actually mildly shuddered at that. "I can only imagine."

"No, man, you can't." Both of them sighed, and leaned back against the lift railing while looking back ahead. "I don't know. Maybe it's just

Mobians," Sorun continued. "They're not *all* that way, but it's like, it's, it's like a general thing with them."

"Perhaps. I couldn't tell you for a fact. Most of the Overlanders I worked with over at G.U.N. tended to ignore me in favor of their own business," Shadow said. "Whether it was out of professional courtesy or they just didn't want to interact with me was something I never cared to learn."

Sorun slowly nodded in understanding. "Was it bad working over there, or...?"

"No. It was adequate. The commander treated me with respect and placed trust in my abilities. Nobody ever acted untoward at me. A comment here or there behind my back from some of the younger recruits, but nothing major. I was satisfied in my position there. I think Rouge was in it more for the thrill and paycheck than anything else, but she's an acceptable partner regardless."

"And how'd you end up working for them to begin with?"

"I simply asked," Shadow stated with a shrug. "I can't speak for Rouge, but they knew of me and my abilities. G.U.N. had... ties to Space Colony ARK and its research. Like you, I... wanted to help the world, and the Freedom Fighters seemed tied up with their own affairs with Eggman. I judged G.U.N. to be a better place to lend my skills." He looked down a slight amount and sighed. "When Eggman obtained the seven Chaos Emeralds he overthrew G.U.N. and occupied their base of operations. The rest of the Overlander settlements fell shortly afterwards. There's been talks of reclaiming it."

"Oh...?" Sorun hummed in interest. "Really now?"

"Eggman's numbers have been slowly but surely dwindling due to our efforts. The princess has been planning things with others from some time now. I know she still has contacts with that human settlement, Station Square. Recently Rouge has managed to get her

own line of contact in occupied G.U.N. territory. They've all been coordinating something while we've been going around damaging Eggman." Shadow shifted his head so that he was looking upwards. "It's still a bit of a ways off, but eventually we'll take it back. And with a proper military up and running once more we could push Eggman all the way back to his own city."

"I see." Well, that was good. It was progress. Not the bordering-insignificant, minute progress he and the rest of the Freedom Fighters had been making in opposing Eggman all this time. Defend a settlement here, foil a scheme there, sometimes blow up a factory to hurt his numbers. Something like what Shadow was describing sounded like taking not even a step, but a legitimate leap forwards in finally kicking Eggman off his high tower and taking the planet back.

It made Sorun feel a bit better. Knowing they were actually working towards a means of attaining their ultimate goal of freeing the planet instead of just flying by the seat of their pants like it seemed like they'd been doing so far. And Sally usually knew what she was doing when it came to these kinds of things, she had to. And Shadow sounded sure of himself. To Sorun it seemed like an actual plan was being made in the background. He was fine with that as long as he could help out using what little time he had left, and ended it with his sword going through Eggman's brain.

Though it was strange, hearing how well Shadow and Rogue had worked with Overlanders. He would have thought there would have been some awkwardness there, even maybe some leftover scorn from the war on the Overlanders' end, but it sounded like that was left behind there for... something, Sorun wasn't sure. Professional courtesy like Shadow had said, perhaps. Whatever the case, it seemed like they adjusted well to working over there. He was glad for them.

Even after all this time, though, Sorun couldn't say for certain if the same applied to him. And seeing as Shadow was apparently in a talking mood, he decided to share his troubles.

"I don't think I fit in at Knothole," Sorun admitted to the hedgehog. "They're just... I don't know, everybody over there is great and everything, but I don't... I'm just not like them, you know?"

"... I only ever grew up around Overlanders. On Space Colony ARK," Shadow said after a long moment of silence. "I see where you're coming from. Despite being half Mobian myself, a majority of my life had been spent away from them. Perhaps that's why I fit in so well with those at G.U.N. I find myself more easily able to associate with Overlanders than Mobians. Mobians, the ones in Knothole at least, can just be too... suffocating, I suppose you could say. Good people. But suffocating in how good they are."

"Yeah," Sorun said with an agreeing nod, "but for me it's even worse. I'm not from this world, so it's like... it's like there's nowhere I can fit in to, you know?"

"Mm." Another beat of silent passed between them. "You should come with me to G.U.N."

Sorun scoffed out a small, quiet laugh at that, having assumed from the absurdity of the suggestion that Shadow had been kidding when he said that. When he looked at the half-Mobian from the corner of his eye, though, he saw that Shadow had turned back to Sorun and was staring intently at him. The quiet laughter died in Sorun's throat, and turned to look at Shadow with disbelieving eyes. "Wait, you're serious?"

"Your talents are wasted with the Freedom Fighters," Shadow grunted, a slight grimace on his face. "I want you to come join G.U.N. with me after Eggman is dealt with."

"Talents?" A disbelieving scoff that matched the shock in his eyes left Sorun as the teen gestured at himself. "What talents? I got powers and a limited skillset accrued in fighting a guerilla war against a mad scientist, sure, but I'm not- I'm not a soldier."

"You could learn. You're young enough, not even an adult by Overlander standards, and you've already shown you learn fast. And the powers you already have put you leagues above any other agent G.U.N. has besides Rouge and myself," Shadow told him. "You'd do more than well there. You could join Rouge and I and be a part of Team Dark."

"U-uh..." Sorun stammered, not quite sure how he was supposed to respond. "Why, why are- why are you asking me this?"

"Because I think you would do better there than with the Freedom Fighters in Knothole," Shadow said. "You made it clear to me that you realize not every single problem in the world can be handled cleanly. It's something people like Faker and the princess, what everybody in Knothole, refuses to see. G.U.N. doesn't have the same limits they do. They help protect the world no matter how grim the task. One of the reasons I chose to work there in the first place was because they didn't shy away from such work. Because they know that sometimes a threat like Eggman needs to be permanently eliminated. Like you do."

"... I did say that," Sorun hesitantly admitted. "And, well, you're not *wrong* , but... I don't know, Shadow, that doesn't really sound like something I-"

"You'd be among Overlanders," Shadow continued. "You could finally have a home with others like you if life in Knothole with those Mobians really makes you so uncomfortable."

Sorun shook his head. "It's not just that, man. And Overlanders aren't humans. They're close, but... they're just not."

"Then settle in Station Square," Shadow suggested. "A whole city full of humans. One of the Overlander settlements. You don't *have* to settle in a place like Knothole."

"It's not just that, Shadow," Sorun denied with a shake of his head. "The Overlanders, the humans in Station Square, sure, they *look*

human and may act human, but they're not *my* people, you know? They don't share the same history and culture that the humans of my world share with me. They're not... Earthlings like me, I guess you can say. It'd be no better living with them than the Mobians, and at least with the Mobians I already know what I'm dealing with." A heavy sigh left him. "It doesn't matter where I choose to live after the war's over anyways."

Shadow blinked, and then tilted his head. "Why would it not matter where you live after Eggman is dead?" he asked, genuine curiosity lacing his voice.

"It just doesn't, alright?" Sorun mumbled out, choosing then to get up to his feet and step forwards away from Shadow. "Look, I appreciate being offered a spot in your mega-cool ultra-secret government black-ops team, but I don't think that it'd be for me. My only concern is Robotnik right now."

He heard a resigned sigh from Shadow behind him. "I can see you're hesitant on the idea. Perhaps in the future you will reconsider." There was a small shuffling sound as Shadow rose up to his feet along with Sorun. "In any event, it seems that we have arrived."

True to Shadow's word, it appeated that the lift they had been riding on the entire time *finally* took them somewhere. The wall they'd been staring ahead at finally ended as an opening began to creep up from the bottom. The lower the lift went, the more it was revealed that the pair were being lowered into a large room. Very large, as the big, circular room looked at least to be around twenty meters in diameter.

As the lift finally stopped and the two stepped out of it and into the room, Sorun's own eyes couldn't move away from what was all the way on the other end of the room. A large, metal sphere bigger than a bus bolted right into the wall with multiple, metal tubes and cables attached to it and sections of the wall behind it. There were multiple clear panes along the surface of the sphere, too, and a sickly, yellow light was bleeding out of those panes and into the dimly-lit, gray room.

"Well, that's a power core if I ever saw one," Sorun said, he and Shadow walking side-by-side towards the large sphere. "Whaddya know. Lift took us right to it."

"I wouldn't relax just yet." Shadow suddenly stuck his arm out in front of Sorun, halting both of them in their tracks. "Up ahead. Two contacts."

Just as Shadow said, there was movement to either side of the power core, behind two giant bundles of metal cables. Two figures stepped out from behind those cables, stepping forwards and slowly moving towards the center of the room. Shadow's entire form began to tense up at the sight of the two, whereas Sorun's eyes just squinted in confusion.

They were both Badniks. One painted red and one painted blue. What was strange about them was that they were both quadruped with long legs and lower torsos, almost akin to a horse. On top though was a different story. Where the lower torso looked like a mechanical horse, the upper torso was a more humanoid shape, left arm attached to a giant, rectangular shield while the right clutched a long spear, the sharpened head of which nearly scraped against the ground. And of course, much to Sorun's disgust, was the round head each one had built in the visage of Eggman's own face, grinning down at them.

"So what would these things be?" Sorun mumbled to Shadow, Yamato manifesting in his left hand. "Centaurs? Egg Knights?"

"Doesn't matter, don't care," Shadow mumbled back, Chaos Spear appearing in his right hand. "You take left, I'll take right."

"Sure." They split off and began walking in opposite directions, the two Badniks across from them doing the same. Sorun stared down at his own opponent, the red Badnik, a small scoff leaving his lips as he used his thumb to lift Yamato from its scabbard. "Alright, time to die."

As if responding to his provocation, the red Badnik reared back on its hind legs as Sorun fully unsheathed Yamato. From the other side of the room, Shadow had already teleported to his own opponent and began battling the blue-painted Badnik with his Chaos Spear. By contrast, Sorun calmly stood in place as the red one planted all four of its mechanical feet on the ground, and then began to charge forwards with its spear pointed right at the unmoving human.

Right before the spear thrusted into Sorun's body, the human Tricked away, making it so that the spear stabbed into empty air. In the same instance Sorun appeared in the air right in front of the Badnik's upper torso, and then he swung the katana in a wide, horizontal swing. The Badnik responded by raising its shield to defend itself, but that had only ended with the shield being cut in half and destroyed completely.

The Badnik took a quick step backwards and stabbed upwards towards Sorun. The human Tricked away again, this time appearing behind the Badnik, though when he swung Yamato once more the Badnik had extended all four legs and jumped slightly to the side. Sorun frowned, and then Tricked a third time to right in front of its feet. He tried swinging his sword at the Badnik's horse-like legs, but like before, the red-painted robot had jumped back away from him.

"Quick-footed bastard, ain'tcha?" Sorun thought, looking up at the Badnik. *"I got just the thing for you."*

With a single thought, eight Summoned Swords began rotating around Sorun. He Tricked up in front of the Badnik's upper torso again, the Spiral Swords spinning around Sorun catching the Badnik in the chest before it could move- a giant gash was sawed onto its chest as a result. The red robot attempted to stab upwards with the spear, but it was caught by Sorun's left Bringer Claw, and promptly cut in half and rendered useless by his katana. The Spiral Swords stopped spinning and compressed closer to Sorun's body, and then fired out, two of the sword nailing the Badnik right in the chest wound and causing it to stumble.

In the same moment the Badnik stumbled, Sorun took the opportunity to Trick down to its legs, and then cut left with Yamato. The katana glided right through the robot's leg, the severed appendage falling to the ground and causing the robot to slump to the side. Sorun Tricked back a few meters away from it, sheathing the katana while staring forwards at the Badnik.

Due to its missing leg, the robot was left stuck in place with its three legs trying and failing to get it to move. The large gash was still present on its chest and sparking, and the two Summoned Swords jammed into its torso was causing its body to further stutter and spark. Sorun took a deep breath, and then slowly gripped Yamato's handle with his right hand.

"This is the end..." Blue energy began crackling along the length of the katana's scabbard, and in the next instant Sorun unsheathed and slashed the katana outward in the same movement. Following that slash, a long, blue, diagonal line appeared across the Badnik's entire body. Sorun spun the katana around afterwards, holding it in a reverse grip and slowly sliding it back into its sheath. The moment the sword's guard connected with the bottom of the scabbard, the blue glow faded and the Badnik fell away in two halves.

Exhaling slowly, Sorun quickly wiped away the bead of blood that began to drip down his nose and turned to his right towards the other end of the room. It seemed that Shadow, fighting the blue counterpart to the red Badnik the teen had just destroyed, was having some amount of difficulty in destroying it. He managed to dodge the blue Badnik's spear just fine, though every time he threw a Chaos Spear the Badnik would doge out of the way, or when Shadow would Spin Dash into it the robot would raise its shield, causing Shadow to bounce harmlessly off of it.

After a successful knockback, Shadow had slid backwards while keeping one hand on the ground for stability. He eventually lost all momentum and came to a complete stop, at which point he slowly removed his hand from the floor and looked back up at the Badnik.

His face was marred in a deep, angered scowl with all of his contempt aimed at the blue Badnik standing before him.

And then he did something so peculiar that it had Sorun reeling in bewilderment.

Shadow had tightly clenched his hand right in front of him, and then threw it to his side as his hand opened up. After that there was a flash of yellow-green energy, and six Chaos Spears were summoned around Shadow. Six Chaos Spears that were spinning around his body in a circle, all pointed outwards.

"What?" Sorun found himself blinking rapidly at the sight, his eyes transfixed on the six spears of Chaos energy that were rotating around Shadow's form. *"T-that's my...!"*

The next instant found Shadow teleporting right in front of the blue Badnik's body. It had tried to defend itself with its rectangular shield, but under the onslaught of the six Chaos Spears rotating around Shadow, it couldn't hold its defense. It was less that the spears cut through the shield and more that the raw Chaos energy making up the spears *melted* right through the shield. Once through, Shadow had Spin Dashed right onto the Badnik's upper torso, the Chaos Spears having all but obliterated its chassis, servos, and all the wiring and circuitry beneath from the power emanating off the spears while Shadow's Spin Dash did nothing but exacerbate the damage done to it.

In the end, the blue Badnik had collapsed in a smoldering, half-melted mess. Shadow flipped backwards and landed feet-first on the ground, the six Chaos Spears spinning around him freezing in place. He reached out and took one of the spears in his hand, while the other six slowly disappeared from sight. He looked down at the wrecked Badnik and, making a "tch" sound at the sight, threw the Chaos Spear right into its melted body.

The Chaos Spear had exploded upon impact. The smoke and dust kicked up from the explosion blew away seconds later, and from

what Sorun saw absolutely nothing of the Badnik remained but a black scorch mark burned into the ground. Shadow made a satisfied huff at the sight, and then teleported right next to Sorun in a green flash.

Sorun couldn't even form words, his mouth agape as he stared at Shadow in complete and utter disbelief. Shadow, in response, eyed Sorun's face that at the moment looked closer's to a fish's face than a human's, and to Sorun's further bafflement he had the gall to actually *smirk* at Sorun. "Try not to look so surprised," Shadow said. He had smugness practically dripping from his voice, and the air of superiority floating around him was so intense that Sorun was almost stifled by it. "I'm the Ultimate Lifeform. A technique like that was a simple one to take for my own."

"... You copycat." In the end, all Sorun could do was sigh out and shake his head as a small grin formed on his lips. "You ganked my Spiral Swords."

Shadow shrugged. "What can I say? It's a *very* good technique." The smirk on his face fell away into his normal scowl as he turned towards the giant sphere attached to the back wall. "Now, then. Onto more pressing matters."

The hedgehog began walking towards the sphere. Sorun remained in place for a few moments to stare at his back, and then he sighed out again and began following him. *"Can't believe he stole my Spiral Swords. Spiral Spears? Eh, I dunno. Good for him, I guess."*

He supposed it was flattering, in some way. That Shadow would think his Spiral Swords were so great that he decided to use them himself with his Chaos Spears. It might have been more flattering if Sorun himself hadn't originally stolen the move from a video game character, but he'd take solace in the fact that Shadow had still gotten it directly from him. Made him feel some small sense of pride in himself, which was a welcome change from how he normally felt.

They both stopped in front of the power core, Sorun eyeing it in curiosity while Shadow looked towards a small computer console connected to the sphere via a bundle of wires. The hedgehog immediately set to work typing away at the console while Sorun began to slowly unsheathe the Yamato from its sheath.

"So should I just, like... should I just cut it?" Sorun asked as he pulled the sword completely free from its scabbard.

"I would think so, but I'm just trying to figure out what exactly it's... oh." Shadow's fingers froze above the console's small keyboard as he read the screen, after which his eyes turned up towards the sphere. "That power core is a nuclear fusion reactor."

"... This thing's nuclear?" Sorun took an unconscious step backwards and lowered his katana. "You sure I should cut it...?"

"It... should be fine," Shadow said, though the fact he'd had to pause and didn't sound a hundred percent sure of himself did nothing to assure Sorun cutting the nuclear metal ball in front of him was safe. "I'm no expert, but I do know the process these types of devices undergo to produce nuclear power is incredibly complex, and the same goes for producing an explosion. I doubt you'll cause a meltdown by cutting the core in half. As long as you do it quickly." He made a low hum in the direction of the power core. "A nuclear Badnik... Well, it wouldn't be the first time Eggman employed nuclear weapons in one of his ploys. It makes me wonder if he truly intended for this Badnik to stomp out Knothole or if he was planning on detonating this when it got close enough."

"Guess we'll never know now." Sorun rose his katana back up, though there was a noticeable tremble in the sword from his hands slightly shaking in fear. He looked towards Shadow for a last-minute assurance, but while he saw the hedgehog nod towards him, his saw that his eye ridges were furrowed in uncertainty. That made Sorun's hands shake even harder. "You're absolutely sure this thing isn't going to blow up if I do this?" he asked.

It took him a moment of thought, but Shadow eventually nodded at Sorun. "A nuclear bomb must undergo a very specific activation process in order to detonate. It's a failsafe to ensure they don't unintentionally go off. Destroying even a single component of this thing should render it inoperable, let alone cutting it completely in half. We should be fine."

"This isn't a bomb, though," Sorun pointed out. "It's a power core."

"It runs on the same mechanisms, Sorun."

"Alright, alright!" Taking a deep, shaky breath, Sorun rose Yamato up above his head. "If we get vaporized in a mushroom cloud it's your fault." He exhaled, tightened his two-handed grip around the Yamato's handle, and as blue energy roiled down the length of the blade he attempted to cut downwards in a straight overhead slice.

"Attempted" being the keyword, as his blade only made it an inch before he froze up again and looked back at Shadow.

"Like on a scale of one to ten how sure-"

"Sorun!"

Startled from Shadow's raised voice, Sorun had successfully sliced the katana downwards in a knee-jerk reaction. He hadn't even realized he'd done it until he saw the blue line vertically bisecting the entire power core, and it was only after the fact did he wince and begin to step back. The blue line faded, leaving a clean seam running right through the power core. Each half listed off to the side, the two pieces still held up by the power cords and bolts connecting it to the wall, though the yellow light bleeding out from the clear panels on the core's surface slowly dimmed until they went completely dark.

Gritting his teeth, Sorun turned back towards Shadow. The hedgehog seemed calm, though he was starting intently at the segmented power core with what seemed to be a locked jaw, and if

he looked closely Sorun could see that he was gripping the computer console hard enough that his fingers were denting the metal.

There was a sudden jerk that rocked the entire room, making both Sorun and Shadow dart their eyes around wildly. Sorun himself had begun to hold Yamato in a death grip, and part of him considered trying to madly slash Yamato in the air in the vain hope that it would randomly make a portal to get him and Shadow back to Knothole. But just as he began to prepare for the worst, there was a strange sound. The faint humming sound of running energy and working machinery that had been faintly heard in the background began to slowly whir down, before then going completely silent. At the same time the lights that were just barely lighting the room slowly dimmed more and more, and then cut out completely quite suddenly, leaving both Sorun and Shadow in complete darkness.

A full ten seconds of utter silence passed in the darkness. The sound of a long, drawn-out breath was heard afterwards, that breath coming from Sorun who'd been holding his breath in anticipation. There was a small flash of blue light as Sorun's Bringer Claws then manifested, the soft blue light being just sufficient enough to illuminate the human's form. Moments later there was a flash of green energy nearby, Shadow's form being lit up by a Chaos Spear being held in his hands. They both slowly looked towards each other, blinked, and then sighed out in tandem.

"Great call, Shadow. Great call," Sorun murmured, sounding weary enough to pass out right there.

"I told you it would be fine," Shadow said, though he sounded slightly weary himself.

Running a hand over his face, a light sheen of nervous sweat over it, Sorun let out a single laugh. "So it's over? We're done?"

"Everything appears to be shut down, and there doesn't appear to be a backup generator or anything of the sort." Shadow took a quick glance around the room, and then gave Sorun a short nod. "We'll

need to go outside and ascertain the condition of the Badnik to be completely sure."

"Okay." Sorun looked away from Shadow into the darkness, and then looked back to Shadow. "So, uh... I don't imagine the lift will be working now that there's no power."

"I... imagine not, no."

"..."

"..."

"... You wanna just, like... grab onto me and I'll fly us out the way we came in?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"... I mean it'll take me way longer to cut us a new way out if-"

"Just..." Shadow held up a hand to silence Sorun, breathed out a quiet grunt, and then nodded his head. "Fine, but be quick about it."

"Yeah, trust me, you don't gotta worry about me takin' my time here..."

It was quite possibly the most awkward flight Sorun had ever taken in his life, and he honestly didn't think he'd ever experience anything similar again, but in just a few short minutes he'd managed to fly himself and Shadow back up the lift shaft, through the large room filled with platforms and dead Badniks, up the giant Badnik's neck, and all the way up to the square hole Sorun had originally cut in the side of the titan's neck .

Sorun's body emerged from the square hole, Bringer Claws disappearing and allowing him to drop down onto the metal giant's shoulder. Shadow, who had been clinging to Sorun by grabbing onto his shoulders, quickly removed himself from the human and rapidly stepped over to the edge of the shoulder. Sorun himself set to quickly dust his shoulders off, shake his head, and then began mumbling under his breath as he followed Shadow.

The pair soon found themselves sitting down at the shoulder's edge, a good distance between them as they stared out onto the forest's horizon at the setting sun. Sorun found himself taking a long, quiet breath at the serene sight, at the orange-colored sky and the vibrant trees stretching as far as the eye could see. The calming sight along with the relief at seeing that the giant robot they were sitting on was completely frozen was enough to put him completely at ease, and even help him to forget the awkward flight back up the robot.

"It seems that we successfully managed to stop the Badnik. It's halted its movements." Shadow voiced Sorun's own thoughts about the now-dead Badnik, followed by the half-Mobian reaching down to tap his gloved knuckles against the robot's shoulder. "Mission accomplished. Good work."

"Yeah. Same to you." Letting out a tired groan, Sorun leaned back onto his elbows to relax his body. "So I guess this giant robot is just here forever now, huh?"

"I sincerely doubt anybody is willing to expend the resources to dismantle an inert Badnik the size of a skyscraper standing in the middle of nowhere, so yes, it seems that this thing is here to stay."

"Neat." He clicked his tongue as a thought came to him, and he turned his head to the left to look at Shadow. "Hey, you wanna do something when we get back to the HQ?"

There wasn't a response at first. What happened was that Shadow swiveled his head around so that his eyes could meet Sorun's, and

what followed next was him blinking his eyes in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"You know, just go and do something," Sorun clarified, shrugging his shoulders as best he could with his elbows supporting his body. "Big mission success requires a big mission break, right?"

"Yes, we have sleep for that."

"Pfft." Sorun shook his head in slight amusement. "Look, I like sleep as much as the next guy, Sonic can attest to that, but I meant actually doing something." He looked back towards the orange sky and began to idly kick his feet against the robot. "You don't have to or anything, I just thought, y'know, it's still a bit early and I'm not feeling completely exhausted here, so... just, just an open offer. If you wanna hang out or whatever since we're done with the mission now and the day is saved and all that."

"Haah..." Shadow tilted his head upwards and breathed out slowly towards the sky, as if contemplating Sorun's request. He closed his mouth, and a few silent moments passed before he looked back down at Sorun. Somehow, the human wasn't completely surprised to find an agreeing look in Shadow's face. "What did you have in mind?"

"Game Over!"

Shadow stared towards the screen, eyes widened in shock and hands clenched so tightly around the controller he grasped that the plastic began to creak. On the other side of the couch was Sorun's much more relaxed form, his body sagging against the couch and his own controller loosely gripped in his hands as he lethargically stared at the screen.

"..." Blinking in disappointment, Sorun slowly turned his head to the right at a frozen Shadow whose eyes were still glued to the HQ's TV's screen. "You freakin' suck at this," Sorun muttered, and then

proceeded to throw the controller at Shadow. It bounced off the striped hedgehog's shoulder, causing him to growl out and toss his own controller against the ground.

"I should have never wasted my time with this garbage," he angrily grumbled as he stood up from the couch. "I'm going to sleep."

"Ultimate Lifeform's got nothing on the Ultimate Gamer," Sorun lazily called behind him. Shadow responded by slamming the door to his room in the HQ shut, causing Sorun to quietly scoff to himself. He waited a moment, and then reached over to grab his discarded controller, only to then exit out of the screen the game was on and navigate to the single player menu of the game that was currently on.

He spent the rest of his night whittling away at the video game until he'd grown bored enough to shut the TV off and head home.

A/N- I know there's a small fanmade Sonic fighting game out there, and in the game one of Shadow's moves is literally a straight rip of Vergil's Spiral Swords but with Chaos Spears, so that's where I got that idea from.

Chapter 35

Recursion Error

Episode 35- Diabolical sword, calamitous edge

"There it is..."

Even peering through a pair of binoculars at over a mile away it would be impossible to miss such a thing. A large, sprawling complex. A factory bigger than any other factory ever constructed by Eggman, save for the construction yards located in his own personal city of New Megaopolis used to construct the mad tyrant's Egg Fleet. A factory complex so large it could hardly be called *just* a factory due to its massive size.

The Freedom Fighters had been gaining some intelligence of the factory for a long time now. It was a major target; something that took a priority in eliminating. And until very recently its location had remained a secret. That had ended when they'd finally gotten wind of a possible location, and after looking around a bit, it was there.

"That's the factory that's been giving us so much trouble for so long. And one of the last ones outside of New Megaopolis to boot. If we manage to take that out it'll really go a long way in pushing Eggman back."

"You think I should get a hat?"

The sentence said by the voice near her caused the red-haired chipmunk to slowly lower the binoculars held up to her eyes. She looked down a bit, silently repeating the sentence she heard before shaking her head and turning to her right. "What?" Sally asked, looking down into the trench she stood in at the human sitting down with his back pressed against the trench wall next to her.

"A hat," Sorun repeated. "Y'know, like a fedora. Somethin' stylish. Bunnie manages to pull off a hat so I was just wondering if I should spring for one."

Sally's mouth opened to rebuke this, but when she realized just how absurd these words were she quickly changed her mind with a shake of her head and glared down at the other teen. "Sorun, I don't think now is the time to be thinking about this."

Sorun rolled his eyes at that. "Sally, you've had the both of us scouting around out here in the sticks for four days straight looking for this thing, and hey, we found it, so now is hat time."

"Could you please be serious about this?"

"I *am* serious about this. We already found the place so it's not like there's much else for us to do other than go back to the HQ and think up a plan of attack." With a soft groan Sorun stood up to his feet, turned around, and stepped to the top of the trench alongside Sally. "You think Honey'd make me a hat? She's probably a good milliner, right?"

"Maybe. I don't know." At this point Sally had slumped her body over the top of the trench, supporting her head with one of her hands as she continued to look at Sorun from the corner of her eyes. She wanted to scold him for acting so flippantly in the face of something so serious, but inside she knew that his logic in that there was nothing else for them to do at this point was sound. So instead she chose to give up a losing fight and let Sorun ramble on about his hats.

"I'm just saying, good headwear-" The human cut himself off suddenly, making Sally raise her head a bit in his direction. She blinked when she saw that he had completely stilled, his eyes widened in the direction of the factory. And then, without warning, he held his hand out towards Sally. "Gimme the binoculars."

"Wha-"

"Give them to me," Sorun demanded, his eyes still trained on the factory. Sally had started a bit at the snappish tone Sorun had taken, but nonetheless she still placed the binoculars in his hands. His fingers immediately curled around them and brought them up to his eyes, and after a few seconds of looking out from them a sound like a growl left his throat. "Tch, you're not gonna believe this. Check it out."

He removed the binoculars from his face and held them out to Sally. The princess looked down at the viewing tool being offered to her and then looked up at Sorun's face, but when he shook the binoculars at her with hurrying intent she snatched them up and looked back towards the factory. She brought the binoculars up to her eyes, and then looked around where Sorun had just been looking.

A soft gasp breathed past her lips when she pointed the binoculars near the front of the factory. There was a gathering of Egg Pawns- a large gathering, at least a hundred of them. Fifty were standing shoulder-to-shoulder in a line on one side, with the other fifty right across from them in another line, creating a small aisle that lead right into the factory. On the other side of the aisle of Badniks was a small ship parked right on the ground, black and red with Eggman's logo stamped on the side, and most startlingly, slowly moving down that aisle of Egg Pawns, was *him* . Eggman himself, sitting in some small, floating, egg-shaped chair. She saw his mouth moving, evidence of him talking, but due to the enormous distance between them she couldn't hear a single thing. She was less concerned about not being able to hear him, though, and more worried about the fact he was there in the first place.

"Robotnik..." The name was practically spat with utter disdain as Sally lowered the binoculars. "What in the world is he doing there...?"

"Who cares? He's there." Sally glanced to the side at Sorun, and then did a double-take on him. Sorun's left hand was clenching his sword, Yamato, by the bottom of the sword's scabbard, and Sorun himself had a certain... *look* on his face. An almost eager expression

that Sally just quite couldn't place. "He's right there... I could go there right now and-"

"And do what?" Seeing where this line of thinking was going, Sally reached over and shook Sorun's shoulder roughly so that he'd face her. "Sorun, there's a hundred Badniks standing between you and him. You'd get swarmed."

"Yeah, but I could get to him before they get to me..." Blue bolts of energy began to crackle along the length of Yamato's scabbard, worrying Sally even further. "Just one single Trick right in front of him and I could-"

"Sorun. *No* ." She grew serious enough that'd she'd grabbed Sorun by both shoulders and whirled him around so that they were directly facing each other. "I don't know what you think you can do, and I understand Eggman being over there makes it *really* tempting to take a chance and go for him, but there are *too many enemies* . I'm not losing you over a stupid chance like that, okay?"

She could somewhat understand Sorun's position. Sally herself wanted nothing more than to run over there and attack Eggman. To beat him unconscious and drag him all the way back to Knothole to answer for his crimes. To finally lock him up and end this war once and for all. Him being just all the way over there created such a tempting urge to go for it.

But with that many Badniks over there, right in front of the biggest factory outside of New Megaopolis, that urge was little more than a daydream. They'd never successfully pull an attempt like that. The two of them would get captured- or worse. They couldn't run head-first without thinking. They needed to prepare. They needed the other Freedom Fighters.

They needed a plan.

She felt that Sorun was shaking in her grasp, and it was only then she realized how badly Sorun wanted to go over there and attack

Eggman. He had a strained, conflicted look on his face, and his hand was so tightly wrapped around his sword's scabbard that the knuckles were white. However, to Sally's relief, he gave her a shaky nod, at which point she released his shoulders.

"Alright... alright, fine." Sorun took a deep breath, ran his right hand through his black hair, and then shook his head while making a low, frustrated growl. "I'll leave him alone, but if he's right there in that giant factory, Sally, then we gotta do something. We already need to destroy that place, but if he's gonna be there while we're doing it-"

"It's a great opportunity, I know, but we need to think this through," Sally told him, speaking slowly and calming in an effort to sooth Sorun. "We'll head back to Freedom HQ and think something up." She began reaching into her vest. "I'll call Tails right now and have him fire the Tornado up-"

"Don't bother, I'll get us back." Sorun walked past Sally towards the middle of the small trench they stood in, Yamato still in hand.

Sally's fingers briefly brushed against the communication device tucked into her vest, but she froze when she saw Sorun stop in the middle of the trench. Curious, she removed her hand and turned her body towards the human. "And how exactly do you plan on getting us halfway across the continent without a plane?" she asked, placing a single hand on her hip while she raised an eye ridge in his direction. "I thought your teleporting power didn't have enough range to cover that distance?"

"Tricking. And it doesn't." His right hand drummed across Yamato's white handle, and a ghost of a smile stretched over his lips as he turned his head halfway to Sally so that a single eye was visible to her. "I finally figured out how portals work."

"... Portals?" Sally's hand dropped off her hip, and now both eye ridges were risen in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I can do this."

Slowly, Sorun unsheathed Yamato from its scabbard. Once the blade was fully pulled out, he rose the sword upwards and made a single, vertical slash downwards. Sally had noted that a thin, blue line was left hovering in the air as a result of the slash, but before she had time to contemplate this Sorun had made another slash, this one horizontally. Another line was left in the wake of the second slash, forming a small, blue cross hovering in the middle of the air.

At first, nothing happened. Sorun was simply staring at the blue cross expectantly, and after a few moments Sally made the conscious decision to ask what was supposed to happen now. Before she could so much as open her mouth, though, the cross seemed to... open. The center of the cross folded into itself, and the space around the cross seemingly followed it. What was once a small, thin cross in the air was now a vaguely rhombus-shaped, two-dimensional hole floating in the air. What exactly was in that hole was unclear, because as far as Sally could see the interior was little more than a constantly swirling mass of dark blue energy, but it certainly *looked* like a portal. Not one she'd ever seen before, but definitely a portal of some sort.

"That leads to the HQ." Sorun's voice drew Sally's attention away from the portal, forcing her to looks towards Sorun in shock. "Just step in and it'll drop you off there."

"You're kidding me." Astonished, Sally's mouth had dropped open a tiny bit as she looked back towards the blue, rhombus-shaped vortex in front of her. "You... are you sure it's safe?"

"Sally, I promise you that this is completely safe." Sorun stepped to the side of the portal, crossing one leg over the other as he used his katana to point towards the center of the portal. "Princesses first, milady," he said, raising up his free hand to tip an invisible hat towards her with a small smirk on his face.

She actually laughed at bit at the display, though her quiet giggles quickly tapered off when she glanced back at the portal. The chipmunk took a hesitant few steps forwards, stopping just in front of

the portal. The swirling, blue colors of various dark shades were even more vivid up close, and at this distance she could just barely hear a small thrumming sound coming from the inside of the blue vortex. Taking another glance towards Sorun, who gave her an encouraging nod with his head, Sally nodded back and stared towards the portal.

"Well... if he says it's safe..." Sorun usually wasn't too mistaken about his powers. In fact if there was one thing he put an unusual amount of energy into, it was mastering the abilities given to him by the Emeralds. So she trusted him when he said the swirling thing in front of her acted as a portal. *"Here goes nothing..."*

Taking a deep breath, Sally stepped into the portal.

Sorun felt a large swell of pride well up in him when he watched as Sally disappeared into the portal created by Yamato. He had a right to; the process and journey of figuring out how the Yamato was actually able to create portals had been an exhaustive one. He'd actually had to go and commit research to it after a while of getting disparaging results.

Well, it'd been a lot of work, but he'd pulled it off. He figured out how to use his magic katana to make portals. He already started imagining the use it would have in his personal life, as well as any possible uses for the Freedom Fighters. Instantaneous travel to anywhere in the world had to have *some* uses, and if he thought hard enough, he foresaw many congratulations from some of the Freedom Fighters for coming up with such a thing. It was a nice thought that made him feel warm.

And then he received a startling thought that made all his pride crash right down.

"Oh fuck. I never tested it with anything other than myself and some rocks." It hadn't even been that long ago, either. It was only just yesterday he'd finally figured it out, during his scouting with Sally.

She'd been sleeping at the time, during which Sorun had been tossing rocks through a portal to teleport them all the way to the room he shared with Sonic in Knothole. He'd of course then walked through himself, and after concluding that he and the rocks made it stepped back out to the other side.

So he knew it worked for him. And he knew it worked for inanimate objects. But he didn't know if it worked for somebody who didn't have a connection to the Yamato like he did.

"... I mean it should be fine, right?" Sorun thought to himself, looking towards the portal with an uneasy look on his face. *"Nah-nah-nah-nah, nah, I'm overthinking this. It worked for the rocks, so Sally... yeah, she shouldn't need a connection to Yamato for it to work. It's just a portal. She should be fine."*

That's what he told himself, at least. Inside he was actually terrified he'd just done something horrible by having Sally walk inside of there. Like strand her on some random point on the planet. Such as a cave somewhere. Or under the ocean. Or even worse some kind of wonky in-between realm or something like that.

"Shiiiiit- okay, alright, let's just walk through and check it out." Sorun began to briskly walk through the portal. *"Please be okay please be okay please-"*

"- be okay- oh, hey, look at that."

Walking through the portal was just like walking through a doorway, with the addition of his vision being overwhelmed in blue, swirling colors in the second it took to transition between one location and the next. And so, he'd walked right into the middle of the Freedom HQ's main living room, the couch to his left and, much to Sorun's relief, the princess standing on his right. Sally was looking herself up and down with a surprised look in her eyes. Off to the side of Sorun's peripheral he saw Sonic's blue form sitting on the couch, his green

eyes widened as he looked back and forth from Sorun, Sally, and the portal.

"Ohhhh thank goodness it worked..." Sorun mumbled in-between a wheezy breath. Sally's ears had perked up at that, causing her to look towards the bent-over human.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Er, nothin', don't worry about it." Sorun lifted up Yamato and slashed it backwards towards the portal. The rhombus-shaped opening in space collapsed in on itself, and then disappeared entirely to leave an empty patch of space behind. "Anyways pretty cool, huh? Instantaneous travel."

"Umm..." Both Sorun's and Sally's eyes were drawn towards the couch, where Sonic was still staring at them both with great confusion in his eyes. "What just happened?"

"That," Sorun began as he moved towards the couch, "was a portal, Sonic. Because that's a thing the Yamato can do. Make portals." With a sigh he sat down in the middle of the couch, crossing one leg over the other while placing Yamato and its scabbard over his lap. "I just transported me and Sally back from the scouting mission we were on."

He expected at least some congratulating praise following this. Receiving it wasn't one of the reasons he'd endeavored to figure portals out in the first place, but he still would have figured he'd get some recognition for it. What he was getting instead was confused, lost looks not only from Sonic but from Sally, too. The hedgehog was glancing at him from the corner of his eyes while Sally stood in front of Sorun, arms crossed and eyes looking down at him.

"So... portals," Sally said, as if trying to confirm for herself the phenomenon Sorun had created a mere minute ago.

"Yeah, portals," Sorun echoed with a nod. "It's good, right?"

"Yes, but I... I thought your sword could only cut things?"

Sorun shook his head. "No, it *separates* things," he corrected. "What part of 'separates everything' isn't clear here?"

The simple explanation didn't seem to do anything to ease Sally's confusion. In fact, she just seemed even more lost now. "But how does that make portals?"

"It... uh..." Clicking his tongue, Sorun glanced to the side at Sonic. "Hey, can you go get me a piece of paper real quick?"

The hedgehog looked just as stumped as Sally was over the development with the portal, but he still agreed to Sorun's request with a small nod. He stood up, and before anybody present could blink he was off in a blue speed blur trailing towards and up the stairs. Sorun stared off after him, and then looked back towards Sally.

The princess's eyes had briefly trailed along Sonic's path, and then with a soft sigh she looked back down at Sorun. "Out of curiosity, how far can those portals go?" she questioned.

Sorun shrugged. "Anywhere on the planet, I guess," he said. "I haven't really tested it out that much. The portal we just came through was the furthest I ever tried- oh, hey Sonic."

He saw Sonic's body stop right next to the couch before the loud, zipping sound that usually accompanied Sonic's running hit Sorun's ears. He saw that the hedgehog was clutching an ordinary, white piece of paper in his hand, which Sorun reached over to take from his grasp. He sat a bit forwards on the edge of the couch afterwards, watching as Sonic stepped besides Sally with both of them looking expectantly towards Sorun.

"Alright, I saw something like this in a movie once, so I think I can explain this," Sorun began. "You guys ever hear of a Einstein-Rosen bridge?"

Both the Mobians in front of him shook their heads, with Sally asking, "A what?"

"Maybe they call it something different here, doesn't matter." The human teen held up the piece of paper for the other two teens to see. "So imagine the three-dimensional space that this world inhabits is represented as a two-dimensional space, in this case this paper I'm holding. Now we say point A-" he pinched one end of the paper with his fingers, "- is where we are right now, Freedom HQ. And point B-" he pinched the other end of the paper, "- is, I dunno, Knothole City. And Sonic, you'd agree with me when I say the fastest way from point A to point B is a straight line, right?"

Slowly, Sonic nodded in agreement. "Totally, yeah," he said.

"Okay, but what if... we did this?" Sorun folded the paper in half so that the two points he'd been pinching were touching. "Basically what Yamato does is it folds two points of space together, and then," he continued as he used his free hand to pick the blade up, "it cuts a hole through those two points." He lightly jabbed the sword's tip through the piece of paper, puncturing the two points. "Now this is a 2-D representation of what it does, but in real life 3-D the concept is pretty much the same thing. Yamato separates the distance between two points of space, hence, portal."

Throughout the entire explanation it didn't appear that Sonic got what Sorun was trying to say. His face had been scrunched up in concentration most of the time, and there were even a few points where he seemed to begin to understand, but then as Sorun would continue the understanding would fade from his eyes and he'd degrade right back into befuddlement. In the end he seemed just as puzzled as he was at the beginning of Sorun's explanation.

Sally was the exact opposite. Unlike Sonic, she'd actually been nodding along with Sorun's explanation throughout the whole thing, and near the end her eyes had lightened up in realization. "Oh! So you mean to say it's a wormhole?" she asked.

"You actually understood that...?" Sonic mumbled out, sending Sally a helpless glance.

Sorun snapped his fingers and pointed at Sally. "Wormhole, right, that's the word," he said with a nod. "Yeah, the Yamato makes wormholes. I just kinda think of a location really hard and, you know, do a little of this and a little of that with the sword, and then we get a wormhole."

"Okay..." Sally trailed off, her eyes flicking down to the sword in Sorun's lap. "And you don't think that at any point in time something like the ability to generate wormholes to any location on the planet could be useful to us?"

At hearing that, Sorun's expression grew flat. Even more, that small, hopeful sense he'd get to hear some praise had been washed away and was slowly starting to be replaced by some other emotion he couldn't quite place. "I literally *just* figured this out yesterday. N-not even yesterday. It was last night!"

"Last night? When we were supposed to be sleeping to conserve energy for the *extended scouting mission* we were on?" Sally asked, her eyes narrowed slightly.

"I had a burst of inspiration!" Sorun argued. "You know how long I've been trying to figure this out? I've been trying to make wormholes with the Yamato since I first got it!"

"And it really took you this long to figure it out?"

There was an air of disbelief about Sally that Sorun found that he didn't like. And he was beginning to be able to identify that unknown emotion welling up in him. It was anger. "... I'm sorry, Sally. I'm sorry the guy with an intro-level education in physics took so long deciphering quantum physics to make wormholes so *you* , because I mainly did this for the sake of the Freedom Fighters, could use them." He crumpled up the paper in his hand, tossed it aside, and stood up to his feet. "I'm not even exaggerating when I say that. I

literally had to go to the library and check out a book on quantum theory just to figure this out. You know how awkward it was going back there after I turned in that Chao book so late!? It wasn't even that one blonde dog lady manning the front desk this time! It was some bigger dog dude, J-something, I don't remember, I couldn't pay attention past all the scolding because he wasn't nearly as forgiving for my late return as she was!"

"Sorun-" Sally had tried to calm Sorun down by raising her hands, but the other teen's response was to turn his back to Sally while crossing his arms. She reached out a hand towards him, stopped halfway, and then slowly lowered her hand back to her side as her face downturned into a small frown. "Why didn't you come to any of us for help with this?" she asked in a quiet voice.

Glancing back at Sally, Sorun felt the tightness in his arms go slack when he saw her face. He sighed, and then faced back forwards while letting out a string of unintelligible grumblings. "Grmbfm... wnntbcl... wanted to impress Nicole... ffmgr..."

Sally blinked, her ears flicking in an attempt to hear what he was saying. "I'm sorry, but what was that?"

"I said I don't like asking for help a lot, okay?" Sorun said, turning his head to look at Sally out of one eye. "Seems like all I do all the time is ask people for help, and it... makes me feel useless, so I wanted to do something on my own, 'cause I thought..." He cut himself off with a sigh, shook his head, and then fully turned around to face Sally. "It doesn't matter what I thought. Can we just focus on the bigger issue here?"

"Sorun..." Sally shook her head in denial, and then took a step closer to him. "You're not useless," she said in a low, almost admonishing tone. "Don't think like that. I understand you worked very hard for this and I'm very grateful you did this with us in mind."

"... Hmph." He spun his head back around so he was facing away from her. "You're just saying that."

"I'm really not." He felt Sally's hand grasp his shoulder and softly squeeze it. "You know you don't have to be upset at asking us for help every now and then. You never had a problem with it before, and look how far it got you."

And yet he did. He always detested asking them, asking anybody, for help. It made him feel week and insignificant, but he always had to whether it was training in some skill he didn't have or help with his powers or assistance during a mission. He always did it without complaint because necessity demanded it, but that didn't change the fact he absolutely loathed asking for help. He preferred doing things on his own so others saw him as capable. Not looking like he couldn't do anything on his own without help from somebody.

That's why he wanted to be recognized for figuring portals out. Not because it was a power given to him, but because it was something he'd used his powers to make all on his own. And that... maybe it would make *her* a bit more impressed at him. But he couldn't deny that Sally sounded genuinely apologetic towards him. And it did feel somewhat nice being praised like that, even if it was mixed into an apology.

"... You really think the portals are cool?" Sorun mumbled out, still keeping his eyes away from Sally.

He could almost feel her roll her eyes from behind him. "Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?"

"I want to hear you say it."

She sighed. "Sorun, I think the portals you make with your magic sword are very cool and useful to the Freedom Fighters."

"Apology accepted, you're forgiven." In a single beat Sorun whirled around to face Sally, his cold, sulky demeanor completely having vanished in a flash as he stared towards her. She had a light grin across her face, which made him breath out a single chuckle as he

pocketed his hands and looked off to the side. "Seriously, though, there's still the whole factory thing we have to address."

"Right, I know." The small grin faded away from Sally's face as she turned towards Sonic, who had been mainly standing to the side the whole time. "Sonic, I'm going to need your help. Something big has come up..."

Tap.

An idea had been brewing inside of Sorun's mind.

Tap.

It was a pretty good idea. A fantastic one, even.

Tap.

The idea was simple: what if he just went and killed Eggman right now?

Tap.

"He's in that factory. Right there in person. In the flesh. Very stabable flesh." Sorun was sitting on the HQ's couch right now, idly tapping Yamato's tip against the ground as he was lost in his own thoughts. Others Sally had gathered for the impromptu mission were gathered all around him, though he tuned their voices out in lieu of his own internal thoughts. *"Why do I gotta go kill myself getting the rest of the Emeralds if I can just go and kill the guy right now?"*

The plan had been to wait until he had all the Emeralds. That had been one of the reasons he'd been so desperate to obtain the ability to make portals with the Yamato. Not only because it would be incredibly useful to the Freedom Fighters in their efforts to free the planet and for the praise, but because it gave him an in. An in to Eggman.

Get all the powers from the Emeralds. Use Yamato to make a portal in the general area where Eggman was in at the time. Go kill him. That was the general plan he'd been formulating for a while now. A plan portals made much more viable. He was usually in that city of his, New Megaopolis. Sorun never knew where, but with all the powers the Emeralds afforded him, he had to believe it wouldn't be that difficult to find him. And if not then to wait until he was in a easier area for him to search through. Somewhere he could reach, which, with the Yamato, was everywhere.

But if he was just in that factory right now he could skip all that and just go kill him.

"So that's forty-eight years lost to Emeralds, plus my normal sixteen years, which makes... sixty-four years in terms of my body's health. If I killed him right now and stopped getting Emeralds, that'd buy me, what, a few decades of life? Maybe four? Shit, it ain't much, but... but it's better than outright dying after I get number seven." He breathed heavily out of his nose and looked up at the HQ's ceiling. *"Man. Maybe if I had a year or two to work up the nerve and ask her... jeez, something like that might actually be viable if I had some life to spare..."*

A pipe dream, maybe, possibly, but that possibility only existed if Eggman died right now, and Eggman was in the open. Why, Sorun didn't know, probably planning something nefarious at that giant factory. It didn't matter. He was there. Vulnerable. Ripe for the killing.

Tap.

Fuck whatever prophetic nonsense the Neo-Walkers thought up. He was doing this his way if the opportunity was there.

Tap.

"Sorun, could you... could you please stop doing that? You're kind of making me nervous here..."

Ceasing his tapping, Sorun tilted his eyes upwards to the right side of the couch. Amy was sitting there, her hammer slung over her shoulder and her eyes nervously trained on Sorun's katana. Wordlessly, he lifted the sword up and, mimicking Amy, slung it over his own shoulder while giving her an apologetic look.

"Sorry, Amy. Pre-mission nerves," he lied, slowly drumming his fingers over the handle.

She pursed her lips at him in slight concern. "Yeah, this is looking like a pretty big one, huh? I'm kinda a little antsy myself here..."

"Ah-huh." Sorun absentmindedly nodded at Amy as he stared ahead, towards Sally who was standing near the end of the HQ's living room in front of everybody.

Credit where credit was due, Sally was quick to act. Whether it was because she realized that factory was a high-priority target that needed dismantling or she, too, was eager to strike while Eggman was there in person, Sorun didn't know. But whatever the case, she wanted to go attack that factory as soon as possible, possibly before Eggman left. Suited Sorun just fine. More people meant a greater chance of success. And with the Yamato's ability to make portals, he could transport them all inside of that factory and strike while he was unawares. Which would just further increase Sorun's chance of successfully ending him.

He just had to find him. While everybody else was going to town on that factory, he just had to find Eggman. He had something that would take care of the rest at that point. And then... then he just had to kill him. And then it would all be over.

"In terms of the interior layout, I don't expect this one to be similar to all the others considering its size." For a bit of time now Sally had been giving a briefing to those gathered, at multiple points addressing a crudely-drawn rendition of the target on a piece of paper taped to the wall behind her. "It's hard to say just what kind of numbers we'll be finding in there, but it's nothing we haven't dealt

with before. We go in hard and fast, take out anything in our way, do what we need to do, and then get out." She turned her head back towards the drawing, eye ridges furrowed. "Furthermore, Eggman has been sighted on the premises. A target of opportunity like that is too good for us to pass up, so we're going now while our window of encountering him is open. Our mission objective is still the same: plant the explosives and then regroup so we can exfiltrate, but if anybody is to encounter Eggman you're to contact the rest of us *immediately* so we can converge on the target." She sent a pointed look in one of the Mobian's direction. "That means you, too, Sonic."

"Yeah, I get it, I get it," Sonic said, nodding at the princess. "No flyin' solo trying to get after Egghead. But you don't want us looking for him?"

"Dealing with him once and for all would be ideal, but we're already heading into this with a lot of unknowns." Sally shook her head. "As much as I hate to say it, he's a secondary objective in this mission."

"Well that's a problem." As much as Sorun hated to admit it, he saw the logic. It was Eggman. The man was dangerous. That was on top of whatever they were going to find in that factory. But if he was really going to carry out his own plan he couldn't follow that order. *"Sorry, Sally. Afraid I'm gonna have to ignore that 'calling others for help' bit. You'd all try to stop me when I try to kill him."*

There was another concern of Sorun's as he took a look around at those gathered. As it stood it was a pretty sizeable group: the entirety of the Chaotix. Amy, Sonic, Sally. Himself. That was it, though, which gave Sorun some concern. "Shouldn't we have more people on this?" he asked, voicing his concerns towards Sally.

"Trust me, I'd like everybody in on this, but some of the others are busy at the moment," she told him. "Antoine and Bunnie are running critical supplies to some of the outlying settlements, Rotor and Tails are performing critical maintenance on the Freedom Fighter Special, Rouge and Shadow-"

"They're occupied and we can't afford to wait, got it." Sorun breathed heavily through his nose as he palmed his face. Rushing into this because Eggman was there only to not make him a priority... he understood the *reason* behind it, but it still seemed somewhat ridiculous to him. Especially since they were going into this shorthanded now. "Nicole?" he asked, peering at the chipmunk through the gaps in his fingers.

"With Tails and Rotor," she answered.

"Mm." He nodded and lowered his hand away from his face.

Sally continued to look towards Sorun to see if he had anything else to say, but when he remained silent she looked towards Knuckles. "Are you and the Chaotix prepared for this?"

"We're as ready as we could be." Knuckles gave her a nod, and then turned to his side. "How we doing on explosives, Espio?"

"For our purposes we should have more than enough. We paid a special visit to the royal armory and carried back as much as we could per Sally's request," the chameleon answered. "I made sure to count."

The small glare that was sent his way from Charmy went ignored.

"Alright then." Sally turned back towards the sole human in the group. "This is all possible thanks to Sorun's new development. Sorun, if you could explain?"

All eyes turned towards Sorun, immediately straining his nerves. All this attention focused solely on him made him a bit uncomfortable, and he was already a bit restless over what was to come. But this was important, so he took in a deep breath and began his own explanation.

"My katana, the Yamato, has the ability to make portals to other locations. I'm not gonna get into the science of how it works, if I can

even call it science, but I've... ehhh, I won't say extensively tested, but it's still a tried and true method," he said. He saw some of the others widen their eyes a bit, Knuckles in particular, and he tried his best to ignore it as he continued. "I know where the place is, so I'm gonna open a portal right into the middle of the factory. Where inside of the place that is I don't know, but it'll still be in."

"Exactly," Sally agreed, drawing all attention back to her much to Sorun's relief. "With Sorun's power we'll be teleporting right in the center of that factory, catching Eggman off-guard. We're going to use the chaos of our sudden appearance to our advantage and get those explosives placed before the Badnik forces have any time to organize any defensive action against us.

"Now, once we get in I want us all splitting off in pairs to go and set the explosives. Except... Sonic. And Sorun." Both teens perked their heads up when they heard Sally call of their names. "Surprise or not, there's still going to be a large amount of Badniks inside of that factory. I want you two running a distraction."

"A distraction?" Sonic repeated with a tilt of his head. Sorun remained silent, breathing out slowly as he thought over Sally's words.

She nodded. "It would take a lot of heat off of everybody else if the Badnik security forces inside the factory were preoccupied with two targets smashing through everything, and you and Sorun are the quickest at dismantling robots. So I want you two pairing up to basically run around the facility destroying everything in sight." She crossed her arms and looked in Sonic's direction, a small smirk playing across her mouth. "And if you just happen to run across Eggman while you both are tearing through the whole factory, well, more power to us."

"Ahhh, that's her play," Sorun finally realized, nodding to himself in understanding. *"She wants us drawing attention away from everybody, and since we're gonna be running around everywhere there's a good chance we're gonna find Eggman. Then we call*

everybody and we show up to take him down." He glanced to the side at Sonic. *"She's probably pairing me up with him just so he can make sure nothing happens to me since I'm our ride out, and because my powers make taking these things out real easy. And since I'd likely be there with Sonic when we first encounter Eggman, I'm right there to make a portal out for us if something goes wrong. Which it probably would with him. Pretty smart thinkin', Sally."* Considering they had no idea what the inside of the place looked like, it was probably the best way to go about doing this. The main thing was just blowing that factory up to bring Eggman's Badnik numbers down even lower. He would have preferred just going straight after Eggman, but he could see why Sally wanted to play it safe. He himself didn't want anybody to be lost because they took a risky bet to try and end this prematurely. A great opportunity if the chance came up, but otherwise she was going for a safe, methodical win here. A guaranteed small victory for the long game with the lowest chance of life lost as opposed to a chancy instant win where something horrible could happen to them all. He could understand and respect what she was doing.

At the same time he couldn't go along with it.

"Still... it's gonna be pretty tricky dodging Sonic so I can go after Eggman on my own," Sorun continued to think. *"I'm gonna have to ditch him at some point before finding Eggman. If we're together and we both get to him, then that's it. Nothing I'll be able to do. If I do it before, though..."* His fingers idly tapped on Yamato's handle. *"All I need is a few moments alone with him so I can use 'that'. It won't matter if they find us afterwards as long as I have it in my back pocket. But I'll still need to find some way to separate Sonic from myself..."*

"I'm perfectly capable of doing that on my own," Sorun called out to Sally. "Just have Sonic help you all with the bombs. It'll go way faster if he's on that detail anyways."

He kept up a cool face on the outside, though he couldn't help but be overcome with silent frustration when he saw Sally shake her head.

"No, I want everybody with a partner on this so we can all keep each other safe."

"Then pair me up with Knuckles. He can do as much damage as Sonic, and Sonic can take his place and set bombs," Sorun suggested. *"Plus it'll be way easier avoiding a guy that can't run faster than sound."*

Again, much to Sorun's consternation, Sally shook her head. "I'd feel better if you went with Sonic, Sorun."

"I knew it. She wants me protected since her entire exfiltration strategy hinges on me and my portals. Not even a day after I get it and she's already planning stuff around my power. It's as admirable as it is maddening." He let out a soft sigh as he looked down to the floor. *"And I guess there aren't many other people she would trust more than Sonic to make sure nothing bad happens to me. Looks like I'm stuck with him."*

"Aw, what's the matter?" There was a brief sound of rapid footsteps, and then Sorun noticed a pair of red sneakers in his peripheral. He looked up to see Sonic smiling down on him. "Don't feel like smashin' some bots with little ol' me?"

"Perish the thought, Sonic," Sorun mumbled in response, sitting back upwards while kicking his feet forwards. "Alright, fine. Me an' Sonic will go wreak havoc to keep the bots off you guys."

"And we'll make sure to keep an eye out for Eggman in the meantime," Sonic added, nodding towards Sally.

"Okay then." Sally closed her eyes, breathed in deeply, and then slowly exhaled as she opened her eyes to everybody gathered in front of her. "So are we all set to go, then?"

There were cries of affirmation and grins all around. Everybody gave Sally readying nods and eagers eyes, causing her to smile the barest amount as she stepped away from the wall.

"Alright. Then we're a go," she announced. "Sorun?"

"One portal comin' up." Sorun bounced up off the couch and walked to the center of the room. He held Yamato's blade up in the air, but stopped short of cutting downwards as he looked towards Sally. "Just to be clear, when all the bombs are set we regroup and I make the getaway portal whether or not we found Eggman, right?" he asked.

She nodded in confirmation. "Yes, that's correct."

His eyes narrowed the smallest amount, though he'd turned his head away to cover them with his hair before anybody could see. "Just checkin'," he said, closing eyes to concentrate before cutting downwards. A blue line was left hanging in the air, followed by a second line bisecting it to make a cross. The blue lines and space itself folded inwards to create rhombus-shaped portal of swirling blue energy.

The portal made, Sorun exhaled and stepped away, swirling Yamato around in his grip and pointing the tip towards the portal. "Alright. Just step inside and we're in," he instructed them.

A few moments passed, but, for some reason, nobody stepped forwards. Eyebrows furrowed in curiosity, Sorun looked back at the crowd behind him. He saw from the corner of his eyes that Sonic and Sally were giving everybody else the same look he had, too, as they were all staring towards the portal Sorun had just made with some apprehension.

Hesitantly, Vector was the one to raise his hand. "Yo, uh... y-you're sure that thing is safe, right?" he asked, pointed towards the portal.

"Yes," came the laconic reply from Sorun. "It's safe."

"... You're sure, right?"

"I could always throw you through, Vector," Sorun threatened, a few spectral feathers appearing over his shoulder. "Have you take a real close look for yourself."

"N-nah, I'm good," the crocodile assured him, raising his palms upwards towards the human. "Though, uh, it's your portal. Why don't you go first?"

Besides him, Charmy gave a nod of agreement as he looked towards the portal. "Yeah, I'm with Vector. You go first."

Most of the others, save for Sonic and Sally, gave agreeing nods to the bee's request. The latter two just looked back towards Sorun, giving him shrugs as they nodded towards the portal. Sorun watched the entire display with slumped shoulders, and then finally gave a relenting sigh as he turned around to face the portal.

"Christ on a crutch you guys..." Rolling his eyes at the ceiling, Sorun stomped his way towards the portal, shaking his head a slight amount the whole way there.

Just as last time, the travel through the portal had been an uneventful, second-long walk of blinding blue light. The environment on the other side of the portal was wholly different from the interior of the Freedom HQ once he exited the portal: metal walls wherever he looked. A metal ceiling that was so high Sorun could barely see it. There wasn't much else to see besides a few metal support beams scattered around and, interestingly enough, a few conveyer belts suspended high near the ceiling and extending from a hole in one wall all the way to the other end of the room through another hole.

He heard footsteps behind him as the others began following Sorun through the portal. Sonic and Sally were the first ones to walk through the portal. Amy and the Chaotix came next, and once the last one came through Sorun walked back to the portal and slashed it with the Yamato, causing it to close and disappear.

There were some quiet mutterings from everybody as they looked around the giant room they'd walked into, some clutching the weapons few held or the satchels of explosives slung around their torsos. Sorun himself walked over to Sonic, tapping the blue hedgehog on the shoulder to draw his attention away from the room around them.

"Alright, let's go," Sorun said as he slid Yamato into its scabbard.

"Huh?" Blinking, Sonic whirled over to Sorun. "Already?"

"Yeah, we're here, clock's ticking." He tossed the sheathed katana up in the air, caught it halfway up the sheath with his left hand, and pointed it towards one of the myriad doorways at one of the ends of the room. "I have a good feeling about that direction."

"That direction, huh?" Sonic mused, turning to where Sorun was pointing while placing his hands on his hips. "What's so special about over there?"

Sorun shrugged. "Nothin', really. There's just so many ways to go that I picked a random place."

Breathing out a sigh, Sonic could only let out a small chuckle while shrugging his shoulders along with Sorun. "That's about as good as what I got." He craned his neck backwards to address Sally. "Hey, Sal, me and Sorun are gonna head out and do our thing. You good to go?"

"Yep," she said with a nod towards the hedgehog. "We're all good here. Stay safe you two."

"I always do," Sonic claimed, staying behind to shoot the princess two finger guns. Sorun had already started walking towards the doorway he'd pointed to earlier.

Rolling her eyes in amusement, Sally turned towards the others. "Alright guys, first things first we should..."

The rest of the Sally's words faded out as Sorun lengthened the distance between himself and the rest of the group. He was only able to enjoy the silence for about two seconds until he heard a small *whoosh* besides him, followed by a blue shape walking besides him.

"So this is exciting, huh, Sorun?" Sonic asked, his tone light and a smirk on his face as he interlocked his fingers behind his quills. "You and me, bustin' bots right in the middle of Egghead's base right under his huge nose."

"Yeah. Exciting," Sorun droned out, eyes still forwards.

"Ah, come on, man, lighten up. It's just a buncha Badniks. Nothin' special."

A short sigh left Sorun. "You're always so carefree during these things, aren't you...?" he tersely muttered, his grip on Yamato tightening. "You never change."

"Never have, never will." Sorun didn't even think he picked up on the human's tone of voice. He just maintained that casual demeanor as he kept walking alongside Sorun. "Well, in any event, we gotta make some noise to cover our pals. So let's shake the lead out and do it-"

"Don't you dare say it-"

"- to it!"

Sorun visibly recoiled, shuddering just the slightest amount as a soft groan slipped past his lips. "I *hate* that saying of yours..." he mumbled under his breath. It made no sense grammatically speaking and just sounded awful to Sorun's ears. But to his chagrin, Sonic, for reasons beyond Sorun's understanding, chose to make that phrase his go-to catchphrase. And he was fairly certain he died a bit more inside every time he heard it.

"Eh, you're no fun," Sonic said. "Let's find you some Badniks to go swing your sword at. Cuttin' some bots up should loosen you up."

For once, Sorun found himself agreeing with Sonic.

They'd tripped some kind of alarm at some point.

Sorun wasn't too sure when it happened. It wasn't as if he and Sonic were being subtle about what they were doing- they were basically nonchalantly strolling through the whole facility, destroying any robot they saw room after room. Perhaps a camera had seen them, or a stray robot had tripped an alarm, or some wandering patrol found the remains of one of their attacks. It didn't really matter since the whole goal was to draw as much attention to them anyways, hence the lack of subtlety on their part.

It seemed to be working for the most part. They'd entered another large room, mostly empty save for some high conveyer belts, some random crates scattered about, and the six Egg Pawns waiting for them as both Sorun and Sonic sauntered through one of the doorways.

"Feels like we're going around in circles from the way all these rooms look so similar," Sorun said, barely sparing the six robots in front of them a glance as their heads were skewered with Summoned Swords.

There was a loud, blaring sound as a large door to their side automatically opened up. Another squad of four Egg Pawns ran out, clutching their lances with their mechanical eyes affixed to Sorun's form. Before they even got close a blue, spinning ball collided into each one, the object cutting clean right through them with seemingly no effort whatsoever. Once the last robot was cut down the blue object stopped and untucked itself to reveal Sonic, who, with a light smile on his face, proceeded to brush the soles of his sneakers against one of the robots to brush them off. "Sorry, guys. You're just too slow."

Sorun rolled his eyes at the display, getting ready to say something before he heard another short alarm. Another door on the other side of the room began opening up, another squad of Egg Pawns rushing through towards them. Sorun had lifted up his sheathed Yamato to defend himself, but before he could even grab its handle Sonic's blue form had zoomed past him towards the approaching robots.

"Move it or lose it!"

As with the previous group, Sonic had made short work of this group of Egg Pawns by easily and effortlessly Spin Dashing right through their bodies. More and more alarms sounded as more doors opened, followed by more small squads of Egg Pawns pouring out, but before Sorun could even move to retaliate Sonic had beat him to it. The hedgehog's spinning form flew right towards each and every one, destroying them in a short and efficient manner before quickly moving onto the next.

"It's juicin' time!"

"Hah! Almost got me! Not!"

"Nice try, ro-butt!"

"This hurts to listen to." By now Sorun had given up on even attacking any of the robots, and had just let the hand holding his katana go slack to his side as he watched the blue hedgehog completely and effortlessly tear through all the robot forces around them. He couldn't help but momentarily grimace every time he heard a one-liner come out of Sonic's mouth, and the longer this went on the more tight his facial expression grew.

It was always like this working with Sonic, though "working with" may have been generous as Sonic always took any opportunity he could to smash more robots than anybody else. It was like a competition to him; something that used to have Sorun scoffing in amusement, but nowadays it just caused a quiet anger to simmer inside of Sorun whenever he had to witness Sonic and his antics.

If there was one single Mobian in all of the Freedom Fighters that got on Sorun's nerves the most, it was Sonic. It was always Sonic that drew his ire. Everything about him irritated Sorun to his core. The way Sonic always managed to go on these missions and take out all these robots without even trying. The way he always kept up that same flippant, devil-may-care attitude no matter what. That same carefree smirk on his face even as he recklessly charged into the most dangerous situations, and always made it out on top no matter what.

There were so many things Sorun felt every single time he did a mission with Sonic and had to watch him absolutely dominate the opposition. Admiration that was soon marred by resentment. Camaraderie mixed with anger. There used to be deep respect, but after a while of seeing the way the hedgehog acted around his adversaries it slowly started to erode into something else, and for a while he couldn't quite place what it was. But after having to see that same smile plastered on Sonic's face all the time as he sawed his way through all those robots, Sorun was able to finally place it.

Intense jealousy. It was an ugly thing to feel towards the blue Mobian, Sorun realized it, but he just couldn't help it. He felt it whenever he looked at himself, at all his powers that were slowly killing him, and then he looked at Sonic. Sonic, who had so much power that all these robots trying to kill him were little more than a minor inconvenience to him, and all he'd ever had to do to gain his powers was be born with them and collect a bunch of rings. It wasn't that he was so careless, it was that he was so powerful that he could *afford* to be careless and then some. Because that's who he just was. Sonic.

Sonic. Who, no matter what, always made it through whatever challenge Sorun had seen the world throw at him with no effort whatsoever because he was just naturally that powerful. Who could go around with a smile permanently affixed to his face because everything just went right for him. Someone so admired by those

around him that pretty much everybody adored him. A hero to the whole world. Somebody who had a loving family to go back home to.

What was Sorun compared to that? Somebody with powers that were slowly killing him, that didn't even put him on the same level as Sonic. He could never smile because every single day he was reminded of everything wrong with his life. He was always having to hide his true feelings away from everybody to spare them of his own suffering; he'd had to periodically stab himself with Yamato in secret just so they wouldn't see him having a panic attack and worry for him. His vain, basically thrown away, effort of distancing himself from everybody was all but in shambles at this point, and because of that Sorun himself didn't even know what his relationship with those around him was. He was a human stuck in a world of Mobians who barely even knew who he was, and his family was a whole other world away and lost to him forever.

Sonic had the opportunity of living an actual life once the war was over. Maybe even find somebody to settle down with. Die old and happy.

Sorun didn't.

He... couldn't outright *hate* Sonic. Deep inside Sorun knew these were all factors that Sonic had no control of. He knew from living and interacting with him that Sonic was a pure, kind-hearted, perhaps the most kind-hearted person Sorun had ever met, individual who always put the needs of others before himself. A completely selfless person who was putting his life on the line just as much as everybody else by being in the Freedom Fighters. He was the very definition of a good person. Sorun couldn't hate that.

At the same time, he couldn't help but absolutely resent Sonic for having everything Sorun didn't have and wanted. And these feelings always made themselves known whenever Sorun saw Sonic act this way on missions.

"Whoo! And that's another thirty down!" Sonic zoomed to a stop right in front of Sorun, looking absolutely no worse for wear and wearing that same cocky smirk on his face. "So what's the score up to now?"

"I stopped keeping count a few rooms ago," Sorun rumbled out, maintaining a blank stare towards Sonic's way. "You could always *try* and leave some for me instead of hogging all the enemies to yourself."

"What, and let you have all the fun? Not a chance," Sonic said.

"Tch..." Sorun turned his head away from Sonic and began walking forwards, Yamato tightly gripped in his hand. He sensed Sonic walking right besides him, and he felt the hedgehog's green eyes locked right onto his face.

"Say," Sonic said, "what's got you all grumpy?"

Closing his eyes to take a breath, Sorun stopped walking and then turned to face Sonic. "Your one-liners," he said. "They drive me nuts."

Sonic scoffed in disbelief at that. "My one-liners? No way, my one-liners are great. You just must be hard at hearing."

"You have absolutely no class. You just spew off petty insults at everything," Sorun claimed.

"What, and yours are so better by comparison?"

"I actually put a lot of thought into mine," Sorun said, brushing his right hand through his dark hair. "You gotta get creative when you insult somebody. It adds that all-important edge of intellectual superiority you need to make the insult legitimate. Without it all you have are cheap jabs."

Sonic blinked towards Sorun, tilting his head in thought and nodding along to Sorun's words as he seemed to think them over. And then

he shrugged while shaking his head, saying, "Nah, Sorun, I think you're putting way too much thought into this."

Thump!

Sorun was ready to retort when the ground beneath them lightly shook alongside the sound of a distant thump. More and more loud thumps, almost sounding like footsteps, reached their ears as the pair turned towards the source the noise: a large, garage-like door built right into the wall they stood next to. A flashing, orange light above the door began flashing as the door automatically began to roll open, with Sorun's shoulders tensing when he saw what was on the other side of the door.

"Oh, it's one of these guys," Sorun mumbled under his breath as he watched the large, purple-colored Badnik walk into the room he and Sonic were in, giant hammer slung over its shoulder. "An Egg Hammer."

"Pfft. It's got nothin' on Amy," Sonic said, confident smirk on his face as he sized the Badnik up and down with his eyes. "Want me to take it out?"

"No. There's something I actually want to try out on this thing." Sorun walked past Sonic and towards the front of the giant Badnik, Yamato still clutched in his left hand. "It's my new move."

He stopped right in front of the Egg Hammer, with the robot's green, menacing eyes staring down right at the human. It hefted the hammer off of its shoulder and gripped it with both hands, readying itself to lift up and smash the hammer down at a moment's notice. Sorun, in response, breathed out slowly as he wrapped the fingers of his right hand around the katana's handle.

"Alright. You got this. You practiced it." Sorun's eyes narrowed up at the Egg Hammer as arcs of blue energy ran along Yamato's sheath. *"Just concentrate... and aim it right..."*

The power running along the length of the sword's sheath began to grow in intensity. It got a point where it began to glow so brightly that the entire sword, from its handle to the black sheath, had turned into a brightly-glowing blue color, with more wisps of blue energy slowly wafting off of it. There was enough Chaos energy that some of the quills on the back Sonic's head began to stand up, and he found himself taking an unconscious step backwards.

In the span of a single second, multiple events occurred. The first was that Sorun had pulled the Yamato out of its sheath a quarter of the way and, in seemingly the exact same movement, re-sheathed it fully. At the same time, a white-blue slash appeared in the air in front of Sorun, and then quickly disappeared. The space all around the Egg Hammer's body began to shift and warp afterwards, as if a dark blue, barely-perceptible bubble had wrapped around it.

And then the cuts assaulted it. Dozens of white-blue, crescent-shaped slashes appeared all at once in the air around the Egg Hammer, all curving in every conceivable direction at the same time and carving through the Badnik's body in the same instance. Slashes that cut with such intensity that they caused a chromatic aberration around the space they slashed in, slashes of red and blue flickering into existence for milliseconds besides the main slashes.

The display came to an abrupt end. The distortion in space and the myriad floating, crescent slashes disappeared almost as soon as they arrived, leaving behind an Egg Hammer covered in dozens and dozens of slash marks along its body. And then it tipped over and fell apart into innumerable pieces, all of which scattered along the floor.

All of this had taken place within the span of a single second.

"That..." Sorun breathed out, straightening up his posture as he ran his right hand through the dark hair hanging in his face, "... was Judgement Cut."

"... Wow." Eyes widened, Sonic stepped next to Sorun while peering down on the ground the Egg Hammer had been standing on. The

nearly-uncountable amount of slashes that had completely decimated the Badnik had cut with such fervor that there were a number of straight grooves cut into the metal ground where it had been standing. "What did you do?" he asked as he turned his head to Sorun.

The human teen answered by holding the sheathed Yamato up for Sonic to see. "Eh, it's kinda complicated," he began. "First I make a slash, and then use Yamato's power to separate the distance between me and what I'm slashing at. Then I separate the time it takes for me to make the actual slash, so real-time it looks like I didn't really do anything. Then around the general area I'm trying to cut in I use Yamato's power of separation to break down the dimensional barriers around there, so once the space is broken up enough the one slash turns into multiple..." He trailed off when he saw Sonic's shoulders begin to sag in confusion, and after registering the lost look on the hedgehog's face he sighed and shook his head. "I use Yamato to slash at something from far away really fast," he explained. *"Now if only I could figure out Judgement Cut End..."*

"Why didn't you just say so?" Sonic mumbled out. "How'd you even figure out how to do something like that?"

"A lot of studying from that book I checked out and theoretical practice."

"You mean that quantum-whatever book?"

"It pays to read, Sonic." Sorun lifted his right hand up and tapped the side of his head. "Pays to read."

"I guess." Sonic's gaze travelled back to the rent-apart Badnik. "You didn't say a cool one-liner, though."

Sorun scoffed. "What, I'm supposed to waste my words on trash mobs like this? Please." More loud thumps stopped Sorun from saying anything further, and caused the two teens to turn around. On

the other end of the room two more large doors had opened up, with two more Egg Hammers emerging and stomping their way towards them. "Looks like we have a couple more," Sorun said as he gripped his sword's handle. "How about-"

"I got it!" Before Sorun could get another word in Sonic had curled up into a spiky ball, began spinning, and shot forwards to the two Badniks. Sorun's eyes followed after the spinning hedgehog in surprise, and he found himself cursing under his breath as he stepped forwards to help Sonic with the robots.

Only, it seemed that Sorun's assistance was wholly unnecessary. Sonic's spinning form had locked onto the rightmost Badnik, curving upwards to connect with the spot its head connected to its body. Sonic's spinning body carved right through the Egg Hammer, and the robot's head soon fell away as Sonic uncurled and landed right on the headless robot's shoulder. The second Egg Hammer saw the decapitation of its twin, and soon unslung the hammer from its shoulder and reared it back in preparation to beat it downwards. Sonic, still standing on the headless Badnik's shoulder, stood completely still while cockily smirking at the second Badnik.

The Egg Hammer swung its hammer. Sonic had jumped upwards mere milliseconds before the hammer hit, the first Badnik's body crumpling under the hammer's weight. Sonic, still in the air, began spinning once more and launched towards the second Badnik. Similar to the first one, Sonic's body had sawed right through the head of the second one, ending with the blue hedgehog landing feet-first on the ground. The Badnik with the split head behind him wobbled on its feet, dropped the hammer it had been holding, and then finally tilted to the side far enough that it tipped over completely and fell down.

Sorun had been watching Sonic attack the two Badniks the entire time. When the first Badnik had fallen he felt his jaw clench tightly, and by the time the second one fell down he was clutching Yamato hard enough that his hand was shaking. And during the entire time

Sonic had kept up that same, infuriating smirk on his face, which only served to make Sorun all the more upset.

"Of course. Of course the one moment I finally get to show off my Judgement Cut... he has to go and invalidate it by taking out two of those things like it was nothing." Sorun found himself looking downwards at his hands. At the small cuts covering his hands that were a result of practicing that move so many times until he'd gotten it right. Until he'd figured out a move that could instantly take down any Badnik. Something he could be proud of and call his. He didn't feel nearly as accomplished in acquiring Judgement Cut and destroying an Egg Hammer with it when Sonic had managed to destroy two with almost no effort at all on his part. *"Why does he always have to make me feel so useless...!?"*

He always did this to Sorun. Always. Even all the way back on the first day he came here, with that foot race. Even if it was indirect, he always had to find some way to make Sorun feel this way. To feel like his efforts amounted to nothing because of the natural power he wielded. Inferior. It was yet another thing Sorun couldn't help but feel whenever Sonic had the urge to show off in front of him.

And he always had to do it with that *damn smirk* ...

"Whew! That was a great workout." Sonic blurred back to Sorun's side, wiping his gloved hands off on each other as he glanced at Sorun from the side of his eyes. "Let's keep movin', huh? I got a feeling we're gettin' close to finding Egghead in this heap."

"... Yeah. Let's," Sorun quietly agreed, spinning on a dime towards a nearby open doorway. He and Sonic walked side-by-side, the hedgehog absentmindedly whistling a small tune while Sorun silently fumed besides him, just barely managing to hold up a blank, passive face.

"Huh, get a load of this place, huh?"

"Mh." Sorun grunted in response, looking around the new room they'd both walked into with a disinterested look. "It's... empty."

The room they'd walked into was rather wide and circular in shape. In front of them was little more than a wide, metal walkway that connected all the way to the other end of the room. There was no floor otherwise; when Sorun walked to one of the edges of the walkway and peered down, all he saw was a drop so long it lead into darkness. He hummed from his crouched position at the edge of the walkway, and then craned his neck back to Sonic who stood behind him.

"Where do you think this drops to?" Sorun asked, pointing down into the abyss below.

Sonic shrugged. "Into a lower level or something maybe, I dunno. This place is huge enough for something like that."

Humming in response, Sorun stood back up to his feet. *"Interesting."* He turned back to Sonic, asking, "You think Eggman would be down on a lower level?"

"I mean, probably?" Again, Sonic shrugged. "Hard to say, but... eh, to be honest with you, Sorun, we've been at this a while. The others are probably gonna be finished pretty soon setting the bombs, so maybe we should think about heading back after a few more rooms. Shame if we don't find Eggman, but as long as this place goes bye-bye I'm cool with it."

"Well, I'm not." Sorun took a final glance towards Sonic. He gave him an empty look, and then turned back down to the drop below. *"I wonder..."*

BWAAN!

Both teens shuddered when a loud, blaring alarm sounded throughout the room a single time. All around the circular room orange lights lit up to highlight eight circular portholes that were built

right into the walls. The eight holes opened up simultaneously, and something flew through each of them that made Sorun snicker at how ridiculously absurd they looked.

He thought they were small, green airplanes at first until he noted the mechanical wings were actually flapping to keep the small devices that were a bit bigger than Sorun himself aloft. And then he saw that, instead of a normal nose cone at the head of each small plane, was a round and bulbous nose cone styled into a face resembling Eggman's. The eight flying things surrounded the walkway Sorun and Sonic stood on in a tight circle, the light sounds of their metal plane wings flapping reaching Sorun's ears and causing him to scoff.

"A flying type?" he quietly mused as he slowly pulled Yamato from its sheath.

"Yeah. Egg Flappers," Sonic supplied, the name causing Sorun to snicker again. "They're about as annoying as they look, but be careful."

"They look ridiculous is what they- oh, they have guns." He only just now saw them as he looked closer at one of the floating, green Badniks. Just under its body was what looked like the small barrel of some kind of gun bolted right to its underside, the opening of said barrel aimed right at Sonic and Sorun. The same could be said for the rest of the Egg Flappers surrounding them.

Before any of them could get another word in edgewise, the barrels of all the guns surrounding them began to glow a bright yellow color. Sorun had reflexively surrounded himself in crossed Summoned Swords, and moments later yellow laser beams fired out of the gun barrels. The beams impacted the crossed swords defending Sorun all around, causing noticeable cracks and breaks to appear along their surfaces. Sonic hadn't missed a beat, and zoomed off to Spin Dash completely through one of the Egg Flappers. A few of the other green Badniks had fired their lasers at the hedgehog while he was still there, but through feats of exceptional prowess he'd flipped over

and dodged through all the shots while spinning up again and smashing through another robot in the same movement.

"There he goes again. Being all amazing and showing off." Letting out a small scoff, Sorun turned his head around as more swords appeared around him to defend his body. He looked upwards, humming when he saw another walkway hovering right above the one he stood on. *"Now there's an idea. If there was ever an opportunity to lose Sonic... well, it'd be now."*

He glanced over at Sonic, watching as he smashed through his third Badnik. Clicking his tongue, Sorun glanced back up at the walkway above. He flicked Yamato upwards once in a tiny movement, and then twice, the movements having been so small his own eyes barely registered the sword moving. Two thin, blue lines appeared at each end of the walkway, causing Sorun to nod to himself as his lips thinned.

In that moment Sonic had hopped back onto the walkway in front of Sorun, a fourth destroyed Egg Flapper falling down into the blackness. From the corner of his eyes Sorun saw a fifth plane-shaped Badnik charging its laser cannon up, prompting him act. A Summoned Sword appeared in front of it at an odd, low angle, and when it struck forwards and impaled the Egg Flapper the machine was flipped upwards. At the same moment it flipped upwards its small laser cannon, having been pointed upwards, fired a laser right up to the walkway Sorun had cut earlier.

The yellow laser struck the walkway. There was a faint creaking sound, and then all of a sudden the walkway began falling directly down to the walkway both Freedom Fighters were standing on. Sorun blinked up at it, then looked to the side at Sonic who was too busy focusing on the remaining Egg Flappers hovering around them.

Two things happened in the same moment. The first was that Sorun, yelling "Look out!" at Sonic, manifested his Bringer Claw and pushed Sonic all the way to the entrance they came from. The second thing to happen was that he jumped right off the walkway mere moments

before the falling one collided with it, the impact destroying the aforementioned walkway and causing both to plummet into the darkness below. Sorun followed the falling debris, his own body succumbing to gravity and falling downwards.

Sonic himself wasn't able to react at first, the shove from the Bringer Claw having been so forceful his body was sent stumbling forwards. He caught himself quickly with his sneakers sliding against the ground, though by the time he looked back the walkway from above had already crashed into the one he'd been shoved off of and fell down into the pit below. It was at the same time he saw Sorun's body plummet downwards along with the debris. He reached out to him and called out his name, but by then the human's body had already fallen out of sight.

Deeper inside of the factory the Freedom Fighters were assaulting, a faint, distant sound could be heard. The sound of light whistling, emanating from the red-cloaked figure that was slowly walking through the halls. His left hand clutched a piece of notebook paper, whereas his right hand was hefting a large sword that was currently resting on his shoulder.

Continuing his whistle, Rubrum continued to calmly saunter down the hall until he came to a crossroads: a fork in the hallway he was in. His whistling was disturbed a bit when he stopped walking mid-step, hopping back a few inches on his one foot until he finally set both feet down at the ground. He looked at the corner of the wall nearest to him, glanced at the paper in his hand, and then with a hum he shrugged the sword off of his shoulder.

With three quick swipes an arrow had been carved into the metal wall, pointing left. Satisfied, he rested the sword back on his shoulder and resumed his whistling as he made his way deeper into the factory.

And here he was again. Falling. It seemed like he was doing a lot of that recently.

Whatever this shaft was apparently went really deep, too, because he was about ten seconds into this fall. On the bright side, though, his plan was coming through real great. Sonic? Gone completely, or at least far enough away that he wouldn't be able to disturb Sorun if he found Eggman. *When* he found Eggman. If he was really here Sorun wasn't wasting any time in finding him and finally killing him so this war could end right now. He just had to worry about actually locating him.

But that came later. Right now he had to survive this fall.

"Ah, man, I just realized I'm gonna have to think up some excuse for why I didn't just fly out of here after falling," Sorun realized. The teen fell with his body parallel to the ground, his hands interlaced behind his head with one leg crossed over the other. *"Eh, I'll just lie and say I got hit in the head by something. Should be believable enough. More importantly is how I'm supposed to find Eggman in this huge place."*

He began humming as his body slowly spun around so that it was facing downwards. *"Guess I'll just make a mad dash and hope I get lucky. The others should be fine in the meantime."* He heard a loud crashing sound from the debris below him colliding with ground. *"Oh, that's my stop."*

Sorun saw that his body was quickly approaching flat ground. Right before he impacted it, he Tricked a few meters away from where the broken walkways crash landed. He appeared right on his feet, looked behind himself at the pile of twisted metal behind him, then made a light scoff as he turned back forwards.

"Sorun? Sorun!?" A voice, Sonic's voice, rang out in Sorun's ear and made him wince, and then he realized he was wearing an earpiece. It must have been Sonic trying to contact him. *"Sorun, are you alr-!?"*

The earpiece was removed from Sorun's ear without a second thought. Sorun looked thoughtfully down at the small, black device he held in his hand, and then shook his head as his hand clenched around it, crushing it in his grasp.

"Sorry, Sonic, but I'm doing this my way," Sorun said, tossing the fragments of the earpiece over his shoulder. "Now where the hell'd I end up?"

It was another walkway, it seemed. Wider and more heavily built by the looks of it. Where he was seemed to be a different story: a vast, open cavern that was so wide Sorun couldn't even see any walls when he looked left or right. Just more metal walkways and conveyer belts everywhere, all leading into giant metal spires that extended up into what Sorun presumed to be the cavern's ceiling, back up into the factory. He whistled at the sight, slowly making his way down the walkway he stood on as he glanced around at the environment.

"Man. I'm getting major nostalgia vibes from this place. Reminds me of the underground factory level from 'Automata'..." Sorun mumbled under his breath as he faced forwards. "Just how huge is this factory, anyways? I wanna believe that the factory up above caving in from all the explosives the other guys are placing is enough to bury this place, but sheesh... I just don't know." He shook his head and began jogging forwards. "Don't think about it too much, Sorun. Won't matter a bit as long as you kill that guy."

Running forwards, Sorun saw that the walkway he was running down was, oddly enough, leading right into a dead end. Specifically, the wall of one of the giant spires that lead up from the darkness below all the way up to the metallic ceiling. He saw that there was a small staircase to the side that wrapped up and around the spire, though, and to save himself some time Sorun Tricked to the highest point on the staircase he could see.

One Trick and some stair-climbing later, Sorun made it to the top of the staircase. Unfortunately he didn't find a door leading into the giant metal spire he'd been climbing, though he did find that the top

of the staircase branched off into another walkway that connected to another spire on the other side. Sorun began running down it, but then he stopped halfway and huffed in frustration when he saw that this walkway just lead to another staircase wrapping around the other spire.

Glancing around, Sorun saw a conveyer belt across the way over the giant pit everything seemed to be suspended over. With another Trick, he'd teleported over there and arrived standing on a small, metal panel that was being carried on the conveyer belt. However, when Sorun looked down at the panel, he couldn't help but cringe in revulsion when he saw a bump in the plate that just barely resembled Eggman's face. The start of an Egg Pawn's head, with hollows eyes and a smile where the electronics would no doubt be socketed.

The teen heard a sudden whirring sound reach his ears, and looked up just in time to see a drill connected to a robot arm attached to the conveyer belt swing towards him. He yelped and jumped back a bit as the drill lowered onto the plate, louder whirring heard as the automatic tool began drilling rivets into the plate Sorun stood on. When he looked ahead, he saw identical plates ahead of the conveyer belt being worked on by other automatic tools. Welding guns, saws, drills and hammers working against the metal plates and slowing shaping the metal into the beginnings of a Badnik.

Sorun Tricked multiple times from plate to plate, ducking under and narrowly dodging a number of automatic tools that kept bearing down on the plates he kept teleporting onto. Their movements were repetitive and in sync with each other, though, and with a few seconds' glance he managed to ascertain the pattern they kept lowering into. Afterwards he was able to dodge and avoid all the tools with ease, and by the time he Tricked all the way to the end of the conveyer belt he found himself sighing in relief. The conveyer belt was rolling into a small, rectangular hole into the side of one of the spires, but when he looked slightly above the hole, he saw a

small metal outcropping sticking out of the side of the spire. And a door right in front of that outcropping.

And then he heard a loud, hissing sound, causing the relief to fade from Sorun as he looked up. Right above him he saw what looked like a giant, rectangular press held above him from a mechanical arm hanging high over his head. Eyes widening in panic, Sorun Tricked out of the way just as the giant press smashed into the metal plate Sorun had been standing on previously. He appeared on the metal outcropping in front of the door, with the teen glancing back just as the press lifted up from the plate it pressed into. "Too close..." he whispered out as Yamato appeared in his hands.

After a few quick slashes a hole had been cut inside of the door, which Sorun quickly walked through. He entered to find a small staircase leading to the center of the spire he'd walked into, which, by all accounts, was rather brightly lit. It was only a few steps down into a large, circular room, though what alarmed Sorun the most was the fact that the walls of the room he'd entered were lined with three Egg Hammers hung up on racks inserted into large, tube-like grooves cut into the walls.

Even more alarming was the fact that, the moment Sorun stepped into the dead center of the room, the green eyes on all three Egg Hammers suddenly lit up.

The pale teen failed to suppress the groan he instinctually made when he saw the three large Badniks begin to detach themselves from the racks they hung off of. All three dropped down onto the floor beneath them, with Sorun feeling a slight tremor every single time one's feet touched down. Even worse was that it seemed each one had their own respective weapon on a separate rack right besides where they had been hanging previously, which they proceeded to reach upwards for and remove. While this had been happening Sorun slightly widened his feet as his hands clamped down on Yamato, his eyes glaring up at the three Egg Hammers.

"Alright. Three. It's no biggie." Sorun slowly exhaled when he saw the three large Badniks begin to slowly converge on him, each on holding a hammer of massive proportion in their hands. His sword began glowing blue. *"Sonic makes it look easy. It should be easy for me, too."*

In a quick draw and re-sheath, the middlemost Egg Hammer was consumed in a vortex of ethereal slashes. Unabated, Sorun shifted his attention to the right Egg Hammer and attempted to perform another Judgement Cut in order to destroy it just like he had the first.

Something had gone wrong, though. He'd managed the instantaneous draw and re-sheath, but a vortex of cuts hadn't completely dismantled the robot. The floating slashes had still appeared- sporadically, spread out everywhere and cutting to and fro uncontrollably. One of the slashes had appeared right next to Sorun, and although the teen tried leaning out of the way of it, the slash still caught him in his right shoulder and caused a cut to appear. A small thing that barely bled, but it still caused Sorun to bite back a growl of frustration when he saw *he'd* been the one wounded and not the Badnik.

"Still can't do them consecutively..." The ground underneath his feet began to softly shake as the two robots began closing in on him. Sorun's grip on the Yamato's handle tightened. *"Of course I couldn't destroy two at once with it. Of course* he *had to go and show me up again... it's always him..."*

Blue energy began wafting off the blade. Sorun glowered up at the two Badniks that stood before him, teeth grit in rage as more energy continued to gather around and leak off of his sword.

"Sonic...!" His frustration had reached a tipping point right as Egg Hammers raised their respective hammers in the effort of smashing Sorun. Yamato's blade had turned a solid blue color, bolts of electricity continually arcing off of it as Sorun's grip on the sword's handle became so fervent that the joints in his fingers began

popping. This went ignored by the Egg Hammers, both of which proceeded commit to the motion of lowering their hammers.

In the blink of an eye, Sorun slashed outwards one single time. Following that single slash was a wide, blue line that trailed the entire wall that he was facing, with said line bisecting both Egg Hammers at the point their heads met their body. The blue coloring soon faded along with the energy wrapped around the blade, revealing a wide, deep cut inside of the wall that made it through all the way to the other side. The two Egg Hammers crashed down to the ground shortly after, their hammers and sparking, severed heads dropping down along with them.

The sound that came next was the intense sound of coughing and hacking. Yamato clattered to the ground after Sorun had lost his grip on it, the teen falling over onto his knees and hands while coughing violently towards the floor. Each cough came with a small splash of blood that flew out of Sorun's mouth and splattered on the ground right below him. After a few more heaves, the coughing fortunately ceased, leaving Sorun on all fours and staring down at a blood-spattered floor.

"... Can't even kill more than two of those things without becoming a bleeding mess," Sorun bitterly thought, using the back of his hand to wipe away the blood leaking out of his nose and mouth. All the frustration and envy from earlier began to simmer into cold animosity. Whether it was at himself and his own weakness or Sonic was unclear to Sorun. He didn't even have the energy to think it out and find an answer. But there was enough residual frustration for him to bang his fast against the ground. The throbbing sensation that followed this went to prove that it had been a mistake to do that, but something happened that distracted Sorun from the slight pain in his hand. A curious sight right next to where his fist banged down on the floor that only now caught Sorun's eye.

An arrow. For whatever reason, there was an arrow carved into the metal floor right next to where he'd slammed his hand down. Sorun blinked in confusion, and then traced the direction the arrow was

pointing to the furthest corner of the room he was kneeling in. His eyes widened a bit when he saw that the arrow was pointing directly towards what looked like an elevator at the end of the room. And what's more, the elevator's doors were open.

"... What?" Sorun looked back down at the arrow, turned to the elevator, blinked, and then slowly stood up to his feet after scooping Yamato back up in his grasp. He slowly walked towards the elevator, taking careful steps as to not stumble, and then walked to the inside of the elevator while keeping a wary eye out. For all intents and purposes, from what he saw, the interior was just a normal elevator. When he looked at the control console, he felt an eyebrow rise up when he saw that there was another arrow scratched onto the wall. An arrow that was pointing to one of the elevator buttons, the second one from the top.

Though he was incredibly suspicious over the arrows he was seeing, Sorun was also intensely curious as to where they lead. And so, he decided to hit the button the arrow was pointing to. The elevator doors slid shut, and Sorun felt the elevator itself quickly shudder as it began moving up the shaft it was inside of. A couple minutes passed, mainly spent with Sorun impatiently tapping his foot in waiting, until he felt the elevator shudder again as it came to an abrupt halt. The elevator doors slid back open, Sorun poking his head out and looking all around to see if there were any enemies nearby. When he saw none, he stepped out of the elevator.

The area Sorun had stepped into wasn't all that much. It was just a tight corridor, one hallway going left and another hallway going right with low, overhead lighting on a high ceiling. Not interesting at all, save for the fact that, right in front of where the elevator opened and scratched right onto the dreary, dark blue metal wall, was yet another arrow carved onto its surface that pointed down the left hall. And even more interesting was the fact that "control room" was scratched onto the wall right underneath the arrow.

"... Someone out there is either looking out for me or this is a huge trap," Sorun thought to himself as he looked down left towards the

empty hallway. *"Either way I'll take it. 'Long as it takes me to Eggman, at least."*

He didn't know if these arrows would, in fact, take him to Eggman or whatever this control room was. Nonetheless, it seemed incredibly convenient and suspicious for him to find these out-of-place markers so easily in such a big place. And, as it was, he had no other better places to be looking around in. So, against his better judgement, he started to follow the arrow.

It'd been around five minutes now since Sorun started following these mysterious arrows. So far it felt less and less like there was any rhyme and reason to these things and more like they were just leading him on a wild goose chase because, for as far as he saw, there wasn't a single control room in sight. Just more and more winding hallways.

And lasers.

"This is actual bullshit!" Sorun's thoughts screamed as he ducked under a yellow beam that swiped over his head. *"It takes a special kind of maniac to put so many traps in the middle of a nothing hallway like this!"*

He didn't know what he'd done - stepped over an invisible laser trap or stepped on a pressure plate or something - but there were times where he'd turn a corner, walk down a hallway, and traps would spring to life. Little emitters connected to rails built into the walls and ceiling that would make moving lines of deadly lasers Sorun would have to physically dodge to get by. Or just Trick through, though he felt himself alternating between dodging and Tricking just to conserve his strength going forwards.

"Whew, man..." He felt a ray pass over his back just as Sorun leapt forwards. He spun around right after, holding a hand to his back and sighing in relief when he didn't feel a charred spot on his back. His expression was soon wiped off along with an accompanying whine of

dismay when he saw the hood of his blue, sleeveless hoodie lying on the ground behind him, the laser having cut it off. *"Oh, man, Honey's gonna be pissed..."*

Shaking his head in a dismissive manner, Sorun turned away from the severed hood and continued down the hallway.

After that it was more walking. More following arrows. The occasional laser trap. He did notice that the turning to a new hallways was becoming less frequent, though. And, more than that, by the time he noticed that he also noticed that the hallway was getting narrower. And much more linear.

There was a second thing he noticed, too. Talking. He couldn't make out the words or even the voice, it was just faint sounds, but he heard somebody saying something. That egged Sorun on to keep going a bit further, the teen straining his ears so he could try and make out that faint voice he was hearing.

Pretty soon, though, he was able to make out that voice. That grouchy male voice that grated Sorun's ears so much it made him want to tear them right off his head. That voice he grew to hate so much. The voice he associated with the one man who ruined this entire planet.

"Oh, yeah. That's him alright." He felt a strange combination of emotions begin to well in his chest when he finally made out Eggman's voice in the distance. Emotions that were accentuated by the look of grim determination in his eyes mixed with the strained, excited smile he had on him. Feelings of intense hatred and glee. Intense anticipation.

If he killed him, than all of this would finally be over. No more fighting, no more Emeralds... no more none of it.

"Alright, Eggman... your curtain call's here." Walking with a bit of a bounce to his step, Sorun tossed the sheathed Yamato up in the air and caught it with his left hand. *"One last fight. Let's go."*

At the end of the hallway there was a brightly-lit, rectangular exit. Sorun reached it without issue, calmly walking through as he gazed around the new room he'd walked into. There were two levels: the one he was currently on, and the second one that had no floor save for an outcropping of metal that wrapped around the entire room. Mainly empty, save for what what was on the second level at the direct opposite end of the room. A large computer console with multiple monitors displaying various images, two Egg Pawns manning the console at either side, and *him* . Eggman, sitting in that strange, floating chair of his. And from the looks of it he was currently yelling and pointing down at the two Egg Pawns.

"I don't care how many of them there are! Find them and detain them at once!" Eggman screamed down at the two Badniks, his face pointed directly at the monitors. Even from all the way in the back Sorun could make out a few of the images from how large those monitors were. He saw one image of Sally at a large, metal pillar, planting an explosive. Julie-Su was at her back, shooting down Badniks with that laser pistol she carried with her. "This is absurd... how did they manage to infiltrate my factory so quickly?" Eggman loudly muttered to himself, sitting back in his chair while tapping a finger against his chin. "I didn't even have any time to make the preparations I'd planned for them. It's as if they just appeared out of thin air..."

Any other of his ramblings were cut off when two Summoned Swords appeared in the air and dropped down through the heads of the two Egg Pawns. The sight startled Eggman enough that he leapt back a bit in his seat, holding his arms to the side with his fingers splayed out.

"Doctor Julian Robotnik!" Sorun called the name out loudly but almost lackadaisically, his arms lazily swinging from side to side as he slowly walked towards to the center of the room. Eggman's posture relaxed immediately upon hearing the voice, one of his fingers reaching over to press a button so that his floating chair

would turn around to face Sorun. "Face-to-face and in the flesh at last! Only took four friggin' months..."

The expression Eggman's round face, which to Sorun was even more repugnant that his holographic counterpart, was about what Sorun expected: bored. Even past those blue spectacles hiding his eyes and the large, fiery orange mustache, the round man managed to look completely unimpressed at Sorun, leaning back in his chair while folding his arms over his lap. "Sorun," he called out in greeting. "It's Doctor Ivo Robotnik, actually. I changed my name all the way back when I first began my coup against the Kingdom of Acorn."

"Oh. Sorry," Sorun apologized, stopping in the middle of the room. "Kintobor, Robotnik, Eggman... what's in a name, anyways?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders up at Eggman. "Same douchebag behind the title no matter what you call yourself."

"Charming as always," Eggman drawled out. "So you and the rest of the Freedom Fighters have come to snuff out my final factory outside of my empire's beautiful capital city? Well, your timing is as punctual as it is annoying," he complimented, his head turning back to one of the monitors. "I had such a grand plan for you all, but then you showed up and ruined it all before I even got the wheels in motion! I only just finished drawing the blueprints up yesterday!"

"Well, you know, you always manage to stay one step ahead of us in these whack job schemes of yours. Nobody felt like letting you hold the streak," Sorun said. "To be completely transparent with you, finding you wasn't even a primary objective. Sally just wanted the place to blow with or without you in custody. Can you believe that?"

"It doesn't surprise me a bit. The Acorn brat never did have the stomach to make the hard choices," Eggman said, waving his hand aside. "So why is it that you're here, then?"

"I really didn't like her way of thinking. Figured if I brought your head back to her she'd forgive me for going against orders."

"Oh-ho!" A short, amused bark left Eggman as he tilted his head back to let the laugh out. He lowered it back down to look at Sorun, a small, challenging smile gracing his face. "Is that right? I'm not surprised in the least." He leaned to the side of his chair, propping his head up with one of his arms as he leered down at Sorun with that twisted smile of his. "I have to ask, Sorun. Why did you do it? Why did you side with the Mobians in Knothole instead of with me?"

Sorun scoffed and shook his head. It was the way Eggman had asked that question, his words. They were still packed with complete maliciousness like with most of the sentences he said, but there was something else at the back of that. A questioning tone that made it sound like he was legitimately confused at Sorun's actions. "You really have to ask something like that?" Sorun questioned. "You're that depraved?"

"Depraved, but not stupid," Eggman corrected him. "You could have had it all, Sorun. You have the drive. The will. You would have fit in no problem standing at my side. At having a place in my Eggman Empire and actually making something of your life. You could have had a place besides your own kind."

"'My kind'?" Sorun spun Yamato around so its handle landed in his right hand, his left still clutching the shaft of the scabbard. His eyes looked up and down the sheath, the teen muttering out loudly enough for Eggman to hear, "I don't have anything like that in this world. Not the Overlanders. Not the humans in Station Square. Not the Mobians. None of them are a part of my kind. An Earthling." He began running his left thumb along the sheath's surface. "Least of all you."

"But why them? Why the Freedom Fighters?" Eggman pressed. "They ruined your life by forcing you onto Mobius, and yet you still threw yourself in with them! Why? What could they have possibly had to offer you that I don't? What possible gain could you have had by siding with them when they're doomed to failure!?"

"You honestly can't figure it out yourself...?" A light, disbelieving laugh left Sorun as his eyes trailed upwards to Eggman. "I just don't like you. That's all."

Eggman's face scrunched up a bit, one part in irritation and one part in confusion. "That can't be all there is to it," he said, shaking his head down at the teen.

"What more is there to say? You flipped the world upside-down and made it a game of ruining and tormenting everybody. You treat torturing the planet like a hobby. Making everybody in Knothole suffer is little more than a *pastime* for you. You're trying to make an empire on the back of everybody's anguish for no better reason than you want to." Sorun's fingers tightened around Yamato's handle. "Frankly, Eggman, I'm sick of it. Sick of playing your game. And hey, you know what? I'll give you props. You're a master at playing this fucking game of yours. The fact you've been going up against people like the Freedom Fighters and Shadow and Sonic and made it this far with a winning hand just goes to show that behind that goofy exterior is a terrifyingly brilliant, insane, sorry excuse for a man. So you know what I'm not doing? I'm not gonna play your game fairly. That's just folly." Blue energy began to run along Yamato's length as he pulled the sword halfway from its sheath. "I decided... I'm just gonna cheat."

With a dead-set face of certainty, Sorun slammed Yamato back into its sheath. Eggman watched on in slight interest, humming under his breath as his glasses-covered eyes watched the sword. The entire katana began to glow a solid blue color, and as Sorun let it go it began to vertically float off the ground, handle pointed to the ceiling, and even began to slowly spin as it slowly rose up towards the center of the room.

"What would happen now is that we would have our big fight, and you would pull something out of your ass like call for a bunch of robots to distract me while you make a dramatic getaway or something along those lines. Then you go back home, cook up another scheme while me and the others keep fighting your forces,

you deploy your plan we narrow managed to beat, and then this goes on repeat 'til people start dying." As Sorun spoke there was a peculiar sound akin to glass breaking. Eggman only continued to hum as around the edges of the room there were white, jagged lines appearing everywhere, like reality itself was breaking down, though seconds later they disappeared completely, leaving him, Sorun, and the floating, blue katana hovering in the middle of the room. "Yeah, that ain't gonna happen," Sorun finished off. "This place will be your grave."

"Is that so?" Eggman asked, drumming his fingers along the side of his skull as he stared at the sword floating in the middle of the room. "And you're going to do that with what? That sword?" He scoffed and tilted his head back. "I know from the combat footage I've seen the cutting abilities of that katana, but I fail to see what this little display here is supposed to do to intimidate me."

"I guess a little explanation is in order then," Sorun said, lazily looking up at Eggman with his hands in his pockets. "That sword is called the Yamato. To put it in terms you would understand, it's from a... storybook, I suppose you could say. From where I'm from."

At the end of his final sentence, Sorun Tricked out from Eggman's sight. The round man became startled and glanced wildly around, and then looked up when he heard a whistle gain his attention. Sorun was up on the ceiling, sitting on one of the ceiling's support struts and looking down at Eggman. His left hand was still in his pocket, while his right hand held a Summoned Sword that was resting on his shoulder.

"In this story the demon king Urizen, one of the Yamato's wielders, made a shield with it," Sorun continued. "I struggled for a while to understand how such a thing was possible, Yamato's power is the ability of absolute separation, you see, but while I was doing some reading it hit me. It wasn't a shield; it was a separate dimension entirely." He removed the spectral sword from his shoulder and poked it up towards the ceiling. Right before the tip managed to make contact with the ceiling, however, it was stopped. The air

between the sword's tip and the ceiling wavered, as if there was an invisible barrier separating the two. "What I've done is I've taken Yamato and used its power of absolute separation to separate the space this room inhabits with the space the rest of the world inhabits," Sorun explained as he lowered the Summoned Sword back on his shoulder. "Where we are right now, Eggman? This room? It's a pocket dimension now. And you're stuck in it with me."

Eggman listened intensely to Sorun's explanation, his bald eye ridges furrowed in deep concentration. Eventually the full implication of Sorun's words began to seep in, though, causing him to lean forwards and grip the edges of his floating chair. "You didn't..." seethed Eggman, his fingers pressing down at the edge of the seat.

"Oh, but I did!" Sorun Tricked again, appearing on the other side of the room from Eggman on the second level outcropping. "Look around, Eggman!" Sorun called out, gesturing from side-to-side. "There's nowhere in the world for you to run because this room might as well *be* the entire world!" He stopped and pointed the tip of his sword at Yamato, which still hung in the center of the room. "Yamato's acting as an anchor to keep this room grounded to the rest of reality. You destroy it? That's that- this space gets destroyed and we both die. The only way to return this space with the rest of this world is if either I willingly dispel the Yamato or you kill me and cause it to dispel on its own. And I'm not dispelling it until you're dead."

That was the plan. Nobody, not even him, could enter or exit the separated space that was this room until Yamato ceased separating this piece of reality with the rest of reality. That meant that Eggman's chance of escaping from Sorun was practically nil. Which meant that Sorun... just had to kill Eggman.

Sorun expected a lot of reactions from Eggman. Shocked disbelief, sputtering rage, maybe even a bit of bargaining from his part. For the crushing reality of the situation to hit him when he realized there was no escaping the separated space Sorun had trapped him in. No escaping from the teen's wrath. And from the looks of it, at first, he

was getting the reaction he wanted. Eggman, was folded over the edge of his seat, his arms still gripping tightly onto the edge even with his body doubled over it.

And then, he began shuddering. Sorun had assumed it was in rage or fear at first, but then he heard it. The laughter. Laughter that was quiet and almost inaudible at first, but then completely switched to booming, boisterous laughter when Eggman threw his whole body back. The mad cackling enraged Sorun as much as it confused him, making him lower the Summoned Sword down to his side as a deep scowl settled on Sorun's features. Finally, Eggman ceased his cackling with a loud, drawn-out sigh and looked towards Sorun.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho! So, you've gotten tired of my game and want to play your own, eh, Sorun?" A mad grin on his face, Eggman reached forwards and pressed one of the buttons on the console of his seat. "Okay, I'm game. We'll see just how willing you are to play with the big boys by the time I'm through with you."

"Yeah, keep talkin'..." Sorun muttered as the Bringer Claws appeared behind him. "They'll be your last words. Get 'em out while you can."

As he spoke, Sorun watched as a white, dome-like covering began to extend up from the seat Eggman was sitting in. His scowl deepened, and he willed four Summoned Swords to appear by his side and fire off towards Eggman. They reached their mark too late, though, as the white plates had already fully encapsulated Eggman, and the swords merely shattered off of their surface. What had once been a floating chair now looked like little more than a giant white, floating, mechanical egg. A mechanical egg whose bottom opened up and allowed something to drop through.

Sorun tensed up his body as he saw the object drop, eyes furrowed in concentration as he readied himself for whatever it was. When he finally got a good look at it, though, he felt his form instantly begin to relax from the absolute bafflement he felt at what he was seeing.

It was a wrecking ball. An honest-to-god checkered wrecking ball colored in light and dark browns connected to Eggman's floating chair by a chain. Sorun blinked and tilted his head to the side, as if waiting for the wrecking ball to perhaps transform or something, but it never did. It just continued to simply hang off from the chair by the chain.

"... You can't be serious." Sorun actually dropped the Summoned Sword he'd been holding, not paying attention at all when it shattered against the ground. "You're going to fight me with that ridiculous thing?"

"You got that right!" Eggman called out, his voice seemingly projected from an unseen speaker somewhere in the egg-shaped chair he was inside. "It isn't too late to back out now if you're not feeling up to it, you know. Not even Sonic has ever succeeded in destroying my Checker Wrecker."

"This condescending bastard..." The snappy remark jabbed at Sorun's pride, enough that both his arms began to twitch. "That's it, you're dead!"

His Bringer Claws beat roughly against the ground, causing Sorun to shoot towards the egg-shaped chair and the wrecking ball hanging below it. The chair just hovered motionlessly in the air, almost as if Eggman was waiting for Sorun to make the first move. This just enraged Sorun and caused him to stop right in front of the enclosed chair, his right Bringer Claw curling into a fist, rearing back, and punching forwards at the checkered wrecking ball.

The spectral fist made impact. This was evidenced enough by the loud *gong!* sound that reverberated throughout the separated space Sorun and Eggman were in. What didn't happen, which immensely shocked the teen, was that the wrecking ball hadn't been smashed to powder by the punch. It hadn't even cracked in the slightest; just knocked back. What *did* happen was that that chair the ball was connected to spun around in the same direction it was knocked back in, causing the wrecking ball to spin completely around back towards

Sorun. The movement had been so fast that Sorun had barely been able to register it, but when he did, he didn't have the opportunity to think about avoiding it with a Trick and instead instinctually rose his Bringer Claws up to block it.

The spectral arms blocking Sorun's body were directly hit by the checkered ball. Sorun felt intense vibrations assault his body as a result, and with a grunt was sent sailing backwards a bit. The arms flapped to stabilize him, and without missing a beat Sorun Tricked down the the ground floor.

"This thing's tough." Sorun began walking to the side of the egg-shaped chair, keeping his eyes up on it while he continually fired Summoned Swords at it. To his growing frustration, the swords continued to break off on the chair's surface, as well as the checkered wrecking ball and its chain. *"I can't use Yamato while it's keeping this room separated. Guess if I can't cut him out, I'll have to just rip him out of that thing."*

Ceasing his volley of Summoned Swords, the teen Tricked up to the top of the chair. Gripping onto the top of it with his bare hands, Sorun willed his Bringer Claws to beat down on the egg-chair's shell over and over again in an attempt to try and beat the metal paneling off to get to Eggman. No matter how many times to spectral arms rapidly punched the metal covering, though, it wouldn't dent. And when he gave up trying to punch it and instead tried having the claws pry the metal off, he found there wasn't a large enough seam in the metal plates for the spectral claws to find purchase on.

And then, the chair began spinning. It was slow at first, just fast enough to let Sorun know what was happening and make him grip onto the chair with both his real arms and spectral, feathered arms. The spinning increased to a faster and faster speed, though, and eventually it got to the point that the centrifugal force was beginning to pull on Sorun's body. Soon enough the speed proved to be too great, and as a result, Sorun was flung right off the pod.

Spinning around uncontrollably, Sorun's body was flung all the way towards one of the side walls. The palms of the spectral hands slammed into the wall right before Sorun impacted it to stop him from impacting it, a gust of wind from the sudden stop blowing Sorun's hair about as he breathed a heavy breath out. He looked back up towards Eggman, and then he physically felt his irises shrink in fear when he saw the wrecking ball heading right towards him.

His Bringer Claws attempted to push forwards in an attempt to block the wrecking ball. To Sorun's shock, the mass of the ball combined with its speed proved to be too much, and to his dismay the blue claws were destroyed completely when they made contact with the approaching ball. Thinking quickly, Sorun Tricked out of the way just as the ball reached his location and buried itself halfway into the wall.

Reappearing on the second level of the room nearby to where the wrecking ball smashed into the wall, Sorun was forced to stumble back a few steps. A dizzying sensation had hit him, and he began to feel a pained sensation run throughout his body as a few drops of blood began to pour from his nose. At the same time, the floating egg chair had pulled the wrecking ball out from the wall by its chain, and then began to quickly fly towards Sorun's position. It spun around once it got close enough, making a full rotation and then abruptly stopping to allow the wrecking ball to fling towards Sorun.

In an effort to protect himself, Sorun had erected wall after wall of crossed Summoned Swords. The Checker Wrecker smashed through each and every layer, though, however enough of its momentum had been halted so that Sorun had just enough time to reform his Bringer Claws to block yet again. The ball hit him, and, due to his weakening constitution, Sorun watched as his Bringer Claws dissipated on direct contact with the ball as his own body was once again sent spinning away.

With a pained grunt, Sorun's body impacted the ground floor of the room. It'd hit with such force that he bounced off, hit the ground again, and then began rolling with a pained cry leaving him with each

roll. He fortunately came to a complete stop, lying prone against the ground. He laid there completely still for a few moments, after which a small groan left Sorun as he attempted to stand up.

He never made it up to his feet. Not because of the light bruising throughout his entire body, though he was certainly feeling that. No, it was that other feeling again. The feeling of his body crying out in pain and just giving out from the overuse of his powers. The feeling of deep, stabbing pains in all his organs that were intense enough that all Sorun could do was raise up to a single knee in a kneeling position. He coughed once, a spurt of blood flying out of his mouth, and then he looked up at the egg-shaped chair, panting heavily while a stream of blood dribbled out of his nose.

"I'm not... letting him get away..." He pulled deep within himself to manifest a single Summoned Sword in a vain attempt at attacking Eggman again. The sword had formed completely cracked and dim, though, and before he could even fire it off another fit of coughs assaulted Sorun, causing the sword to shatter completely right there next to him. *"Damn it all..."*

"Well, Sorun, I think I've senselessly beaten you around enough for me to get the idea across." Sorun's eyes trailed up to the egg-shaped chair, just barely being able to suppress his pained growl of rage when he saw the top metal plates fold back into the chair, revealing the man that was sitting inside of it. He was grinning from ear-to-ear, arms crossed and looking right down at Sorun. "And my oh my, just look at you. I didn't mean to bloody you up that much. You spend so much time around Mobians and you forget how fragile humans are compared to them, I tell you."

Saying nothing in response, half because he was too livid and half because he was physically capable of doing so at the moment, Sorun just watched with absolute fury in his eyes as Eggman's floated chair hovered over to the floating, blue katana in the middle of the room. Eggman hummed in intrigue at the sight of it, uncrossing his arms and rubbing at his chin with his right hand as he inspected the sword.

"The Yamato, eh...?" Eggman leaned closer towards the floating sword. Close enough that its glowing image was reflected off of the blue-lensed glasses over his eyes. He hummed once more, and then leaned back in his seat as the hovering chair floated back a bit. "Quite an interesting sword you have there, Sorun. The power to separate space itself... quite remarkable indeed. But not good enough." The chair began rotating backwards, as if getting ready to swing the brown wrecking ball hanging under it. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to call that little bluff of yours!"

The chair swung to the side, swinging the wrecking ball along with it. The weighted ball smashed right into the katana before Sorun's eyes, shattering it completely and causing the shards to dissipate into blue ash. The effect was immediately plain to see: the the space around the outer edges of the room began to slowly dissolve, as if there had been a large, invisible bubble around them that was slowly evaporating. The process had only taken a few seconds, and by the end the effect had gone away completely. Both the room itself and its two occupants were left completely intact, and Eggman, upon seeing this, began laughing again while Sorun felt even more anger begin to burn through him.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha..." Wiping an invisible tear away from his eye, Eggman leaned over the edge of his floating seat. One arm hung down limply while the other was folded over the chair's lip, Eggman smiling down at the defeated teen all the while. "You lose, Sorun. You've lost at your own game. Did you honestly think I was going to buy that whole 'the sword was an anchor' bit? You insult me, you really do.

"Now, I could end you right here and now, but where would be the fun in that?" Eggman's chair turned towards the computer monitors that were near the back of the room. He then leaned a bit back and began typing at a few of the buttons that were on a small console right in front of him. There was a single loud, blaring sound from the speakers inside of the computer console at the back end of the room, and as he continued to motionlessly kneel down on the floor

Sorun saw all the computer monitors above the console turn red. The words that were flashing across the red screens, however, was what nearly made the teen's heart stop right there.

SELF-DESTRUCT SEQUENCE INITIATED

Self-destruct. The madman was actually going to blow the whole factory up himself. And soon, too- there was a five-minute countdown timer on the lower-right corner of all the screens. That only served to make Sorun panic even more.

"That's right. I'm going to blow you and the entire resistance to kingdom come," Eggman gloated, his devious smile turning gleeful when he turned back around to Sorun to see the dire-stricken look on his face. "Now, I have no doubt that you'll all pull off some miraculous feat that will save you from this catastrophe, and then we can do this again some other time. In the event this does just so happen to be the end for you, though, let me just leave you with this."

The floating chair carrying Eggman lowered itself and hovered closer to Sorun. He stopped right in front of him, close enough that Sorun was able to see his own reflection in Eggman's glasses. His kneeling body, completely beaten and at Eggman's mercy. It caused feelings of frustration and self-loathing the likes of which he'd never felt before in his life to erupt inside of Sorun. To see himself brought so low in front of somebody he hated so much and tried so hard to kill. He couldn't stand it.

"Look, Sorun, you got moxie. I'll give you that much. But that's all you've got. You really thought you could just waltz in here with all your shiny new powers and thought you could beat *me* ? Someone who's been playing the game far longer than you?" A short bark of laughter burst out of Eggman. "Face it, kid. You're a complete newbie I can ride circles around because you're nothing but a punk riding on the coattails of a bunch of powers that were handed to you. You're not special. You're not fast or strong or clever like all the other Freedom Fighters.

"And you are certainly no Sonic."

Those were the words. The words that sent Sorun's ears ringing so loudly he could barely hear anything else over it. That made him go completely still as he looked up helplessly at Eggman, irises shrunken and shaking in indignation at what he just heard. To be compared to *him* and told that he was absolutely nothing compared to that hedgehog everyone around him adored.

To know he was right.

It hurt.

"Well, I think I've taken enough of your time. What little of it is left, anyways." Darkly chuckling, Eggman pressed another button on the console of his chair. The chair began to raise up towards the ceiling, where a section began to open up to reveal a well-lit shaft going further up into the facility. "Until next time, Sorun! Or goodbye in case this truly is the end for you! It's been a blast!"

"Get back here...!" The mocking wave that Eggman was sending down to Sorun as he ascended up the hole in the ceiling only further fueled Sorun's rage as he attempted to reach up towards the mad scientist. But despite his best efforts, nothing would come up. No Bringer Claws. No Summoned Swords. Nothing. Even the mere action of just raising his arm was so labor-intensive it shook from the effort. *"He needs to die... I need... goddamn... goddamn it..."*

His entire body flopped face-first onto the ground. Try as he might, nothing would respond to him. The best Sorun could manage was twitch his appendages and barely move his head enough to look up. Every single attempt at moving something resulted in a lance of pain that forced all his muscles to seize up. He couldn't even move, let alone summon one of his powers. And from his peripheral vision he could already see that Eggman was long gone.

And out from the corner of his vision he could see the computer monitors. The monitors and that countdown timer that was slowly

counting down to the destruction of the facility. He had to leave. If his body wasn't failing him he could have easily left by summoning Yamato and making a portal out of here. But every single attempt was met with another spike of pain going through him.

"Come on... just let me do it..." A few wisps of blue power began to gather around his immobile left hand. The beginning shape of a katana began to form, but then Sorun's chest had tightened, and a pained cough accompanied by another splash of blood leaving his mouth caused the blue particles gathering around his hand to dissipate. *"Everyone's gonna die if I don't..."*

He couldn't do it. His body just wouldn't let him.

It was when the crashing feelings of failure, the feeling that he'd just let everybody down, began to hit him that he heard it. The sounds of rapid footsteps right behind him, out of the hallway Sorun had walked through to get into this room in the first place. A rapid set of footsteps going so fast it sounded like a continuous, zooming sound. Sorun knew fully well what that sound was. Those footsteps were Sonic's footsteps.

A myriad of emotions assaulted Sorun when he realized this. There were emotions of immense relief and ease knowing he wasn't completely helpless and there was now actually a chance of him not being blown up in a factory. All of that was buried under everything else that started to rise up in Sorun, though. He felt sheer mortification that Sonic was going to come and find Sorun in this state. This broken, defeated state that made it so he couldn't even stand up on his own feet. And even worse was knowing that it was him that had to come and save Sorun. He would have been fine if it was anybody else. But the fact it was *him* that was coming to his rescue had Sorun feeling even worse than he already felt, if that was even possible.

"Sorun!" Even hearing Sonic call his name out made Sorun painfully flinch. He hated this. He absolutely hated what was happening right now. The fuming rage he felt when he saw Sonic's red sneakers stop

in front of his view was almost enough to override the pain he was feeling. "Sorun, are you alright!?"

"... I look alright to you?" Sorun rattled out, his voice low and breathy. He couldn't even manage a resentful expression to match the emotions he was feeling right now when he slowly tilted his head up at the blue hedgehog. Feelings of absolute resentment that only multiplied tenfold when he saw that look of intense concern on Sonic's face.

"Er, well... no, but it's gonna be okay, pal!" Sonic bent down and began to pick Sorun's body up. "Something got set off and this whole joint's gonna self-destruct! We gotta get out of here!"

"Get your goddamned hands off of me..." If he had the strength to do it Sorun would have fought to wiggle out of Sonic's grasp just so he didn't have to suffer through this. But as it was he couldn't move at all, so Sorun had no choice but to quietly sigh and submit. "I can't make the sword..." Sorun managed to murmur out.

"It's fine, buddy, it's fine. I already ran everybody else out of here. They're all safe, so we just gotta bail and we're good."

"Of course you did... How did you even find me, anyways?"

"I kept running around until I found a bunch of those arrows you scratched into the walls a few hallways back!" Sonic answered as he turned around back to the hallway entrance, Sorun cradled in his arms. "Smart thinking, by the way. Made tracking you down a whole lot easier."

"I didn't... yeah, sure." He was too tired to argue the point and Sorun felt that taking the credit for the arrows would let him save some miniscule amount of face. Regardless, he just wanted to leave and get this day over with. "Just go."

"You got it! Let's juice!"

Sorun didn't know whether it was the wind tearing at his body from moving at super-sonic speed keeping him from passing out or the increasingly dismal feeling he felt in himself. He settled on his utter hatred for that phrase of Sonic's keeping him up.

The factory had blow up, of course. It hadn't been an overly showy affair. a loud boom, lots of crumbling metal and even more fire. Over the course of a few seconds the factory that had once stood tall was reduced to little more than flaming rubble.

A large distance away the Freedom Fighters that had went on the mission to destroy the factory looked on with victorious faces. There were cheers all throughout the group, some among them high-fiving others or giving each other congratulating pats on the back. Seeing how big an accomplishment this was, it was little surprise that spirits were high all around.

Sonic should have been happy along with them. He should have - he felt like he wanted to - but he just couldn't seem to bring himself to celebrate alongside everybody else. His thoughts kept being drawn back to the sole human in the group, and while everyone celebrated behind him the hedgehog found his eyes being drawn towards Sorun.

In his mad dash to get everybody out of the factory before it blew up Sonic had grabbed everybody one at a time and sequestered them all in a faraway hill that overlooked the factory in the distance. The hill, along with everything else around, was barren and filled with dead, decaying gray grass, though there was a tree in the middle of the hill. A black, dead tree that Sorun was sitting against. Completely isolated away from everybody else, and sitting on the other side of the tree so he didn't have to face them.

This was the reason Sonic couldn't be in a celebratory mood with everybody else. Because of how Sorun was acting. Ever since Sonic brought him to the hill here with everybody else the human had been acting extremely withdrawn, refusing to even speak with or look at

anybody. For the life of him Sonic couldn't understand why; he'd thought it'd had to do with his injuries at first and that Sorun was just too tired, but that was minutes ago. Now the pale teen was moving around fine on his own, and even managed to make his katana which he was now staring down at in his hands.

He didn't know what the deal with Sorun was. So Sonic decided to go ahead and ask him.

Moving away from the rest of the group, Sonic began to slowly approach the human who sat with his back to everybody, full attention still down on his sword. He didn't even seem to register Sonic was approaching him at all, and Sonic himself felt his footsteps begin to slow when he heard Sorun utter a single word out.

"Power..." It was a word hissed out so quietly that Sonic had to perk his ears up just to hear it, and even then he almost wished he hadn't. There had been so much malice and hatred said with that word that it barely even sounded like a word to Sonic. More like a feral growl. It was enough to send a chill up his spine, causing him to gulp and reach out towards Sorun.

"Hey, Sorun? Buddy?" Sonic softly called out. "You doing okay there?"

Sorun's head had snapped up so suddenly it had startled Sonic. He sat completely still at first, and then softly exhaled as he shook his head and then turned to look at Sonic. He'd cleaned himself up and looked relatively fine now, though his black hair was a disheveled mess at the moment. And there was something to his eyes that made Sonic intensely worried over Sorun. He didn't know what it was. There was just something off about the way Sorun was staring right at the hedgehog, and he just couldn't place what it was.

"What do you want?" The question was succinct and seemed almost harsh in the way it was spoken by Sorun. It caused Sonic to falter in his movement, followed by him sighing as he stepped around the

tree to stop right in front of Sorun, the human's eyes and head following him.

"Just... checking up on you," Sonic answered, finding himself nervously reaching behind his head to scratch at his quills. "So what happened when we got separated?" He decided to go to the matter directly to see if he could try and piece together what was going on. Or at least get some picture of what happened to Sorun to leave him in the state Sonic had found him in. He was glad he was fine now, but he'd be lying to himself if he said he hadn't been incredibly worried when he saw the human's body lying still on the ground like that.

Sorun slowly blinked, regarding Sonic with an expression he just couldn't read. Finally he sighed out again and began speaking. "I fell," he said. "Something was going to fall on you. So I pushed you out of the way and fell."

"Yeah, I got that much. Thanks, by the way," Sonic said, genuinely grateful for the quick save Sorun had pulled. "Couldn't you have just flown out, though?"

"Something hit me on the head."

Sonic found himself wincing. He'd wondered if something had happened, but he didn't want to think it was something like that. "Well, why didn't you call for help?" he asked him. "I was running around all over the place looking for you. You had me really worried."

"My earpiece fell out when I hit my head. I lost it."

At that, Sonic groaned and rubbed a hand across his face. "See, this is why I keep saying you need to get a wrist communicator like the rest of us so stuff like that doesn't happen. What was I supposed to do if I couldn't find you in time before the factory blew up?"

Sorun rolled his eyes up to the dead tree's bare branches. "I made the arrows, didn't I? I didn't want to slow down and wait for you when

Eggman was somewhere."

"Oh..." So that was the issue. Sorun *had* been chomping at the bit pretty hard to get at Eggman now that Sonic recalled it. And he supposed the human had a point- he'd at least laid a trail for Sonic to follow to find him. He'd have to give him that much. Though the hedgehog felt a pit in his stomach begin to grow when he realized why it was the human was looking so dour and why he'd been in the state he'd found him in. "So did you find him?"

"..." Sorun shuffled uncomfortably against the tree and looked away from Sonic's eyes. "Yes."

"And what happened?" Sonic hesitantly asked.

"... Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"I... guess not, no." And that had what he'd been afraid of. Sorun didn't take loss well- Sonic knew that much from living with him for so long. He could barely even imagine what it must have felt like to him to lose to someone like Eggman, though he could sympathize, at least. "Are you okay?"

"... I shouldn't have lost." Sorun's eyes fell down to the sheathed katana in his lap, which he began to idly stroke at with his fingers. "I should have beat him. Not the other way around."

"Hey, I get how you fe-" Sonic cut himself off when Sorun's entire body violently twitched halfway through his sentence. His hands seemed to seize up on Yamato's sheath, and he began to lightly shake in place as the human's breathing became more shallow. "Er, uh, look, Sorun, nobody here was expecting you to beat Eggman."

"You could have."

The words felt like they cut deeply into Sonic. Inside, he knew that Sorun was probably speaking the truth. He didn't know exactly what had gone on in there, and honestly, Sonic wasn't really sure he

wanted to know how badly the fight had went for Sorun. Physically speaking, though, he seemed alright. That's what mattered most to Sonic. It was the mental part that had him worried, and so, he decided that a bit of positive reinforcement was in order to get the human's spirit up.

"Sorun, listen. You did great." Sonic kneeled down in front of the other teen and extended hand towards his shoulder. Sorun flinched at the contact, though he did slowly turned his eyes upwards at Sonic as he gave the human his best reassuring smile. "I mean, all this that we did? We wouldn't have been able to do any of it if your cool sword hadn't been able to teleport us in there like that," he said. "Yeah, sure, it didn't end the best, but Eggman's a dangerous and crafty guy. And the important thing is that the factory is gone. That's a step closer to winning, right?" He gave Sorun's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Don't beat yourself up over this, okay? You did the best you could, and we all made it out safe and sound. Everything's fine."

Not once had Sorun's facial expression moved in the slightest as Sonic talked. Despite his best efforts, the pale human had only continued to stare at Sonic with that same unreadable, almost disturbing look in his eyes. Even as Sonic finished speaking Sorun's face didn't soften up in the slightest. He only breathed lightly out of his mouth and looked back down at his sword.

"Give me a minute or two and I'll make a portal back to the HQ." That was all he said. He didn't look back up at Sonic or even make the motion to speak any further. He only continued to look down at his sword.

Frowning, Sonic slid his hand off of Sorun's shoulder and gave the human a quick nod. He stood up and moved to go join the others, but then quickly stopped and craned his head back. "Hey, Sorun? I'm really glad you're okay."

"... Leave me alone, Sonic. Please."

His attempts at cheering the human up practically burning to cinders, Sonic decided to it call it quits there. "Sure," he muttered out, casting one last glance at Sorun before walking away.

"It's so easy for you to say that, Sonic. Somebody like you with power."

He'd failed. Worse than failed- he'd doomed himself. All because he couldn't beat Eggman.

What had gone wrong? That's what Sorun contemplated to himself as he continued to stare forlornly down at the sword in his lap. His plan had been flawless, or so he'd thought. Isolate Eggman in a pocket dimension using the Yamato so he couldn't escape and kill him with Sorun's remaining powers. Even tell a lie about destroying the sword destroying the pocket dimension instead of just destroying the barrier separating the space to scare Eggman into not attacking it. That hadn't worked at all. None of it did. He'd lost, Eggman escaped, and Sorun almost lost his life. He would have lost his life, and everybody else's lives, if it wasn't for him. Sonic.

Even as he heard Sonic step away from him, Sorun's thoughts on the hedgehog were so conflicted he couldn't make sense of any of it. He knew he had just been trying to make Sorun feel better. He knew and appreciated it because deep down he knew Sonic was a good person. But none of that changed what he *was* . How his very existence and all that speed and power he had seemed to invalidate Sorun's own existence and the life he was giving, especially when he failed in a situation Sonic would have won in.

And where did that leave him? Here, defeated. He'd wanted so hard to kill Eggman right there, end the war, and preserve what little life he had left. That's all he had wanted. But Sorun couldn't have even done that. Because, because why? Because he just wasn't powerful enough? Was that it? Was the issue truly that he simply didn't have the power necessary to defeat him yet? He needed even more

Emeralds, perhaps all of them? Most assuredly that had to be the case.

So it'd been for nothing, then. That entire fight against Eggman had been nothing but a humiliating reminder to him that he was too weak to do anything on his own without these powers. That was just one single emotion swirling around in him- intense humiliation. Humiliation at being so weak compared to Sonic, and even having been called out on it by Eggman. At having been so weak he had to be saved by Sonic and entrust everybody else's safety to him. To be seen in that state, that helpless, vulnerable state that caused no end to the shame tearing through his very being. Frustration at his own weakness, and frustration at Sonic's seeming lack of weakness.

He'd just wanted to live a bit longer. Why couldn't he have had even that? He just wanted all this pain to finally end.

"... Fine. I guess it was too good to be true." Sorun jammed the end of Yamato into the ground, using it as a crutch to stand up to his feet. *"I need all of them to take him down. I need power... more power..."*

"Hey, Sorun?" The human straightened his body out a bit and turned his head to the side at the source of the voice. It was Sally, who had a look of worry on her face that was almost identical to the one Sonic had worn minutes prior. He could tolerate her, at least. She didn't make him feel absolutely worthless. "Are you doing okay?"

"If you mean am I good to make a portal for us to go back, then yes," Sorun answered. When Sally continued giving him that look, he sighed and turned his head away. "If you're about to go and lecture me for going off on my own like that-"

"Sonic told me. I know it wasn't your fault, Sorun, but..." He heard her stop speaking, and then watched as she stepped around him so she was back in his view. "He's really worried about you, you know."

"Mm-hm." Sorun pulled Yamato out of its sheath. "And?"

"I wanted to say..." When Sorun looked back up at her after inspecting his blade, he saw Sally wringing her hands together, as if searching for the right words to say. "You... did really well, getting us into that factory," she settled on, turning her eyes back up to Sorun. "I know I didn't make it very clear before, but it's really great you're putting in so much effort for the cause. I just wanted you to know that."

It was hollow comfort to Sorun's ears, and it did little to visually improve his mood, but it was still something. Acknowledgement. Something that said what he did meant something. Justification to his existence.

"Just," Sally continued, "if you can, please try not to go and run off on your own like that again. I know you have all your powers and taking on Eggman like that was really tempting, but you're not Sonic."

"You're not Sonic."

"You're not Sonic."

"And you are certainly no Sonic."

The words kept playing in Sorun's head over and over again. Like a constant reminder. For a single moment he'd even flashed back to that room, to him lying defeated under Eggman as he grinned maniacally down at him. But then he blinked, and he was brought back to the reality of him standing next to a dead tree with Sally right in front of him.

"... Why does he get to be so special, Sally?" Sorun's voice had come out quiet and cracked, his head turning back to his sword so that he could see his own miserable visage in the metal's reflection. "Why?"

"Sorun, you... don't talk like that." Behind Sally's chastising tone was a hint of worry that Sorun manage to detect. Even a bit of distress. A

pitying tone of voice that did nothing to help his mood. "Sonic, he's just... he's just Sonic, I don't know what to say. But everybody's special. He has his speed, you have your sword... and without your sword none of this would have been possible." She took a step closer to him. "You should be proud for what you've helped us achieve."

Pride. He didn't feel prideful at all. He felt like his pride had been stripped away from him the moment he lost. From the second Sonic had seen him like that and had to go save him.

Sally seemed to see that Sorun's mood hadn't shifted in the slightest. It made her look a bit more upset, the chipmunk glancing back at the group near them before focusing back on Sorun. "I know you said that accepting help makes you feel useless, but we're a team, Sorun. Helping each other is what we do. Because all of that?" She gestured her hand out in the direction of the flaming factory remains. "Sorun, that wasn't just Sonic. It was us. All of us. And you're a part of us. You're far from useless. You mean a lot to all of us."

"... Sure, Sally." Yamato's edge cut through the air twice before she could respond. Space folded inwards, and a portal back to Freedom HQ was made. "Portal's ready." He took a step forwards, paused, and glanced back at Sally. "Thanks."

And without another word, Sorun stepped through it. The indescribable amount of self-loathing he felt made it so he couldn't even look back at anybody.

Chapter 36

A/N- Oh, this site sometimes...

So here's what happened. If you couldn't read last chapter and kept getting an error message, it's because apparently for a few days now the fanfic site's been affected by a bug that wouldn't allow new chapters to show up on the browser version. Apparently it was affecting a lot of other authors attempting to post and it was real bad, though the app version reportedly worked alright. As of now it looks like the boys behind the curtain managed to fix things, hopefully, don't know if the emails are even working right now, a bit ago the story updated and showed chapter 35 so I assumed all is good. Fiddled around with some things, even went and deleted and reposted it, and for all intents and purposes it looks good. So if you didn't read it 'cause of the bug go back and read 35.

Anyways, this chapter wasn't really planned. In fact it only exists because I wanted something short to post to make sure that the site's working again. So yeah, here ya go. I turned a bug test into some plot.

Recursion Error

Episode 36- A little help

There'd been a big hope by Sorun that after the one-part successful mission to destroy the giant factory and the one-part utter botching of his personal mission, all he needed to do was sleep it off. Emotions had been tense, mostly his, everybody else had been doing great, and he... well, he just hadn't been in a good place. So he figured he'd sleep it off, recuperate his physical and mental strength overnight, and in the morning he'd feel better.

He didn't.

He felt worse, actually.

The entire hedgehog household had been avoided by Sorun that morning. He couldn't stand to be in the same room as Sonic or his family members that resembled him. Couldn't even talk to him since just being in his presence dug up all those emotions from yesterday he wanted to forget. The envy and resentment and shame.

So he left. Specifically through the window. And then he made a portal to Freedom HQ. Somewhere he could just go to be away for a bit. And perhaps with someone if his hunch was right, which he hoped it was.

Thankfully she had been there as he'd hoped. Plugged into the lab's computer, doing something. He didn't even know what happened between him finding her and him just sitting down in the chair and talking with Nicole. He vaguely recalled words of greeting being exchanged between the two, but before he'd known it he'd just started laying out everything right in front of her. The whole mission, what had happened, his feelings. Everything.

It was strange. Strange the way Sorun felt all his troubles just... melt away whenever he was with her. Less strange was the reason *why* he always sought her out, he knew the reason and he cursed himself for it every day, but at the same time he just couldn't help himself. She was one of the only people he allowed himself to confide these things in, to be vulnerable around, and it was nice to get this out.

"And I just... I just lost, Nicole. I lost super hard." He was leaning so far back in the chair in front of the lab's computer that his body was practically parallel with the ground. He could still see the computer monitors, though, just from the bottom of his vision. And just barely he could make out Nicole's head icon on the screen looking at him. "And it doesn't feel great."

"I was lead to believe your mission against that factory was a success." Nicole had been quiet throughout most of the story Sorun had told. The most she ever did was stop and ask questions, particularly around Sorun's process of making portals with his sword. She'd been unusually inquisitive over that, especially over the scientific aspect of it. Any other time and he would have seen it as cute in a way, but right now he wasn't feeling it at all. "Your battle with Dr. Robotnik... it truly went that terribly?"

Softly groaning, Sorun ran a hand over his face. "In a manner of speaking, yeah." He sat further up in the chair so that he was facing the computer. "It's not even that I was getting smacked around by a wrecking ball-" Nicole's icon glitched and disappeared for a single microsecond, too fast for Sorun to notice, "-, it's... he said some things." With a sigh, Sorun manifested Yamato in his left hand. He wasted no time in pulling the sheath off the sword, and then nonchalantly tossed the scabbard over his shoulder. The sound of wood clattering against the ground behind him barely even reached his ears as he inspected the katana's blade. "... I don't know. Maybe he's right. I have a lot of doubts about myself all the time. He was just saying what I'm thinking."

"Must you put yourself down so much?"

Sorun's eyes flicked up briefly when he saw Nicole's form manifest into reality from besides him. He regarded her for a moment and stared back down at his blade. "What am I without this thing?" he mumbled, more to himself than Nicole. "What am I without my powers? These abilities I can barely call my own? How many mission successes can I attribute solely to them?" He held the blade up over his head, squinting at his reflection. "I'm a worthless nobody without these things, Nicole. Anybody from Earth could have wound up in my position and done this. And they probably would have been able to do it better, too. You guys could have gotten some special forces guy, a Navy SEAL or someone like that, but instead you got me. And I'm not really good for anything."

"I do not know how seals pertain to this conversation. I thought your zone did not have Mobians?"

He felt a headache begin to come on. "It's things like this that make it not fun to live here, Nicole."

She briefly paused. "Regardless, what you say about yourself is simply not true."

Sorun would have scoffed at that if it weren't for the fact that Nicole stepped in front of the chair and grabbed both its arms with her hands, startling him. Even more startling was when she forcibly spun the chair so he was directly facing her. Most startling of all was how upset she looked. Not the sad kind of upset, either, but the more mad kind of upset. The same kind of upset look she'd had on her face when she'd ambushed him during that other factory mission.

"What's with that look?" Sorun asked, lowering the sword back into his lap as he looked up at Nicole's eyes.

"I do not like it when you talk about yourself like this," she said. When Sorun grew uncomfortable enough he tried to use his feet to push away from her. To his dismay, she held firm on the chair. "You're not worthless. You're Sorun."

At that, Sorun scoffed. "And what's so great about that guy?" he asked.

"Plenty." She dragged the chair back so that Sorun was closer to her. "Even without powers you are somebody everybody within the Freedom Fighters admires."

"I don't believe that for a second," Sorun denied, turning his head away from Nicole. "Nobody likes me."

"That's false," she assured him. "Whenever I am being carried around by Sally I hear things whenever she talks with others. Bunnie and Antoine both seem quite fond of you, Antoine in particular."

"Antoine just likes having someone he can beat in sword fights."

"Antoine likes having somebody with a common interest he can spend time with." Sorun blinked in surprise at Nicole's words, which prompted the lynx to continue. "Sally admires the dedication you put into the Freedom Fighters. Tails looks up to you as someone who does the right thing, even if you sometimes act like you don't like it. Which is just that; an act."

The more she spoke, the more Sorun found himself shrinking further back into his seat while quietly breathing out in quiet acceptance, his eyes still down on his own reflection. He hadn't known. He knew all along they wanted to befriend him, but he'd always assumed that was for their own reasons. Because they were polite like that. He hadn't realized there were qualities to him that the all actually liked. Qualities that didn't involve his powers...

"Rotor's warmed up to you," she continued, "Knuckles has commended you in your ability to show little hesitation during fights, Sonic-"

"Don't bring him up." Those wounds were still too fresh for him to be hearing about the blue hedgehog. At the same time, part of him couldn't help but admit he was curious as to what Sonic had to say about him.

" *Sonic* ," Nicole repeated, outright ignoring Sorun's request, "is under the impression you act so aloof around the others because you think it makes you look cooler, and somewhat deplores this aspect of you, but at the same time he greatly admires that you choose to do the right thing for the sake of others despite it going against this act of yours." She smiled a bit and looked to the side. "And he's also said that he enjoys that you give him such a challenge at video games, and has vowed to get better and one day beat you at one behind your back."

"Pfft. That's never gonna happen. He's worse than Shadow." A beat passed. "Wait." Now that he thought about it there *was* one thing that

he had over Sonic. Video games. It wasn't really practical in any sense of the word, but goddamn, it was *something* he could call his. All the speed in the world didn't help him when he couldn't control how fast the electrical signals from pressed buttons travelled. And even with his reflexes he'd yet to beat Sorun at a single game.

It brought a small smile to his face. It was something. Something to call his.

Nicole seemed the see the change in Sorun's demeanor, and in turn began to smile so earnestly at him. "And," she finished off, "I like that you spend so much time with me and give me many enjoyable memories to look back on."

"You make it so hard for me to stay upset..." A light, breathy chuckle left Sorun. He couldn't deny it, and he sure as hell didn't know how Nicole managed to pull it off, but he felt better. Still a bit sore over what Eggman had done to him, metaphorically and literally speaking, but... but what she said helped. Helped a great deal.

He found himself looking back down at Yamato. He saw his own reflection to the left side of the wavy temper line that ran down the center of the blade. He saw Nicole's reflection on the right side, her image upside-down and right next to Sorun's image. Even if both images were slightly wavy and distorted due to the imperfect reflection, it was still an image he couldn't help but admire. He liked the picture.

Sometimes he really wished he had more time.

"None of this really covers people like Sonic being stronger than me, but Sally already gave me that lecture... I get what you mean." He noted that the area around him had gotten darker, like a shadow had been cast over him. He looked up, and then pressed his back so far into the seat in surprise he heard the chair's frame squeak. Nicole was still gripping onto the chair's arms, only now she was leaning over him. That smile was still on her face. "Could you stop doing that and let me up...?" he nervously asked.

Nicole blinked in response, and then looked down as if Sorun's words caused something to register in her. "Oh. Right. Of course." She immediately let go of the chair and stepped back, holding her hands behind her back while unblinkingly staring towards Sorun. The human used his legs to push the chair back a bit, and then stood up off the chair with his sword still in hand.

"Anyways..." Sorun sighed out, running a hand through his hair, "I, um... thanks, Nicole. For this. I really needed it." He exhaled through his nose and turned his head to the side. "Don't know what I'd do without you sometimes."

"It's no trouble at all, Sorun," Nicole assured him. "I'm happy to see that you're-"

She was cut off when her image began to distort and briefly flicker. Sorun's eyes snapped back to her, slightly widened in surprise, while at the same time the smile on Nicole's face lowered by a substantial margin. She looked down at her right hand as her image stabilized, her shoulders slumping a bit as she looked back towards Sorun.

"The power reserves," she explained.

"Ah." Nodding in understanding, Sorun began to awkwardly rub at the back of his neck. "It's fine, I understand. I can still stick around to talk if you-?"

"No. I... actually did have some work that needed doing, Sorun." Nicole glanced back towards the lab's computer, a small, frustrated frown set on her blank face. Her form flickered again, and with hands still clasped behind her back she turned to Sorun. "I trust you'll be well now?"

"Better than I was coming in here. Again, thank-"

Nicole's form completely disappeared. Her icon reappeared on one of the monitors, and at the same time Sorun saw a little black hand giving a thumbs-up appear next to the icon. Sorun gave the

computer a sad smile, and then turned his back to it. Two slashes were made in the air, and a moment later a portal was created in front of him. Without a moment's hesitation Sorun stepped through the portal, making a few steps through the blue void and appeared through the other side.

"Must be rough for her. I always feel bad she's gotta live like that," Sorun thought to himself as he slashed the portal behind him closed. He sighed afterwards, and then looked up at the house he'd stepped out of the portal in front of. Sonic's house. *"As much as I'd like to avoid the guy forever, I don't think I could pull that trick off. Ugh, man..."*

He stepped up to the front door and reached forwards to open it. He never even made it that far, as the door swung open before he made contact with the handle. Sorun's hand as a result froze mid-grab, his eyes slightly widened and locked onto the blue form that was on the other side. Sonic, who was in much the same position Sorun was for a good moment, blinked and slowly lowered his hand away from the door as Sorun did the same.

"Oh, uh, hey. Sorun." The greeting by Sonic was about as stilted and awkward as Sorun felt right about now, and he imagined that Sonic felt the same. He couldn't quite blame him. "You're back."

"Yeah, I... needed some time alone to think," Sorun said, slowly pocketing his hands as he continued to stare towards Sonic. Sally's words from yesterday still rang in his head. Nicole's rang about a hundred times louder, and he found them a thousand times more comfort in them. At the very least, they helped quell the feelings of envy he felt inside. Enough that he could stand to look at Sonic and think rational thoughts.

"You really needed to go through the window?"

"... I do what I want."

"Right, right." A small, amused grin found itself on Sonic's face, his overall demeanor looking extraordinarily relaxed. Like he was relieved of something. "It's still early," he said, moving aside to allow Sorun an entranceway into the house. "Mom's up making breakfast. You down for having some with us?"

"..." Sorun hummed in thought, looking down at his feet. It was a strange thing. He didn't want to say yes, but at the same time he felt more strongly that he didn't want to say no. The feelings of hunger he had outright denied him from just walking away from potential food.

"And you are certainly no Sonic."

He felt his hands tighten inside of his pockets. How he hated that man and how right he was. But... he supposed there was no helping it. At least not the way he was now, anyways. Maybe in the future when he had more Chaos Emeralds that could change. For now he'd settle for being second fiddle. Or whatever line of fiddle he was compared to everybody else.

If nothing else, he still had mastery of games over Sonic. He took a bit of solace in that.

Nodding to himself, Sorun finally made up his mind and looked back up at Sonic. "Sure, let's go."

Chapter 37

A/N- Finally managed to pass that 100-review threshold. Yay for that. Thanks to all those who helped the story get this far and everyone for reading, as always.

Recursion Error

Episode 37- One is a really lonely number

There were a lot of places that Sorun expected his journey of life, or whatever it could even be called at this point, would take him. Some places were expected. Random forested areas around the northern continent, the occasional Eggman factory, places like that. Then there were the wackier, out of this world locations Sorun's adventures in this world found him in. Like the digital world, or under the ocean.

And then there were cases that were sort of in the middle. Like being inside of a mountain. Or, in this case, at the peaks of snowcapped mountains. With him falling downwards and slicing his sword right through the middle of an Egg Hammer as it threatened to smash a group of Overlander soldiers with its hammer.

Oddly enough the journey to get here was more strange than the actual events currently transpiring...

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6 hours prior

"Sorun, Sorun, Sorun...~" A musical hum left the golden-furred cat as she held up a torn, blue hoodie that was somehow scorched and drenched at the same time. "How in the world did this happen?" Honey asked, the sweet tone of her voice hiding the malice layered

underneath as she looked up at the human standing across the counter from her.

Not even fazed by her voice, Sorun sent the cat a flat look. "You ever fight a robot frog with a flamethrower in its mouth, Honey?" Sorun asked her. "I did. I had to fight two. At the same time. It wasn't fun." It sucked, actually. He didn't know how something could be so scorching hot and wet at the same time. Eggman found a way, somehow. He was a master at building contradictions like that.

The ruined hoodie was slammed down onto the counter with enough force that it created enough wind to blow back both the teen's and cat's black hair. "I don't care what you're fighting out there!" she screeched at him. "How could you let something as egregious as this happen to my poor product!?"

"You know, I'd like to see how well your red dress would hold up while you're getting tag-teamed by fire-breathing murder frogs," Sorun said to her, voice bland and lacking all energy. "Look, this was my last hoodie. You think you can fix it?"

"What am I going to do with you...?" Turning her gold eyes down to the hoodie, she regarded it for a whole millisecond, and then looked back up at Sorun. "Nope. It's shot. Finished. Gone to the great beyond. I can't salvage this hot mess."

"Fantastic." Reaching a hand up to rub at the bridge of his nose, Sorun asked her, "Is there anything you can do for me? I ain't exactly opposed to running into battle in nothing but pants and a t-shirt, but, well..."

He gestured down to his body, causing Honey to lean over the counter to get a better look at him. The cat's face scrunched up into an expression of absolute disgust when she saw the multiple scuff marks, burns, rips and tears all through his shirt and pants. Surprisingly his black boots were almost as pristine as the day Honey first gave them to him. He didn't know how the hell that

happened. She built 'em good, he guessed. Either that or whatever she made the leather out of to make the things was real tough.

He still didn't know where people in this world got leather from. And frankly, he wasn't sure that he wanted to know. He hoped it was some sort of artificial substitute, which would go to explain how it was they lasted so long, but he just didn't know, nor was he tempted to seek an answer out.

"I should slap you for going out in public looking like that. While wearing my brand, no less. Wait here." Grumbling under her breath, Honey stepped out from around the counter and made her way towards her back room. Sorun watched her depart, and then began to quietly hum under his breath as he leaned his back against the counter while waiting for her.

"It's always so fun coming here," he sarcastically thought. He never knew what to expect whenever he walked into this place, only that it surely wouldn't be a boring experience and there was a good chance of something horrible and mentally-scarring happening. Honey had that effect, and in a way, somehow, it had grown to be refreshing for Sorun. Maybe it was because it served as a break to Sorun and him having to deal with all the other Mobians he dealt with on a daily basis. That or Stockholm Syndrome. Considering he was basically an indentured clothes slave to her at this point it was probably the latter.

But despite all the craziness, Honey made quality goods. The fact his boots made of a leather of nebulous origins were still in one piece after all this time alone spoke volumes. He quite honestly didn't trust anybody else to make clothes for him other than her, and she had a way of fitting things so that they fit him *just right* . He'd never admit it to her face, but the woman was a genius when it came to clothes. And also insane. He'd admit that to her face.

Still, dealing with her eccentricities was worth it for her clothes. About the only reason he went so far to advertise her brand, really. That

and because he couldn't afford not to exploit that discount she gave him.

"Alright, here it is. Your new ensemble." Sorun was stirred from his thoughts when he looked up at the sound of Honey's voice. She'd walked back into view, hefting a small box of clothes on the counter he leaned on before leaving yet again to go towards a nearby rack of clothes. "I've been mulling over that style of yours for a while now. I think I got something down."

"You did, huh...?" Humming, Sorun leaned over the box and began rifling through its contents. Overall, he wasn't all that impressed with what he saw. A bunch of pairs of pants similar to the pair he already wore, except dark blue in color. And a bunch of plain black long-sleeved shirts. "Wow, so instead of having me wear a blue shirt and black pants, you decided to make me wear blue pants and a black shirt." With a flat face Sorun looked back up at Honey. "Ingenious," he drawled out.

"The blue top blended in too well with your outer layer, and your bottoms need to contrast with your top," Honey said, her hands shuffling through a line of clothes held up on a bunch of hangers. She made a "ah-hah!" noise, and then pulled something off from the rack. "I decided that the punkish vibe you were making from the hoodie wasn't suiting you and sending the right message to what my brand is all about, and honestly, sleeveless on you was lacking class. We're ditching that altogether and going for something more refined."

Sorun scoffed. "Yeah, 'cause nothin' says refined like long sleeves instead of- mph." He was interrupted when a cloth something was thrown over his head, muffling the human's words. His hands automatically flung up to his face to remove the offending piece of clothing, and with a huff he tore whatever was on him off his head.

He almost threw it back at Honey when he saw her giving him a coy smile, but then he saw what it was he was holding in his hands and held off so he could actually look at it. On closer inspection, he saw

that it was a long coat. A blue long coat, expertly stitched together from the coat tail all the way to the blue sleeves. Black interior, light yet sturdy from the feel of it, and he could just tell by looking it'd fit perfectly over him. Eyebrows raised in genuine surprise, Sorun looked back up to Honey. The eyebrows lowered back down when he saw her smug expression.

"Well...?" she asked, tail wagging mischievously behind her as she leaned in closer to Sorun to gauge his reaction. Sorun rolled his eyes in response to this, though he couldn't help but admit that there was something deeply appealing about the coat to him. She was right; it really did look refined. Stylish, almost.

"... Yeah, alright. I like it." He slung the coat over his shoulder, and with his hands sliding into his pocket Sorun re-leaned against the counter while still looking towards Honey. "So what do I owe you for it?" he asked.

"Hm? Oh, nothing. It's on the house."

Sorun almost tripped on his face when he heard that. Generous, Honey was not. In fact he'd known her long enough to know that she was a pretty ruthless businesswoman that didn't do things for "free". Tasks that offered no monetary gain for her but still ultimately benefited her in the long run, like making Sorun advertise for her, sure, she was all for that. Completely free, though? That was basically unheard of.

"What exactly did I do to earn all this for free?" Sorun asked, voice laced in suspicion as he sent the golden cat a raised eyebrow.

Honey hummed, rolling back forth on her feet with her hands clasped behind her back as she gave Sorun a wide, knowing grin. "Oh, nothing much. It's just for the past couple of months I've been getting a lot more business run through here. Even got a couple of Mobians traveling in from some of the outlying villages who said they came here just because some human Freedom Fighter told them about the

place. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Ah, he was caught. "Nah. Nothin'," Sorun said, shrugging as he feigned ignorance. "Musta been some other human you do business with. Can't believe you'd cheat on me like that."

"Ignoring that I'm not and you're the only human I've ever even met, do you know of any *other* humans in the Freedom Fighters situated in Knothole?"

"... Yeah, that guy. He goes around, does stuff here and there. Good old... Jjjjjjimmy."

"Jimmy."

"Yeah. Jimmy."

She rolled her eyes completely around, her irises falling back on Sorun. The grin on her face had only widened. "Well, Jimmy, I very much appreciate you having promoted my business so well. The clothes are a way of repaying that. And also showing off a bit more of my product."

"Ahhh, there it is." Altruism. It was somewhere down there in Honey's heart. Somewhere deep, deep down. And Sorun supposed he should have felt honored that he was someone Honey liked enough to show that side. But then he remembered how she acted, and he quickly realized he didn't feel this way. "Well, Honey, as always it's been an experience. I gotta go back to my unpaid job now."

His words caused Honey's ears to straighten upwards. "They don't pay you to be a Freedom Fighter?"

"Nah," Sorun said with a shake of his head, "I get paid in more more valuable, less materialistic things."

"The satisfaction of helping other people and admiration of those around you while ultimately working towards the goal of a free world?"

"Something like that I guess, yeah, sure. 'Least that's what I tell myself to get me up in the morning. One thing, anyways," Sorun said. "But every now and then Sally throws some cash my way since I'm pretty much the only person in all the Freedom Fighters without a source of income. Sally's a princess so she's basically bankrolled for life, Sonic and Tails still live with their parents, Antoine and Bunnie live together and apparently Antoine gets a pension since he has an official position as a commander of the kingdom's forces the *lucky son of a gun* , Amy... don't know what her deal is, Rotor... makes stuff I guess, I don't know, and the Chaotix are basically broke like me, too, but they get to mooch off all the food in the Freedom HQ since they're all bunking there." He was fairly certain that Shadow was broke as well due to losing his status as a G.U.N. agent as a result of Eggman's takeover. He'd assume Rouge would be in the same boat as him, but she always seemed well-off every time Sorun saw her.

She was a mysterious one, that bat.

Honey tittered in amusement. "What, Sonic's family doesn't feed you?"

"No, but even with that discount you gave me most of what I do get goes to you. And food for my pet Chao. Fruits and nuts and stuff like that." Left unsaid was all the stress aid items Sorun had wasted money on. Like that puzzle ring set he'd tried out and broke out of frustration, the scented candles that did absolutely nothing to help with his nerves, and that stress ball he'd squeezed so hard that it'd popped. In the end all getting that stuff did was make him more stressed for having wasted time and money on them. "Anyways-ooh," he suddenly said as he glanced at the clock, "yeah, hate to cut this short, but I gotta go."

"Resistance stuff?" Honey asked. When she saw Sorun nod his head as he made his way to the door, box of clothes and coat in hand, she then asked, "so what's on your docket for today?"

Already halfway out the door, Sorun paused and stuck his head back into the shop. "Oh, this one's a doozy. I get to go liberate a whole city from robot tyranny."

Honey blinked, and the amused grin she'd had on her face dropped right off. "Wait, really?"

"Yeah, we're going to Station Square," Sorun answered with a nod. "The time's finally come to go to that place, so... yeah."

"Ah, alright." Ears drooping back to their normal position, Honey moved back to the clothes rack besides her and began to dig through it. "Well, I gotta get ready for today. You be careful out there." She reached a hand out and pointed towards Sorun. "And don't you *dare* ruin that coat I just made you. I put a lot of effort into that."

"I'll put forth my best attempt." Sending her one last wave, Sorun exited the shop. Honey shook her head at the direction he left, and then focused her attention back on her clothes.

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5 hours, 40 minutes prior

"You're late!"

"I know I know I know!" He'd only taken a single step out of the portal before he heard Sally yell at him. Slashing backwards to close said portal behind him, Sorun looked towards Sally with an apologetic look on his face. "I got wrapped up in something." And what a something it was. He'd yet to try the coat on, but these new pants and shirt? They fit spectacularly. And Honey was right- the sleeves did make him feel refined.

His apology seemed to mean very little, though, as the princess crossed her arms right in front of him. Behind her Sorun could see the open doors of the hangar the Freedom Fighters kept their aircraft in, and a few of the Freedom Fighters themselves scrambling around the FF Special as the giant ship's engines fired up. Somehow the sight of that and knowing where it was about to carry him was more nerve-wracking to Sorun than the princess standing in front of him.

"I'd like to think somebody who can make wormholes out of thin air could be a bit more punctual, especially considering what we're about to go to pull off, Sorun." She sounding chastising, but the small grin on Sally's face gave away how she truly felt. "Glad you made it."

"Yep." Sorun took another glance at the ship behind Sally. "So we're all good to go?"

"All the supplies are packed and everyone's ready and waiting, so yes," she said with a nod. "Rotor's up in the Special's cockpit preparing for liftoff. We'll be heading out any minute now."

"Ah, great." Sorun began to walk past Sally. "Well, guess all that's left to do is find a seat and-"

"Wait a sec, Sorun." Sally quickly stuck her arm out in front of Sorun to block his path. "There, um... there's a slight development we should probably address before leaving."

The human teen glanced down at the arm blocking his path, and then looked towards Sally herself. She had a slightly uncomfortable, awkward look on her face, and the look in her eyes almost seemed apologetic towards Sorun. "Okay? Can I ask what-?"

"Chao."

"Ah, I see." He understood the moment he heard that one sound be uttered to him. Sighing out, he turned around to the source of the voice, and wasn't at all surprised to see his Chao. Virgil was just floating there, his bladed arms crossed over his chest and his head

adorned with silver crest-like horns staring straight at him. There was a large frown across the Chao's face, making him look like he was displeased with something, and Sorun, knowing precisely what the problem was, sent a blank look towards Sally. The chipmunk, in response, began to sheepishly rub at her arm.

"Your Chao has been very insistent in coming along with us," Sally explained to him. "He flew over here on his own and refuses to go back home."

"The fearsome princess Sally Acorn couldn't remove a single Chao...?" Sorun disbelievingly muttered out.

"Have you seen what he looks like?" she asked him, gesturing a hand towards Virgil. "For the life of me, I don't know what you did to make him evolve into such a scary form, Sorun." She shook her head and looked at Virgil. "Also we... can't."

Sorun rose an eyebrow. "What do you mean 'can't?"

"None of us can actually catch him," she said, making both of Sorun's eyes widen. "And Sonic doesn't want to try anymore because every time he grabs at Virgil he cuts his gloves." She looked back to Sorun. "Do you know why he's acting like this?"

"Yeah, yeah I do." Huffing out a breath, Sorun turned his eyes towards the Chao. "Virgil, Virgil..."

It'd been a problem ever since he'd first gotten the Chao. He didn't like to be separated from Sorun for too long. It was to the point that he practically had to force the Chao to stay at home whenever he went out on a mission, and even then he'd still sometimes fight Sorun. All because he... well, Sorun wasn't quite sure. Because he didn't like Sorun being in danger all the time and wanted to protect him since he was his caretaker, maybe? He'd seemed really eager to fight that wasp mech that one time.

But that was before he'd evolved; after was a different story. He was a lot less vocal, more cool and relaxed, his overall demeanor was just a lot less energetic and more relaxed, and as a whole he was just easier to deal with. But there was still a certain... discontent with him that Sorun could see whenever he left him at home to go on a mission somewhere. He could always tell the Chao was upset from the way he'd cross his arms and refuse to utter even a single sound, and this would persist while Sorun was gone to a whole day after he'd return home.

Sorun supposed that he should have known at one point Virgil would go and do something like this. That his patience would wear thin or he'd just decide enough was enough. He didn't know he'd go and be so aggressive with the matter, though.

"You wanna come with me, don't you, Virgil?" Sorun asked the floating Chao.

"Chao."

That was a yes. "Well, you can't. Go home."

"Chao-chao."

That was a no. And it caused Sorun to groan and rub at the bridge of his nose. "Why do you want to come with me?"

Virgil did three things. First he uncrossed his arms, and then pointed one of his appendages at the sheathed katana Sorun was holding in his left hand. And then he twisted his right arm, just enough that the sunlight gleamed off the black blade jutting out of his arm and curving up past his shoulder.

Sorun understood this immediately, and after glancing down at Yamato looked back up at the Chao. "I know you're all evolved and everything, Virgil, but it's still too dangerous for you to come with me."

"Chao, chao-chao." Virgil gestured towards Sorun, and his frown deepened.

A frown that matched Virgil's grew on Sorun's face. "Yeah, I know it's dangerous for me, too. It's dangerous for everybody. But I'm not putting you in danger just because you want to go."

"Chao?"

He recognized the inflection at the end as Virgil asking a question. "Because everybody else is experienced and used to this kind of thing, and I got powers. And you're just, well..."

"Chao..."

Sorun reared back a bit from how hostile that "chao" sounded. Even Sally seemed a bit off-put by it. And then when Sorun looked towards the Chao's blue eyes, at the way they were narrowed so threateningly towards him, he understood immediately.

He laughed. It was a small, quiet laugh, barely above a chuckle, and it was something that made Sally look at him oddly. But Sorun couldn't help it- he'd laughed because he understood exactly what the hostility radiating off of Virgil meant. Why he was being so aggressive and insistent on going on the mission with Sorun. How could he not, when he'd been feeling the same way himself whenever he looked at Sonic.

"Little guy doesn't like being called weak and wants to be useful. Figures. He's so much like me." It was almost amusing how much he'd imprinted off of Sorun. There had to be something Chaos energy-related about it. That book he read outright said they were natural conductors for the stuff, and there was no way he naturally just became this way. The fact he'd developed into that form alone said enough. *"Well, Virgil, I understand where you're coming from. But if something happened to you I wouldn't be able to live with myself."*

His mind made up, Sorun acted midway through a laugh. The smile on his face was wiped in the same instance he snapped his arm forwards in an attempt to grab the dark blue Chao floating right in front of him.

Except, he didn't manage to grab him. Virgil had dodged and dipped his entire body downwards, fast enough that Sorun's eyes barely managed to track his body. And the entire time the Chao's indignant eyes were still locked onto Sorun's.

"The hell...?" Eyes narrowing, Sorun slowly exhaled as his Bringer Claws manifested on his back. "You really gotta make it this hard for me?"

A major issue was beginning to present itself. The issue was that with his evolution came the regeneration of Virgil's lost wing and flight. And apparently that meant he was just a bit too agile for Sorun to grab, because, try as he might, he couldn't so much as lay a finger on Virgil. His human arms never came close to brushing against his flying body. The Bringer Claws came closer, but he still wasn't able to grab him. It was enough to make Sorun grin. Even with four arms, he couldn't catch the little guy.

When he felt a weight settle on his head, Sorun all but gave up. He didn't even need to look up to know that Virgil was up there, sitting on his head and more than likely still carrying that indignant frown of his. Sorun didn't doubt that any further efforts on grabbing the little guy were futile. So, with a weary sigh, Sorun shrugged and gave up.

"Alright, fine, you can come. But the instant it gets too dangerous I'm opening a portal and sending you back home. Deal?"

"Chao."

"Sorun!"

Flinching, Sorun glanced to the side at Sally. She didn't look nearly as agreeing as Sorun was. "What do you want me to do, Sally?" he

asked her. "He's gonna follow me no matter what, and unless you wanna tell Sonic to stop being a baby and take his gloves off so he can carry him home, he's coming."

She looked a slight bit more convinced, but not completely. "Sorun, I don't-"

"Look, he's my responsibility, alright? Just let me worry about it."

Sally bit at her lower lip in thought. She looked hesitant at the idea, very hesitant, her eyes continually flicking from Sorun's face to the Chao sitting on top of his head. Finally, something akin to an agreeing groan left her, and as one hand rubbed at the space between her eyes the other hand waved Sorun off. "Fine, fine," she said, "he can go. But you're looking after him."

"Naturally." Sorun felt the weight lift off of his head, and then saw Virgil float next to his head from the corner of his eye. The Chao still had his perpetual scowl over his face, but at the same time he looked appeased. At least that's how it looked from the way his eyes were slightly more relaxed-looking. Taking note of the sight, Sorun looked back to Sally. "So we're good to go?" he asked.

Nodding, Sally said, "We should be. All that's left is for us to board and head off."

"Right." Sorun turned right around and began walking to the giant ship in the hangar, Virgil floating right besides him. Sally followed closely from behind. "Well, time to go save a city, I guess."

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5 hours, 20 minutes prior

Apparently Sally had been a busy girl in the background.

Shadow had made mention of it, but the princess had been in contact with important people. Getting a connection with the president of Station Square, because *that* made sense to Sorun's

ears, was easy enough as from what Sorun heard the Freedom Fighters had helped out a lot in Station Square in the past, so he and Sally were on good terms, and so, by extension, the Freedom Fighters were on good terms with Station Square. Even if Station Square's integration into technical UF Overlander territory caused communication between them to become a bit more sparse before Eggman's big takeover.

The other contact was only possible because of Rouge and Shadow's connections, which, pragmatically speaking, made sense as Sorun would be very worried if they wouldn't be able to get into contact with their boss. The Commander of G.U.N., Mr. President Man, and Sally had all been colluding this big move for a while now while everybody else had been going around dismantling Eggman's operations. The goal of this big move was simple: liberate Station Square from Eggman's control, and liberate G.U.N. HQ from Eggman's control. Simultaneously.

Something like this was only possible now due to greatly diminished numbers on Eggman's part. They all must have been doing something right, because across the board of the whole world the number of Eggman's robots had been falling at a dramatic rate. Sorun himself hadn't known that all those operations he and the rest of the Freedom Fighters had been doing had had that big of an effect, and even some of the others were a bit surprised at how effective all those sabotage operations of theirs were. But, the results spoke for themselves: Eggman's ground forces were a fraction of what they used to be. Not to say he still didn't have a massive force, it was still practically an army, but with all the heat he'd been getting as a result of all the pushback from them he'd decided to reorganize a bit and shuffled most of his forces back to his own city.

So what did that mean in essence? Basically, it meant that a majority of the Badnik forces were centralized in New Megaopolis. This meant that the place was even worse than a fortress from the sheer concentration of enemies and whatever else was in that city. Virtually

impenetrable. An impossible target for them to attack due to the density of Badniks. And because Eggman's city was shored up so well with Badniks, that gave him free reign to use the factories there to manufacture *more* Badniks. That wasn't even accounting for the fact he still had a whole fleet of warships just sitting around. So that was still a major problem.

On the upside, it also meant that his forces were greatly spread thin pretty much everywhere else in the world. That included the forces that were occupying the territories he conquered, such as Station Square, G.U.N. headquarters, and all the UF territories and Overlander settlements.

With this in mind, the powers to be, meaning Sally, her brother, the president of Station Square, and the G.U.N. Commander, had all decided that the time to act was now before Eggman managed to replenish his ranks with more robots.

It was meant to be a two-pronged attack. Rouge and Shadow, already affiliated with G.U.N., were to go and help with the assault on their HQ in order to wrest it from Eggman's control. They'd already left a while ago, and from what little Sorun heard so far things over there were going well enough. Once they regained control the idea was to launch a campaign to take back all the Overlander territory from Eggman once settlement at a time, city by city, gathering more resources all the while to build their strength back up.

But that was all their problem. The Overlanders'. Station Square got saddled with the Freedom Fighters, half the reason due to geometric positioning. The UF territories were all congregated towards the eastern continent, mostly around where the European nations used to be. Station Square was in the west, down in what used to be South America near where Brazil had once been. It was easier for them to fly down and deal with it than G.U.N. to divide its resources and fly across the ocean just to help liberate them when they had all those occupied UF cities to free. The other half was because Station Square was already allies with the Kingdom of Acorn, and, with

Station Square being allied with the Overlander territories, by extension, it helped the kingdom's relations with the Overlanders in the long run.

Complicated politics Sorun cared none for aside, it still made enough sense why they had to be the ones to go and liberate Station Square. And seeing as how it was going to be such a big operation, it was all hands on deck save for Team Dark, who were busy dealing with the situation at G.U.N. Sorun didn't mind it all that much. He figured it might be nice, seeing humans again after months of life among Mobians. Even if they weren't Earthlings like him.

"Alright, we're coming up on Station Square now." That was Rotor's voice, who sat at the helm of the FF special. Sally was standing right besides him, leaning forwards with one hand on his seat for support as she looked out the viewing window of the ship. Sorun was standing just behind them, making an interested hum every now and then as he examined the thin, black shirt slipped over his torso.

"It's been a while since I've worn anything with sleeves. Feels weird." It really was a refreshing look for him, especially as the hoodie had grown old on him. Brushing his hand over a sleeve and making a satisfied sound, Sorun stepped forwards right next to Sally so he could go and see just what they were dealing with.

From what he'd been told, Station Square was supposed to be a city inside of a mountain. Well, he saw the mountain- or what was left of it, anyways. Now it was less a mountain and more a giant crater, at the center of which was a city. And what a city it was- even from all the way here in the sky he could make out a huge, sprawling, metropolis the likes of which dragged some sense of nostalgia out from somewhere deep in Sorun. It definitely looked like a city built by humans.

"I thought Station Square was inside a mountain?" Sorun questioned as he turned his head to Sally.

She nodded. "It was." She glanced to the side at Sorun. "I told you the mountain was lost a while back, remember?" When the human teen just blankly stared back at her, she extrapolated with, "It's a long story."

"... Okay then." He exhaled deeply out of his nose and decided to just take that in stride. "So you want me to just drop right in the middle of the place?"

"We need to establish a safe landing zone so we can unload all the supplies we brought in from Knothole," she explained to him. "There's a rather large clearing near the edge of the city. The plan is for the resisting forces here to meet up with us, and we'll go from there."

"And those would be...?"

"The police and small military force that operated here before Eggman's takeover," she answered. "They were greatly diminished from the occupation, but over time they've been working up towards something in preparation for this. All we have to do-"

"Yeah-yeah-yeah, I'll leave the details to you." Sorun waved a hand over in Sally's direction, who rolled her eyes at the human. A sudden shudder beneath his feet signaled the ship stopping midair, prompting Sorun to look over at Rotor. "This the spot?" he asked.

"Yup," Rotor confirmed with a nod. "You, um... you sure you're able to make it down there alright?"

"Between the wings, teleportation, and portals?" He missed the exasperated gasp that came from the walrus as Sorun grabbed his new coat off a nearby chair. "I dunno, Rotor. I'll make something up on the way down." He opened the door leading out of the cockpit, called back "I'll call you when it's clear", and then closed the door behind him.

Walking through the length of the ship had been a short trip. Walking through the cargo hold had been a more interesting sight. The liberation of the city was also part of a relief effort, so Knothole had spared some essential supplies for the city. Basic things: food, water, medicine, miscellaneous clothing items. No weapons, though, considering Badniks were bulletproof and humans like Sorun didn't have the physical capability to defeat Badniks in any sort of close-combat. He had to wonder just what exactly the human resistance down below were planning.

Sitting around were all the Freedom Fighters and the Chaotix. They'd given him encouraging nods as he passed, which Sorun returned in kind as he made his way to the back door. He winced slightly as he heard the door begin to open, wind rushing in and blowing past his face.

"Yo, Sorun!" The pale human turned around at his voice being called out. He saw Sonic zoom right behind him, same carefree grin over his face as always. "You headin' down?"

Sorun didn't have it in him to form a witty remark. "Yeah," he answered. "Just gonna go clear the landing zone real quick. Hey, you seen Vir- oh, hey." Another blue thing, significantly smaller in size, floated into his view. The Chao gave Sorun a quick nod, the teen blinking back in response and refocusing on Sonic. "Anyway, yeah, I'm goin'. Shouldn't take me more than five or so minutes."

"Sounds good. Seeya soon. Nice new threads, by the way." Sonic clicked his tongue and pointed at Sorun, and then turned around to walk back to the others. He'd passed Virgil along the way, the Chao giving him a single, scornful look that caused Sonic to flinch away from him. Sorun chuckled at the sight, but the amusement was soon wiped off his face when he turned back to the open hangar door.

"Chao?" Virgil floated right next to Sorun, and he, too, was staring at the opened hangar door. Sorun couldn't help but note the apprehension he saw in the Chao's eyes, which caused him to scoff and gesture to the open air in front of them.

"What are you complaining about? You have wings," Sorun pointed out, looking towards the Chao's two split wings. "Don't tell me you're afraid of heights."

"Chao-chao." Virgil vehemently shook his head as a negative response. It didn't remove the apprehension from his face. "C-chao."

Sorun sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look, you're the one that wanted to come with me on this. Guess what, jumping from really high places is part of the job. For some weird reason."

"Chao-chao. Chao."

"Okay, look, Virgil, I get it. It's a new experience for you, and heights are scary. I totally understand." As Virgil continued staring towards the open doorway, Sorun's hand began to subtly creep up behind his floating form. "But listen, sometimes the mother bird needs to push her baby bird out of the nest. What I'm about to do isn't too dissimilar to that. In fact it's pretty much a one-to-one recreation." When his hand got close enough he managed to wrap his fingers around the previously distracted and now surprised Chao. "Don't worry, you get used to it!" Sorun finished as he began running to the open exit.

"Chao!" Virgil's protest had fall on deaf ears, as Sorun had already jumped out.

The familiar feeling of wind rushing against his body was the very first thing Sorun took note of as his body began falling towards the very far away but quickly approaching ground. The second thing was the struggling Chao in his grasp, which Sorun perceived as Virgil struggling against him.

Sorun reacted by throwing him.

"Little bird needs to learn!" Sorun yelled out as he reared his arm back, and then pushing it forwards to throw the Chao. Virgil's distressed chaoing were soon drowned out from both the wind and distance as he sailed away to parts unknown. Sorun sighed in relief,

and then allowed himself to relax as he continued to fall. Then he started to panic a few seconds later when he realized he didn't have his coat draped over his shoulder.

"What the- where did- oh!" As he spun around in the air, he finally found sight of his coat. It was just behind him, falling at a slower rate due to its lighter mass and quickly growing further and further away from Sorun the closer he got to the ground. Sorun was quick in manifesting a Bringer Claw to reach up and grab the coat, and then had it reel it back all the way to him were he proceeded to grab it with his normal hands.

Putting on a coat while falling at terminal velocity towards the ground was evidently a difficult task. The cloth would keep whipping into his face and the sleeves and coattail would continually blow past him. There'd even been a couple of times where he had lost his grip on the coat and had to re-grab it. After a bit more effort, he finally managed to push both of his arms fully through the coat's sleeves.

And just in time, too, because Sorun could see ground fast approaching. In a large patch of green with a few trees and sidewalks scattered around. A park, of some sort. A park infested with a few Egg Pawns. And a gold one.

Mere meters before Sorun hit the ground, he Tricked and disappeared. The next instant found the blade of a katana bursting through the front of the golden Egg Pawn spotted earlier, only for the blade to then slice through the entire upper half of its body. Sorun then nonchalantly walked past the robot's corpse, not even paying attention to all of the other normal Egg Pawns that had set their sights on him. He instead reached his open hand up, where a small blue and black creature landed standing in his palm.

"See, told you it wasn't so bad," Sorun said, lowering his arm so that he was eye-level with Virgil. "I mean, come on, you can fly. Heights shouldn't mean anything to you."

"Chao..." Virgil turned his head away from Sorun so that he didn't have to look him in the eye. Snorting in amusement, Sorun looked forwards towards all the robots that began to surround them, lances in hand. Rolling his eyes, Sorun clicked his tongue twice to gain the Chao's attention, who then turned around on Sorun's hand to look at the robots.

"Well, Virg, you wanted to see what it's all about. Here it is." Sorun brought the hand the Chao was standing on closer to him, and then fully thrust it out towards the nearest robot. "Time to go to work!"

He hadn't been expecting much when he'd decided to bring his pet Chao to the field with him. He'd done it mainly so he'd stop complaining to Sorun, and Sorun had figured that once he fought a single robot and realized he was outmatched, Sorun would just take a second to open a portal back home, shove Virgil through, and carry on with the rest of the mission. A little reality check that would finally get the Chao off his back.

Under no circumstances did he expect to see Virgil fly directly towards one of the Egg Paws while pointing his bladed arms out to the side, and then start spinning around like a demented little spinning top. Sorun expected even less for Virgil to cut right through the Badnik's head.

"... Whoa." Sorun found himself blinking in surprise. The robot fell forwards at the loss of its head, with Virgil floating still in the air right behind it. The remaining Egg Pawns were looking back and forth between Sorun and the Chao, acting like they were confused on which one they should be targeting. Virgil hadn't even given them the time to deliberate on that, as he immediately got to work flying to the other robots and spinning through them. Sorun watched the sight for a bit, and then got bored enough to look down at his sleeves.

"Man, this coat is really comfy. You outdid yourself with this one, Honey." He flicked his eyes back up to Virgil, who'd already dispatched half of the Badniks surrounding them, and let out a quiet scoff. *"Why wasn't I taking him out on missions sooner? Goddamn.*

He's like a little monster that can fit in my pocket. A... pocket monster of sorts." He blinked. *"Oh, that's where that comes from..."*

He hadn't even finished thinking his own thoughts before the last Badnik had fallen. Virgil floated victoriously among the mechanical bodies, staring towards Sorun with half-lidded, bored eyes and a lazy frown. Sorun gave him an approving scoff.

"Alright, fine. You proved me wrong. Nice job." He gave the Chao a thumbs-up, which caused just the barest of satisfied smiles to form on Virgil's mouth. Sorun couldn't help but roll his eyes as he rolled up the sleeve on his left arm to reveal the small watch-like device strapped to his wrist. He clicked his tongue as his right hand began to fiddle with the small dials on the device's face. "Man, this thing itches like crazy... Hey, you comin' in?" Sorun asked into the device as he took a glance around at the empty clearing. "Yeah, we should be all good..."

---

4 hours prior

There was something wrong with the humans that resided in Station Square.

Not something wrong in the sense that they were sick, or that there was something off with them mentally speaking. Sorun saw a few. Didn't talk to them personally, but hung around as they talked with Sally and the rest of the Freedom Fighters so they could organize things. They'd asked about *him* , though. Why a human was working with the Freedom Fighters, and where that human got powers from. Sorun had made a request to the others not to divulge these things, as he didn't really want the attention. He was too focused on these humans.

He thought he'd feel something when he first saw them. That he'd feel some insane rush of nostalgia, or that he'd just feel... *something* . Some relief, something to tell him that even though they weren't

technically *his* kind, they were still humans and he was somewhat among his people here. That he'd feel a sense of being at home.

But there was something wrong with their faces.

Sorun couldn't place it. He just couldn't place it. Their proportions were right. Heights were... average for human heights. Which meant they were all taller than him. Which also caused some snickering from the Freedom Fighters behind his back that he pretended not to notice but in actuality really did notice and was sent fuming from it. Skin tones varied from light tones to tan tones to dark tones. Hairs wildly varied but were mainly just browns, blacks, and blondes, a few reds here and there. Eyes were also the normal range of colors. All that was good. They were human. They acted and sounded like humans.

But their faces were... off. Off in a way Sorun couldn't very well describe. It was like some proportions of their features, their jaws and cheekbones and noses, were either wildly pronounced or the exact opposite randomly on everyone. Not to a grotesque degree, but it wasn't normal, either. Hell, it was only to a point on some people that it was barely noticeable. But Sorun noticed it.

Currently he was sitting on a box inside of a building. A police station that was fortified into a kind of miniature command center for the human resistance here. He looked to his right at a window, where he could barely make out his own reflection in the glass. His face was normal. Pale, thin, symmetrical. Angular features. Eyes that were- Christ, were they always that sunken in?

"Fuck, that can't be healthy..."

Aside from the eyes, his face was normal. Good-looking if he said so himself. But then he'd look away at one of the humans sitting nearby, and Sorun would find himself almost recoiling when he saw their face. Not because they were hideous, they weren't, but because there was just something inherently different with their faces that

didn't give Sorun the impression they were human despite the fact that they *were* human.

And that was the crux of the issue. He didn't feel a goddamn thing standing around them. They felt as much as total strangers as Mobians did. They were humans, but not his humans. Not Earthlings.

A heavy sigh left him as he looked down at the katana resting in his lap. He idly began playing with the dark blue ribbon tied around the scabbard as he thought back to recent events.

The humans here had given the Freedom Fighters an overwhelmingly positive warm welcome. Sorun had just thought it was because they were here to help free the place, but he'd been corrected and informed that Mobians were well accepted here. They'd been lead to this police station after supplies from the ship had been unloaded, and Sally had been in talks with some of the higher ups in charge here while everybody else waited around for orders. She'd come back, and after that the time to get to work to freeing the city had started. And during that time Sorun had gotten his answer as to what kind of resistance the humans here had been putting up to Eggman's Badniks.

Short answer: they couldn't do shit.

Long answer: the humans of Station Square weren't exactly equipped to handle a situation like this. Most of it stemmed from the fact that Station Square was an isolated, self-sustaining community that until relatively recently had been completely secluded from the rest of world. By all appearances before Eggman rolled in the city had been a pretty great place to live in, too, so it wasn't overly militant by any stretch of the word. So the police force was just that: a police force that at best just had sidearms using standard ballistic ammunition to arm their officers. And since they were so self-contained, their military force was less a military force and more an advanced SWAT group with higher-grade equipment and that numbered about the same as the police force.

So what did that give the humans of Station Square in terms of weapons to fight the Badniks? Not much. Sidearms and small-arms conventional rifles that did about zilch in terms of damage to even the weakest of Badniks. A *few* explosive weapons to be sparingly used. Some vehicles like armored APCs that were used more to move civilians around than anything else. That was about it.

Essentially the Freedom Fighters were the only chance these people had.

Fucking great.

Now, did that mean that liberating this city from the Badnik occupation would mean copious amounts of fighting on the Freedom Fighters' part? To go feet-first into the battlefield, fighting hordes of robots to retake the city one piece at a time? To put their lives on the line in such a dangerous task that it would require utmost focus and utilization of all their skills on their part?

Well, yes, but Sorun didn't get to partake in any of that. And that was part of what was vexing him so much at the moment.

See, what the humans here lacked in strength, they made up for in other ways. Specifically speaking, since they'd been under the robot occupation for so long, they knew a thing or two. They may have been trash fighters, but they were more than capable scouts. Enemy encampments, oil and power supply depots to fuel the robots forces, weapon caches, and pretty much every single location of interest that needed to be taken out in order to gain back control of the city was all neatly marked down on a map, right down to the exact coordinate. The problem wasn't locating them. The problem was getting there and effectively dismantling those locations while under heat from the numerous robot forces scattered about.

Fortunately the Yamato and its ability to create portals circumvented all of that.

The stupidly simple formula was thus: open a portal to an important location. Have a group of Freedom Fighters or Sonic or Knuckles and his team go through and clean house, all made easier from a sudden and unexpected appearance. Send a second group to another location to divide the Badnik forces. Have their own attacking forces come back to base after successfully dismantling their target and rotate them out for other teams of Freedom Fighters, and then have the returning group rest by delivering the supplies they'd brought to civilian camps located throughout the city in safe locations. Which, again, were made trivial due to Sorun and his portals. Rinse and repeat until they were done.

It was a plan thought up by Sally, who'd been the one to designate the teams and decide the rotation and locations they'd attack, as well as the one allocating all the supplies to the civilians at the advisement of the humans working with them. Had this plan been effective thus far?

Well, seeing as they'd already taken more than a quarter of the city back with zero casualties Sorun would say so.

That was the bright side to all of this. The liberation of Station Square was going swimmingly well. So well, in fact, that for a people that had been oppressed by a mad tyrant for months, spirits were pretty high. And above all it looked like they were all going to win this and go home safe and sound. The downside was that Sorun was relegated to portal duty and he was bored to tears.

Sighing, he slid himself off of the crate he'd been sitting on and, seeing nothing better to do, went and approached a pair of humans donned in police uniforms he'd seen talking down the way. Two average-looking men, one of them bald. Nothing special about them at all except for the fact they were people. Humans. And Sorun should have felt something when he saw them.

But when he approached them and they both looked down at him, he felt nothing. Nothing but irritation at their height and how he had to

look up at him. He'd almost forgotten this feeling, what with living with animal people his height for so long.

"Er, hey... guys," Sorun awkwardly greeted the two officers. "How's the, uh, how's it- how's it going?"

They both blinked down at him, almost liked they were confused why a short teenager like him was standing in the middle of a police station converted into a command center in the middle of a battle. But then he saw their eyes drift towards the katana he was holding in his left hand, and a light of recognition flashed in their eyes.

"Oh, hey! You're the guy that came in with the Mobians everybody's been talking about!" one of the officers, the bald one, exclaimed.

"Yeah, that's... that's me," Sorun said with a nod. "You holding up okay?"

The second officer was the one to respond. "Yeah, we're doing good. Your, uh... people have really been helping out. That and the freaky, er, portal stuff you can do. No offense."

"Slightly taken." The two officers stiffened up at that. "You guys need anything?"

They relaxed a bit. "No, we're good," the first officer said, "but thanks anyways. If you don't mind us asking, though, why... why's someone so young like you running around with them?"

More irritation spiked in Sorun that he suppressed. "... I'm about as old as the rest of the Freedom Fighters." He was older than some, even. Tails was only eleven. And Amy... well, with how she'd artificially aged her body, he wasn't so sure how to classify her age.

"Fair point." The two officers flicked their eyes at each other, and then back to Sorun. "Don't, um, is your parents okay with you doing this?"

Sorun decided he didn't like talking with these two. "Listen, I got things to go do. But feel free to call for me if some robots come and attack the place again. Wouldn't want the station to wind up like a scene right out of 'Terminator'."

"Out of what?"

When he saw the confused looks in both of the officers' eyes, it caused a sense of frustration and sadness to build up in Sorun. He said nothing in response, instead waving the two off as he walked away.

Walking through the halls and rooms of the precinct hadn't been all that illuminating. Mostly he just saw other humans around, talking about current events or planning and preparing for an excursion out into the field or some such thing. He did note that he caught the eyes of a few, and he had to wonder if this height thing of his really was working against him. Did they think he was younger than he actually was? Was that it? He supposed he couldn't be all that surprised that they thought this, he had similar problems back on Earth often, but he still couldn't help but feel more than a bit insulted over it. He never had this problem in Knothole.

It was this in conjunction to the fact that there was just inherently something wrong with the way humans here looked that made Sorun not want to talk to any of them. So he distanced himself with them and tried to keep to himself as he made his way to the vehicle depot, which was where the Freedom Fighters had been holding up for the time being while not somewhere out there and where Sorun was sending them off in portals. He just wanted to go there and stay there until it was time to leave.

Of course he had to run into Sally as he crossed a corner on his way there.

"Oh! Sorry, I was- oh, Sorun!" Sally's demeanor relaxed at the sight of him, and she immediately went to straightening her vest out. "I've been looking for you."

"Ah, lemme guess." With a blank look Sorun held Yamato up and shook it. "More portals?"

"More portals," she confirmed with a nod. "Come on, we'll go to the depot."

Wordlessly, Sorun began following Sally as she lead him to the back of the station, where the vehicle depot was. Along the way Sorun continued to cast glances at any humans they passed, and, when they'd passed the section of the police station where the jail cells were present, he had to do a double take. The jail cells had been converted to makeshift shelters for any civilians they managed to hide away here, and among the human civilians he saw there, Sorun noticed that there were a few Mobians, too. Not any Freedom Fighters he knew, but normal, civilian-looking Mobians. Some dogs, cats, a bird he was pretty sure he saw.

Curious.

"Why are there Mobians here?" Sorun asked Sally as they continued walking side-by-side. "Thought this was a city of humans."

Sally took a look over to where Sorun was looking. "Station Square is a lot more accommodating to Mobians as opposed to any of the Overlander cities over in their territory. In fact Overlanders... actually don't accept Mobians living with them at all," she said, voice slightly quiet. "But Station Square does," she continued in her normal voice, turning to Sorun. "A lot of Mobians looking to make a life outside of Knothole or a village somewhere came here for work, and due to our past presence, the city generally welcomes them with open arms. But that was before the occupation."

"Right." Well, that was nice of them. The humans. He frowned at the thought. "Do I look different than them to you?" he asked her.

She looked confused at the question. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I... I don't know, I thought I'd probably feel at home when I got here, that it'd be like living back home, but I keep looking around at all these people and they're not..." He hesitated when he struggled to find the right words. "They just don't feel like how people back on Earth feel like," he decided. "I don't know. I think it's how they look."

"How they look?" Sally repeated.

"Yeah, they're... I, I don't know. There's just something different with their faces, I guess. I mean they're humans from a whole alternate dimension, so... so I guess it would make sense they wouldn't look exactly like Earthlings. Maybe it's the weird colors here. Or the lighting." He gave a half shrug. "What do you think? Do I look any different from them to you?"

She hummed, her blue eyes looking Sorun's form up and down, and then ending on his face. She stared for a bit, and then a small smirk crossed her features. "Well, you do seem awfully short compared-"

"Knock it off with the short thing, I'm serious," Sorun bit out. "I swear, I get cursed with short genes and you people never let me hear the end of it. It wasn't a problem until we came here since I'm as tall as you all are!"

"I'm joking, Sorun, calm down." Sally waved him down with that same mirthful grin still on her face, though there was still a contemplative look in her eyes. "Well, Sorun, you... well, you've always seemed a bit different than any of the humans I've ever met here."

That hadn't been the answer he'd been expecting. He didn't know how he was supposed to perceive that. "Different... how?" he asked her.

Sally shrugged. "Just something about you."

Well, that told him absolutely nothing. "Could you be more specific, please?"

He stopped walking when Sally stopped walking. She leaned a bit closer to him, eyes narrowed as she scrutinized his features closely. Finally she backed off and turned back around. "I can't really say for certain. You're... just you."

"I'm... me?" he repeated, voice unsure. "Of course I'm me, Sally, but what does- what does that even mean?"

"I don't know, Sorun. You asked and that was the best I had." She continued walking, with Sorun staring at her back for a bit before sighing and following closely behind her. "You're just a bit different. That's all. Everybody is, and the things that make them so different from everybody is what makes them unique. That's the beautiful thing about life."

Sorun found himself blowing a lock of hair out from his face, an unsatisfied feeling settling within him. That was the Mobian outlook on the matter. The completely unbiased and open-minded mentality they all possessed that made them look past the surface of those around them. A mentality born from living among so many different species of Mobian. Appearances just didn't matter that much to them. It was a factor, but to them, not a very important one. Something he was honestly a bit thankful for, as it made living among them that much easier, but in this instance he wasn't finding himself being too appreciative of the mindset and the vague answers it was making Sally say.

"I am from a whole different universe," Sorun eventually reasoned. "I imagine that probably contributes something."

"Maybe," Sally agreed, stopping when they came to a door. "Here we are."

The door was swiftly opened, the two walking right through into the large room on the other side. There wasn't much to say about the vehicle depot; it was little more than a giant garage that was currently stacked with boxes of various supplies. Off in the distance, towards the middle of the garage, Sorun could see a Mobian with a

red shell carrying a large wooden crate twice as tall as he was with a single hand. Sally had whistled to gain his attention, causing Mighty to turn towards them and wave with his free hand.

"Hey guys!" Mighty greeted, still hefting the giant crate over his head even as the other two stopped in front of him. "Everything going well?"

"It's going great, Mighty," Sally said. "Are those the supplies for the camp set up in the school they were asking for?"

"Yep." Mighty turned his head to Sorun. "Uh, hey, you mind-?"

"School again, got it." Two slices later and a portal was made hovering in the air between them. Mighty nodded his thanks to Sorun, and then quickly made his way through the portal with his crate still in hand.

Sorun watched the armadillo disappear through the portal with a sigh, and as he closed it with Yamato he turned towards Sally. "You know, I can do more than just open portals," he said.

"Yes, I'm aware, but it's because you're opening these portals for us that the attack is going about as well as it possibly could." She turned towards Sorun, single hip on hand with a small smile on her face as she looked at him. "You're doing a very important job nobody else can do."

"Yeah, I get that, but I could be-"

"Everybody else is handling it, Sorun." When she saw that he didn't look too satisfied, her smile softened a bit and she stepped closer to him. " *If* , and only if, something comes up, though, I'll turn to you, alright?" she amended, going as far as to place a hand on his shoulder. "Until then it would really help out if you could keep teleporting everybody everywhere so we could finish this as soon as possible."

Sorun made a low sigh. It was hard to argue with her point. His powers were essentially a linchpin in what was shaping to be a winning strategy, and if he was in her shoes he didn't know if he'd want to go and jeopardize that. It didn't change that he still wanted to go and do something besides open portals all day. Not when everybody else was out there fighting.

But, he trusted her judgement more than his own. And she just had to go and hook him with that promise that maybe she'd let him go do something out there. A promise that entailed an opportunity he doubted would present itself, but it was more than nothing. And he really didn't think she'd settle for much more than that.

"Alright, fine," he relented, brushing her hand off of his shoulder. "Was there something else that needed transporting while we're here?"

Sally put on a thinking face for a few seconds, after which her ears straightened up. "Oh, yeah. Knuckles called back a bit ago and said he was done with attacking..."

---

3 hours prior

As it turned out an opportunity did arise, so Sorun supposed some miracles did exist.

It wasn't really something that overly dire. One of the teams being sent out was Bunnie and Antoine, as they were working as a pair. And when they'd called in and said they were having a little bit of trouble taking out a large group of Badniks they'd been sent to take out, they'd, of course, radioed in for assistance. And Sorun, being the only one available at the time, volunteered to go.

Sally had been hesitant, of course. Very hesitant. It'd taken some convincing on Sorun's part and using the logic of it wasn't that dangerous a task for him, but she'd caved eventually and let him go. So Sorun, elated that he finally got to go out there and do something,

had practically jumped through the portal to the couple's location once it had been given to him.

Except when he'd arrived it hadn't exactly been the intense battle he'd been expecting. In fact when he'd arrived to a small street corner, all around him were the destroyed remains of Badniks. Antoine was off to one end stabbing an Egg Pawn to death with his saber. And at the other end Bunnie was standing there, enveloped in a translucent, pink shield emanating from her artificial arm as she was weathering fire from... something. And when Sorun turned to look at that something he couldn't help but groan in irritation.

A new Egg Pawn. A blue one, in fact, with the same blue eyes and wide smile reminiscent of Eggman. In fact the only difference this one seemed to have over all the other Egg Pawns he'd seen was that this one was blue. And that instead of a lance in its right hand there was was looked like a gun firing yellow lasers at a shielded Bunnie.

"Jesus, they have guns now?" Sorun thought to himself as he grasped Yamato. *"Well, whatever. Judgement Cut."*

The robot that was assaulting Bunnie with laser fire was soon engulfed in a bubble of warped space. Uncountable blue, ethereal slashes rent it to bits, after which the bubble disappeared and the remains of the Badnik scattered across the ground. Bunnie had lowered the energy shield to look at the pile of destroyed robot in front of her with astonished eyes, while Antoine had pulled his sword out of the dead robot underneath him to do the same.

"You know... when you guys called for help, I figured there'd actually be something for me to do." They both turned behind them to spy Sorun, who was holding the sheathed Yamato over his shoulders with both hands grasping it. "Then I come here and there's just, like, a single dude. What's up with that?"

"Oh! Bonjour, Sorun!" After sheathing his own sword and letting it hang off his side, Antoine began to approach Sorun while waving

towards him. Bunnie was not far behind. "Er, oui, pardon moi but ze Badneeks were beginning to become a handfilled, so I-"

"Antoine, Sugah, didja seriously call fer backup jus' 'cause ya panicked seein' me pinned down?" Bunnie had outstretched her real arm and grasped Antoine's shoulder to stop him, and then spun him around so they were looking at each other eye-to-eye.

Antoine gave her a sheepish grin. "Bunnie, ma cherie, I did not paneek. We 'ave been fighting here for so long zat I begin to grow weary, zo when I saw you fighting all on your own I... may 'ave called for assistance, oui."

"It was *one* robot. Ah could've-"

"Alright alright alright, settle it somewhere else you two." A portal had already been opened behind Sorun, who was gesturing towards it with his sword.

They looked ready to keep arguing between themselves, stopped when Sorun cleared his throat and pointed to the portal again. They fortunately quieted down, and then walked through the portal alongside Sorun.

"Okay, so it's a good thing you guys are here now. 'Cause I need a small favor," Sorun said upon the three of them exiting the portal into the police station. The teen quickly cut the portal behind him, and then turned to the two Mobians giving him their attention. "I lost track of Virgil a little bit ago. He got bored and wandered off somewhere, I dunno. Could one of you go and look for him, 'cause I got more portals to make."

It wasn't the biggest issue, and if it were any other time he would have used looking around for the Chao as an excuse to not get bored. But Sally was having him pull overtime with these portals, and he only had a few minutes left before he was scheduled to go and make some more. And while he wasn't exactly explicitly worried about Virgil wandering around on his own, well, it still made him a bit

antsy not knowing where he was. In unknown territory. Which was ironic given this was a police station full of friendly officers now that he really thought about it.

"Your, er... Chao, was eet?" Antoine asked, looking the slightest bit nervous. "Are you being sure eet iz safe for moi?"

"... Yeah?" Sorun rose an eyebrow at the coyote. "Why wouldn't it be safe?"

"I see ze way your Chao acts around Sonic," Antoine answered. "He iz not ze most friendliest of Chao."

"No, that's just Sonic, he doesn't like him. He's not gonna attack you, Antoine. Promise." He turned the Mobian around by his shoulders and began to push at his back despite the slight protesting movements he made. "Just don't, you know, grab at him. He only lets me and Nicole do that. Just lead him back to me."

"And if he does not follow moi?"

"Entice him with some nuts or something, I dunno. We're in a police station. There's gotta be a... nut-laced donut or something lying around." He lightly pushed Antoine away and began waving him off. "Thanks man I owe you seriously don't grab him!"

He waved the coyote off as he began walking down the rows of police desks they'd teleported near. Antoine turned back towards Sorun, slightly hesitant look on his face, though he still waved back at Sorun after the Earthling gave him an encouraging nod.

"Are ya 'sho yer little critter ain't gonna hurt Antoine?" Bunnie, who still stood besides Sorun, asked. When he turned to look at her he saw that the rabbit looked slightly concerned. "Ah've seen 'im around, and li'l Virgil can be a might bit... vicious, Sorun."

Sorun shook his head. "Nah, Antoine's actually one of the people Virgil likes. He won't bite."

That made her relax a bit, though she didn't look completely convinced. "An'... what about the way he acts 'round Sonic?"

"Oh, yeah, he tries to cut him all the time. It's really funny." He let out a single chuckle, though it was cut off halfway when he saw the disturbed look Bunnie was giving him. "What? It's not like he could actually hurt him. He's got that weird billion ring durability thing on him. Virgil can't even scratch him."

"And if he didn't have that?"

"Considering I saw Virgil cut through solid titanium earlier? Eh, probably best not to think about it." Sorun placed his free hand inside of his pocket, left still gripping his sword. "But yeah, nah, Antoine'll be fine. Don't worry about him."

It was a bit strange, but Virgil had an internal list of people he preferred. At the top, of course, was Sorun himself and, oddly, Nicole. Sorun was the only person the Chao let pick up and handle, and usually tried to stay near him and would be relaxed around. For some reason he gave Nicole the exact same privileges as he gave Sorun, which was doubly odd as he didn't do that with anybody else, and even odder he sometimes saw the Chao actually smile near Nicole whenever he let them close to one another. He didn't even do that with Sorun.

Below them were Sonic's parents, Antoine, Bunnie, Amy, and Sally. Sonic's parents, Sorun imagined, because they cared for the Chao whenever Sorun was out on a mission and couldn't do it himself. The other four, he wasn't too sure of. All he knew was that Virgil tolerated them enough that he'd freely hang around them when possible and would let them have very liberal amounts of physical contact with him, usually in the form of rubbing and petting. The Chao silently fumed every time though, something he rarely did with Sorun and never did with Nicole.

Shadow was unique in that Virgil seemed to act respectful towards him. It was in the way he would go a bit straighter and keep a wary

eye on the dark hedgehog whenever they were near. Sorun wasn't really sure what the Chao saw in him. Shadow had added his two cents in as "the Chao knowing the pecking order of things and showing respect to those due respect". Maybe he was right. It could have also been the fact that Sorun caught Shadow sneaking the Chao an apple once when he thought no one was looking, which were Virgil's favorite food.

With the exception of Sonic, everybody else Virgil just generally ignored. He'd cast them dismissive looks here and there, sometimes let out breathy scoffs, but otherwise he was well-behaved. Cold, but behaved. He'd sometimes glare at Tails, though, when the fox wasn't looking.

Sonic he outright attacked at every available opportunity, which Sorun found hilarious.

Why the Chao acted this way? Sorun didn't have a clue. Maybe a lot more of himself had imprinted onto the Chao than he first realized, which, if that was the case, did go to explain a bit. Though, truly, Sorun didn't know for certain. And really he didn't care all that much to look too deep into it.

Turning his focus away from the Chao, Sorun turned his eyes back to Bunnie. "So what was up with you two back there, anyways?" he asked her.

"Oh, don't you worry none about it, Sorun," Bunnie said to him as she brushed her hand through her hair and readjusted her hat. "Sugah-Twan means well. A bit too well. He gets worried about me all the time, frettin' ovah every li'l thing. Ah love him tah death, but ah swear he can be downright suffocatin'."

"Ahhh, it's one of those things. Well in that case I got nothing for you."

The rabbit sent him a flat look. "Gee. Thanks."

"What do you want me to say? If *you* can't tell him that his fiancé is a cyborg capable of defending herself, probably more than he could, then I'm not gonna be able to do anything."

She exhaled and rolled her eyes in response to Sorun. After a moment, though, a thoughtful look came to her, but then she shook her head and gave Sorun a skeptical look. "Ya think ah should go an' tell him ah'm more capable of lookin' after me than he is?"

"... No, don't say that. He wouldn't like that," Sorun denied with a shake of his own head. "Bunnie, guys don't like it when you say someone is stronger than them. They especially don't like it when you say someone's better at protecting something they love because that someone is stronger than them, and for you, that'd be a double whammy. Really hurts the ol' pride center."

Bunnie snorted at that and crossed her arms. "Ah already figured me sayin' that to mah Antoine wouldn't do no good. Plus seein' him flounder all ovah me has its cute moments," she said, making Sorun tiredly breath out. "I didn't take ya fer the prideful type, though," she added.

"Mm, I try not to be. Some people just bring the worst of me out, though." Sorun turned from the cyborg and began walking away. "Alright, I gotta go make more portals. Good luck with literally everything going on around us."

"Alright, then. Stay safe," Bunnie called behind him. Sorun lifted up a hand and gave her a two-fingered salute from behind his back, and then kept moving forwards.

"'Prideful type'. Pfft. Everybody is at some level. Some people just let it go easier than others," Sorun thought to himself as he crossed an open doorway. *"I usually like to think I'm in the audience of people that don't really care about stuff like that. But I guess I'd be wrong there, Bunnie. Because some people just go and make that really, really hard for me..."*

2 hours prior

Silently, Sorun willed his Bringer Claws to set down the giant crate of supplies he'd been carrying. A crate that was so big that he was confident he wasn't strong enough to lift it on his own, but that's what he had the Bringer Claws for. And why whenever he had to lift something that looked even remotely heavy, he deferred to them.

Right now things were going a bit slow and they'd needed an extra pair of hands to get things moved around, so Sorun, with little else to do, had volunteered. He wasn't so sure he would have done such a thing if he knew beforehand how mind-numbing the task of moving boxes around was, but he was already in it, so there wasn't much to do there. That lead him to here: moving boxes out of a portal to the basement of one of the buildings the human resistance were using to house civilians amidst all the fighting.

And that would have been the end of it, too, if Sorun hadn't heard a pair of voices begin to be heard coming down the stairs that lead into the room he was in right now. Worse still, Sorun recognized those voices. And so, while silently cursing to himself, Sorun did the most reasonable thing he could think of in order to avoid contact with the owners of the two voices he was hearing right now: he hid behind the crate he'd just set down. And just in time, too, as he heard the voices and their owners make it to the bottom of the stairs and into the basement just as he hid.

"- I'm tellin' ya, Tails, it's going smoothly. I wouldn't be surprised if we made it back home in time for dinner." That was Sonic's voice, who sounded like he was walking besides Tails as they both entered the room. "We're takin' back whole pieces of the city by the *minute* , and with how few of Egghead's bots are runnin' around, it's practically a cinch. You don't have anything to worry about."

"Yeah. I guess," came the voice of the young fox. "I'm just worried it's one of those things where it's too good to be true, you know?"

"Trust me bud, I feel ya, but I really think we just caught a break this time." There was a small creaking sound as Sonic sat on something wooden. "Sally's managing us around, and since there's so many of us the bots can't even keep up. I haven't even broken a sweat since we got here it's been so easy."

"I think a lot of it is because of Sorun," Tails said. "You now, with his portals."

"Oh, yeah, for sure. This thing's going a million times faster 'cause of him." There was a pause. "He's real cool."

"Cool? Me?" Sorun felt himself furrowing his brows in confusion. *"He still thinks that after all this time? How?"*

In a statement that just furthered Sorun's confusion, Tails added, "Yeah, it's really great how much he's been helping out with his portals. I really wish he'd come to me for help when he was trying to figure those out, the concept behind them sounds really interesting."

"If by interesting you mean boring, then yeah, sure. Still can't figure out how he wrapped his head around all that science stuff," he heard Sonic mutter. "But," he continued in a cheery voice, "it's not even just that. It's all the other stuff he does whenever we're fighting robots together, you know? He's got this... style."

"Style?" Tails repeated, in confusion that didn't even come close to matching Sorun's.

"Yeah, style," Sonic confirmed. "He's all quiet and calm and collected, but not in the boring brooding way Shadow does it. His is... it's just cool, you know? The way he's all showy with his sword, and his- oh, oh! And he's got this one really cool move he showed me!" A light laugh left Sonic. "Oh man, Tails, you have to get him to show it to you sometime. It's way past cool. He does this thing were he pulls the sword out and back in really fast, and there's this really weird whooshing sound like *hhhmmvvvshzzz* and the Badnik he's aiming at just gets sliced to pieces out of nowhere! Even gave it a cool

name, too. Calls it Judgement Cut. Ha-hah! It's the best!" A drawn-out, mirth-filled sigh was heard leaving him. "He's just really cool, you know? A lot of what he does reminds me of some kinda comic hero, but he manages to pull it off with that weird style of his.

"But honestly, Tails, I got a ton of respect for the guy. It's all the little things he does, you know? He never talks like he cares all that much, but he acts like he does. It's that and the way he's always improving himself, getting more powers and getting those stronger like with the portals... he's just so cool."

"..." Sorun himself, still eavesdropping on the entire conversation, couldn't even so much as formulate any thoughts on Sonic's words. He was so baffled by how highly the hedgehog was speaking of him, something he never anticipated, that he didn't even know what he was supposed to take away from it. He couldn't even begin to describe the pleasant sensation he was feeling in himself.

"Wow, Sonic." That was Tails' voice, which sounded a bit quieter than usual. "I didn't know you thought so much of him."

"Well, yeah. Of course I do." There was a small sigh from Sonic. "The guy could stand to be a bit more open with everybody and drop the cool guy act so he doesn't act like a weirdo all the time, but yeah."

There was a disagreeing hum from Tails. "He isn't that bad. He helps me out fixing the plane sometimes when he doesn't have anything else to do."

"... He does?" Sonic asked, sounding genuinely surprised. "With what?"

"Well, those arms of his can reach really far and lift heavy things, so it makes handling the plane's parts really easy."

There was something akin to a confused groan from Sonic. "See, this is what I mean. He never acts the same way he talks. He's

always gotta be confusing like that."

A small sound, like something being lifted up, was heard before Tails began speaking again. "Who knows, Sonic? Sorun's always been weird like that. Maybe he does it just to mess with you."

"Hah, yeah, at this point I wouldn't even be surprised." There was a small tap sound as Sonic's feet hit the ground. "Alright," he said, pausing to pick something up from the sound of it, "let's get this stuff upstairs to all those people, alright?"

"Mh-hm!"

Sorun continued to sit motionless against the crate as he listened to the two Mobians depart back up the stairs. He waited until he'd heard their footsteps fade so much that he couldn't hear them anymore, and after that he didn't even bother looking past the crate to ensure that they were gone. He just quickly held his katana up, formed a portal as silently as possible, and tiptoed right through it to the other side, back to the police station. He dismissed the portal in nearly the same breath he'd summoned it in the first place, heaving a deep breath afterwards.

"Honestly... I really don't understand that guy."

---

1 hour prior

"You swapped out bees for a scorpion? Well, that ain't gonna help you here."

Sorun never imagined that the final charge during the liberation of a whole city wasn't something that happened mere *hours* after the initial attack. But, that said, the decommissioning of the Badnik presence in Station Square had been going no less than stellar due to Sally's leading, Sorun's portals, and the efforts of everybody else involved. It certainly helped that they had Sonic, Knuckles, and

Mighty there, who had all pretty much torn through whatever target they'd been pointed at, as well as everybody else backing them up.

All in all? It'd been a very short, decisive battle so far that was going so well Sorun hardly believed it. And so, with little surprise, the time for the final push had come where *everyone* had gone out to attack specific targets to finally free the city. That even included Sorun, who Sally had let off the metaphorical leash to go and attack something due to his portals no longer being needed in this final phase. She'd even been nice enough to save him a satisfying target. A telecommunications tower near the center of the city that had been used to keep in contact with Eggman over in New Megaopolis. Sorun had been more than happy to go. He'd been less happy that Virgil kept bugging him to take him with, but in the end he'd relented and brought the Chao along.

Well, as it happened, Sorun's least favorite lackey in all of existence just happened to be there. Whether he was there to oversee the city and it was sheer coincidence he was present during their attack or he was there *because* of the attack was unclear to Sorun, and he hadn't cared enough to ponder on it. He really only cared about destroying the small tower located in the center of a city plaza, the surrounding Egg Pawns, and then beat Snively into unconsciousness. Because he really didn't like that guy.

Right now he'd Tricked onto the top of a nearby rundown bus, with Virgil hovering just over his left side. On the other side was what was once a telecommunications tower that had been about twenty meters in height and functioning before a Judgement Cut had torn it asunder. The same was said for the surrounding Badniks that had been protecting it.

And then there was the thing in front of him that Snively was riding around in. Another mech. A mech that was styled after a giant black scorpion, with Snively riding in a open cockpit inside the mech's head. Sorun recalled having burst out in short laughter when he saw it due to the sheer ridiculousness of how it looked, though he'd quickly regained his composure for the task at hand. Even then,

though, he couldn't resist mocking the short Overlander piloting the thing.

"I think you'll find this Egg Scorpion is more than sufficient for the likes of *you* ." A button somewhere on the console in front of Snively was pressed. The tail of the scorpion mech, the end of which was the barrel of some sort of weapon with a large blade bolted at the bottom of it, began to glow an intense yellow as light particles began to gather around its opening. Sorun, eyes half-lidded in boredom, yawned and reached to the side to lightly shove Virgil away, nodding his head over at the mech's left side. The Chao nodded to him, and then began to fly away as Sorun continued standing in place while staring right at the charging tail.

Right when the end of the tail brightened up, Sorun Tricked away somewhere. Not even a moment later a blinding yellow beam of energy streamed out of the end of the tail. The laser passed by where Sorun had been standing, melting the top of the bus under it, and then slammed into a nearby building that had just happened to be behind Sorun. A large, gaping hole was created in the building as a result of contact from the laser, and Sorun, who had Tricked a few meters away to watch the display, shook his head in disappointment at Snively.

"Look at that. You blew up some poor guy's building. I'm actually gonna feel really bad if someone lived there." Sorun clicked his tongue in disappointment. "Anyways, Snively, it's slappin' time." He twirled Yamato in his hand and rested it on his right shoulder. "Every word you say, I'm gonna slap you. So you either run now or, well, eh..."

"So you're to thrash me, is that it?" Snively asked, drumming his fingers along the mech's control console. A mocking grin spread along his face. "The same way Dr. Robotnik thrashed you around, perhaps?"

Sorun bristled at that, taking in a sharp inhale as he thrust Yamato out to his side with enough force that the sheath came flying off and

clattered off the ground far away from him. "Oh baby. That's seventeen slaps."

He Tricked away again, causing Snively's eyes to go wide as he searched around the area looking for him. A short whistle drew his attention behind him, where he saw Sorun standing right on the back of the Egg Scorpion just behind the cockpit Snively sat in. Sorun was looking down at the scientist, mouth set in a neutral frown and eyes baleful as he glared at him.

"Hey, Snively, since I got ya already, mind answering something for me?" Sorun requested. "Do all Overlanders look weird like you, or are you just a special case of bein' this ugly li'l gremlin dude? 'Cause I'm doing a bit of a case study here, and seeing the humans in Station Square is raising some serious questions for me-"

"Perish, fool!"

"Nineteen!" Hearing the scorpion tail behind him shift, Sorun tilted his head straight upwards. He saw the laser tail with its bladed end hovering right over him, and right when it made the move to thrust downwards, Sorun Tricked. As a result, the bladed tail pierced right into the back of the mech.

Sorun had reappeared on the right side of the scorpion, right next to its large, clamp-like claw. From the other side he saw Virgil floating next to the other claw, and then gave the Chao a nod. While Snively feverishly tapped at the mech's controls to try and dislodge the tail stuck into its own back, Virgil began spinning while Sorun gripped both hands around Yamato's handle and prepared a swing. Virgil then flew forwards, his spinning form and bladed arms cutting right through the thin joint that connected the clamp-like claw to the rest of the mech's body. At the same time Sorun had made a single downward slash that separated the claw on his side from the mech. Both claws were heard simultaneously hitting the ground, at which point Sorun slashed outwards to cut away the eight mechanical legs on his side.

The damage done, the Egg Scorpion listed off to the side with the loss of half of its legs. Sorun then Tricked up into the air, his body held aloft by his newly-formed Bringer Claws as he made a third slash, this one severing the scorpion's tail in half in a shower of sparks.

"You ready to get slapped!?" The second the final word left Sorun he Tricked right in front of the cockpit on the scorpion's head, his right Bringer Claw reaching out and clamping around Snively's head before he could make a move to go anywhere. The long-nosed Overlander looked up at Sorun with fearful eyes, his entire body shaking and teeth chattering from fright, while Sorun just continued to calmly stare with an almost contemplative look. "Ah, you know what? We'll just call it at twenty. Nice even, round number."

When he stopped speaking, the Bringer Claw holding Snively's head slammed him face-first into the mech's control console hard enough that sparking sounds were heard. The spectral claw holding him in place, Sorun rose his right leg up and stomped down on the back of head twice, eliciting a muffled cry of pain each time. The blue hand lifted Snively face's back up, where Sorun's left Bringer Claw punched him in the stomach five times, and then in the face five times. After that, Sorun willed the hand to lift Snively up to his level just so that he could slap Snively across the face with his real hand five times. The claw then slammed Snively's face back down into console, where Sorun proceeded to stare down at him, let out a calming breath, and then quickly stomp the back of his head one more time.

Finished with his assault Sorun finally dispelled his Bringer Claws and watched as Snively's body went limp face-down against the console. Sorun blinked at the sight, and then crouched down in front of him. The catharsis he felt from the beatdown was quickly beginning to wear off.

"Uh, Snively? Snively...?" Humming, Sorun grabbed Snively by the individual hairs vertically aligning his scalp and lifted his head up. "I didn't accidentally kill ya, did I?"

The state of Snively's face when Sorun finally saw it wasn't a pretty sight, though it was one that made Sorun somewhat happy to see. Both of his eyes were blackened and swelled halfway shut, there were multiple bleeding welts along his face, and his bleeding nose was bent at a crooked angle. He did see him breathing, though, and he even heard a low pained moan leave the small man's mouth. Satisfied, Sorun released his grip on the hairs and let his body flop back on the console.

"If Eggman didn't have a whole fleet pointed at Knothole, I swear... Although..." Sorun's thoughts mused as the teen looked up in thought. *"I wonder if I could teleport to the police station real quick and steal a gun from the armory. Freedom Fighters don't use guns, and I sure don't. Eggman would just assume one of the humans here did it if he found his nephew riddled with bullet holes and not sword holes, right? Knothole'd be in the clear."*

It was an idea that the teen was seriously considering going through with, and even more found himself wanting to go through with it. Unfortunately, during his silent contemplation Snively, beaten, battered, and apparently still conscious, slowly extended a quavering finger and hit one of the buttons on the control console.

Sorun's thoughts were cut off when the head below him began to shudder. He looked down at Snively, eyes widening when he saw his finger compressing a button and then widening further when he saw the head of the scorpion mech begin to detach from the main body. He Tricked a short distance away on the ground, and watched as panels built into the head of the scorpion began to open up. Jets of fire burst out of the opened panels, propelling the head upwards and lifting it up into the sky. The jets built into the head increased in intensity, and all Sorun could do was watch with a blank expression as the robot head carrying Snively lifted off into the sky far enough that it disappeared from sight.

"... Well, that's tough." Sorun sighed, and then looked back down. He saw that Virgil had floated right next to him, and absentmindedly began to stroke him between his silver crest with one finger as he

brought his other hand up to his mouth. "Hey, I'm all done over here," Sorun spoke into the device strapped onto the hand's wrist, his eyes looking towards the destroyed communication tower.

"Sorun?" Sally's voice sounded out from the wrist communicator's speakers. *"You're done dismantling the telecommunication tower already? How did things go?"*

"..." A loud rumbling sound interrupted Sorun from answering Sally. He turned towards the sound, and then blinked when he saw the building shot by Snively's laser from earlier collapse in on itself entirely. Both Sorun and Virgil glanced at each other, followed by Sorun raising his wrist back to his mouth and saying, "Yeah, it went pretty okay."

---

10 minutes prior

And just like that, they saved the city.

It was amazing how fast the general mood changed once the last Badnik had been dismantled and the city officially declared free. The streets had practically flooded with more humans who had been hunkering down and waiting for all the fighting to die down. Spirits were high as practically everybody was out celebrating.

For Sorun, it was a strange feeling. He'd honestly expected it to be much harder than this, but no, they'd done it. He knew that some of the other Freedom Fighters felt the same way as him, but in the end he decided that after everything else that had happened, maybe it was best not to look a gift horse in the mouth. So he decided to just be happy for the people they'd just helped liberate.

Though, he had a hard time with that. Not because he wasn't happy he'd helped free a city from Eggman's tyranny, that was always great, but he couldn't help but feel that large disconnect from all the happy people around him. He felt about the same seeing them all rejoice in their newfound freedom as he felt whenever they saved

some random Mobian village from a robot attack. He couldn't help but think that, if they were his people, Earthlings, he would have been overjoyed along with them. But, try as he might, and admittedly he didn't try all that hard, he didn't. Still glad for them, but that was about it.

So he tried not to interact with anybody as he made his way back to the FF Special. He failed in this endeavor when he was ambushed by, of all things, a news crew. A lady with a microphone and some guy holding a camera in Sorun's face. Not even an hour into a free city and the news was already up. From what little he gleaned some of the officers back at the station had pointed him out, and he'd been subsequently hunted down for a statement.

"You seriously don't have anything better to do with your time?" Sorun grumbled, tone irate as he tried to dodge the lady attempting to shove a microphone in his face. *"I'm gonna break that damn thing if she gets any closer with it."*

"We're just collecting statements from all the Freedom Fighters that helped free the city from Dr. Robotnik," the newswoman explained to him, which made Sorun slightly relax. "We've already collected statements from most of the other Freedom Fighters, so we were just hoping to get yours as well."

Sorun scoffed. "I guarantee you'll get something way more inspirational out of whatever Sonic or Sally said to you. I got nothin' else to add."

"Just a single statement," she insisted, the woman who was uncomfortably taller than Sorun shoving the microphone close enough to his mouth to make his eyes narrow. "And... perhaps you'd be willing to answer a few questions about how you came about working with-?"

"Nope." Sorun pushed the microphone away and shook his head. "One statement and I dip out, a'ight?"

She frowned, but then nodded towards him while still pointing the microphone at him. Sorun glanced towards the camera afterwards, staring into the black lens and sighing when he realized he didn't have anything on hand to actually say. He wracked his brain for anything he could use, and then straightened up a bit when an idea came to him.

Clearing his throat, Sorun turned so that he was fully facing the camera. He inhaled a breath, exhaled it and shook his head when he realized what he was about to say, and then stared right into the lens as he began tugging at his blue coat. "Buy Honey. Located in Knothole."

No doubt his statement caused confusion between the cameraman and newswoman, but he didn't stick around to see what looks their faces made. He'd quickly formed Yamato and made a portal behind him, hopped through, and then closed it behind him all in the same breath. He heard himself sigh in relief when the familiar interior of the FF Special met his eyes, and without another thought he began walking to the front of the ship.

"I can't believe I just did that. Honey owes me so much for shilling out for her," Sorun thought to himself as he made it to the ship's cockpit. He opened the door leading to it, and felt his eyes widen a bit in surprise when he saw a large, purple form sitting in one of the chairs. "Rotor? What're you doing here?"

The walrus, who for the most part seemed to have been fiddling with some of the control, stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Oh, hey Sorun," he greeted before turning back to the controls. "Nothing much. City's free and I didn't really feel like hanging around, so I decided to come back to run some last-minute checks and diagnostics on the ship before we head back. Tails radioed ahead and said he was coming by in a bit." He didn't look up even as Sorun stepped besides him, the teen's eyes affixed to the windshield. "Why are you here?"

The teen reached up to scratch the side of his neck. "Ah, you know, from what I heard the president himself wanted to speak to the Freedom Fighters personally and congratulate them on their service to the city and all that, but I didn't really wanna go."

"Mm, why not?"

"You know, as much as I've always wanted to get a medal from a president, I didn't want a medal from a president," Sorun answered. "Plus I'm not really one to bask in the limelight. That's more Sonic's thing. Or Sally's, I guess, since she's pretty much the public face for us."

"True."

"Also I, uh, I, I don't, I-I don't really handle crowds that well," Sorun sheepishly said after a few moments.

Rotor sagely nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I can understand that. Not everybody can handle public relations like Sally can," he said. "Kinda like Amy. I remember the day she had her ceremony when she officially became a Freedom Fighter. She looked really excited and happy, but you could tell from her eyes she was really nervous to be standing up there in front of all those people."

"Well, I guess that- wait what there's a ceremony? Amy got a ceremony? What the heck I only ever got a handshake from Sally what is this why am I only hearing about this now?"

"Oh, yeah, it was because she was getting a medal for services provided by her to the kingdom. Amy got it through her own merit because of a lot of good work she did. Well, her and her hammer," Rotor added in with a small chuckle. "But yeah, Sally used the ceremony as an opportunity to ask her to officially join us, and she said yes. Not really surprising seeing as she always wanted to be a Freedom Fighter."

"There's a medal, what...?"

"Yeah, the Acorn Medal of Valor."

"I didn't even know that was a thing. Feels like I shoulda gotten like ten of those by now."

Rotor chuckled when he heard that. "Well, things were pretty hectic back then when you first met us. Never had the time. Maybe sometime down the line Sally'll give you that ceremony. You've more than earned it."

"Damn right." Forget the president and whatever medal he probably wasn't even offering them, he wanted *that* medal. And a ceremony if that was really a thing. A ceremony sounded nice. And it'd be another thing to look back on before he died.

Sighing, Sorun leaned over the dashboard of the ship as he continued to stare out the front window. Rotor continued messing with the ship's controls, Sorun periodically flicking his eyes over to the walrus. After around a minute of this, he turned his head over to Rotor again.

"You ever hear back from Shadow?" he asked. "He and Rouge are still helping G.U.N. out, right?"

Rotor shook his head. "No, haven't heard a thing."

Sorun hummed. "You think they're alright?"

"Shadow? Alright? Don't see why not," Rotor said. "They're better equipped over there to handle Badniks than Station Square here is. And Shadow and Rouge can take care of themselves. They're fine."

"I guess." Sorun's hands began to tap against the dashboard. "Out of curiosity where is G.U.N. HQ located again?"

Rotor stopped tapping against the control panel. His eyes glanced towards Sorun who was looking at him, and the walrus narrowed his eyes a bit at him in question. "Why are you asking?"

"Just curious," Sorun repeated with a shrug. "I know Tails went and flew them out there, and that all the Overlander UF stuff is across the ocean in Europ- Eurish, I mean. Just wanted to know where."

"... Okay..." Eyes still locked onto Sorun, Rotor reached down and tapped a few buttons. A small black screen with a green grid-like pattern on it, sitting in the dashboard between the two, lit up. Sorun leaned in closer as a green rendering of the world map came into view, and then zoomed in on the eastern portion of the world, around what was once Europe and now Eurish. The map settled on large piece of land just barely disconnected from the rest of Eurish, where Rotor proceeded to tap at the screen with one of his claws. "G.U.N. HQ is located on a mountain called Guardian Mountain. It's near Spagonia and right next to Central City, which are both Overlander cities."

"Ah, that's where it is." Sorun nodded and then extended his left hand. "Thanks, Rotor. I'm gonna head over there," he said as Yamato manifested in his grasp.

"What? You're doing what!?" When the pale teen walked away from the console towards the center of the cockpit, Rotor spun around in his seat to continue addressing Sorun. He seemed rather distressed by Sorun's claim. "Sorun, come on, you just now got done taking back a whole city from Eggman!"

"I've spent the last five-ish hours opening portals. I'm fine."

"Sorun-!"

"Look, Rotor, it'll be fine." Stepping back towards Rotor, Sorun fumbled with his wrist communicator, removed it from his wrist, and held it out for the walrus to take. "This thing doesn't really suit me, so here. Early birthday present."

The purple Mobian stared down at the device sitting in the middle of his palm, a flat look on his face. "Wow, a gift that I made for you. You're the most thoughtful person I've ever met," he droned out as

he looked back up at Sorun. "You're just giving me this so Sally can't call you and order you to come back."

"Ehhhh you can't prove that." A vertical slash was made in the air with Sorun's katana. "I'm just going over to check and make sure everything's alright." A horizontal slash. "If I'm quick enough she won't even know I'm gone. It'll be out little secret."

"No, if she asks I'm telling her you went over to G.U.N. HQ."

The portal opened up. "... That's fair," Sorun conceded. "Welp, I'm off. Seeya," Sorun said as he began stepping towards the portal.

Rotor stared after him, looked down at the wrist communicator again, and with an irritated expression called out, "This isn't the kind of attitude that wins medals, you know!"

"'This isn't the kind of attitude that wins medals, you know'." Sorun mockingly repeated under his breath as he entered the portal. "Pfft, right, don't see you with a medal, pal."

It wasn't like he was worried about Shadow or anything; he knew he was capable of looking after himself. But Sorun needed an excuse to leave Station Square, or at least get away from it for a while. He didn't want to deal with the people there. They reminded him too much of home and yet at the same time reminded him that they weren't his people.

But there was another reason he wanted to go to G.U.N. HQ. Overlanders were there.

Functionally Sorun knew the line separating humans and Overlanders was a thin one. The humans in Station Square only existed because they'd lived in that city in what used to be a mountain for thousands of years, hadn't even been touched by the Xorda and their gene bombs. The Overlanders, the humans that had survived past the Xorda, the ones who had been exposed to those gene bombs... Sorun needed to know. What they looked like, how

close to Earthlings they were. Humans in Station Square were close, but they weren't quite there. They just didn't look right. Too different. Too minutely different on such a maddeningly small scale it practically didn't make a difference. But it did to Sorun. It mattered to him.

The Overlanders, though... he needed to see for himself. He wanted to see Overlanders with his own eyes while the faces of all those humans in Station Square were fresh in his mind. So he'd go and help out Shadow with G.U.N. HQ under false pretenses of wanting to help just so he could go and look at some Overlanders.

Unfortunately, traveling such vast distances with portals was new for Sorun. He'd never travelled halfway across the world before, let alone up a mountain. As such, when he walked through and closed the portal behind him, he realized there was no ground beneath his feet.

"Sh-!"

Present

And that was that.

Looking at all the powers at his disposal, he wasn't too worried about the fact he'd accidentally teleported so high into the air and was falling down. It was something for him to keep in mind the next time he made a portal to somewhere so far away, though. The difference in elevation. Making a portal somewhere he'd never been to and only knew the location of was always a tricky affair for him. Seeing it on a map helped, and coordinates sometimes helped even more. Having been there in person in the past made it a trivial affair. But when he had to ballpark it on little more than an image on a map, it wasn't always so exact. Hence why he was falling through the air right now.

Ah, well. Something new for him to learn, and he'd be fine in the end. He was more concerned with what was going on down below.

Rotor had been right when he said G.U.N. HQ was in a mountain. All around him were tall, snowcapped mountains stretching out for as far as the eye could see, and right below him was a curious sight. A long, metal runway extending out the side of a mountain, like some kind of landing pad for aerial vehicles. A giant, metal door was installed into the mountain where the runway connected with said mountain, but otherwise, he didn't see any type of vehicle on that metal platform. What he did see was a barrier of sandbags placed halfway through, with a line of human-shaped soldiers in gray uniforms lined up against the sandbags with their backs to the door in the mountain. They were firing the automatic rifles they had in their hands at an Egg Hammer that was slowly lumbering towards them, giant hammer in hand and ready to smash down on all of them.

Interestingly, there *was* damage being dealt to the thing. Not enough damage to stop it, but even from here Sorun could see its metal chassis was pockmarked in damage from the G.U.N. soldiers' guns. It made a small hum leave his lips.

"They must be using really high caliber rounds if those guns can hurt Badniks. And that's an Egg Hammer, too. Hmm..." He readied his sword in his right grip. *"Guess I'll help 'em out."*

With a single Trick, Sorun teleported right above the Egg Hammer with his sword held above him. He dropped straight down the Badnik, his sword tracing a line through the center of its entire body. He landed in a semi-crouch, fanning his sword out to the side as the two halves of the massive Badnik fell away from each other and landed on either side of Sorun. He then breathed out, standing back up to his full height while twirling the sword around once.

"Okay, play it cool." Taking a deep breath, Sorun fully turned around to the line of soldiers that were standing behind the wall of sandbags. For the most part, they looked extremely confused. So confused that some of them had aimed their guns downwards, as if unsure what to do, while others were sending each other questioning looks. "Yo...~!" Sorun called out, waving the hand holding his

scabbard at them. "I'm Sorun! You guys seen Shadow around? Or Rouge?"

Multiple loud, clanking sounds behind him interrupted Sorun. He clicked his tongue in irritation and turned around, letting out a small sigh when he saw Badniks begin to appear behind him. From green Egg Flappers flying in from somewhere to Egg Pawns of red, gold, and even blue colors climbing up from the side of the platform and unveiling their various weapons. And all of them were looking right at him.

Sorun let out a small sigh, and he was ready to Trick forwards to begin cutting all those robots down. He was stopped in his tracks when something zoomed in from the corner of his vision. A black and red blurry sphere that shot forwards and cut through the Badnik that was nearest to Sorun. The robot exploded in a shower of parts, sparks, and oil, and the figure that had been the one to destroy it backflipped backwards and landed feet-first while facing Sorun. The teen wasn't that surprised to see that scowl on Shadow's face directed right at him.

"Just what do you think you're doing here?" Shadow asked him.

"Ah, you know." Sorun Tricked away, and then reappeared behind Shadow with his sword going through a red Egg Pawn that had tried to sneak up on him. "Had some free time, figured you could use some help. So here I am."

After he finished speaking, Sorun formed a wall of crossed Summoned Swords to defend himself from the laser fire of one of the blue Egg Pawns. It was promptly destroyed when Shadow threw a Chaos Spear at it.

"I was lead to believe you and the Freedom Fighters were busy with Station Square," Shadow stated.

Sorun shrugged as his Summoned Swords turned midair and fired out, piercing and destroying multiple Badniks. "Would you believe

me if I said we solved that problem way sooner than we thought? As it happens, portals cut down the time it takes to liberate a whole city really short. We just now finished up."

"Hmph." Shadow dodged to the side of a lance that attempted to skewer him, and then jumped up and kicked the offending Egg Pawn in the face. Its facial plate crumpled completely under the force of Shadow's kick, and it was sent flying back into a group of robots behind it. "I'm...perfectly capable... of handling this... on my own!" Shadow said in-between Spin Dashing through more robots.

"Oh, come on!" Two Bringer Claws reached upwards, grabbed two Egg Flappers, and slammed them together hard enough that both their forms flattened completely. "You're gonna say no to me helping out? I already came all the way out here and everything!"

He Tricked again, appearing between a red and golden Egg Pawn. He immediately slashed through the golden one, though before he could turn to the red one Shadow had slammed feet-first into it, kicking it away as he landed on the ground behind Sorun.

"Did the princess even sanction you coming here?" Shadow asked as he tossed another Chaos Spear at a robot. "I sincerely doubt she'd let you hop right into another combat scenario after the work you all did in Station Square."

Sorun moved his head out of the way to avoid being stabbed by a lance, and then cut the offending robot down. "Eh, she doesn't exactly know I'm here."

"You went on your own?" Shadow huffed and flip-kicked a Badnik away. "That's not the kind of work ethic you should adopt if you're going to be working here."

"You say it like I agreed to that," Sorun grunted as he cut through another robot. "You don't honestly think I'm still considering that offer?"

"I'm biding my time for you to come to your senses." After spinning through another blue Egg Pawn, Shadow crossed his arms while looking towards Sorun, who turned to face him right after using a spectral claw to slam another Egg Pawn to death on the ground. "Rouge and I, as well as the G.U.N. soldiers here, have already repelled the Badnik occupation here," Shadow informed him. "We're merely cleaning up the stragglers before resuming operations. If you're truly so insistent on helping, I suppose I can let you handle a few robots."

"How generous of you," Sorun drawled out. He twirled the scabbard he held in his left hand around as he began walking towards a nearby group of Egg Pawns, who themselves began to back up away from Sorun as he flicked his sword out. "But sure. I got time to kill."

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30 minutes later

Shadow had been truthful when he said a majority of the Badnik forces had already been decimated by G.U.N. personnel by the time Sorun had gotten there. He'd arrived to little more than a cleanup operation, at a point where his assistance was completely unnecessary. It was fine enough for Sorun. The only reason he'd even come here was just to see Overlanders.

He'd stuck around with Shadow for the most part while they'd helped dispatch the remaining robots around the base. And it truly was *around* the base, as he'd never been lead inside the actual place. The closest he got was a giant multi-level hangar bay full of all sorts of jet and helicopters and other vehicles and formerly a bunch of killer robots before he and Shadow got to them. The entrance to that had been from the giant metal door he'd seen in the side of the mountain, and Shadow had insisted he stick close by to him as they went around destroying robots. So Sorun hadn't had the honor of seeing the base in its entirety.

That was then. Now Sorun was still walking throughout the hangar, long after they'd finally killed the last robot. Not feeling a sense of urgency, unlike everybody else around Sorun, he'd chosen to just meander around the place. Looking around at all the vehicles and the people. The G.U.N. soldiers and engineers running around doing their own tasks were ignoring him for the most part. Just them acting professional, Sorun supposed, though he did get a couple of looks here and there from some of them. Then again, maybe a short human like Sorun walking around the place wasn't the strangest sight these people saw, because for some reason there was an actual child here.

He saw her while he was looking around the place. A small Overlander girl who had to be a child due to the fact she was shorter than Sorun was. A blonde girl who, much to his bewilderment, was handling welding tools and working on a helicopter with other adult engineers nearby. Compared to that what was a pint-sized human like him in a blue coat carrying a katana around?

"... Okay, that's just weird," Sorun had thought to himself as he walked past the girl fixing a helicopter. *"Why do they got a girl- holy shit they have ED-209s..."*

Yep, there they were. Straight out of 'Robocop'. They didn't look exactly like the droids from the movie, it looked like the main body had a pilot seat for an Overlander to operate it, but it was still a seat attached to a pair of robot legs with guns for arms. All lined up in rows on the side of the hangar bay next to a bunch of helicopters. It was enough to make a small laugh leave Sorun when he saw them. But then he looked around at some of the Overlanders he saw and he felt that laugh die right out of his mouth.

Overlanders. The whole reason he'd come here in the first place. He saw them and at first he'd seen them as indistinguishable from humans. But then he'd gotten a closer look at some of them to better discern their facial features.

At first, he found himself to be a bit delighted. Their faces were more like his. Natural, smooth proportions. They didn't have that "off" feeling he felt whenever he looked at a Station Square human. He had been happy, but then he looked closer, and he realized that... something *was* off with them. A different kind of "off" he'd felt from the others. Their features, some of them were *too* smooth. *Too* angled. Like their faces were sculpted and not natural. And their hair and eye colors... they were all so wild. He saw normal browns and blacks here and there, but then he'd be surprised to find blues, greens, reds, and purples in both eyes and hair in some of them.

"They look like 'Final Fantasy' characters. Like they just walked right out of a friggin' anime..." Sorun realized. It was in those unrealistic proportions in their facial features. It wasn't present on everybody, some were normal like him, but it was there on most people. That wasn't even addressing the wide range of colors he was seeing. *"And what the hell- some of them only have four fingers. Gah, they... what the hell..."*

He'd felt his heart sink when he noticed these miniscule details. Part of him wondered if he would have been better off if they *were* all short, diminutive people like Snively was. At least then he would have been able to tell at a second's glance that Overlanders were nowhere close to being like Earthlings and he could just call it there. But no, they'd had to bait him first. He'd had to get all excited seeing that they were normal, only for him to look closer and realize, no, they weren't normal.

"Guess it kind of figures. Don't even know what I was expecting anyways." While walking he saw Shadow over near the end of the hangar talking to some Overlander in a gray uniform. He saw the half-Mobian glance towards his way and immediately begin to approach him, causing Sorun to internally cringe and turn away. *"I think I just want to go back to Knothole-"*

"Sorun, wait a second." He'd just started to twitch his right hand to Yamato's handle when he heard Shadow's voice call out to him. He bit back the curse that was beginning to form on his lips and turned

around just as Shadow stopped behind him. "Your assistance here was unexpected, however we wanted to let you know your help was appreciated."

The "we" part caught Sorun off guard. "Is that G.U.N. talking or you talking?" Soru asked.

"Both," he instantly answered. "Additionally, there was somebody that wanted to talk to you."

"Huh?" Sorun sent the hedgehog a questioning glance, and then looked up. He saw that the Overlander Shadow was talking to earlier was approaching them. A very important Overlander if all those colorful stripes on his uniform said anyth- oh he knew where this was heading. "Ah no- listen, I actually just want to go back to Knothole," he told Shadow as he began backing up, "so thanks and all, but-"

"He just wanted a moment of your time," Shadow insisted.

"Well, I don't want to talk to him." Sorun attempted to leave, but he found himself stopped when something held firm on his right sleeve. He turned his head around, and then quietly exclaimed when he saw Shadow holding onto his coat sleeve. "You're being serious right now?"

The scowl on Shadow's face said enough. "He's the Commander of G.U.N."

"Good for him, let me go." Sorun tried tugging his sleeve away, but Shadow stubbornly held onto him.

"Sorun, I truly think you should-"

"You are pushing really hard for something that's not gonna happen!" Sorun hissed out, taking a step towards Shadow while pointing at him with the hand holding Yamato. "I told you I'm not comin' here."

Shadow finally let go of Sorun's sleeve, though he did it just to cross his arms. "I'm not attempting to force you into anything. And he was the one that wished to speak with you."

"Why? Because he wants to thank me for coming here to help with the robots?"

"Partly." Shadow glanced to the side at the Overlander as he grew closer to the pair, and then looked back to Sorun. "I... told him about you beforehand when I came back here."

Sorun's mouth dropped open a bit. "You did what? Egh, *Shadow* ..." he groaned out in irritation, running his free hand through his hair. "Why'd you go and tell the G.U.N. overlords about me?"

"Sorun, I had to," he said. "It's my obligation as a G.U.N. agent. Your powers make you a person of interest, so they wanted a profile of you. They have files on all the Freedom Fighters and the Chaotix."

A strangled sound left Sorun as he gestured towards Shadow. "Every single thing you've told me is a red flag."

Sighing, Shadow ran a hand over his face. "They're precautionary measures, Sorun. They even have files on me. They have files on everyone. It's to ensure the safety of the planet in a worst-case scenario, nothing more." He sent Sorun a sharp glare. "And do not go spouting off nonsense like calling them overlords in front of the Commander."

It was a rational and practical explanation, one that any other day Sorun probably would have accepted, but right now he wasn't in a mood to do so. "Ugh, for the..." His arms went limp to his side when he saw the Overlander was nearly at their position. "Fine, he's already here so I'll say hey." Shadow opened his mouth to speak, though Sorun held a hand up to silence him. "And *only* say hey. I'm not interested in anything outside that."

If Shadow had any complaints, they died in his throat when the Overlander came to a stop right in front of them. Sorun himself had to bite back a sigh at the taller, older male in front of him, and found his grip on Yamato tightening a bit as he looked up at the man's face.

Out of all the Overlanders he'd seen thus far, this man was about the most "normal", Earthling-looking one Sorun had seen. Aged face, strong, broad jaw, light features and white hair. Sorun himself probably would have mistaken him for an Earthling if it weren't for the fact he had a green eye and a brown eye. Heterochromia wasn't exactly unheard of where he was from, but in these circumstances, among Overlanders and what he'd seen, something like that was practically normal.

He had an air about him, too. An authoritative air that, given if what Shadow was said was true and he was the Commander of G.U.N., was to be expected. It went along with the stern look he had on his features. Even the way he was standing: posture completely straight, hands rigid and at his sides, feet straight. Mismatched eyes focused right on Sorun. Sorun wasn't too sure if he liked that piercing gaze of his.

"I assume you must be the one Agent Shadow told me about." A strong and no-nonsense type of voice. The kind of voice Sorun would expect out of somebody like this. The kind of voice that made him a bit uncomfortable, along with the height difference. "He's told me much."

"Yeah, maybe too much." Sorun's eyes flicked towards Shadow, who was standing silently off to the side while observing the two. Making no reaction, Sorun looked back up at the Overlander. "Only good things, right?"

His face didn't so much as twitch at the joke. "I am Commander Abraham Tower, the commander of G.U.N. as Shadow has likely informed you."

"Hey, I'm Sorun."

That made his face twitch, just a bit. That little bit of flippant attitude from Sorun. Shadow had twitched, too, and shot Sorun an unapproving look. Sorun didn't find himself caring, and continued speaking to Commander Tower.

"So. G.U.N." Slipping his free hand into his pocket, Sorun took a quick glance around the hangar. "You guys seem well off. Fight against Eggman going well on your end?"

"It's never 'well' against him," The Overlander crisply stated. "It's fighting to make sure he never rolls over on Overlander territory. An uphill fight at that."

"Mm." Eyes still looking to the side, Sorun looked towards a piece of a cut-apart Badnik lying on the ground. *"I wanted to call him out on G.U.N. never helping out the Mobians with Eggman, but I guess I can't really say anything without knowing the situation on this side of the world. For all I know they've been having to deal with his shit for over a decade, too. The state of things here and what he says leans towards that."* He sighed. *"Tch. Yeah, that worked out real well for them."*

Opinions aside, Sorun didn't feel it was his place to judge a military organization he had little information on. If anything he should have been leaning towards a positive side with the benefit of the doubt and the fact that Shadow was working with them and vouched for their credibility. From all appearances they seemed on the up-and-up.

But he couldn't find it in himself to care all that much. His mind was still too focused on Overlanders, and at the end of the day, G.U.N. had nothing to do with him other than his own association with Shadow and Rouge. He just wanted to get this over with and leave.

"Why are we talking?" Sorun asked the taller male, wanting to get right to the point.

"I'm made aware you played a part in clearing out Dr. Robotnik's machines from our headquarters," Tower said. "I wished to extend G.U.N.'s thanks for your assistance, and-"

"Appreciated, bye." His patience having run out, Sorun nodded to the Commander and turned around. He only made it a few steps before an irritated Shadow called his name out.

"Sorun-"

"I said I'd stick around to say hey. We said hey," Sorun said, stopping to glare towards Shadow. "That's it, we're done. I didn't come here to hear anything else."

"Then why did you come here?" This question came from Tower, who was still sternly looking towards the teen. And yet underneath that steely gaze there was a hint of curiosity Sorun chose to ignore.

Quietly exhaling from his nose, Sorun picked his eyes up to the Overlander's. "Came here looking for something, found it, didn't like it." He turned his head back forwards and away from them. "And now I'm leaving. So I repeat: bye."

He Tricked away before another word could be said.

Something possessed him to go back to the metal landing platform jutting out of the mountain he'd originally landed on. Maybe because he wanted some time to himself to think. Or that he was stalling for as long as he could before he went back to Knothole and Sally yelled at him. Possibly a combination of these two things.

And that took him here. At the edge of the metal platform, looking down the mountain range. All the way down towards ground level, far off the distance, he saw it. An Overlander city, Central City Rotor had said. It was hard to make out at this distance, but it reminded him a lot of Station Square, though a bit different in its constructed. And both of those reminded him of his home city back on Earth. Did, and

at the same time didn't due to the differences between them. Just like the people that inhabited both.

He heard footsteps behind him. He already knew it was Shadow- the metal bottoms of his rocket shoes clanked loudly against the metal ground. He didn't react in the slightest when Shadow stepped right besides him, nor did he react when he felt crimson eyes rest on him. He just continued to stare out at the city below.

"You could have been a little more tactful with the commander," Shadow said, his tone chastising.

"It's amazing how little I care." Sorun's blue eyes flicked to Shadow, who sighed at Sorun's statement. "I want to ask you a question."

"A question," Shadow repeated. "What is it?"

"If you were to meet me for the first time, and you didn't know I was an Earthling from a different zone, would you think I was a human or a Overlander?"

It was a question that gave Shadow pause, and made him furrow his eye ridges at Sorun. The teen just silently and expectantly stared at him, however, and after a few moments of quiet contemplation Shadow decided on his answer.

"I've had precious contact with the humans in Station Square, Sorun, although I have seen them before. That said, I would have said you're an Overlander."

Sorun hadn't really known what he would have thought of either answer. He wasn't too surprised to not be satisfied with the one he got. "Why them?" he asked.

"Because I've never known a human to ever leave Station Square for any reason."

A low sigh left the teen. "Don't know what I was expecting there," he mumbled out. "You know, when I went to Station Square and saw all those humans I was expecting to feel, I don't know, some sense of familiarity with them. I knew they weren't my kind, not technically, but I knew they were still human and figured even with the cultural difference it'd be enough." He shook his head. "It wasn't. They don't... they look different, Shadow."

"Different?"

"The Overlanders look more like humans from my zone than the humans here. Except they don't, because I don't know a single human back home that was born with natural blue hair. I blame gene bombs on that, but... ugh." He shook his head. "I just don't feel any connection with them at all. I thought I would, but I don't. And I went in knowing I probably wouldn't, but I guess I just hoped I was wrong." He flipped his arm up and let it flop back to his side. "I don't know."

Shadow remained silent at hearing Sorun's words. He continued to look at him, blinked slowly, and then turned his head out to Central City down below. Sorun did the same, with the two of them continuing to look down at the city for what felt like minutes until Shadow spoke again.

"The age of the human race here is thousands of years ahead of your species in your world," the hedgehog said, breaking the silence. "The humans in Station Square alone were relegated to their own city for thousands of years when that plane crash trapped them in that mountain. Furthermore, this is an entirely different zone. You can't have expected them to look exactly like the humans of your zone with all these factors in play."

He had a point, Sorun would admit that. Whether it was due to evolution and time or just because it was a race of humans from a different zone, there was no feasible way for them to be the same as the humans from his zone. Any chance of the Overlanders being the same were wiped out with whatever meddling the gene bombs did to their DNA. And even ignoring all that, none of them could gain

powers from Chaos Emeralds like he could. Because he was from an abnormal zone absent of Chaos energy. For all he knew that played a part in humans' development here, too. Quite plainly even looking past surface appearances there were too many differences among them for Sorun to call these people his people, culture aside.

"Yeah. I guess not," Sorun said in agreement after a long, contemplative moment. "I suppose that makes me the only member of my kind on this planet. I get to be all alone." He glanced back at Shadow. "Kinda like you, I guess."

"Hmph." All Shadow gave was a small, noncommittal grunt. "So what are you going to do?"

"Go back to Knothole. Help settle things with Eggman." Sorun reached up and scratched at his hair. "I feel more comfortable with them than here or in Station Square. The non-Earthling humans and Overlanders just keep reminding me of people back on Earth and how they're not them. I can't stand them. At least with Mobians I can look them in the eye and not think of home. Plus... I got people I care about there." He stopped scratching and lowered his hand back to his side. "Don't tell anybody I said that, though."

"I won't," Shadow promised him. "I don't think I can especially blame you. Not with my own issues integrating with Mobians. My own supposed kind, even if I'm not a full Mobian. So I understand where you're coming from in some sense." He looked back towards Sorun. "When this is all over, though, there's still a place here for you should you ever change your mind."

Sorun scoffed. "Don't count on it, Shadow."

"As you will." Shadow shrugged and looked back down to Central City, Sorun doing the same. A few more minutes of silence passed before Shadow broke it again. "I'm afraid you'll be returning to Knothole City alone. I'm staying here."

"Oh, yeah?" Sorun muttered, eyes still on the city.

"With G.U.N. free and back at operational capacity, Rouge and I are officially agents of theirs once more. The Commander wants me to stay and spearhead operations to take back Overlander territory from the Doctor. With how thin his forces are spread, and with how easy Station Square was reclaimed, I suspect this won't pose much of a challenge."

"But that means you'll be staying on this side of the world."

"For the time being. Yes." They turned back towards each other. "When the time comes, perhaps we'll be able to tackle the Doctor together and keep that promise we made. But neither of us know where the future will take us, so should that task fall solely to one of us-"

"He's dead, yeah. You don't gotta worry about that," Sorun assured him.

Shadow nodded, looking slightly relieved as his frown relaxed into a neutral expression. That was about as close to a genuine smile that Sorun assumed Shadow could form. "Then for now it appears this is goodbye." He extended his hand out to Sorun, which surprised the Earthling a bit as he looked down at the hand. "What is it you like to say? It's been an experience working with you?"

"Something like that. I'm not sure I'm the most quotable guy." Sorun reached his hand out and grasped Shadow's gloved hand. They shook, something that made Sorun feel a bit honored and glad for that Shadow had done such a thing with him. Then all he felt was pain when Shadow squeezed down a bit harder than he ought to have. "Alright, alright, ease up!"

A small huff left Shadow, and for a single second the ghost of a smirk formed on his lips. It disappeared when Sorun lifted his head back up to his face, though his eyes seemed just a bit brighter as Sorun stepped away from him and unsheathed his sword.

"So that's it?"

Shadow nodded. "That's it. You should know that Rouge will be going back to Knothole, as an official liaison from G.U.N. Just to keep an eye on things for the time being."

"Ah-huh. She need a ride?" Sorun asked as he cut open a portal.

"She has her own means of travel."

"If you say so." With the portal opened, Sorun turned back towards Shadow. "I'll be going now. Take care, Shadow. Adios."

He kept looking at Shadow even as he stepped into the portal. It could have been the way space around the edges of the portal warped, or it could have been a trick of the eye from all the sunlight reflecting off of the snow on the mountain. Whatever it was, Sorun could have sworn he saw the corners of Shadow's mouth upturn just the slightest amount as he finally walked through the portal.

It must have just been the warped space.

Pushing what was surely an illusion from his mind, Sorun stepped all the way through the portal and closed it behind him. Sighing out in exhaustion as he dispelled Yamato, he turned around flopped right onto the couch in Freedom HQ, closing his eyes in an effort to finally get some rest.

He was only able to close his eyes for about three seconds before he heard someone clear their throat.

"Mm?" Sorun cracked an eye open to look at who it was standing in front of him. He immediately caught Sally's visage, arms crossed and eyes glaring right down onto Sorun. She didn't look very happy. "Oh, you guys are already back, huh?"

"Yeah. We just came back a few minutes ago," she dryly stated. "Would you care to tell me where you went?"

Sorun's half-open eye maintained its contact with Sally for all of two seconds before it re-closed. "Shadow says hi."

And thus, the scolding began.

A/N- Having these back-to-back big chapters take a lot, and I didn't really intend for it to get this big. The Station Square chapter was another one of those chapters I wasn't really looking that forwards to like the Angel Island one that got scrapped, but hey, it's out of the way now. The next five-ish chapters are gonna be on the short side, that's what I plan, at least, and after that we get to the fun stuff I've been waiting to get to.

Chapter 38

Recursion Error

Episode 38- The sunk cost fallacy of Chaos powers

Spagonia.

Sorun had absolutely no idea where the hell the name came from. It was an Overlander city, he knew that much. It sounded *vaguely* Italian, so he assumed it took its roots from there. It also sounded like somebody just named it after spaghetti, and Sorun's biggest fear was that the only surviving remnant of Italian culture in this strange post-apocalyptic world was spaghetti.

Place wasn't even a whole country like Italy was. It was just a city. A city that used to be under Eggman's control until G.U.N. had done their thing and started taking territory back. Not all of the Overlander cities were free, not just yet, but from what Sorun heard a good majority of them were already secured at this point. And seeing as how close Spagonia was to the G.U.N. HQ, it wasn't that hard to see why it had been one of the first cities G.U.N. liberated and put back in Overlander control.

Well, whatever the case for the ridiculous name, he was here for one reason and one reason only: a sweet, sweet Chaos Emerald.

"Thank you for spotting me for the ice cream, Rouge," Sorun thanked. He licked on the white ice cream scoop sitting upon the cone in his hand, his eyes glancing towards the side at the white bat standing next to him. "I would have bought it on my own but I'm poor."

The white bat, her arms crossed, regarded Sorun with a lazy look. "You never considered that mobiums wouldn't be recognized as a

valid currency in Overlander territory?"

"No, even if it was, I still wouldn't have been able to afford this."

"It's sad stories like this that make me glad that I chose a job that actually pays." She sighed and shook her head. "Can't say I've ever had a guy take me out and make *me* pay for the food."

"Don't flatter yourself that much. You only got me the basic vanilla." He took a bite from his ice cream and turned away from Rouge, facing forwards to the large building in front of them. "Spagonia University, huh..."

It looked like a large, standard campus to him. Large main buildings connected to small side buildings, all surrounding a central courtyard. A classic university if he ever saw one. For some reason there was a Chaos Emerald here, and they only knew about it thanks to the Overlanders. Specifically, the Commander of G.U.N. had been the one to contact Sally and tell her about the Emerald being held here, who had relayed it to Sorun. And Rouge, under orders from her employers, had been the one to show Sorun the way to the university after he teleported here.

"So how exactly did a Chaos Emerald wind up here?" Sorun asked, taking the final bite out of his ice cream. "Would have figured that Eggman would have detected an Emerald sitting in one of the cities he used to occupy with how much Chaos energy these things radiate."

"Some G.U.N. operatives that were hiding in a makeshift outpost in the outlands between here and the HQ under orders from the Commander. They were avoiding the occupation and keeping in close contact with other operatives to build up to the operation that took place back at HQ. When the Emeralds scattered after we brought you to this zone, one of the Emeralds just happened to land near them. One of the operatives, an engineer, thought fast and managed to jury rig a sort of containment device that helped mask the Emerald's signature. The university was a safe place we had

people in during the occupation, so it was discretely transported here for study and to keep it out of Eggman's hands."

Sorun hummed in acknowledgment. "Must have been a smart engineer to make something that quickly."

"Ah, I wasn't that surprised when I heard. It was Hope that did it."

"... That really young girl I saw when I was over there?" Sorun asked, tone a bit surprised.

She nodded. "Yeah, that's the one. Girl's real gifted, I'll give her that much."

"Didn't know G.U.N. was into recruiting children."

"Just in the same way the Freedom Fighters let child prodigies like Tails fight with them."

He scoffed. She had a point there, one he couldn't refute.

Rouge stepped in front of Sorun's view, with Sorun's eyes lazily following her as he munched on the waffle cone. "Hey, you should know that Shadow's the one that pushed for them to tell you all that the Emerald was here for you. Commander Tower was really hesitant in going through with it, but he relented and agreed on the reasoning that you were owed something for helping out over at the HQ the other week."

"Is that so?" So the good Commander was hesitant in letting him have more Emeralds. He had to wonder if it was because G.U.N. wanted them for their own uses or if it was because they didn't like the idea of some random teenager running around and getting powers off of them. Especially a teenager that already expressed no interest in joining them.

Maybe he was being a bit too critical of them, though. They were still *giving* it to him, and they were still a good organization from the

impression he got. Working against Eggman for the sake of the planet. So he'd trust them, even if the cautious part of his brained exposed to countless media examples cautioned him against it and made him wonder if they were only letting him take it since they all had a common enemy in Eggman. "Well, I appreciate you guys doing me this solid and giving me the Emerald," he said. *"It would have been a real shame to have taken it from you."*

"Thank G.U.N., not me. Not every day I'm going out and *giving* gems away..." Rouge muttered under her breath. "Anyway, they radioed ahead. Just go up there and ask for Professor Pickle. He was the one in charge of studying it."

"... Professor Pickle," Sorun repeated in disbelief.

Rouge gave him a shrug. "I don't know, that's just the name they gave me."

"Okay... You want me to make you a portal back somewhere, or-?"

"Thanks for the offer, Sorun, but I've got my own ride." She gave him a short nod before her bat wings lightly began flapping to lift her off the ground. "See you around."

Sorun wordlessly watched Rouge take off. His eyes trailed after her form, and then fell down to the university sitting before him. He tossed the last piece of the waffle cone in his mouth, brushed his hands off, and began walking forwards.

"I fucking swear, if he's an actual pickle..."

Ding!

The first thing Sorun encountered when he'd entered the front door to the university was a massive foyer that branched off into multiple hallways. There was a small office right next to the entrance fortunately enough, though, and there was even a man in a white

coat manning what looked like a kind of greeter's desk in front of that office. Seeing no reason not to, Sorun went up to the desk and rang the bell on the front to gain the Overlander's attention.

"Hm? Huh?" The man jumped up a bit when the sound of the bell being run reached his ears. He looked around the front of the desk, and then looked downwards towards Sorun. He'd blinked in surprise at the sight of him. "Er, hello little boy. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Don't hurt him." He felt anger spike in himself when Sorun heard the man refer to him as a boy. He took a calming breath to even out his mood, and then calmly looked up at the man behind the desk. "Do you know where I can find Professor Pickle? I'm suppose to meet with him, so if you could please direct me to him, I would be most appreciative." Calm and respectful. He'd hoped it was enough that he could just get his directions and be on his way.

The man behind the desk scratched at his head. "Professor Pickle? Is he you're grandfather? Didn't even know he had kids," he muttered. "Did your mom and dad send you here, 'cause-"

A spectral blue hand grabbing the collar of his suit and pulling him halfway across the desk shut him right up. He froze entirely when he met the eyes of a very angry teenager in front of him.

"Listen you moronic fuck, I'm the dude G.U.N. said was taking the Emerald you all have here, so if you don't stop calling me a goddamn kid and tell me where the hell this Pickle guy is in the next five seconds-!"

"Er, um, hey, guy? You doing okay there? Kid?"

The voice of the greeter shook Sorun from his daydream. He grimaced a bit when he recalled the images he thought up, and then

did his best to put the image out of his mind as he cleared his throat and looked back up at the Overlander.

"Sir, could you please just direct me to Professor Pickle?" he requested.

"Um, yeah. Upstairs, room 2-A."

"Thank you." Sorun walked away from the desk, turning around but keeping his head craned in the direction of the Overlander. "Don't go around mistaking teenagers for kids. We don't like that."

Not bothering to look back, Sorun turned away from the desk and stormed towards the stairs. Stomping up them managed to alleviate some of his anger, and by the time he made it to the top half of it had simmered away. He still wore a cross expression on his face though as he began walking down a hall labeled "A", muttering under his breath as he followed signs until he came upon a door with a "2-A" plaque hanging next to it. When he reached forwards and felt that the door was unlocked, Sorun hummed in approval and opened it up.

He'd never been in a university lab before. Upon first glance, it looked less like a lab and more like a library. There was still actual equipment lying around - tables filled with all sorts of doodads and science things beyond Sorun - and what seemed to be science notes scattered around everywhere, but there were also a large amount of bookshelves everywhere that were filled to the brim with books. Some were even out and laying on some of the tables, the books all opened up to random pages with even more notebook paper filled in with writing resting on them.

"Wow, this place is a mess," Sorun muttered to himself as he looked around the room. He saw plenty of books and equipment, but, much to his confusion, no Pickle. "Er, Professor Pickle? You here? Hello?"

There was no voice that called back to him. The only sounds he heard was the low hum of the various pieces of science equipment

haphazardly strewn around him.

"Is he not in at this hour? No, the guy at the desk woulda said something. So where the hell...?" Sorun trailed off when he walked next to one of the tables. He saw something on it from the corner of his eye, something that made him immediately freeze and snap his head towards it.

A pickle. There was a single pickle lying on the table, in a clean spot between a mess of notes spread around it. Sorun stared unblinking down at the pickle, various, unbelievable thoughts running through his head as he regarded the otherwise innocuous pickle with skepticism and trepidation.

"No way. It's impossible. It can't be." Slowly, ever so slowly, Sorun began to reach out towards the pickle. *"There's no way this can actually be happening..."*

Gingerly, he took hold of the pickle. Nothing happened. He swallowed, and with a beating heart, he turned the pickle the other way around.

... It was just an ordinary pickle.

"Well that was a letdown," Sorun gasped out, his shoulders going a bit slack. "... Wait a second here." Sorun lifted the pickle up a bit for the light to catch it better, and then squinted his eyes at it. "Hold on, this ain't even a pickle. It's a cucumber."

"Oh, thank you for that."

Sorun felt himself freeze and go completely rigid when a wrinkled hand came into his view and gently took the cucumber out from his hand. He was so perturbed by the action that Sorun was just left there, staring blankly at his now-empty hand that had once been holding the cucumber. He slowly blinked and, not knowing what to think of this, turned around towards whoever just took the cucumber from him.

There was a man behind him. An aged man in a brown suit, who... had put the cucumber he'd taken from Sorun, put it between two slices of bread, and was currently consuming it in a really slow and almost uncomfortable fashion. He didn't even seem to be acknowledging Sorun's existence right next to him, though Sorun wasn't too sure if that was true or Not. Considering the old Overlander's bushy, white eyebrows were completely obscuring his eyes, Sorun didn't even know if he could see.

No, on a second look, it was true. The old Overlander was eating his sandwich while facing towards a wall.

"... Why me?" Sorun forlornly thought to himself before loudly clearing his throat. "Um, hi? Hello?" He stepped closer to the old man and attempted to wave his hand in front of his face to gain his attention, but he didn't even seem to react to his presence. "Yoo-hoo? Old timer? Come on, man, I ain't got all day."

"H-hm? Oh!" It was only when he was halfway through his sandwich did the old man finally acknowledge Sorun. "My apologies, lad, I didn't see you there."

A forced smile found its way on Sorun's face. "Hiiii... are you Professor Pickle?"

The old man took another bite from his sandwich. An agonizingly slow bite that made Sorun more uncomfortable by the moment. "Yes, that is I," he said after swallowing his bite. "Did you need something from me?"

"Yeah, I- come on, man, don't- he did." Sorun's hand slapped into his face when the professor took another bite of his sandwich. He waited for him to finish, and then, suppressing a heavy sigh, looked back at the brown-suited Overlander. "Look, I really need something from you."

"... Oh, hello. I didn't notice you there."

"Christ..." Inhaling deeply, Sorun couldn't help but to run his hands through his hair as he watched the professor walk off, mumbling something under his breath all the while as he finished off his sandwich. Ignoring Sorun like he'd forgotten the teen had been standing there, which, from the looks of things, he probably did. It caused a strange sensation of frustration and sadness to well in the teen. *"They didn't tell me I had to deal with a senile geriatric. How do I even do this?"*

He didn't think he could shake him like he'd fantasized doing with the guy out in the front desk. He was so old and brittle-looking that Sorun was worried he'd accidentally break something, or worse, outright kill the guy. Then again, talking seemed to be getting Sorun even less than nowhere, if such a thing was even possible. He didn't know at all what he was supposed to do here.

"Oh, wait! I know you!" In a sudden turn that startled Sorun, the professor turned right around towards Sorun and regarded him with a knowing smile. "You must be the one who's here for the Chaos Emerald, yes?"

"Yes, yes I am!" Sorun confirmed, nodding fervently towards Professor Pickle and his newly-found clarity. "G.U.N. said I could have it so if you could please give it to me that'd be just great!"

"Of course, of course. I-I have it around here somewhere, just give me a minute here."

Sorun nodded towards the older man, and then stepped back to lean against a nearby table. He watched as the aged professor stepped towards a nearby shelf full of mechanical... somethings, his hands reaching forwards towards the handle keeping the shelf shut. He opened it and began shuffling his hands around in the interior, and he began removing bits of equipment from inside only to then place it on a nearby table.

"You know, as fascinating as studying this artifact has been, this kind of research was never my forte, you see," the professor mumbled

out in a voice that was almost too quiet for Sorun to hear. He continued to set aside more pieces of equipment while he rambled on. "I got my doctorate in history, you see, but they were understaffed what with all that nonsense about robots going on outside, so those kind uniformed men had asked me and my lab assistant to look into the matter until they got their own labs back into shape. Are you a delivery person for them, young man?"

"No, uh... I'm Sorun. G.U.N. said I could have it since I need it for something. It's a long story."

"Oh, alright, alright. Ah, here it is."

Sorun started when the aged Overlander pulled something out from inside of the cabinet: a small, cylindrical glass container, the top and bottom of which seemed to be metal lids with all sorts of electronic diodes attached to them and with wires haphazardly spilling out. Sorun was less concerned with those, however, and more with what was on the inside of the container: a brightly-glowing, green gem.

"Oh, hey, look at that. An Emerald that actually looks like an Emerald," Sorun thought as he watched the professor place the container down on a table. *"So that container is what hid its energy signature from Eggman. According to Rouge that little girl at G.U.N. built it. Hm. Looks... kinda thrown-together. Guess they* were *desperate at the time."*

"Now let me just see here..." the professor hummed as he stared towards the container, hand stroking his chin. "There was a code for opening this, though I don't quite recall... hm..." He reached forwards and began tapping at a small numerical pad on the top of the container's lid. "Was it two-zero-eight-three...? Oh, no, that wasn't it," he muttered when there was a quiet beep accompanying a small red flash from a light next to the pad. "Two-two-zero-five? No, not it, either. Hrm..."

"Er, professor?" Sorun called out. "You, um... you doing okay?"

"No, I seem to have forgotten the code for unlocking this contraption. Forgive me, Sormur, I'm usually quite good at remembering these types of things."

Sorun ignored the mispronunciation of his name for more pressing issues. "Did you write it down somewhere?" he asked.

To his dismay, Professor Pickle shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Well, there's nothing to it, I suppose. We'll just have to work our way through all the numbers."

"What?" He found himself not believing what he just heard, but then he felt a shock go through him when he saw the professor's finger hover over the button marked with a zero. "Hey wait, man, come on-!"

"Zero-zero-zero-zero... no, that's not it. Zero-zero-zero-one... no? Mm, unfortunate."

Sorun slapped himself in the face to help muffle the frustrated cry he instinctually made. When he lowered his hand, twitching with its fingers slowly curling inwards, he asked, "You want me to just break it, 'cause I can-"

"No, no, that is quite alright, Summer, that won't be necessary."

"Seriously it'll only take like two seconds and I got places to be-"

"Have some patience, young Sonder, this won't take but a mere few minutes."

Sorun sputtered out in disbelief. "'A mere few-' you're trying to brute-force your way through ten-thousand codes!"

Whether Professor Pickle even heard his objections or not wasn't clear. He simply continued plucking away at the numerical pad, murmuring under his breath in what was surely unintelligible gibberish.

There was a flash of blue as Yamato was summoned in his left hand. Sorun's right hand, still twitching, slowly inched closer and closer towards the handle, though it stopped just shy of actually wrapping around it. His hand was stuck in that position for a few moments, after which Sorun made a loud sound that was halfway between a sigh and a groan as the sword disappeared from his grasp. He shook his head, found a nearby chair, and plopped down in it. Afterwards he splayed his legs out, crossed his arms, and looked towards the professor as he continued guessing away at the numerical pad.

"Well, on the upside, this is the least most labor-intensive way of getting a Chaos Emerald yet," Sorun thought. *"Just gotta wait about a billion years for him to finally get that thing open. Piece a... cake..."*

Yawning, Sorun began to sleepily blink his eyes. Tiredness began to overtake him as his head nodded downwards, and before he knew it he'd fallen asleep completely.

BING!

"AH AH WHAT- HUH-!" He'd been in a deep sleep before that loud binging sound roused Sorun from his slumber. It'd been so jarring that he'd fallen right out of the chair and onto the floor, disoriented and confused from the unfamiliar surroundings. There he stayed for a solid five seconds, wondering why he was laying on the cold floor of some lab before the memories of his day caught up to him and he realized what he was currently suffering through.

Groaning, he stood up to his feet, the popping sounds of his stiff joints accompanying him. He let out a low, dejected sigh, which was immediately wiped off his face when he looked towards the table where he remembered Professor Pickle was at. The container from earlier was empty, the lid opened and the light next to the numerical pad glowing green. Besides it stood the professor himself, holding the Chaos Emerald in his hands.

"Oh, you finally got it open?" Sorun groaned out, rolling his neck around and forcing the joints to elicit a few more pops before stopping in front of the old Overlander. "How long was I- you know what, I don't even want to know."

"Hmm? Oh, Sorghum, you're awake," Professor Pickle stated, not seeming to register the way Sorun's face subtly wrinkled when he stopped right in front of the older male. "No, actually I eventually remembered what the correct combination was. Sorry for making you wait so long, young man."

"It's... fine." It's not what he wanted to say, but he didn't have the heart in him to scream at an old man. Even though he really wanted to. So instead he exhaled a slow breath to calm himself, and then extended his right hand. "May I please have that now?" he requested.

He nodded. "Of course. Here you are."

The green, glowing gem was held outwards towards the teen. Sorun stared down at it, almost mesmerized by the green glow of the gem. Part of him found it a bit funny at how easy this was turning out, but he wasn't going to complain about his life being made a bit simpler. And so, depriving the world of any opportunity to take this moment from him, Sorun placed his hand down on the Emerald, his face flinching when he felt it affix itself to his palm.

"Well, that was easy," Sorun mumbled as he pulled his hand back, Emerald still attached to him. "Alright, that's all I needed. Sorry to have disturbed you over this, old- er, professor. It's been... it's been an experience and a half. I'll let you get back to it."

"But of course, young man, think nothing of it. Though I must confess I do feel compelled to ask you just what exactly you plan on doing with that," the aged Overlander said, wrinkled hands folder in front of him as he stared towards Sorun's face.

Sorun clicked his tongue. He thought about telling him, but then decided against it. "It's, um... it's not something you should worry about, man."

"Alright, then." The professor nodded at Sorun, which brought the teen some small relief that he wouldn't be pressing the issue. "Would you perhaps be willing to stay behind for a sandwich or two with me? I rarely ever get guests here besides from my assistant, though he's been out for quite a bit now. Something to do with that silly occupation nonsense everyone kept whispering about, I'm sure, but now that that's over with he should be coming back soon."

Blinking, Sorun looked down at the Emerald stuck to his hand, and then back up at the professor. "I'd love to, but I really don't want to. Professor?" When he saw he wasn't standing in front of him anymore, Sorun swiveled his head around to look for the old man. He found him slowly shuffling away, muttering under his breath again as he made his way to some random corner of the lab. "... Well that happened," Sorun sighed out, looking down once more at the Emerald in his hand. He sighed, and then placed his other hand on it. "Alright, let's just get this over with and go home," he said to himself as green sparks began arcing out of the gem.

The first thing that had happened when he exited his portal was that he was assaulted. Granted it was by a small dog that barely even come up to his knees, so assault may have been a strong word, but with how he was feeling it certainly felt like it.

He didn't know what the matter was with himself. Some time after Sorun absorbed that Emerald he just felt a bit off. Sick-off. He always felt a little bad after absorbing an Emerald, and admittedly it had been getting steadily worse with each Emerald, but there was something especially bad with this one, and right now he just felt sick to his stomach. So when he'd teleported into the Hedgehog household's kitchen and gotten rammed in the legs by Sonic's dog, Muttski, Sorun about doubled-over right there. But he managed to

maintain a brave face, close the portal behind him, and then dispelled the katana as he bent down to pet the dog on his head.

"Hey there, pal," Sorun whispered, stroking the tan dog on the top of his head. He tried to lick at the hand, causing Sorun to recoil his hand away from the dog and stand up. The dog whined at tried pawning at Sorun's leg, but when he stepped away he simply huffed and turned away.

Sorun watched the dog leave him, breathed out, and looked up. He felt his breath hitch in his throat when he saw two individuals already in the kitchen with him. Jules, sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of oil and with his mechanical eyes affixed onto Sorun, and his wife, who was over at the sink with her hands inside of soapy water holding dishes, currently frozen and staring towards the teen. Sorun let out an awkward laugh and waved at the two, not entirely sure on what to say.

"Uh, hey guys," Sorun greeted, a small, incredibly forced smile on his face. "Sorry for, er, startling you. I meant to go to the front door but getting an exact location is tricky sometimes so-so- I didn't mean to just barge into the kitchen like that."

"Oh no, dear, you're alright," Bernadette assured him, after which she turned back to her dishes. "How did everything go on your trip to... oh my, what was the place called? Spagornio?"

"Spagonia," Sorun corrected her, "and it went fine, thanks for asking." He moved past the kitchen table while nodding towards the blue, roboticized hedgehog sitting in it. "Jules."

"Sorun," Jules greeted with another nod. He then lifted up his cup of oil and began drinking from it, Sorun already having moved into the living room.

A low groan left Sorun as he found the couch in the living room, proceeded by him sitting down in it. He slumped forwards, his head

falling into his hands. Fingers curled into his scalp, dark hair spilling out between the gaps in his fingers as he made a sigh.

"I feel sick. It wasn't so bad after I got the Emerald, but it's been getting worse since I left the university." He felt something in his abdomen, like his very organs had shuddered inside of him, and he had to hold back a gag from the sensation. *"I don't know what's going on..."*

"Hey, Sorun!" The sound of Sonic's voice hadn't even reached Sorun's ears before he felt the couch seat right besides him compress. He steeled himself to not look as unwell as possible, and then sat straight up as he turned to the blue, teenage hedgehog sitting right besides him. "You just get back from your mission?"

Sometimes Sorun really wished he could feel good enough at all times of the day to have that same big, optimistic grin Sonic always wore. He hadn't felt that good in months, though. He especially didn't feel like it right now from all the pains he was feeling.

Sorun forced himself to nod, the very motion making him regret doing so. "It was less a mission and more a chore for how easy it was, but yeah."

"They had an Emerald?"

"They had an Emerald," Sorun confirmed, refraining from nodding again. "They left it to some professor guy to look after and study it. He was..."

"Interesting?" Sonic finished for him.

"... I wouldn't go that far," Sorun denied. "But yeah, it was a simple grab-and-go. No robots or anything like that. Don't really have anything to say about it."

"Ah, alright. Cool, cool."

Sorun remained silent after that, not wishing to respond. In truth, talking was a bit of a struggle for him at the moment. Saying words only exacerbated the intense nausea he was feeling, and even then it was a sensation that was slowly becoming worse in him. Keeping a straight face was becoming harder and harder. He was tempted to get up right now and just go to bed so he could try and sleep this off, and it was an idea that grew more tempting by the second the longer this went on.

"So..." Sonic leaned back in the couch, slinging one leg over the other while interlacing his hands behind his head. "You get a cool new power from the Chaos Emerald?" he asked, still looking at Sorun from the corner of his eye.

It took much more effort than he was comfortable with to not grit his teeth when he answered. "Yes, of course."

"Neat. What'd you get?"

"Nothing too special," Sorun answered, voice calm and even.

"Aw, come on!" Sonic exclaimed, turning towards and leaning closer to Sorun. "You always get something cool from the Emeralds! I wanna see it!"

Softly groaning, Sorun flicked his eyes over at Sonic and said, "And ruin the surprise? No way." He tried playing it off as him just being a tease, but the reality was he didn't think he'd be able to show *that* off without something bad happening. He was already struggling to hold it together with how he was feeling. He didn't want to imagine what activating that would do to him.

"Come on, don't be like that! Show me!"

"I'll use it if I have to, but I'm not gonna-" Sorun cut himself off, clamping his mouth shut as another painful spasm rocked his insides. He just, *just* managed to keep his composure throughout it, but he could feel that he was losing the ability to keep it together.

He couldn't lose it in front of anybody, especially Sonic. Couldn't let him see him sick. There'd be questions he couldn't answer.

"I need to use the bathroom," Sorun suddenly announced, standing up just a bit too quickly from the couch. So quickly that it seemed to have startled Sonic, though this was something Sorun barely paid any mind to.

"Uh... okay?" Sonic quirked an eye towards Sorun as he began walking away. "You feeling alright?"

"Ate something bad in Spagonia." That was the only explanation Sorun offered before turning a corner, which he hoped would prove more than sufficient to get any worries of Sonic's off of him. It better have, because the instant he'd turned a corner and made it out of Sonic's sight, he'd lost his composure and collapsed against the wall.

The spasms on his insides were becoming more and more frequent. There was a pain that accompanied it, too. A deep, stabbing pain that was intense enough that he was barely standing on his feet, needing to use the wall he was crawling across for support. He almost didn't make it to the bathroom at all, every single step being another agonizing moment, but he'd just managed to make it to the door. And he'd probably slammed it behind him harder than he ought to have, but at this juncture he didn't even have the capacity to care.

He'd flung himself onto the toilet without even thinking about it. He hadn't been a moment too soon before he started throwing up into it, which only intensified the pain he was feeling throughout his entire torso. He violently coughed through the bouts of vomiting, and ended up collapsing on the ground with his arms instinctually wrapped around his stomach.

Something was very wrong.

Sorun had thrown up before in his life. They were rare occurrences, when he'd been sick or ate something exceptionally bad, but he knew what vomit tasted like. That acrid, stinging sensation that

would assault his senses and the unpleasant taste that would be left in his mouth. And he'd always felt slightly better whenever something made him throw up.

This wasn't that. He felt worse. And he didn't smell and taste an acrid sensation in his mouth. There wasn't a stinging sensation from having his stomach contents ejected from his mouth. This felt... stickier. And there was a pungent smell of iron assaulting his nose, and a similar taste in his mouth. That wasn't vomit. That was something much worse. And Sorun was very afraid of what that was.

Shaking, he slowly unwound his arms and gripped the edges of the toilet. With great effort he lifted his head up to look into the bowl, and when he stared down it, he nearly found himself collapsing back on the floor.

Dark red. The water inside the bowl was stained in dark red.

"Wait... wait, hold on..." Sorun's very vision had begun to shake when he saw the dark contents of the toilet bowl. When he realized what the smell and taste in his mouth was. He felt his breaths become heavier. *"Th-that can't be-"*

He began to uncontrollably cough again. Every cough was joined by a splash of blood leaving his mouth and splattering against the toilet, staining it further and further. It was enough that he'd bolted up to his feet, almost in fright from seeing all the blood being expunged from his mouth, the feeling of it dripping down from both of his nostrils, but due to the state of his body the sudden rise had caused an intense sensation of vertigo to assault him. He spun on his feet, dizzy and vision spinning, when he'd suddenly felt his foot catch on some of the blood that had been dripped onto the ground.

There was a loud squeak noise, and Sorun found himself slipping over entirely. He thoughtlessly reached his hands out to grab at something, but unfortunately he wasn't able to find anything to grab onto before he felt his head slam into the side of the nearby bathtub. He collapsed right onto the ground after, his body under assault from

all sorts of pain. The pain in his abdomen, the throbbing sensation he felt from where his head had been hit, all the fright from seeing all the blood leaving him. It was too much. He couldn't find himself to do anything but remain on the floor, frozen and shaking from it all.

And then, all of a sudden, it stopped.

He didn't know what had happened. One second he'd been paralyzed on the floor in agony from it all. And then, like a switch had been flipped, it had all just stopped. The pain in his abdomen and head had vanished, just like that. Now he felt absolutely nothing. He took a shuddering breath at the sensation, or lack thereof, and slowly placed his hands on the ground and began to pick himself up.

"What... I... what happened...?" He held a hand to his head, noticing the small bump that was beginning to form from where he'd been hit, and then glanced over to the side. There was a red smear from where he'd slipped on his blood previously, and the toilet was still a blood-spattered mess. *"Wasn't a dream... what happened?"*

Confused, Sorun looked down at his hands. Slightly stained in blood, but otherwise alright. He tightly clenched his hands, but then found his brows creasing after the action.

There was... something wrong. The way his hands felt when he clenched them. He'd still felt it, felt the pressure of the tips of his fingers pressing into his palms, but that had been all he felt. He felt the tendons in his hand constricting to move the fingers. But that was all he felt. He pushed down harder, hard enough that small, red crescents were beginning to form in his palms from the nails digging into them, but while he felt the pressure of it, he didn't feel the stinging sensation he should have felt from his own fingernails stabbing into him.

"What is this? Why don't I feel this?" His heavy breathing returning, Sorun willed a Summoned Sword to appear. Hesitantly, he held his right forearm towards the floating sword after rolling up the sleeve on his shirt and coat. His eyes flicked from the spectral sword to his

arm, and then, gritting his teeth, he willed the sword to jab forwards just a bit to dig its tip through his skin.

Nothing. He felt nothing.

Even as the sword shattered and disappeared, and even as he watched blood drip down from the new wound he made in himself, he felt not a single thing other than the pressure of the sword entering him. He did other things, like pinch random places on his body and even hit some areas with his own fists, but no matter what he did, all he felt were the dull sensations of something landing against him each time. He didn't actually feel any physical pain from it.

"Oh..." He found himself collapsing into a sitting position, leaning against the bathtub he'd slammed his head into prior. He couldn't help but laugh at it. A low, bitter chuckle that held absolutely no joy in it whatsoever. *"My body's so fucked up from whatever these Emeralds are doing to me that I can't even feel pain anymore..."*

A lack of pain. A side effect from the Chaos Emeralds damaging his body, it must have been. Nerve damage, probably, or at least something similar. He didn't know. His medical knowledge was nonexistent, only bits and pieces he'd picked up from his mother. He didn't know nearly enough about the human nervous system to make any kind of guess as to what had been damaged to cause this effect.

Knock, knock!

"Sorun, dear?" That was Bernadette's voice. Concerned, from the sound of it. "Are you alright in there?"

"Shit." He took another glance around at the room, at all the blood splattered everywhere. He couldn't let them see this. Forget them thinking he was sick, what were they going to think if they saw him losing all this blood everywhere? He wouldn't put it past Sonic physically dragging him to the doctor against his will if he saw all this. *"Can't let her see this. Need to get rid of it."* He grimaced and

began standing up, Bringer Claws forming over his back. *"Just gotta flush the blood away, mop up the rest with the paper towels they keep by the sink. Make a portal and dump it in the ocean somewhere. Need to hurry..."*

"Sorun?"

"Y-yeah, I'm fine!" Sorun called out. He'd already scrambled to the toiled and practically slammed down on the handle, causing it to flush. At the same time his Bringer Claws were frantically grabbing at paper towels, wetting them slightly with water from the sink and proceeding to clean up the blood all over the toilet and floor. "I-I just- I'm just a bit sick, that's all," he answered through the door, grabbing some paper towels of his own to wipe any excess blood off his face.

The door handle began to jiggle. Sorun thanked himself for having had the foresight to blindly hit the locking button on the handle after he'd thrown it closed when he'd burst in here.

"Do you need any help?" Bernadette asked from the other side of the door.

"No, I'm fine!" Most of the blood was mopped up by now from his blue claws. A portal had already been opened with Yamato.

"Are you sur-?"

"I only need a second, ma'am!" The spectral claws were shoving the bloodied paper towels through the portal by the handful. Once done he dispelled them, the portal, and Yamato, the panicking teen then taking a quick and careful look around the bathroom. Floors were clean. Toilet was without a speck of red. Nothing on the bathtub or sink. All seemed good. He took a second glance around the whole room just to be sure. Then a third.

After the fourth one, he breathed out a small sigh. The blood was gone. Evidence gone, washed away in the ocean. It was fine. He just

had to keep up the lie and say he had something bad on his trip, that was all.

Rolling the sleeves on his right arm back up, Sorun finally unlocked the door for Mrs. Hedgehog. He found himself stumbling a bit after, but tried playing it off as best he could by making it appear he was just casually leaning against the door frame.

The blue, female hedgehog he was currently looking at in the eye looked very concerned. An uncomfortable amount of concern, all directed at him. There was a deep, worry frown on Bernadette's face, and he saw her eyes repeatedly look past his shoulder and into the bathroom, and then look back towards Sorun's face.

"Sorun, are you alright?" she asked him. "You sounded dreadful just now."

"Yeah. That." Sorun's cheeks tinged red in embarrassment, and he glanced back towards the toilet. "I... there was this professor guy I met on my trip in Spagonia, and he offered me a sandwich. There must have been something in it that didn't agree with me," he explained, turning his head back to the hedgehog. "Humans don't really deal with food poisoning all that well. Or I don't, at least," he continued. "But it was just something I ate. There's no need to worry."

She visibly relaxed a little bit, which Sorun was thankful for. She seemed to believe him. "We could help you to the doctor if-"

He practically heard his mind screaming "no" over and over. "It's fine," he assured her. "I don't need a doctor."

"You're sure? You... is your skin supposed to look so light, Sorun?"

He glanced down at his hands. They were a bit paler than normal. He guessed that wasn't too surprising, given all the blood he'd just lost.

Sorun shook his head. "It's alright, ma'am." He lightly pushed himself off the door frame. "I... actually think I'm going to try and sleep this off, if it's not too much trouble. I'm sorry to have been a bother, ma'am."

"Oh, hush now, Sorun. It's no issue at all. I was just worried." She sent him a warm smile that proved to be too much for him, causing him to turn away from her face. Then he felt the pressure of her hand compressing against the back of his shoulder. "Some rest will do you some good. Please don't strain yourself too much and hopefully you'll feel better when you wake up."

His face still turned away from her, Sorun smiled. An empty, broken smile. "I don't think you'll have to worry too much about me," he assured her, reaching back to softly brush her hand off of him. The smile dropped from his face, and he continued walking forwards without another word.

Eventually he made it back to Sonic's room, on his spare bed. Sonic's racecar bed remained unoccupied by its owner. It was still dusk out, so it wasn't too surprising to him. Either he didn't want to retire this early or his mother explained what had happened to him and he wanted to give Sorun some peace and quiet. He was thankful for it anyways, whatever the case was. He needed some time to himself.

"I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this," Sorun thought, laying in his bead and staring upwards, his own hand hovering above his face. *"At what point does absorbing Chaos Emeralds turn into a detrimental process? My powers are compensating less and less for my body failing. I used to be able to fire off hundreds and hundreds of Summoned Swords without batting an eye, back when I first got them. Now I can't so much as shoot off more than a handful or a few of the techniques without getting winded. My stamina keeps getting lowered further and further with each Emerald. And now I have this shit to deal with."*

A large part of him, the sensible part, wondered if he would even be in any kind of fighting shape if he absorbed any more Emeralds. That if he went and absorbed the sixth one he'd even be left standing. He was already left with a deadened sense of pain, and he didn't even know how far that truly extended. What if it was brain damage? What if his brain was being damaged from all this Chaos energy coursing through him? What about his organs? For all he knew they were still convulsing and failing inside of his torso, and he just didn't feel it anymore. He didn't even feel nauseous from it.

He could probably keep his symptoms under wraps, especially if he didn't have to worry about pain anymore. That would probably actually work in his favor, but he didn't know if that would do anything for his lessening stamina. He'd felt it the most during his fight with Eggman, when he'd been overtaxing his powers so much he hadn't even lasted a few minutes against him. Fighting weak enemies and taking quick rests between fights kept him going. It was a strategy he'd been relying on this entire time. Extended fights became less and less viable the further this went on. They plain *weren't* viable anymore for him.

But what if the opposite was true? What if the powers from the final two Emeralds made it worth his body failing? He doubted it, but the possibility was there considering he didn't even know what they were. There was truly no knowing at the end of the day what the final two Emeralds would give him, if he even made it that far.

Five out of seven. So few left, and so little life to give for them anymore.

"... Agh. I guess it doesn't really matter. If we get any more I'll have to absorb them anyway to avoid suspicion from the others." His hand flopped onto the bed besides him, and Sorun found that his eyelids were growing heavier. *"I'll deal with it all later. I'm just... really tired now..."*

Sorun drifted off to sleep before he even registered his eyelids closing all the way.

Chapter 39

Recursion Error

Episode 39- The man in red

"Yep. There they are alright."

Even in the dead of night it was hard to miss them due to all the lights they were shining around in that little makeshift camp of theirs. Headlights from the APCs parked around, small portable floodlamps that had been set up, the G.U.N. soldiers running around with the flashlights attached to their guns. It was almost impossible to miss them all.

But there they were, in a forest clearing he was staring at from his position up in a tree branch, his eyes searching for the one and only thing that would get a group of G.U.N. soldiers all the way out here in the middle of nowhere. And he saw it plain as day when he spotted a solider walking towards one of the APCs at the back of the makeshift camp, an object clenched in their hands and their sides flanked by more soldiers. A brightly-glowing, gray Chaos Emerald.

"Huh, it was here." Rubrum hummed, looked down at the paper in his hand, and shoved it back into his pocket. He made another hum as he looked down at his feet, towards the duffel bag that was at the end of the branch and nestled against the tree itself. He stared down at the cyan light that was bleeding out of the opening of the bag, and then turned back towards the G.U.N. camp. *"Alright, let's get this over with."*

He jumped. It was at a height and distance that was impossible for any normal human or Overlander, and at the height he'd been falling any normal man would have had their legs shattered when they finally touched down. But when Rubrum landed on his feet right at

the edge of the Overlanders' camp, he didn't seem any worse for wear. In fact, he'd even made a show of slowly and lazily winding his shoulders as he stretched his neck out.

The twenty-odd G.U.N. soldiers he'd landed in front of didn't seem all that impressed by his performance based on the way they were all aiming their weapons and shouting orders at him.

Rubrum sighed, and reached his finger past his hood to dig into his ear when he heard all sorts of orders like "freeze!" and "down on your knees!" being barked at him. All the flashlights from the guns being pointed at him and illuminating his red-dressed visage did little for his mood, too. He felt more annoyed at it all than anything else. At all the guns being pointed at him, the shouting, and the fact he had to go through with this in the first place.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, I can explain." He gave them the courtesy to at least raise his hands up for them, and spoke loudly enough that he was sure they all heard him. "You see, uh... well, I guess there's really no easy way to say this, is there?" With his right hand still rose up, he pointed towards the APC at the back of the makeshift camp. "Yeah, that Chaos Emerald you guys have stashed back there? I super need it."

The soldiers aiming their guns at him cast unsure glances at each other, the barrels of their weapons still pointed at him. One soldier had called out to him, "You're asking us to give you the gem?"

Rubrum shook his head. "No, I'm telling you I'm taking it. That's what you would call an unequivocal fact." They must not have liked that answer from the way he heard their guns click. The sound of safeties being switched off. This caused him to sigh and lower his arms back down. "What does G.U.N. even want with that thing, anyways?" he asked them. "Was good ol' Tower gonna hand it over to the Freedom Fighters like he did with the green one? Or was he gonna keep it for G.U.N. to have?"

Not a word was said by any of the soldiers. All they gave him were unblinking stares, their rifles fully affixed at Rubrum's body.

"I'm not naïve enough to think the Commander has the best interest of Mobians at heart," Rubrum continued, his voice lowering to an icy tone. "Doesn't really matter what he intended for it. I lost all respect for G.U.N. a long time ago after what you tried to pull."

"Are you with the Freedom Fighters?" This question was asked by the soldier who spoke to Rubrum before, causing the hooded man to shake his head.

"Well, no." Rubrum took a step forwards. "I'd be a pretty terrible Freedom Fighter if-"

The sound of gunfire cut off his words.

Rubrum's body began jerking from the dozens and dozens of high caliber rounds that tore through his body. Wound after gaping wound was opened at various points on his body, and small clouds of blood burst out of his body in time with the staccato beats of the rifles firing into him. After a few seconds of continuous bullets tearing through him, the soldiers stopped firing all at once, leaving Rubrum and his hole-riddled body to slowly teeter back and forth on his feet, and then fall backwards onto his back.

The soldiers who had all fired upon him all looked down at the man's body, their rifles still aimed at his still form. Their forms began to relax when they saw his body remained motionless, after which they began to lower their guns and reach for the radios strapped to their uniforms.

"Aaaand I'm back..."

Rifles were snapped back forwards and stances became rigid when the soldiers all saw, with shaking eyes, Rubrum's body lift back upwards onto his feet, as if pulled up by an invisible force. They watched with bated breath as the wounds and holes in his body

began to seal and heal up, with the man himself letting off a small, disappointed sigh as he shook his head.

"I had a feeling you'd do that." Rubrum reached his right arm out to the side. Red energy coiled around his hand, and when he clenched it, an object materialized in his grasp in a fiery burst of red energy. A long, metal claymore sword with a guard stylized as a skull on either side. "Well, it's not like you're the first group of innocent people I had to cut through to get to a Chaos Emerald." Rubrum spun the sword in his hand around once. "'Least you'll be the last."

The soldiers began firing their rifles again. Unlike the first time, though, not a single round ever made it to Rubrum. In a feat of blinding speed his hand began to spin the sword in front of him like a fan blade. Yellow sparks began flying in front of him as bullet after bullet pinged off of the sword, which completely blocked all of the gunfire from ever reaching Rubrum. Despite the futility, though, the soldiers continued to fire at him, and it was only when the last magazine went empty did Rubrum act.

The blade continued to be spun around until Rubrum stopped it in a position that it was pointed at the soldiers. His entire body lunged forwards in a single movement, his form a blur as he and the sword flew towards the group. He stopped right in the middle of the soldiers, and then swung the blade outwards in a wide arc, causing all of the soldiers to dive out of the way and scatter from him.

"You had to push it." Rubrum stabbed his sword forwards. A G.U.N. soldier let out a deathly cry of pain when half of the sword pierced right through his abdomen. "You couldn't have just given it to me." With a single hand holding the sword's handle, Rubrum swung it upwards, causing the soldier's body to fly up in the air. He turned his hooded head at a nearby soldier desperately attempting to load another magazine into his weapon, and then swung his blade outwards and cut him in half right through his midsection. "What the hell did I expect?"

The solider whose body he'd tossed in the air earlier fell back down to his level. Rubrum kicked the body, causing it to fly forwards and crash against another soldier. The body had just bounced off of the Overlander before Rubrum was in front of them, stabbing his sword forwards and piercing through both of their bodies. He whirled around, swinging the sword like it was a weightless thing in front of him and flinging the dead bodies off of it towards more of the G.U.N. soldiers.

He continued killing in this fashion. Dashing around, jumping, and twirling his body with monstrous speed and agility while swinging his sword around as if it weighed nothing. He cut through each soldier quickly and methodically, every life being ended instantly with a single slash or thrust and every swing coating the grass beneath his feet in more and more red. The soldiers left alive, their numbers quickly dwindling by the second, had tried retaliating by firing back on Rubrum, but due to his movements bullets either whizzed by him entirely, or very rarely made contact only for the wound to then instantly regenerate.

Rubrum slid to the side, moving his head slightly away to avoid the gunfire of the soldier in front of him before flicking his claymore outwards, swiftly decapitating him. He then looked forwards, noticing a few of the remaining soldiers standing all the way on the other side of the camp with their weapons aimed at him. He then quickly grabbed his sword with both hands, bringing the handle upwards while pointing the tip of the sword at the soldiers. Red energy began to gather around the upper half of the sword's blade.

And then, Rubrum threw the sword.

Like a helicopter blade, the thrown sword whirled through the air while trailing red lines of raw power behind it. Some of the more quick-thinking soldiers had tried to fire upon the sword, though this proved to be an effort in futility as the bullets impacting the sword did nothing to halt its momentum. The spinning sword cleaved cleanly through the torso of one soldier, and then changed direction entirely. The sword was guided through the air, seemingly under some

invisible control, and as much as the soldiers tried, they could do nothing to save themselves from the spinning sword. Some continued to try and fire at the sword while some had tried running, but no matter what they did the sword followed them and cut right through them.

After cleaving through the last soldier, the spinning sword flew back towards Rubrum. He snapped his hand out, effortlessly catching the claymore by the handle and deftly spinning it into a normal grip. He looked around at the camp full of dead bodies, and then turned his concealed eyes towards the APC sitting at the back of the camp.

There was only one soldier left alive. His gun was long dropped at his feet, and he'd pressed his back straight against the APC. His entire body was shaking, eyes fearful and mouth panting heavily as he stared towards Rubrum. His quavering hand was holding a radio, which the panicked soldier was now shouting into.

"Mayday, mayday we need immediate assistance! I repea-!"

Rubrum's body shot forwards, sword pointed out in front of him with a red cone of energy surrounding his entire form. The soldier could only continue to scream at the sight, as Rubrum's approach had been too fast for him to make any sort of movement to avoid him. The sword plunged right through the soldier's body all the way to the skull-shaped hilt, piercing all the way to the inside of the APC. The soldier pinned to the APC by the sword could only look down at the sword piercing through him in mute surprise, and then quickly went limp, the radio dropping from his hand. Rubrum then tore the blade out from the APC and soldier, blood splashing onto him as the soldier's body was unceremoniously flung onto the ground behind him.

Pausing momentarily, Rubrum's hidden eyes looked down at the blood that had been splattered onto his red cloak. His hooded face lingered on the sight, and then turned towards the camp of soldiers he'd just slaughtered. Bodies of G.U.N. soldiers littered the ground, some cut in half, and nearly the entire patch of grass that the camp

rested on was dyed in red blood. Rubrum found himself sighing at the sight.

"What a goddamned waste..." A sudden loud, beating sound reaching his ears caused his head to perk up. "Oh, what the fuck is it now?"

His head turned upwards towards the beating sound, and he found himself immediately slumping his shoulders when he saw what it was. There was a helicopter hovering up in the air, having lifted off from some part deeper into the forest, and currently it was hovering just outside of the camp, and pointed right at Rubrum. He couldn't help but notice the long-barreled weapons that were on the underside of the helicopter, and how they began to aim towards Rubrum's body.

Rubrum himself said nothing in response to this. Instead, he flipped his sword around into a reversed grip. Red energy began to gather down the entire length of the blade at the same time that the barrels of the weapons on the helicopter began to spin. Before even a single round could be fired off, though, Rubrum swung his sword.

Upon swinging the sword coursing with red energy, a large, crescent-shaped wave of energy shot out from the blade and flew towards the helicopter. The speed of the red wave proved to be too much for the helicopter to avoid, and as such, it was directly hit by it. The red energy wave cleaved clean through the middle of the helicopter, leaving a red line that ran right through its whole center. Red electricity began arcing out from the red line bisecting the helicopter, and just as the two halves of the flying vehicle began to fall away, they exploded completely, obliterating the helicopter itself and the pilots that had been inside of it. In the end, all that was left was a handful of ashes and small pieces of metallic debris that fell to the ground below.

Silently, Rubrum flipped his sword back around into a normal grip, and then lightly swung the blade to remove the excess red power still clinging to the blade. Satisfied, he took one last glance at the

helicopter wreckage, and then a final look at the blood-soaked camp, and finally turned around towards the APC.

He found himself maneuvering towards the back of the APC. One quick cut with his sword found its back being cleaved right off, which Rubrum then proceeded to grab and throw away. He then turned to the interior of the APC, carefully walking in as he observed what was in front of him.

There wasn't much to say about the inside of the APC. White lights dotting the small roof made the small room well-lit. It was mostly empty, too, save for rows of seats lining each side and a small, metal pedestal sitting in the center. A pedestal upon which sat the gray Chaos Emerald he'd seen from earlier. Rubrum tilted his head a bit when he saw it splattered with blood, and then looked to the left, where he saw a blood-splattered hole pierced into the wall. He let out a small hum when he realized that had been where he'd pierced that final soldier through.

"All this blood for a fuckin' rock," he mumbled under his breath as he turned back to the Emerald. "Why is it that the gray one always gives me so much trouble?" He sighed, and then released his grip on the claymore sword. It disappeared in a flash of fiery, red energy. "Well, whatever the case, it's finished. Now all's left is to drop this thing off to him..."

New Megaopolis

"And here we go again..."

Coming into this place had been about as easy as any other place Rubrum went to these days. Physically entering was never an issue for him. It was the emotional aspect and the fact that just walking into this place, being near those men, made his skin itch and hand twitch for his sword. But, as always, he held back. It took nearly all his willpower each and every time, but he'd managed to hold back.

He was currently up on the ceiling of a large control room. Computers everywhere, walkways leading to doors, a typical sight. And right below the cross beam he was sitting on was a short Overlander in a green coat working on a computer. The second man below him, Rubrum's main focus, was in a floating chair that was hovering in the middle of the room, his fingers dancing over the keyboard of a computer monitor he was currently scowling at.

Eggman and Snively. Two people Rubrum hated above all others. And he had to give them a Chaos Emerald. Again.

"Ugh... Feels like I'm getting stabbed in the gut again every time I do this," Rubrum thought to himself. *"Well, at least I get to punch Snively in the face again. That'll cheer me up a little bit."*

Adjusting the strap keeping the duffle bag secure against his body, Rubrum dropped down from the cross beam and landed in a crouch right on top of the computer Snively was working on.

Naturally, a figure dropping down right in front of him out of the blue had startled Snively. But then his eyes scanned over Rubrum's form, and they widened dramatically when he seemed to recognize who he was. He even made a small "eep" noise, which brought Rubrum some small amount of satisfaction.

"Hey," Rubrum greeted, still crouched down.

"... Hi," Snively greeted back, swallowing heavily as his body began to lightly quiver.

"Looks like somebody messed your face up." Rubrum leaned in a bit closer, taking note of the bandage wrapped around Snively's long nose and the faded wounds dotting his face. "Guess what, I'm gonna mess it up even more."

"No, no wait-!"

Rubrum's hand snapped forwards and gripped Snively's throat, silencing him from speaking further. The short Overlander gagged out and began flailing his limbs as Rubrum lifted him up off his feet, and then curled his other hand into a fist as he prepared to assault Snively's face.

"Stop."

Rubrum paused when he heard Eggman's voice. He quirked his hooded head to the side, looking upwards at the man in his floating chair with the Doctor's struggling nephew still in his grasp. The chair had spun around so that it was facing Rubrum's direction, with Eggman himself leaning to the side of it with a bored expression on his face.

"... 'Stop'?" Rubrum repeated. "You remember there's a little something that starts with 'Metal' and ends with 'Sonic' that says there's nothing you can do to stop me, right? Case in point." He punched Snively in the face, his body jerking as a pained cry left him. "See? Look at this." He punched him again. "This is free. It's free, baby."

He wondered if Eggman even believed Rubrum when he said there was nothing Eggman could do to stop him beating his nephew like this. It wasn't like he was even bluffing, there really was nothing he could do, but he expected at least one single twitch of his mustache at the sight of him abusing his nephew. Some sign of frustration that Rubrum could see and take to heart so he could tell himself it was at least a little worth it.

But no. Eggman just passively looked on with that same bored, unimpressed expression he wore on his face. And it made Rubrum feel like the frustrated one.

Eventually Snively's form went limp in Rubrum's grasp. He stopped punching him, drank in the sight of his bruised face with just a fraction of the satisfaction he'd hoped to feel, and then looked down to confirm that, yes, he was unconscious. So it was with a whiny sigh

that Rubrum tossed the unconscious body away and then looked up at Eggman. "You're taking all the fun out of this," he said.

"You honestly think I care you keep beating my nephew to a pulp? It's a mild annoyance at best for how much he keeps whining about it around me," Eggman said.

"And yet, you keep him around."

"He has his uses. And what's family for?" Eggman asked, giving a half-shrug. "I do find myself asking why you're so insistent on assaulting him at every opportunity you find, though."

Rubrum looked back towards Snively's motionless form. His hidden eyes glared heatedly at the body, after which he turned back to Eggman. "He's the second person I hate most in the world. You're first."

"Really? Snively? *Snively* ?" The incredulity in Eggman's voice was so apparent it almost seemed overexaggerated. "I understand hating me, it's a given seeing everything I've strived for, but him? I'm almost insulted you hold him in such high regard next to me. My lackey of a nephew. What could he have possibly done to earn your ire?"

"He did something unforgiveable." Rubrum's response had been so immediate and quickly given that it made Eggman quiet down from surprise. "That's all."

After he finished talking, Rubrum jumped up. Eggman's chair slowly swiveled around, the Doctor's spectacled eyes following him as Rubrum landed in a sitting position on one of the high monitors located next to Eggman. He crossed one leg over the other, propped his head on one fist, and used the other hand to point at Eggman.

"Enough about your nephew, though. Let's talk about you," Rubrum said. "Your empire's seen better days, huh?"

"... Feh. I don't know what you're talking about," Eggman claimed, waving a hand in Rubrum's direction and turning around to a different computer monitor. "The Eggman Empire's stronger than ever."

"Is it, though?" Rubrum asked. "Is it really?"

"Of course it is!" Eggman spread his arms out wide, gesturing to all the computer monitors scattered around them. "Look around at my city. *My* city. An unconquerable fortress from which I can build my empire up at my leisure."

"Sure, yeah, you got one city. And yeah, you have so much power congregated here that there's not really anything anybody could do if you decided to just dig yourself in here and stay indefinitely. I mean, that's pretty much what you did," Rubrum conceded. "Your empire's lookin' a bit small these days, though. You used to have factories all over the place, and pretty much every single important settlement worth mentioning was under your name. Now, though?" With a small laugh, Rubrum shrugged his shoulders. "All your factories got trashed by the Freedom Fighters. The Overlanders and G.U.N. are taking back more of their territory on the daily. Meanwhile on the Mobian side of things your forces got reduced to such a pathetic number that they managed to push all your robots back and take their land back." He scoffed. "Face it, man. You went from having all the territory to almost none of it." Rubrum held his hand up and began counting off his fingers. "All 'cause of a ragtag group of Freedom Fighters, a displaced government agent and science experiment, a princess, a hedgehog... and some guy with a katana."

To his credit, Eggman didn't so much as bristle at any of Rubrum's observations. He did, however, become somewhat straighter in his seated position. "I still have an entire Egg Fleet at my beck and call that I can use at any moment," he reminded him. "Knothole's very destruction is but a press of a button away."

"And I have no doubt your finger is just *itching* to press that button with how current events have been treating you." Rubrum reached

behind him, unslung the duffel bag, and then opened the top. "Before you resort to that, though, I got another gift for you."

He flicked his wrist in such a way that something inside of the duffel bag flew out of it towards Eggman. The Doctor deftly caught the object before it impacted with his face, and let out a interested hum afterwards as he examined the object. Rubrum, meanwhile, re-slung the duffel bag over his torso.

"... And here I thought you said you were done giving me gifts," Eggman said, looking up from the gray, bloodstained Chaos Emerald in his hand. "What ever happened to that?"

Rubrum shrugged. "I lied. I do that a lot."

"Hmph..." He looked back down at the Emerald. "Do you always have to bring me these things when they're so filthy? Honestly, it's beyond me what you do to them to get them bloodied like this."

"Boo-hoo, surprised you even care about something like that considering how much blood you already have on your hands."

"I have high standards, thank you very much." Holding out the bloodied Emerald out in front of him, Eggman made a gagging sound and attempted to use the sleeve of his red coat to try and wipe the blood off. All this proved to do was smear the blood further along the gray gem's surface, though, causing him to grumble and place it down at the control console of his chair. "Why are you doing this?"

Rubrum waved a hand. "Because it's all in accordance with His will. I thought I already explained this to you. It's His bright idea, not mine."

The answer caused Eggman to groan. "Yes, yes, it's vaguery after vaguery with you, isn't it?" He pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand and gestured towards Rubrum with another. "If there's nothing else then just leave me be. I have better things to do than be listening to you." He turned to look back down the Emerald, and began leering at it. "Much, *much* better things."

"You do that." Rubrum pushed himself forwards and slid off the ceiling beams, dropping down and landing on the metal floor. "Give the cretin my regards when he wakes up," he added, nodding towards Snively's form as he turned to leave.

The only thing he received in response was a huff from Eggman, who was more focused on the Chaos Emerald in his hands than Rubrum himself. This went largely ignored by Rubrum, who walked away towards one of the nearby doors, pressed a nearby button, and waited for the door to slide open. He immediately walked through and hit the button behind him to close the door back up, after which he stopped, grabbed the duffel bag strapped to him, and removed it from his body.

"It's almost too easy," he mumbled to himself, staring down the opening and into the bag. The bright glow of a cyan-colored Chaos Emerald met his gaze, causing him to scoff, close the bag back up, and re-strap it to himself. "So," he mumbled out, digging into his pocket to bring out the piece of notebook paper he carried, "what's next?"

Chapter 40

Recursion Error

Episode 40- Love. It's crazy.

"Oh, he ain't even trying at this point."

It'd been a normal morning for Sorun. Wake up, fall back asleep, and then wake back up to begin his day. And that's what he'd been doing, right up until he'd gotten to the open doorway to Sonic's room. He stopped when he noticed there was something down there, near the bottom of the doorway. A small glint of light gleaming off a string that was tied down in a line near the floor. A tripwire.

"Another one of his pranks." Internally scoffing, Sorun carefully stepped over the barely-visible string and looked up to confirm his suspicions. He wasn't at all surprised to see that there was a bucket of what he assumed to be water resting on top of the door frame, propped up from the open door it was sitting under. *"Not your most creative one, Sonic."*

It was always small, harmless jokes that Sonic played on him, but usually they were leagues more creative than this. Like that time he'd hollowed out a bar of soap and but a bath bomb inside of it, and then waited for Sorun to take a shower with it. Somehow Sorun didn't feel that a tripwire quite compared to that.

He changed his mind when he stepped over the tripwire, only to feel something compress under his foot when he stepped around it.

"Huh- oh." He deeply frowned when he looked closer at where he stepped, and noticed there was a smaller, even more thin tripwire he hadn't seen beforehand behind the one he'd tried stepping around. *"Sonic, you sly-"*

The bucket flung forwards, and Sorun found himself drenched in water from the bucket. He sighed and let his arms limply fall against his side when he heard two things: the bucket clattering against the ground, and laughter. He made a deep sigh as he looked up, where he saw the source of the laughter.

He rarely ever saw a grin that smug on Sonic's face as he watched him step from around the corner. He knew the grin irritated him, but as much as he wanted to, Sorun couldn't be too mad at the hedgehog. He was more mad at himself for having fallen for such a prank. And in a way he could respect Sonic for getting him like that.

"You're that upset about the peanut butter I put in your gloves while you were sleeping?" Sorun asked, flicking his arms to try and throw off as much moisture as he could.

"Well, you don't wear gloves, so you don't know what it's like washing those things out," Sonic said back to him. "I thought I'd return the favor and save you a morning shower."

Sorun made a "tch" sound and rolled his eyes, while Sonic continued to silently snicker at him while holding his stomach in amusement. He began walking forwards, his wet, bare feet making a squishing sound against the floor as he moved.

"Fine, you got me. Good one," Sorun said. "Have fun cleaning this up before your parents find out you made the whole hallway wet."

"Ah-ha-ha... what?"

Clicking his tongue, Sorun clapped the now-frozen hedgehog on the shoulder and flashed him a small grin. "The price of victory is sometimes steep, Sonic."

"Oh, man..."

It was with a small, perturbed frown that Sorun looked at it. The seemingly harmless carton of orange juice that was just sitting there in the fridge. Innocent on the surface, and indeed, by all means harmless. But every time he looked at the drink he was reminded of the reason why he was on Mobius in the first place, and that him dying was partially the fault of the fact he'd had a craving for the stuff that night.

Nevertheless, he still liked the taste of the stuff, so he grabbed it, poured himself a glass, put the carton back, and closed the fridge.

"You seen Virgil anywhere?" Sorun asked, turning back towards the dinner table. Sonic was sitting at one end, arms crossed with an untouched bowl of cereal in front of him. Sorun had maneuvered to the other end of the table, where his own bowl of cereal was waiting for him. "He kinda wanders around sometimes."

Sonic shook his head as Sorun sat down in the opposite seat. "No, I haven't seen your little terror around anywhere," he said. "Sorun, why does your Chao hate me so much?"

"He doesn't hate you," Sorun denied after taking a sip of his juice. "He just has a specific way of showing affection."

"By trying to cut me?"

"What are you complaining about? Him trying to cut you is like somebody trying to cut a block of steel with safety scissors. You're super tough."

"Yeah, but it still hurts, man."

Sorun scoffed through his teeth, a small, almost nonexistent smirk on his face. "I don't know, Sonic. He likes and dislikes people." He sent the hedgehog an inquisitive look. "Can't you just ask him? You have that alien translator implant, don't you?"

Shaking his head, Sonic said, "It doesn't work on Chao."

"... The universal translator made by aliens that works on literally any species doesn't work on Chao," Sorun deadpanned.

"Look, I don't know how it works," Sonic told him. "Aliens, sure, dogs, apparently, but Chao?" He shrugged. "All I get whenever I try are just chao's. Chao are weird like that."

"That they are," Sorun agreed, some small amount of disappointment in his tone. He'd always been somewhat curious on what Virgil could say if he could talk, and he'd been hoping Sonic could provide him some answers with his translator. But Chao just had to be the special exception to that, for some reason or another. Chaos reasons, most likely.

Putting it out of his mind, Sorun reached towards his spoon, grabbed it, and frowned. It was something he'd been having to get used to, not being able to feel cold. The ability to feel temperature was lost with his ability to feel pain. It was somewhat convenient, he supposed, as he never got too hot or too cold anymore, but at the same time it was somewhat maddening as he couldn't feel the small things he was finding he'd taken for granted. Like wind brushing against his face. He still *felt* the wind, but he didn't feel the chilling touch that came with it anymore. Better than not feeling it at all, he supposed, which was probably the only reason he hadn't gone crazy from it.

Or the spoon he was holding for another instance. He still felt it, the object in his hand, the weight of it. The shape. Its smooth texture. He couldn't feel the cold from the metal, though.

If he didn't know he was dying pretty soon, he would have been more concerned over it. But knowing the end was near had a way of numbing it for him, so he'd adapted to it relatively well so far. It wasn't like the inability to feel pain wasn't that inconvenient in the first place. And as long as he read the dials on handles alright and watched himself he didn't think he'd be accidentally burning himself on hot water or something like that anytime soon. And if he did, well, it wasn't like it mattered all that much.

"I still don't see why you eat cereal dry," Sonic commented as he watched Sorun eat a spoonful of cereal. "What's wrong with milk in your cereal?"

"Only maniacs eat cereal with milk, or any solid mixed with liquid," Sorun said as he swallowed the cereal. "Same reason I hate soup and refuse to partake in it."

Sonic gave him a sideways look. "So... everybody's a maniac, then?"

"Feels like it sometimes," Sorun said as he ate another spoonful of cereal.

Sonic rolled his eyes at that. "Yeah, right," he remarked. "So what's your plan for today?"

"Tails is repairing some stuff on the Special. Asked me for help," he answered. "And by 'help' he means 'use your Bringer Claws to carry the big, heavy stuff so I can do it faster', but he worded it really nicely, so I said yes. I'm gonna go find Sally later to make sure she doesn't need me for anything, and after that I'm swinging by the hangar."

"You've been helping him out a lot recently, huh?"

Sorun shrugged. "He's a nice kid. Hard to say no to."

"Ah-huh." Sonic began tapping his finger against the table. A small grin was forming on his mouth. "Same kid that made the portal that brought you here. You seem really chummy with him now."

The spoon stopped halfway to the bowl. Sorun held it there, his body frozen, and as his eyes glanced up to meet Sonic's he sighed and dropped the spoon altogether. "You're bringing this up again?" Sorun asked him. When Sonic opened his mouth to talk back, Sorun beat him to the punch and said, "I will talk about *any* other topic than this one, Sonic. I'm not in the mood."

"Alright," Sonic agreed, sitting back in his seat to fully face Sorun. "You ever liked a girl before?"

Sorun was somewhat glad he chose that point to stop eating cereal, as he was fairly certain he would have choked on his food if he'd heard that while eating. "What...?" Sorun asked, his voice barely above a choked whisper.

"Y'know, a girl," Sonic repeated. "Like, was there anybody back in your zone you ever liked?"

"Oh." Sorun felt his shoulders sag a bit in relief. He'd tensed up pretty hard thinking Sonic had meant something else. "Nah, not really," he said, shaking his head.

Sonic looked a bit surprised at that. "Seriously? Nobody ever?"

"Nah, nobody wanted to date the short guy in class, Sonic."

"Ooh." Sonic winced at that and gave Sorun a sympathetic look. "Well, uh... there's nobody like that here," he added, and Sorun felt himself tensing back up. "You ever think about-?"

"How 'bout you, Sonic?" Sorun interrupted, pointing his spoon at the suddenly-flustered hedgehog. "Is there a girl you like?"

Sorun found himself taking great pleasure in how uncomfortable Sonic suddenly looked. "Hey, come on, I was asking you-!"

"And I said no. So no we're on to you," Sorun reasoned, giving Sonic an innocent smirk. "You're the one that changed the topic to this, and I already answered you. Now you have to answer me. It's only fair."

The blue Mobian looked like he wanted to fight the logic from the way his face scrunched up in concentration. He seemed to fail at finding an answer from the sudden look of defeat that grew on his face, though, and it was with a small groan he went a bit limp in his seat. Sorun celebrated the small victory with more cereal.

"Yeah, fine..." Sonic mumbled out, making Sorun raise his eyebrows in surprise. "There was... someone."

"Was it Amy?" Sorun asked between mouthfuls of cereal. "I know she has a thing for you."

Sonic looked about ready to gag when he heard that. "No, it's not her," he denied with a shake of his head. "I get she likes me, and she's a great friend, but I don't... really feel that way towards her, you know?"

He supposed he did. "Yeah, sure," he agreed with a nod. "So who is it?"

"Was," Sonic corrected, "and it was... it was Sally, alright?"

This time Sorun *did* choke on his cereal. He roughly coughed a few times to loosen the food particles stuck in his throat, and then affixed Sonic with a look of disbelief. He felt his eyes widen when he saw Sonic giving him a truthful, somewhat embarrassed look. "Wow, seriously? You went for the princess?" Sorun gasped out. "You really aim high, don'tcha?"

That was probably the last answer he'd been expecting. Granted he didn't know what to expect, and he supposed there was no reason it couldn't happen, but *her* ? Sally had a sense of humor and was always up to lighthearted fun, he knew that, but compared to somebody like Sonic she may as well have been a no-nonsense commander. It was practically night and day.

Apparently opposites did attract.

"Would you not say it like that?" The amount of embarrassment Sonic was displaying would have Sorun rolling on the floor laughing if he wasn't so stupefied at the moment. "We've known each other since we were kids and have been Freedom Fighters together for that long. So, you know, over time it... just kinda happened."

Plausible enough, Sorun supposed. Years fighting a tyrannical dictator with a close group of friends had to develop some relationships. Antoine and Bunnie were living proof of that. "But you're not together anymore?" Sorun asked. When Sonic shook his head, he asked, "Why not?"

"It was after the whole space thing," Sonic muttered. "I get thrown halfway across the universe, and then take weeks to get back here only to find out I was gone for almost a whole year." He threw his hand up after saying that. "How does that even make sense? How can time move faster here than how it was moving out there?"

"Probably something with the Theory of Relativity." When Sonic gave him a questioning look, Sorun explained with, "It says light is equal to time or something like that, so the farther away you are, uh... you know what, I don't really know, ask Tails."

Sonic rolled his eyes. "Some good reading that book did you, huh?"

"Gimme a break. I stopped reading after I figured portals out," Sorun mumbled. "So you get back from space. Then what happens?"

"Ah, it was during one of Mina's concert. There was this big celebration going on. Sally got... I don't even know what to call it, she just..." After struggling to find the words, Sonic sighed and shook his head. "Me being lost in space for so long did something to her. She didn't want to lose me again, so she flat-out said she didn't want me going out there fighting Eggman."

Sorun silently scoffed. He already knew what answer Sonic would have said. "And naturally you said no."

"Of course I did!" Sonic exclaimed, standing up. "It's not like there's any other super-fast hedgehogs out there to fight him! There's Shadow, but he's with G.U.N. doing his thing," he said. "I fight Eggman because I can do it and make it back okay, and because if I'm the one doing it then people who can't who'd come back way messed up or worse trying don't have to. I fight him to protect

everybody." He sighed and flopped back in his seat. "But yeah, she didn't see it like that."

"How bad did it go?"

"She slapped me in front of everybody at the concert and ran off."

Sorun winced and hissed through his teeth. "Oooh, that's... yeah, that's bad." He felt like he'd been slapped himself just hearing that.

"You're tellin' me," Sonic mumbled in agreement. "She even called me selfish. Can you believe that?"

He couldn't, actually. Sonic, selfish? Sonic was the most selfless person Sorun knew. His reasons for fighting, the very reasons he'd just explained, was so selfless Sorun found a hard time seeing what part of it was selfish.

He almost heard whispers of Dante when he heard Sonic speak. About one fighting to protect what one loved.

"No, none of your reasoning is selfish. Sally's wrong." He almost felt a bit angry hearing what she did. Her saying that? He really wouldn't have believed it if it came from anybody other than Sonic. She seemed so level-headed that she was one of the last people Sorun would expect to do something like that. In front of a crowd of people, no less.

Love made people do strange things, apparently. He guessed he could see where she came from in doing that if he looked at it from that angle. Even then he could still scarcely believe it.

"Don't gotta lay it on that thick," Sonic said, scratching at one of his ears. "I... kinda get why Sally did what she did, I don't really blame her, but I just couldn't do something like that, you know? So we broke it off." He sighed, crossed his arms, and looked down. "We were kinda apart for a while after that, but we were still friends. Bunch of stuff happened afterwards, but otherwise everything was

still good. Then Eggman and the Emeralds happened and, well... I guess it took our minds off the break up, because we kinda got back to normal after that. Too much going on, I guess."

"You still miss being with her?"

"... I don't know. We've both moved on, Sorun, and I don't really wanna go digging the past up like that, but... I just don't know."

"Mm." Sorun nodded at Sonic, and then took a last bite of cereal. He removed the spoon from his mouth, and then scowled a bit when he saw a bit of red straining the metal. "That's really rough, man," Sorun told him as he sat up from his seat, empty dishes in hand.

As Sorun stopped in front of the sink, Sonic nodded. "Yeah, tell me about it." He craned his head backwards just as Sorun finished rinsing his spoon off. "Would you have done the same thing if someone you really liked asked you to do that?" he asked.

Sorun, halfway through washing his bowl, paused in thought. He only needed a few seconds before resuming with washing the bowl. "I don't really think me sitting around with all my powers would be a good use of them," Sorun answered. He set aside the cleaned bowl and reached for the empty glass he brought over before continuing to speak. "Of course I don't want to fight, but I want to see people hurt even less. And like it or not I have the powers and know how to use them. If somebody asked me to stop just so I wouldn't get hurt..." He paused to let out a rueful chuckle. "Well, I guess I'd hope that they'd see my position and understand. And if they wanted to break up, that's as much their choice as it is my choice to continue to fight. A really big shame, but not much to do about it. That's the way it is, I guess."

"Yeah, I figured pretty much the same. That's why I never pushed it with Sally after we broke up," Sonic agreed. A single, small laugh escaped him. "It's really funny hearin' ya say all that, though. Kinda reminds me of that talk we had the first night you were here. You remember that?"

"I have no recollection of this night you speak of." Finished washing his dishes, and turning the faucet off a bit rougher than he ought to have, Sorun spun around to face Sonic while leaning against the sink. He roughly tapped on the kitchen counter when he saw that knowing smirk on Sonic's face. "I still think she made a wrong call," he said in an effort to steer back towards the previous topic, "but... I guess I can't really talk, never having been in the same position. That and all the princess stuff she has to deal with, leading the Freedom Fighters..." He shrugged and pushed off the sink. "Yeah, I don't know. She's got a lot of stuff to deal with. No telling what goes on in her head with all that."

Sonic gave him an agreeing nod. "Yeah, she's... she's real strong like that," he said. "Really amazes me sometimes."

Sorun said nothing in response to this. Instead, his eyes drifted over to a nearby clock, and then back to Sonic. "I gotta go," he said.

"Alright. Seeya," Sonic said, waving at Sorun as he made it to the front door. Sorun briefly waved back at Sonic, quickly slipped on the pair of black boots by the door, and then departed without another word.

Sorun was fairly certain that he was in the clear for any Freedom Fighter stuff for today. Most of the time he was told in advance if something he was needed for was coming up, and if he was needed immediately somebody was usually sent for him if he wasn't already at the HQ, which most days he was. But ever since Eggman's forces had been pushed all the way back to his city, freeing up everywhere else, his role as a Freedom Fighter had been... diminished, somewhat. Everybody's had, really, as there wasn't nearly as much fighting that needed to be done as there used to be.

A blessing for Sorun, he supposed, as it meant less opportunities to risk his neck, and the same went for everybody else. It was also a sign that they were actually winning this thing, and it made him feel a bit more at ease. Above that, though, it gave him more excuses to

laze about, which he would have used this day to exploit to the fullest if it wasn't for the fact he made prior obligations to Tails. But that could come later. First was to find Sally and make sure he was actually free for the day.

Which brought him here, to Castle Acorn. He'd only ever been here three time, once when he'd been escorted by Sally, once when he'd been invited, and another time when he'd basically broken in. Ignoring that latter event, Sorun was never actually sure if he was allowed to just waltz into the place unannounced. With an escort, maybe, but on his own? He was pretty confident it was okay, being a Freedom Fighter had to have some perks and seeing as he was technically a foreigner he could make an argument for not being familiar with the customs involved in this, but he'd rather just avoid all that hassle entirely. Which usually meant he'd avoid the *castle* entirely, but he'd already teleported to Freedom HQ, and Sally hadn't been there. So if she wasn't here, that meant she was likely in the castle somewhere. The castle Sorun wasn't too sure he was allowed free entrance into.

The solution he came up with was that he was just going to sneak in. Usually this wouldn't be a feat he'd be able to accomplish; The surrounding area and the castle itself may have been big, but they also had plenty of guards keeping watch at all times to ensure nobody could sneak past them. And usually that remained true. But Sorun had the ability to Trick, so the plan was for him to just teleport to a nearby window and then search around until he found Sally.

Of course, that plan fell apart when he just happened to catch Sally on a nearby hill overlooking the castle. He counted himself lucky for the encounter that saved him having to snoop around the castle, and then a mischievous idea came to him. Nothing too harmful; he just wanted to give her a bit of a scare. So he Tricked right behind her, tapped her shoulder, and whispered, "Boo."

"Eek!" She immediately whirled around, hands reflexively forming into a defensive posture. She relaxed when she saw it was just

Sorun, though her expression did turn a bit sour when she saw the Earthling snickering at her. "Ugh, Sorun!"

"In my defense it's really hard not to abuse that," Sorun said in defense of himself. "Anyways, hey. I just came to ask if there was anything I needed to do today, because I promised to help Tails with something later on so I was, y'know, just making sure."

She crossed her arms. "You came to make sure of that *after* promising to help him?"

"... Admittedly it probably wasn't my smartest move."

With a roll of her eyes, Sally said, "No, Sorun, I didn't have anything for you to do. Ever since Eggman got forced all the way to New Megaopolis, there... well, there hasn't really been much for the Freedom Fighters to do. All's been really quiet." She sighed quietly and turned around, back towards the direction of the castle. "I'd be concerned that all the quiet means he's preparing something big in retaliation for everything we've done, but without any safe way into New Megaopolis, there's not really anything we can do but prepare in the meantime."

Sorun hummed in agreement. She was right; there wasn't anything to do but wait for him to make a move. For him now it was just waiting to get the last of the Emeralds. He enjoyed the reprieve, but he couldn't help but also note the uneasiness that came with it. It seemed that Sally suffered from the same worries as him.

"So... what are you doing all the way up here, staring so forlornly out at the castle like that?" Sorun asked, attempting to steer the conversation away.

She shook her head. "I'm not forlorn." She looked to the side at a nearby rock, and then walked over to it. She then proceeded to sit down on the rock, her eyes still cast on the castle in the distance. "I'm just thinking. Now that Eggman isn't such an overbearing threat on us, I can focus my attention on other things."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

"Just the future, I guess," she airily answered. "You ever think about the future?"

"... I try not to," Sorun said as he sat down on the ground besides the rock Sally sat on.

"Really?" She turned her head to him and gave him an inquisitive look. "Why not?"

"Because what's there for me when this is all done with? The whole Freedom Fighter thing?" Nothing but oblivion, he supposed, but he asked in part to direct the conversation and in part to avoid delving into that subject matter. He scoffed and briefly flipped a hand up. "It's practically all I got goin' for me, Sally, but that can't last forever. So what's left for me after that?" He sighed and shook his head. "I don't know, so I try not to look too hard into it. I'll just deal with it when it gets here."

"That's a pragmatic way of looking at it, I suppose," Sally said. "But it's not like you won't have your life to look forwards to living once this war is over, right?"

Sorun had to resist making a withering sigh. "Ah-huh." He began tapping at the ground. "So you were saying about the future you were thinking of?"

Nodding, Sally turned back towards the direction of the castle. "Just what you would expect. The future of my family, friends, my kingdom and people... Mostly, though, I've been thinking about my future. What life for me will be like once the war is over. It's not like we haven't been able to balance living normal lives in-between being Freedom Fighters, so it won't be *that* big a shift, but... I just wonder about things." She sighed. "Hey, Sorun? Have you ever... liked somebody? Romantically speaking?"

"... Are we seriously doing this again?" Sorun sighed through his nose, just barely grinning as he shook his head in slight disbelief. "Not really, no," he answered. "What about you?"

"Well, you might find this hard to believe, but, well..." She began to nervously rub at her arm. "There was a time where Sonic and I were... together."

"Oh my god, we are doing this again." Sorun shook his head again. He could have just said he knew the story already from Sonic, but he refrained from doing so. He was too curious at hearing her side of the story, so he decided to just pretend he didn't know anything in the hopes he could figure out what made her act the way she did. "So what happened?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"It was after when the Xorda invaded us, when they deployed this giant weapon. I told you about it once, right?"

"Sometime way back, sure."

"Right, well, Sonic sacrificed himself to save us all from it, because *of course* he would, but instead of dying he... somehow got lost in space," she said. "He says it only took him weeks to make his way back to Mobius, but for us here it was almost a whole year." Her voice suddenly grew quiet. "It... hurt for so long, thinking he was gone. Like there was a hole in my chest that just wouldn't heal itself, and until he just suddenly showed up completely fine one day it wouldn't stop hurting." A light smile found its way onto her face. "But then he did show up one day. He finally made it back, and I... I honestly thought I was looking at a ghost until I held him in my arms and he explained to me what happened.

"For a while after that everything was fine, but then... but then that night had to happen." Sally suddenly began scowling. "It was during one of Mina's concerts. We got into an argument." She made a frustrated sigh. "He actually wanted to go straight back to fighting Eggman, and I told him I didn't want him doing that. He wouldn't

budge, so I gave him an ultimatum, right then and there: it was either staying with me or fighting Eggman."

"So what'd you do when he chose Eggman over you?"

Her eyes drifted down at Sorun, almost looking annoyed that he'd said that with so much certainty and had been right. She then turned back to the castle. "I slapped him and called him selfish in front of everybody."

"What a shocker." Sorun turned his head up at Sally. "Don't you think that was a bit much?" he asked her. "Slapping the guy?"

Sally looked back down at Sorun, her eyes locking with his. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I think *you* were the selfish one for doing that," he said with a straight face.

There was a myriad of emotions that flickered across Sally's face in a short amount of time. So much that Sorun couldn't quite figure out what she was thinking when he said that until the very end, when she levelled at him with an unusually calm look. "Why do you think that?" she asked, and Sorun couldn't help but note how her voice lost a bit of its normal tone.

Slightly worried on the inside and remaining completely calm on the outside, Sorun turned his head towards the castle. "Sonic is the most selfless person I've ever met in my entire life. On an emotional level I can't comprehend the guy," Sorun admitted, making Sally's eyes widen slightly. "What I do understand is that he deeply loves everybody. Not just his friends and family, not even just his neighbors, but just people in general. It's... startling to me, how one person like him can care so much. So I'm not surprised at all that Sonic chose fighting Eggman over you."

Reaching down by his side, Sorun grabbed a small pebble and chucked it down the hill. "Sonic," Sorun continued, "fights him

because he loves everybody. He can't stand the idea that there's somebody like Eggman out there hurting people at his whim, destroying families and whole villages. And he gets to be special in that he's one of the very few people in the world with the power to do something about it." He threw another stone. "He fights because he's one of the only people that actually *can* fight. He does it because, above all else, he wants to use his power to protect everybody he loves, which just happens to be everybody. You included."

He threw a third stone and waited for Sally to respond. It took her quite a few seconds, but eventually she quietly asked him, "Isn't that the same reason you came back here after you ran? Because you wanted to use your powers to protect?"

"... Something like that." A fourth stone. "The desire to protect isn't exactly unique; what makes him unique is that it's a desire to protect everyone. Sonic's just special in that he can make it a reality with his abilities. And your leadership. And with help from all his friends with their own skills. And very recently some idiot who eats Chaos Emeralds like he eats chili dogs." A fifth stone. "You... must have been somebody really special to him if he chose to give you *that* kind of love when he gives so much love to everybody else. That's why I think it was selfish of you for forcing that kind of choice on him. He wasn't going to choose his own love over everybody else, because he's just too selfless to do something like that. You may as well have just said you were breaking up with him and saved everybody the drama."

As he was tossing a sixth stone, he heard Sally sigh out loud. "I know," she said. "That stubbornly selfless nature of his is one of the reasons I fell in love with him in the first place. It's also why I just couldn't do it anymore," she mumbled out. "I was there mourning at his grave every single day while he was in space. My heart was in *pieces* , Sorun, and when he came back and suddenly everything was better but he wanted to go back to risking his life, I just..." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I couldn't go through with that again. That heartache. I don't know if I'd be able to bear it."

Sorun didn't say anything at first. He simply just rolled a seventh pebble in the palm of his hand, staring down at it as he silently thought. "I've never had my heart broken, so I can't sympathize. But I think I can understand why you did what you did." He threw the pebble. "You don't think abandoning the guy over a what-if was a bit hasty, though? Especially seeing as the war is going in our favor? That what-if won't even be a reality once Eggman is gone."

Sally opened her eyes back up and stared out at the castle. "Maybe," she hesitantly agreed, "but it's all in the past now. We've moved on, we're friends again, and I don't want to risk making things awkward by trying for romance again. It's not what I want."

"Then what *do* you want?"

"Well, number one I want you to stop throwing rocks before you hit somebody with one."

With the eighth stone in his hand, Sorun looked back towards Sally. She was looking at him from the side of her eyes with a small grin on her face, causing Sorun to make an amused scoff and drop the rock back onto the ground next to him.

"Alright, fine," he said with a roll of his eyes. "Was there anything else the princess wanted?"

"An end to the war and peace for the Kingdom of Acorn would be nice."

"We're working on it."

"Pfft." She held a hand to her mouth to stifle the laughter that threatened to escape. "Then in that case, I think that I'm good for now." She breathed out, smile growing a bit bigger. After that Sally turned her body around and slid off the rock she'd been sitting on. "You know what, Sorun? I really think I needed this," she said. "Thanks. For talking with me about this. It's really helped make things clear for me."

"I should be the one thanking you," Sorun said as he rose up to his feet. "You've taught me an important lesson."

"Oh, yeah?" she said, placing a hand on her hip as Sorun turned to face her. "And what's that?"

"Romance is too complicated, I'm never dealing with it to preserve my sanity."

She laughed out loud at that, trying and failing to stifle it yet again. Even Sorun managed to grin at the sight, the pale teen breathing out a chuckle while looking out to the side.

Inhaling from the laughter, Sally looked back at Sorun. "Oh, don't say that," she said with a smile. "I'm sure you'd be fine."

"I doubt it," he said.

"No, really, I am," Sally reaffirmed. "You can be really insightful and thoughtful when you want to. I know there's someone that appreciates that."

"You're givin' me too much credit." Sorun paused, and looked up at the sun. "You know what, I gotta go hit Tails up. Guy's probably already at the hangar wondering where I am." Yamato manifested in Sorun's grasp. He moved to pull it from the sheath, and then glanced back at Sally. "You want a portal to somewhere?"

She shook her head. "I actually like to walk around, unlike some people," she said, giving him a smirk.

Rolling his eyes, Sorun removed Yamato from the sheath. "I'm not ashamed of my laziness." He cut a portal in the space in front of them. "Have a nice day, Sally."

"Same to you." Sally waved to Sorun as he began stepping into the portal. The Earthling waved back at the Mobian chipmunk right before disappearing through the hole in space.

"Can you please hand me the socket wrench, Sorun?"

"Socket wrench. Right." From the stool he stood on, Sorun looked at the small workbench besides him and at the various tools scattered around. He found himself blanching at the seemingly dozens of wrench-looking devices that seemed to be staring back at him. Gulping, he turned back forwards, towards the fox Mobian laying his back on the floor and under the Freedom Fighter Special with his hands up inside of the large ship's electronic guts. "Which one was that again?" Sorun asked.

"The one with the circular head."

"That tells me nothing," Sorun thought as he looked back at the tools. Almost half of the wrenches he was looking at had circular heads. Biting his lower lip, he had his Bringer Claw choose one at random and extend out to the fox. Tails reached up, took the tool, and went back to work, making Sorun breath out in relief when he seemed to have chosen the right one. Then his breath hitched when Tails paused and held the tool back out.

"Sorun," he said, "this is a sprocket wrench."

"That's what you asked for."

"No, I need a *socket* wrench. This is a *sprocket* wrench."

"... There's a difference?"

"Ugh..." Tails pulled himself out from the underside of the giant ship, and then hovered up into the air. He flew towards the workbench Sorun sat next to, tossed the sprocket wrench into the nearby toolbox, and then picked up a different wrench that, to Sorun's eyes, may as well have been identical to the one he tried giving the fox. "This is a socket wrench," he said.

Sorun squinted at the wrench. "... I'm pretty sure that's the same wrench I gave you."

The flat look that Tails gave Sorun shattered all of the teen's confidence. "Why did I ask you to come and help me again?" Tails asked.

"Because you need me to carry stuff like that so you don't have to set up the chain-pulley thing." Sorun nodded his head to the left, towards the back end of the FF Special where one of its large thrusters was detached and lying on the ground besides it. A thruster that was bigger than ones Sorun had seen on commercial planes back on Earth.

Tails nodded. "Ohhh, right... Speaking of which, help me with that."

"Ah-huh." Blue, feathered arms appeared behind Sorun, and then extended forwards. They grabbed onto the thruster and rose it up towards the back end of the ship, where it had been connected previously before Tails had taken it off. Sorun pressed it up against the spot and asked, "Just hold it here, right?"

"Yeah, that's good!" After quickly grabbing an assortment of tools from the workbench, Tails flew up and towards the back section of the ship. Sorun had grabbed the stool he was sitting on meanwhile and followed him, and then after setting the stool down right under the thruster sat down and watched Tails work.

"So," Sorun began, "how have you been?"

"Pretty great, actually," Tails answered, his voice carrying over the clanking and whirring sounds of... whatever he was doing up there that Sorun couldn't quite make out. "Things have been really quiet now, so I've had a lot of time to myself to catch up on some things."

"Cool." Sorun took a glance around. "You know," he said, "this hangar is... kinda big, even with the ship and your plane. What's up with that?"

"Well, this place is technically an air base for the kingdom's aerial vehicles. We... kind of lost most of those after Eggman got the seven Emeralds," Tails answered. "My plane and the Special were pretty much the only things that survived during those days, and during a really bad attack the air base actually got hit. We used to have a proper runway, you know, and not the giant patch of dirt out there we have now." He made a loud sigh. "But, with everything that had been going on, I guess nobody had the time to repair the thing. Maybe now that everything's way quiet they'll have time now."

Sorun quietly nodded, not all that interested. "Neat. So otherwise you're all good?"

"I guess." Tails flew over to the other side of the turbine and began working again. "With all this extra time I've been thinking. 'Bout stuff and... other things that I haven't had time to think of for a while." He cut himself off when he began to loudly drill at something. "Hey, Sorun? Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Have you, um... have you ever had a crush on anybody?"

"What is up with today?" Sorun went as far as to slap his own palm against his face, the sound of which was drowned out when Tails continued to drill. He could hardly believe he was being asked this again, and by Tails of all people. If anything he would have thought somebody as young as him wouldn't even ask something like that. "No, not at all."

The drilling ceased. "Oh." Another short series of drillings. "I did, once."

The hand remained on Sorun's face, and he found himself sighing into it. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." When Sorun removed his hand and looked up, he saw Tails hovering next to the thruster and looking down at him. "You can let

go, by the way. It's secured."

The Bringer Claws disappeared, and with them left Sorun's desire to remain here for much longer. But before he could even try and think up an excuse to leave, Tails had flown down, grabbed a second stool, and set it up next to Sorun before sitting down in it. Sorun, meanwhile, was visibly deflating in his own stool.

"It was something that happened a while ago, and now that we don't have to worry about Eggman all that much and I'm not worrying all the time I keep coming back to it," Tails continued while settling in his stool. "I don't know who else to go to for this. My parents would be too embarrassing, and everybody else, well..." He shook his head. "It's just too awkward."

"Can't you talk to Sonic about this?" Sorun asked. "Don't you look up to him?"

"Yeah. I do. He's... he's like a big brother to me." Tails hesitantly looked to the side. "But this isn't something I can talk to him about."

"But you can with me?"

"Well... you never met the person I'm talking about like everybody else did," he explained. "And you... don't treat me like a kid like some of the others do sometimes."

"Yeah, because I don't know a single kid that can do whatever you did to a ship turbine like that," Sorun said, gesturing towards the ship. "Jeez, I can't even do that. I can't even fly a plan like you, either."

"Ain't that the truth..." Tails muttered out, causing Sorun to give him a dirty glare. "Anyway," he continued, looking back at Sorun just as his expression turned back to normal, "her name was Fiona."

A low sigh left Sorun. He didn't want to do this. In reality there was nothing stopping him from just getting up and leaving right this

instant, but Tails had already started getting into whatever he wanted to talk about. Leaving by now would be incredibly rude. So he resigned to his fate and slumped forwards in his stool a bit as he listened to the fox talk.

"She was a fox, like me. She... also had a really rough past and came at odds with the Freedom Fighters some times, but eventually she came around and started living in Knothole with us. Even helped us out a few times." A small smile began growing on his face. "We hung out a bunch, and I... really started to like her. A bunch. I liked her all the way back during the whole robot-double thing, but that's a whole different story," he said, making Sorun crease his eyebrows in confusion. "But then," Tails continued, and the small smile on his face faded, "Sonic came back from space."

The confusion lacing Sorun's features increased. "Isn't... that a good thing...?"

"Well, yeah, of course it was. We all thought he was gone forever, so when he came back it was really great. But then his breakup with Sally happened, and-" He cut himself off, eyes going widened. "Oh, wait, I don't know if I should tell you-"

"Sonic already told me."

"Oh. Phew." Tails relaxed a bit, and then continued speaking. "Well, yeah, they had their breakup, and after a while... Fiona began dating Sonic."

"... Wait, how old was she again?"

Tails shrugged. "Around Sonic and Sally's age."

Sorun blinked. "Uh-"

"And it's just stupid, you know!?" Tails suddenly exclaimed, throwing his hands out in frustration. "He *knew* I liked her but he still dated her! What kind of big brother does that!?"

"Did I wake up in some weird alternate universe or something?" At this point Sorun wouldn't even be surprised if that was what happened, because he wasn't recognizing any of the behavior anybody around him was displaying. Sonic being so abashed while telling his story, hearing about Sally's actions, the way he was seeing Tails act right now. It seemed so radically different than what he was used to seeing out of them.

Was it all really because of love? Lined up with stories he heard back on Earth, both real-life and in fiction. He wasn't exactly an expert on the subject, but it had to be true if it made people act weird like this. Love really did make people do strange things. Or in this case a childish crush, because the longer Tails went on the more Sorun suspected that what he was listening to was far from love.

"So did... did she die...?" Sorun hesitantly asked.

Tails shook his head. "No. She betrayed us and ran off with Scourge."

"..." Sorun rolled his hand at Tails. "I don't know who that is."

"He's a Sonic from a different zone," Tails explained. "It's like a mirror zone of this one. Moebius. He's... he's a real bad guy."

"... Huh?" He needed a few seconds to process the sentence Tails just said, after which he had to hold a hand to his suddenly-throbbing forehead. "There's an evil Sonic, what...?"

"Well I wouldn't call him..." Tails paused, and then shook his head. "No, I guess that... kinda describes him pretty good. Yeah."

And now had that in the back of his mind forever. That was great. "Kind of a weird thing to drop on me so casually, but whatever," Sorun muttered under his breath. He decided he wasn't going to look too far into that little nugget of knowledge. He already had an evil mad doctor to deal with. He didn't need a evil Sonic or whatever

Scourge was on top of that. "So she ran off with Not-Sonic," Sorun said, "and then what?"

"Then nothing. We never saw her or Scourge again after that. Too busy with Eggman." Tails sighed out and rubbed at his forehead. "She even slapped me right before she disappeared with Scourge. I just wanted her to stay."

"What is it with these girls and slapping people?" Sorun loudly exhaled, leaned forwards, and steepled his hands together. This didn't sound at all like what happened between Sonic and Sally. this sounded like something way more worse, and Sorun didn't know what he was supposed to say to Tails. Because he didn't know how to deal with romance woes. Or to deal with what he strongly suspected to be a childish crush for somebody that likely didn't even care about Tails considering she was an older teenager and Tails was eleven.

He found himself wanting less and less to be involved with this the longer this went on. But, he was in it too far to back out now. So Sorun took a deep breath and tried his best with what he had.

"Tails, have you... have you ever considered that, just maybe, Fiona wasn't, you know... a good person?" he asked, hands still steepled together.

The fact that Tails looked like Sorun just punched him in the face didn't bode well for the Earthling. "Why would you say something like that?"

"Well, I mean... all you told me of her was that she was a bad person who was good for a bit, and then slapped you and ran off with a bad person," Sorun said. "That doesn't, like... it feels like you're leaving a lot of details out, and admittedly I don't know the whole picture, but the picture you did paint of her wasn't a very good one." When Tails maintained that hurt look on his face, Sorun sighed and tried again. "What I'm trying to say is... maybe she was, possibly, perhaps... taking advantage of you because you're-"

"Because I'm what?" Tails snapped. "A kid?" He scoffed and turned away from Sorun. "That's what Sonic said."

"He said that because he's right!" Sorun's mind screamed. He made a soft groan and tried rethinking his words. "Tails, in terms of intelligence an maturity-" Sorun internally winced, somewhat doubting that second aspect more and more, "- you're far above a child. But you're making it sound like you were just someone she hanged out with while her eyes were on Sonic. And then the other Sonic." He began breathing a bit easier when he saw Tails begin to relax a bit. "What I'm trying to say is... I don't see you as a child. But are you sure Fiona didn't see you as one?"

"... I don't know," Tails finally admitted after a long moment of silence. He sighed and slumped forwards, both his ears and his tails drooping. "You know what she said to me when she slapped me? That I should never trust anybody," he mumbled out.

"Well, that's just plain wrong."

"I know," he agreed, "but I... maybe you're right," he sighed out. "I mean, it's not like I've never considered what you're telling me as the truth, that... that Fiona was a bad person, or that she tried to be good but just couldn't do it. I don't know what she was thinking when she went with Scourge. Sometimes I wonder if we could have done things different and could have gotten her to stay here," he said. "I just... keep thinking back to Sonic. And how she chose him over me."

Clicking his tongue, Sorun looked ahead and gestured his hand out. "Listen, Tails. You're eleven. You got a whole life ahead of you," he said. "I mean, Sonic and Sally got over each other and moved on, right? There's no reason you can't do the same thing. Just keep living life until you find someone else. You got time." He clapped a hand on Tails' shoulder. " *Believe me* , you got time. Jeez, maybe even wait a few more years 'til you're older before you even start considering it. Get your own stuff in order first, know what I mean?"

"Huh. Maybe... that makes sense." Tails blinked at Sorun with wide eyes as he removed his hand, and then looked down at his two feet that he was slowly kicking in thought. "I guess... I guess waiting couldn't hurt. But with Fiona, I... I don't know. I'll have to think on it." He looked back up at Sorun as a wide smile grew on his face. "I'll save that for later. Thanks, Sorun. It felt nice talking this over with you."

"Yeah man sure don't mention it." By now Sorun was completely sagging in his stool, quietly sighing out as he wiped a hand over his forehead. *"I don't know how I did it, but I think I did it. Whatever 'it' is. Man, this is exhausting..."*

"Sorun? Can I ask you something?" When Sorun gave an affirmative grunt, Tails asked, "Is that what you're doing? Waiting until you have your life together before considering being with somebody?"

And now Sorun was sitting up completely straight, Tails' question having startled all sense of weariness out of him. He glanced to the side at Tails, and then breathed out while rubbing his neck and looking the other way. "Did somebody put you up to this?" he asked. "Is this why you brought this whole topic up to begin with? It was Sonic, wasn't it?"

Tails shook his head. "No, I'm just wondering," he said. "You never really talk about this kind of thing-"

"Because I'm never interested in it," Sorun quickly replied. "Tails, I'm a social outcast. What part of that screams 'I'm looking for romance' to you?"

"I mean... you're not *really* a social outcast," Tails denied. "Not anymore, at least. I see you out all the time now."

"Ugh, Tails..." Running a hand over his face, Sorun stood up out of the stool. "Why do you gotta go and say that?" Shaking his head, he turned back to the fox. "It's just not something I want, alright? So drop it."

"Alright, I will. Sheesh." Rolling his eyes, Tails jumped up off his own stool and stepped in front of Sorun. "Well, I really just needed help with the thruster," he said. "I can handle the rest on my own. Oh, wait, before I forget!"

Tails' tails suddenly began spinning up, causing his body to lift up into the air. Sorun watched as he flew towards the workbench. He hovered over it for a few moments, and then made a happy sound, grabbed something, and flew back to Sorun before touching back down at the ground. He then held something up to Sorun: one of the wrist communicators the other Freedom Fighters wore.

"Rotor finally finished making a wrist communicator with reinforced parts for Knuckles, so hopefully he won't break this one. Rotor said he'd slap Knuckles if he managed to bust it anyway," Tails said, a small, sheepish grin on his face. "I promised I'd give it to Knuckles later since Rotor was busy with something, but there's still a few more repairs I wanna make on the Freedom Fighter Special. Would you mind giving it to him for me?"

After regarding the wrist communicator for a few moments, Sorun shrugged and took it from Tails' hand. "Sure, I can do that real quick," he agreed. "You know where he is?"

"I'd think he'd be at the HQ. If not there then probably in one of the training zones like usual."

"Gotcha." Sorun pocketed the wrist communicator, and then manifested Yamato. "Alright, I'll go do that now. Seeya 'round."

"Bye!" Tails waved the Earthling off as he made a portal with his sword. Sorun waved back at him, and then exited through the portal.

After looking around for a bit Sorun had finally found Knuckles. Like Tails had said he'd been at one of the training grounds if not at the HQ, and in this case, it was the small field of wooden posts. Sorun had found him sitting on the ground against one of the posts, and

interestingly enough Julie-Su was there with him. She was leaning against a post next to his, and the two seemed to be in deep conversation over something. Something happy, Sorun wagered, from the nice smiles they had on both of their faces.

Well, whatever it was, Sorun wasn't much interested in it. He just wanted to drop this wrist communicator off and then go do something else. Maybe go for a walk around Knothole or something. Clear his head of all this relationship stuff everybody kept feeding him.

"Yeah, and then- oh, hey. Sorun!" They both turned their heads towards the approaching Earthling, with Knuckles waving at him. "What's going on?"

"Nothing much. Rotor finally finished this reinforced wrist thing for you," Sorun said, digging into his pocket and taking the communicator out. "He said he'd slap you if you managed to break this one." Sorun craned his neck over his shoulder. "I'd take it seriously if I were you, been a lot of that going around."

"Hah! I'll be sure to." Knuckles caught the wrist communicator after Sorun tossed it to him, and then asked, "Is it only the one? Rotor said he'd make Mighty one, too."

Sorun shrugged. "Well, Tails gave it to me to give it to you, but he only had one, yeah."

"He probably still working on it, Knuckles. You know how swamped he is with his projects sometimes." Julie-Su pushed herself off of the post she leaned on and turned to Knuckles. "I'll go check up on him and see what's taking so long."

"Alright. See you later."

"See you." They both gave each other smiles, followed by Julie-Su turning around to walk away. She gave Sorun a brief nod, the teen nodding back to the other teen as she walked away.

Once out of sight, Sorun turned from the direction Julie-Su walked off back to Knuckles. He did a double-take when he saw the large smile that was still plastered on the echidna's face, his eyesl staring back to the direction Julie-Su had walked in. It was only when Sorun cleared his throat did he finally turn his attention to him.

"You, uh... doing okay there, man?" Sorun asked, quirking an eyebrow at the red Mobian.

"Oh, yeah. Totally. Just, uh... me an' Julie-Su were just talking about, y'know, stuff and..." He sighed, and then affixed his eyes upwards at Sorun's. "You ever seriously been into a girl, Sorun? Like, *seriously* been into one?"

"Oh, for the love of...!" Sorun had to resist slapping his own face again as an utterly exasperated feeling overtook him. "No, Knuckles. I haven't," Sorun snapped in a tone that made the echidna flinch. "So what's it gonna be, Knuckles? Huh? What's the story? What's the super-tragic love story you're gonna tell me that somehow involves Julie-Su that has you questioning everything you're doing, huh? What is it!?"

Sorun's rant had grown so heated that Knuckles had actually leaned a bit back into the post he sat against, violet eyes widened and an arm held out in front of him. It was only when Sorun finished with heavy breaths did Knuckles choose to finally lower his arm and speak. "Um... I don't know what's going on with you, but me and Julie-Su are going steady," he slowly said. "There's... not really any issues between us."

"... Oh." Sighing in frustration at his own outburst, Sorun walked over to the post Julie-Su had been leaning against previously. He less sat and more crashed into a sitting position on the ground, leaning against the post while Knuckles warily eyed him. "Sorry man, it's just- for some reason everybody's been giving me their relationship problems all day, and I'm sick of hearing it," he said. "Is there some kind of holiday or something I'm unaware of?"

Knuckles shook his head. "Not that I know of," he said. "So I guess you don't want to hear about me and Ju-"

"Noooo..." Sorun groaned out, causing Knuckles to smirk a bit. He groaned so much that he'd leaned forwards enough so that his face landed into his lap. "And it's 'Julie-Su and I', not the other way around," Sorun corrected, voice muffled by his lap.

At that, Knuckles rolled his eyes. "What are you, a grammar teacher?"

Sorun's head picked itself straight back up with enough speed that Knuckles started a bit from it. "If you're gonna speak the language, then speak it properly," he angrily grumbled out. "But," he said, expression relaxing, "I'd rather talk about anything else than anything relating to romance of any kind, Knuckles. I'm romanced out for the day. For the month. For the rest of my life."

"Rest of your life's kinda a long time to swear that off, ain't it?"

"Oh boy you'd think, anyway!" Sorun loudly clapped his hands, making Knuckles jump slightly. "You know what I want to hear about? Some echidna history," Sorun said. "I already got a bit of the lore from Espio, but he just told me the recent stuff. Not really any real echidna history, like why you guys live up on a floating island. Or why there's a floating island."

"The lore?" Knuckles repeated with a small grin. "Is that what you call it?"

"Yeah, man, the lore. You know, like... just *the lore* , man."

"The lore," Knuckles repeated, testing the word out. He made a small, satisfied "hmph" sound, nodding his head. "Sounds like a word dad would use," he mumbled out before turning back to Sorun. "I don't really know much, but I can tell you what I can if you really want. You sure you want to hear it, though? It's pretty complicated."

"Complicated?" Sorun had to laugh at that. "Let me tell you about complicated, Knuckles. Complicated is the position I find myself in every single day. Complicated is every single problem and adventure I hear the Freedom Fighters have or have had, but whenever somebody tells me it they play it off like completely normal because here, it is normal. I literally just learned from Tails that there's apparently an alternate universe full of evil versions of you guys and he played it off like it was nothing."

"Oh, Moebius? Yeah, they've been trouble a couple of times."

"See, see!? This is what I mean!" Sorun exclaimed, gesturing wildly out in front of him. "Every single complicated thing in this world is normalized to an everyday affair because everybody is desensitized to the sheer ridiculousness of it all, so when *you* , Knuckles, tells me that 'it's complicated', you really worry me."

There was a certain look on Knuckles face following his rant; one that Sorun couldn't quite place. Somber, perhaps. That was the closest word Sorun could think of. He supposed he understood why- if Espio was to be believed his kind was decimated, and a large majority of what was left were cyborg nuts fighting a civil war somewhere on Angel Island. He couldn't begin to imagine what sort of history would have lead to that happening, let alone why the echidna were living on a floating island in the first place.

But, he was curious. And desperate to get away from the topic of romance. Seeing as Knuckles himself was an echidna and a native to the island, it made sense to ask him.

"I'll try and keep it simple," Knuckles assured him. "You still up for it?"

"Yeah, man." Sorun nodded at the echidna. "Go for it."

"Alright, then." Knuckles took a deep, steadying breath, and then focused his eyes on Sorun. "Well, I guess to start with..."

What followed was a deluge of information that may as well have been incomprehensible nonsense to Sorun's ears. He'd tried to listen to and understand Knuckles, really, he had, but the only important details Sorun managed to glean out from the long-winded explanation was that he truly didn't know if the echidna species as a whole was alright in the head. Because he sincerely doubted it listening to Knuckles.

He hadn't even needed to get the full story to come to this conclusion. He'd gotten as far as their species having lifted the island up from Downunda to avoid a meteor sometime long in the past before he started losing Knuckles. Everything from the history afterwards to the major splits and schisms in their society to the weird hangup they had with technology, it was all... nonsense. Utter, complete nonsense. And Sorun wasn't having anymore of it.

"Look, Knuckles, echidna, Dark Legion, Guardians, weird alternate dimensions, it's- it's all very fascinating, I get it, but can I just ask you *why your people's history is so convoluted* ?" With a ragged sigh Sorun ran a hand through his hair. "I mean, Jesus, I thought things down here were complicated, but you guys took it to a whole 'nother level up there on that island."

Knuckled breathed through his nose and flipped his hand up. "Couldn't tell ya, Sorun. My people've been through a lot."

"Apparently so," Sorun muttered out. "Did you come all the way down here just to escape this craziness, because I wouldn't blame you in the slightest."

"No, I came down here because there's this maniac called Eggman that's a bit of an existential threat to the entire world, and Angel Island happens to be a part of the world," Knuckles answered. "The Chaotix agreed and followed me. My dad... not so much."

"Ah, yeah, you're dad, who was part of this weird... contrived Guardian Illuminati thing," Sorun said. "You were seriously born into

a line of weirdos bent on this whole secrecy-slash-protect-the-thing-making-the-island-float thing? Which is an Emerald by the way?"

"Master Emerald, it's a long story so don't ask, and no, you *can not touch it* , Sorun." Knuckles affixed Sorun with a serious look, one that made the pale teen freeze in place. "I saw your eyes light up when I told you the thing holding the island up in the air is a giant Chaos Emerald. Don't you even think about touching it."

"I wasn't gonna doom your entire island and make it fall back down to terra firma just for a power," Sorun said. He didn't tell Knuckles the part where he briefly considered it, but in the end decided against it. Destroying a whole island and its ecosystem, and everyone living on it, sounded counterintuitive to the whole reason he was doing this in the first place. And while the idea of absorbing a giant Chaos Emerald sounded nice, he was also afraid absorbing that much Chaos energy would kill him on the spot. So the Master Emerald sounded like a no-go.

Knuckle nodded at Sorun, satisfied with the answer he gave. "Well, good. Anyway, the Brotherhood weren't weirdos," Knuckles grumbled out. "They are, or were, since they're apparently all gone except my dad, just driven."

"Setting up a whole system where you make a fake wall of fire using holograms to make you think your dad walked into a wall of fire and died for a really stupid reason so he could spy on you through cameras like a weirdo to groom you to be a part of the echidna Illuminati sounds kind of weird," Sorun said. "I can say for certain I would have punched my dad if he did that to me. I would have punched him a lot. I would have knocked teeth out."

"They were *very* driven, alright!?"

"Yeah, you gotta be some kinda driven to fake your death in front of your kid," Sorun scoffed out. He crossed his arms, then asked, "So... dear old dad didn't approve of you comin' here?"

The question made Knuckles sigh out and shake his head. "No," he answered. "He thought that since I was a Guardian my duty was to remain on Angel Island to guard the Master Emerald, the one thing keeping the island floating. And he said I had even more reason to say since most of what's left of my people are living in a single little village after the whole Eggman thing. Not many of us left."

"And because you made the sensible decision to go deal with the root of the problem instead of continuing to treat the symptoms, you two cut contact."

"Pretty much, yeah."

"... Knuckles, I mean this with all due respect. Your dad sounds like a really terrible person."

"He's not," Knuckles denied with a shake of his head. "Geez, would you lay off him already!? You're focusing on all the bad qualities and none of the good!"

"All you're giving me are bad qualities!"

"He...!" Knuckles paused to take a calming breath. "Okay, maybe not *everything* he did was the best, but he only did what he thought was the best for the island and our kind. He did it for my sake, for everybody on the island's sake. We've had some disagreements, but I still love him." He made a low hum and brushed some of his dreadlocks behind his shoulder. "You sound like my mom. She separated from him and remarried to someone else because she never agreed with what he did to me."

"Sounds like a sensible woman," Sorun thought to himself. "So she's at that camp?"

Knuckles nodded. "Yeah. Her, and my step-dad... and my little half-brother," he quietly mumbled out.

Sorun's head perked up in interest. "Oh, you have one of those?" he asked. "What's his name?"

"You'll laugh if I tell you."

"Oh, come on, how bad can-"

"Kneecaps."

The name given out by Knuckles had been said so quickly that Sorun had barely caught it. Catch it he did, though, and he had to look towards Knuckles with widened eyes to confirm that what he heard was indeed correct. He didn't even know what to think when the echidna gave him a nod.

"... Kneecaps," Sorun slowly repeated in an unsure tone.

"It's a shortened version of the name, but basically, yeah. Kneecaps," Knuckles mumbled in confirmation. "Believe me, I didn't like the name, either, but mom did, so what am I gonna do?"

"..." Sorun had to take a deep breath to steady himself. "Kneecaps." He looked at one of Knuckles' hands and the twin spikes protruding from them. "Knuckles." He looked up an Knuckles' face. "Does your family in particular just have a weird thing with naming kids after body parts, or-?"

"No, no no no, that's a different thing entirely," Knuckles said with a shake of his head. "'Knuckles' was the name of some old echidna tribe my dad named me after. And echidna, well..." He rose his spiked fist up to his face. "Normal echidna don't have bone spikes sticking out of their hands like I do. They usually just wear gloves with spikes in 'em."

Sorun tilted his head to the side in confusion. "But you do? Because your connection to the Chaos Force is unusually strong?" he guessed.

"Pretty much. The only reason I even have powers is 'cause dad blasted me with some weird Chaos energy ray thing when I was an egg."

Sorun blinked once. "Your dad gave you the Bruce Banner treatment?" He blinked twice. "You were an egg!?"

It was Knuckles' turn to look confused. "Yeah, echidna females lay eggs," he slowly explained. "And... and the who treatment?"

"It's nothing, forget it." Sorun had to shake his mind clear after Knuckles' little revelation had him shuddering. He didn't know if he needed to know that particular piece of information. He regretted learning a lot of the information this conversation was providing if he was being honest with himself. "Okay, ignoring that, and ignoring everything having to do with your dad, Knuckles, I gotta say... I shoulda listened to you. Because your whole kind somehow made things up on that island more complicated than everything else going on in the rest of the world, and that, sir, is an accomplishment."

The statement hadn't gone very far towards improving Knuckles' mood. He'd waved a hand in Sorun's direction, looking displeased but at the same time understanding. Like he knew and understood that the information he was giving the Earthling was exhausting in its contents. "I warned you it'd be a lot," he stated. "Sorry if I kind of overloaded you there."

"You didn't do anything. It's fine," Sorun said in response. His eyes drifted away from Knuckles, staring forwards as he thought something over in his head. After a few minutes he slowly clicked his tongue and, with his head still pointed forwards, he looked at Knuckles from the corner of his eyes. "One last thing I was curious about," he said, voice going a bit lower. "Have you ever heard of an echidna named Aurora? Or Athair by any chance?"

He saw that the names elicited a surprised response out of Knuckles. Enough that he'd widened his eyes a bit at Sorun. "Aurora and Athair?" he asked. "Yeah, they're... they're these weird echidna

that are really close to the Chaos Force, if that makes any sense. I actually met them once, but I don't really know much about them otherwise. I know that Tails did a couple of things with Athair, back when he was still alive. And Athair had his own whole thing. Was supposed to be a Guardian like me, but he went a different path."

"So they're, what, Chaos ghosts?"

"I don't know. All I know is that their connections to the Chaos Force were really strong, and that they had some weird relationship with these three ancient things, but they died," Knuckles explained. "They keep to themselves, mostly. Athair doesn't really talk with Tails anymore. Where'd you hear about them, anyways?"

Sorun shrugged. "Don't recall. Just heard their names be mentioned once, probably from Tails. I was just curious." He turned his head fully towards Knuckles. "But that's all you know?"

"'Fraid so. Sorry if that wasn't good enough for you."

"Ah, it's fine. Like I said, I was just curious about some names I heard. It's no skin off my back." It wasn't exactly a complete lie. He'd been hoping to glean some more information off of them from Knuckles, since he was an echidna and seemed to be "in the know", as it were, but it sounded like he didn't know much himself. But, even if he did have substantial information on them, Sorun wasn't too sure what he would have done with it. He wasn't exactly invested in learning their history or how they got to where they were now; just what they were in general. And most of what Knuckles said he already knew himself.

It sounded like Tails was a bit ingrained with them, though, if only by pure association. He personally knew an Neo-Walker, and his still-alive (for now) uncle was another one as well. An interesting lead, but not one Sorun was too interested in pursuing. He honestly doubted Tails would be much help, either, and even then it's not like Sorun had any plans with them or anything of the sort. The questions stemmed from pure curiosity.

Well, in the end, it didn't matter. He'd already made up his mind on what he was doing, and as far as he was concerned they were all inconsequential at this point. He had better things to worry about than some ghosts.

"Alright, I think I've heard about all I can." Without a sound, Sorun stood up to his legs, only idly noticing the lack of pins and needles in his legs from sitting for so long before turning back to Knuckles. "I'm gonna go on a walk. Clear my head. I'll see you later, alright?"

"Yeah, sure. See you later." Knuckles called out, settling back against his post as he looked up at the sky. Sorun nodded towards him, and then began walking out towards the direction of Knothole with his hands placed securely in his pockets.

"Kneecaps... There's something seriously wrong with the echidna up there on that island."

Sorun had made true on his desire to walk around Knothole and clear his head. For the most part it wasn't working, because he kept thinking back to every single conversation he'd had with people today. It was fading with time, though, and he found himself dwelling on all those words less and less the more he walked around to find more things to distract himself with. As far as clearing his head, it was a slow and steady process. Slow, but one that worked.

And then he just had to hear *his* voice.

"Oh, Sorun! Bonjour!" His feet practically made a grinding sound when they halted their movements. Sorun took a deep breath, and turned around to the voice he recognized as belonging to Antoine. As he suspected, the coyote was standing right behind him, and, for some reason, he was carrying two armloads of bags full of vegetables. "How nice to be seeing you here! I was just out getting ze groceries for ze very special dinner I 'ave been planning for ma cherie Bunnie zis evening." A large, dopey smile grew on his face.

"Ahhh, Sorun. Love. Eet iz such a beautiful thing, non? Tell me, have you ever felt-"

Sorun Tricked away out of sight, leaving behind a very confused Antoine.

"Man, I am so done with today..."

Not even a second after Sorun said this, the teen had flopped face-first onto the HQ's couch. He barely had the energy to do much else than just lay there, completely exhausted. Mentally exhausted from having had to endure everything he'd listened to do, and physically exhausted for about the same reasons.

He always knew there was a reason he'd unconsciously avoided prying too far into people's love lives. This was apparently why- it was too complex for him to keep track of. He couldn't even blame himself for what happened today because by some cosmic coincidence almost everyone chose to air out some of their thoughts on the matter on *him* of all people, on the same day of all things. It told him a couple of things. One, he could never be a counselor even if he had the time to become one, and two, love... love did indeed do weird things to people.

The sound of a pair of footsteps approaching the couch had stirred him from his thoughts, and Sorun just barely resisted groaning into the cushion out of frustration. Knowing how his day was going it was going to be somebody else that wanted to talk about the troubles their love life had. He wasn't going to have it. He was done with that. He wasn't going to go through the mental hoops of trying to piece it all together when all the echidna stuff Knuckles had told him previously was already frying his brain. So when he heard the footsteps stop right besides him, Sorun pushed his face just high enough off the cushion so he could see the pair of feet in order to ascertain just who it was and formulate an appropriate response in order to escape them without seeming rude.

But then he stopped cold when he realized that whoever was standing next to the couch wasn't wearing shoes. He didn't even need to think on who it was, his mind instinctually recognizing the brown and black fur pattern, and his suspicions were only confirmed when he looked up at the purple cloth dress wrapped around the body's torso.

"Uh... hey." It was the only response Sorun could think to say when he saw Nicole looking down at him. She had a curious look on her face, her head just slightly tilted to the side as she looked down at him, and her hands held behind her back. "I've had a day."

She blinked in confusion. "I would imagine everybody would experience 'a day' every single day, Sorun."

"You're not wrong." Sorun shuffled up into a sitting position, all his earlier exhaustion having practically disappeared. He moved to the side and rested one arm on the sofa's armrest while the other arm hung at his side. He'd had an idea of venting all the frustration he'd accrued over the course of the entire day at Nicole, but as the seconds ticked by he found those frustrations beginning to disappear at a startlingly rapid rate. In fact, by the time he looked back up at her face, he found that his mind was completely sound. It was a such a pleasant change of a mindset that he'd accidentally gone and blankly stared towards Nicole's face, though he'd quickly caught himself and looked away at the side. "So what's going on with you?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"Rotor required an extra set of hands for assistance in an experiment he was conducting," she answered. "He provided me a Power Ring to help produce my body. The experiment was completed earlier than expected, and upon exiting the lab I found you here."

"Oh, okay." Sorun clicked his tongue. "So," he said, slowly looking back towards her, "how, uh, how much longer do you have on your ring?"

"Twenty minutes, by my estimation." Nicole moved her hands to the front side of her body. Sorun found himself looking down in surprise when he saw she was grasping a wired game controller in each hand. "I had actually been hoping to get some practice in before my time ran out," she said, the corners of her mouth upturned in a small smile. "But seeing as you're here-"

"You're seriously that upset at my winning streak?" Sorun asked. As Nicole moved to sit down next to him, he flicked his eyes over to the TV and saw that it and the console were already both turned on. He quietly scoffed at the sight. "You didn't even ask before turning all that on."

She handed him the second controller, which Sorun eagerly accepted. "I saw no need to knowing the frequency you accept my offers. Was I wrong to assume such a thing?"

Sorun shook his head. "No, not at all."

"I thought as much," she said, grasping her own controller. "And I would have you know winning three games in a row can hardly classify as a winning streak."

"Gonna be four in a minute here." Sorun glanced to the side at Nicole. Their eyes briefly met, and he felt a smile mirroring the one Nicole wore grow on his face. He turned back to the TV, muttering, "Thanks, Nicole."

"No thanks are necessary, Sorun." Her fingers began flying over the controller's buttons at the same time Sorun's fingers began to move, both of their eyes locked right onto the TV's screen. "Perhaps you can briefly tell me about your day while we're at it."

"Ain't much to tell, but yeah, sure. It all started when I took a single step outside the door..."

During their small session Nicole had managed to beat Sorun and take away his streak at some point. He didn't find himself minding

that at all, too lost in the moment. The only thing that had made him upset was that they'd only had twenty minutes together before the Power Ring finally ran out. Twenty minutes that somehow made up for the entire day he'd experienced.

Chapter 41

Recursion Error

Episode 41- We're planning a party

Sorun had seen a lot of pathetic sights in his life. Seeing his own reflection in glass staring forlornly down at a display full of pies was up there with the worst of them.

There he'd been. Wandering around Knothole without a care in the world when he'd come across a bakery of some sort. And now he was here, standing outside the front window and staring at all the colorful pies that were on display behind the glass. And when Sorun reached into his pocket and pulled out the contents, all he found were three mobium coins resting in his palm.

"The life of a poor man," Sorun morosely thought as he pocketed the three coins. *"Never shoulda bought those expensive-ass candles..."*

He was only drawn away from his money woes when he saw a peculiar sight in the reflection of the window, nearby and right behind him. Two floating forms that he recognized as the only two bee Mobians that lived in all of Knothole. He rose his eyebrows a bit in surprise at the sight, and then turned around towards the two of them.

All the way on the other side of the street was Charmy. The small Mobian was floating and meandering about, the usual smile on his face as he went from shop window to shop window while looking through them all. On Sorun's side of the street, with her back to him, was Saffron. Even with her back to him, though, Sorun could tell that the female bee was staring out towards Charmy.

"Huh, there's those two," Sorun thought to himself. He found his feet automatically carrying himself towards the closer bee, all the while silently wondering to himself, *"Wonder what's going on with them?"*

Even after stopping right next to Saffron, the bee didn't seem to notice his presence, her eyes continually focused on Charmy in the distance. From this position he could see that there was an almost sullen look on her face. Sorun, looking right at the floating Mobian, rocked back and forth on his feet while waiting for her to finally take notice of him. His patience eventually wore off, making him speak up.

"Hey, Saffron," Sorun coolly greeted, "what's going on?"

She straightened up in surprise at hearing his voice, and then turned around, relaxing when she made out Sorun's form. "Oh, Sorun. I'm sorry, I didn't notice you standing there," she said, voice quiet and light. "I hope I wasn't too rude by-"

"Saffron, you're fine, you're fine," Sorun assured her, his eyes drifting over to Charmy's location. The male bee was still looking around at all the shops, seemingly oblivious of the other two looking at him. "What's up with Charmy?"

"Hm? Oh!" A smile grew on her face when she turned to look at Charmy alongside Sorun. "Well, Charmy decided we were all going to have a party."

"... A party," Sorun repeated. "Really?"

Saffron nodded. "Charmy felt that since there hasn't been a single incident with Eggman in a whole week and everything's been quiet, it was time we should celebrate. You know, with us having come so far and done so much to freeing the planet from him and everything getting so peaceful as of late..." She trailed off a bit, smile growing wider as she clasped her hands in front of her. "He talked with Sally over it and she agreed to let us use the Freedom HQ. She even agreed to help us set everything up!"

"Knowing her she just agreed to it for a morale boost," Sorun jokingly stated, though he did reach a hand up to rub at the back of his head. "Though... I guess a party does sound kinda nice."

It sounded very nice, actually, and Sorun rarely ever got to do anything even remotely nice these days. So going to something like a party to wind down felt extraordinarily pleasing to him. At the very least it was something to take his mind off the near future, and he'd prefer doing that with a party as opposed to killing robots any day.

So yeah. A party sounded nice to him.

"I know. Princess Sally seemed really thrilled with the idea." For some reason, the smile on Saffron's face dropped just slightly. "I think it will do good for Charmy. I hope it does. He's... been through a lot."

The change of tone in the bee's voice was immediately noticeable to Sorun, who glanced to the side at her with a slightly questioning look. "He has, huh?" he mumbled out.

She gave him a sad nod. "We used to have a home of our own, in the Golden Hive Colony. It was a kingdom our kind inhabited, a place all bees called their own. And Charmy... Charmy was next in line to become king."

"Wait, seriously?" Sorun fully turned his head to Saffron in shock. "Charmy? Royalty? Like, Sally-level of royalty?" He turned back to the male bee in the distance, confusion marring his features. None of the interactions he'd ever had with the bee ever painted him as someone even remotely royal in any way. Not from the childish way he always acted, or his total lack of an authoritative aura, for lack of a better term. Qualities that he saw in Sally that Sorun saw none of in Charmy.

He hardly believed it, but if it came from Saffron, it had to be true. She was much too timid and polite to lie, especially about something like this.

"Yes, it's true. He was a prince to our people," Saffron confirmed. "But... it's gone now. The entire colony, our people and families... they're all gone..."

A slow, deep sigh left Sorun. "Robotnik?" he guessed.

"Yes," she said, features having turned saddened. "As far as we can tell, we were some of the only survivors of the attack. Even before that Charmy had lost a dear friend of his named Mello due to the actions of criminals on Angel Island." Her face fell into an extremely dour expression. "He tries to keep a strong face in front of me and the others, but sometimes I really worry about him, especially after everything... after everything..."

By now she'd grown so sad that her sentences were beginning to be interrupted by hiccups. It was a situation that made Sorun increasingly more uncomfortable the longer he stood there, and when he saw the edges of Saffron's eyes begin to moisten he decided to speak up out of concern. "U-uh, Saffron, are you okay?"

She sniffed, and then wiped the tears out of her eyes as she turned to Sorun, a small, wavering smile on her face. "Oh, I'm sorry, Sorun. I'm fine. Thank you for the concern." The smile grew more steady, though it did drop a bit when she glanced back at Charmy's direction. "I just hope that this party will do him some good and help take his mind off things. I always try to be there for him, but, well..."

"Yeah..." Sorun replied, tone listless as he glanced off in the same direction.

Saffron continued looking at Charmy's way until her head suddenly picked up. "Oh my, I just remembered! Charmy wanted me to gather things for the party." Saffron's wings began to buzz at a higher intensity as her body turned away. "I hope I'll see you at the party, Sorun!"

"Um, sure..." Sorun waved the bee off as she flew away, eyes trailing after her form until she disappeared around a house's corner. He

sighed, and then turned back towards Charmy, who was still wandering around across the street.

"The people that live here are always so cheery that sometimes I forget that they have pretty terrible lives like I do," Sorun thought to himself, eyes still on Charmy. *"How the hell does someone like Charmy go through all that and stay the same cheerful guy I see around all the time?"*

It was an aspect of the usually-cheery bee that completely baffled Sorun. The revelation of him being royalty was all but forgotten now, his mind too focused on this development. Never, not even once, during any time he'd interacted with Charmy had he ever expected the Mobian had ever gone through *that* kind of loss. Losing a friend was one thing, but a whole kingdom, family, and possibly almost his entire species? That sounded absolutely devastating, which was why Sorun was so confused when he looked at that childlike Mobian floating off across the street.

If he was being honest with himself it made him feel a bit ashamed of himself, and of the way he'd acted during his first month here on Mobius. Especially from the way his attitude had been after the incident with the first Emerald. Even then his current attitude wasn't much better now that he really thought on it.

"Well, this is frustratingly humbling. And here I thought I was the only guy that got to be depressed around here." A deep sigh left Sorun, his brows creasing as he came to a decision. *"Charmy and the rest of these Mobians, I swear... they really amaze me sometimes."*

He saw that there was a box nearby that Charmy was blindly flying towards as he continued to look around. Making a split-second decision, Sorun decided to Trick onto the box and settle into a sitting position as to appear he'd been sitting there for a while. It'd taken about twenty seconds, after which Charmy had floated so close to Sorun that he almost bumped into the sitting Earthing. He let out a startled gasp and hovered back a bit to put some space between them.

"Gah! Eh-heh, sorry, Sorun, didn't see ya there." Charmy made a light chuckle and closed his eyes while grinning at Sorun, going as far as to rub the back of his head and grin so widely that his teeth shone. "Whatcha doin' here?"

Sorun didn't respond at first, too mesmerized by that wide smile the bee was giving him. A smile that didn't line up at all with all the trauma Saffron had described to Sorun that Charmy had suffered. None of the floating Mobian's demeanor fit it at all. Beneath the surface of confusion in his mind he felt different kinds of admiration, and he could even feel bits of envy well in him at the sight of Charmy. All he could do was stare as he thought about him.

"How does he do it? How?" Sorun silently wondered. *"How does he continue going about smiling like that after losing almost everything? Is it because he has friends? A significant other like Saffron? Is it just because he's just that much better of a person compared to me?* Him *? What could it possibly be?"*

"Er, Sorun?" Charmy voiced, a bit nervously. "You're, er, kinda staring."

Sorun blinked, and then clicked his tongue in irritation when he realized how lost in his thoughts he'd been. "My apologies, Charmy. I was thinking of something," he said.

"Okay?" Tilting his head in a curious manner, Charmy floated a bit closer to him. "What're ya doin' out here?"

"Lamenting my current status as being amidst the destitute. Anyway," he said, turning back to Charmy, "I heard you were planning a bash?"

"A ba- oh, you mean the party! Yeah!" Charmy brightened up immediately, and a smile was sent Sorun's way. "It's gonna be a really neat thing! Sally and Saffron are helping me set everything up, and I decided that while they're doing that I was gonna make a cake!"

Sorun's head sharply tilted at an odd angle. "A cake?"

"Mm-hm!" Charmy's smile turned a bit sheepish. "Though I, eh-heh... can't really find the bakery..."

"Is that why he was wandering around like that?" Sorun regarded the bee for a moment, and then turned around to the shop he'd seen the pies in briefly, going as far as to point at it. "The bakery over there should have most of everything you need. And there's a grocer down the way that sells things like eggs or other things you might need for it." He turned back to Charmy. "I can lend you a pair of hands should you require them. Or four. Or even more since-"

"You'd really do something like that for me!?" The wide smiled turned beaming, enough that Sorun found himself wincing. There must have been sunlight reflecting off his teeth, because there was no other way he could be smiling so brightly that he was practically shining. "That'd be such a big help!"

His face remaining in a neutral expression, which, compared to Charmy, may as well have been the exact opposite of the bee's demeanor, Sorun stood up off the crate. "You seem like you need the help. And you're a nice guy," Sorun said. "It'd be a bit too cruel leaving you hanging."

"Heh-heh. Aw, come on, Sorun, you don't gotta say stuff like that." He flashed Sorun a thumbs-up. "But thank you so much for helping me with this! I really appreciate it!"

"... It's not an issue, Charmy." Sorun's eyes flicked towards the direction of the bakery. "You'll have to pay for everything, though. I wasn't exaggerating about that destitute bit I said earlier. I really am flat broke."

"Ah, you really sound like Vector when you say stuff like that..." Charmy sighed out, floating in front of Sorun's view. "Anyway, don't sweat it. Princess Sally gave me some money so we're all good on that front!"

"Then in that case, let's go."

"Thanks again for helping out with all this, Sorun!" This voice came came from Charmy, who had just now floated out from the blue portal that had appeared in the Freedom HQ's kitchen. He had a bag in his hands filled to the brim with baking supplies, and after setting it down on the kitchen's counter he turned towards the portal. "And thanks for giving us a ride here, too! I was really worried about carrying this all back!"

A second form, Sorun, calmly walked through the portal. His Bringer Claws were manifested, both carrying more bags of supplies, while Yamato and its scabbard rested in his hands. He quickly closed the portal, and then dispelled the sword as the blue, feathered arms put the two bags down alongside the one Charmy had set down. "Well, it's not like I was gonna make us walk all the way back here. Or fly, in your case."

Charmy made a light giggle, and then turned towards the bags to unload them, but paused when one of Sorun's Bringer Claws beat him to it. The blue hand deftly reached into the bags and began to rapidly carry out the items, from bags of flour to eggs, and then began placing it all along the counter quickly while at the same time ensuring no damage was done to the items. At the same time the other hand was reaching into cabinets to bring out various bowls and measuring cups for use later.

Whistling at the sight of the arms blurring around, Charmy turned towards Sorun. "Wow, Sorun. Those arms of yours sure are... *handy* , huh?"

The pun was enough to have Sorun make a facial twitch, after which he faced Charmy. The bee was grinning cheekily at him, causing the teen to roll his eyes and pocket his normal hands. "Six outta ten," he blandly stated, walking towards the counter.

"W-wha-!?" Charmy sputtered, following closely by Sorun's side. "Aw, come on! I had to think really hard for that one!" he complained. "It's a seven, at least!"

They both stopped by the counter, with Sorun giving a shrug. "Six-and-a-half."

"Nuh-uh, you can't go halfsies!"

"This isn't the context you use halfsies in," Sorun corrected, glancing at Charmy from the side of his eyes. "Halfsies is when you split something with someone. This is meeting in the middle."

All that had accomplished was to make Charmy groan out and shake his head. "Agh, whatever. It was still a good pun."

Sorun said nothing in response, though the corners of his mouth did upturn into the smallest of grins. He made sure to wipe it off when he saw Charmy look his way to avoid being seen with it. Afterwards he looked down at the countertop they were both directly in front of.

As he did this the Bringer Claws disappeared, their work completely done. All the supplies they'd need, from the bowls to the cups to the pans taken from the cabinet, to all the ingredients and miscellaneous baking items like the frosting they'd bought, was on full display and neatly resting right in front of them. With all the preparation complete, all that was left was to make the actual cake.

The both of them stood there for multiple moments, silently staring at the spread of items in front of them. At one point Charmy had made a single cough and began to awkwardly rub at his arm, while Sorun had made an unsettled hum at the sight of it all. The dark-haired teen had eventually reached out and grabbed a purple bowl, though all he'd done with it was set it in front of them and gently rock it with his hand.

"... Hey, Charmy?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you actually know how to make a cake?"

The Mobian shook his head. "No. Do you?"

"I've never baked a day in my life."

"Oh..."

It quickly dawned on the two just how ill-prepared for this task they truly were. Charmy had blanched from the mere thought of it, while Sorun had released his grip on the bowl, only to reach over and grab one of the eggs.

Perhaps going forwards knowing this wasn't something they were equipped to handle wasn't the best way to go about this, but he didn't find himself caring all that much. Ever since his talk with Saffron he'd been too curious over Charmy, and all it took was for Charmy's sunny disposition to win Sorun over for becoming fond of him. Sorun himself wasn't so sure how it'd happened. The bee's attitude, maybe, or his small size, or the fact he admired Charmy's integrity to maintain that personality of his despite how much adversity he'd apparently faced. He was honestly amazed he'd grown so attached to him in such a short amount of time, even if he still couldn't figure out *how* Charmy maintained that integrity of his.

He hadn't exactly intended to let what was supposed to be an educational outing for himself turn into a bonding session with Charmy, but it'd happened while he wasn't looking, so he wasn't willing to let this go here. Especially after he'd promised Charmy he'd help with the cake.

They were making this cake, dammit.

"How hard can it be? It's just mixing things together and throwing it in an oven," Sorun reasoned, bringing the egg he'd grabbed in front of his face. "We'll just start with the eggs... eggs with a very

questionable origin now that I think about it." He tapped the egg. "Wasn't the lady we bought this from a chicken...?"

"Er, Sorun?" Charmy continued to look towards Sorun's face as he stared at the egg he held in his hand with a contemplative look. Eventually he ran out of patience, prompting Charmy to shout out, "Sorun!"

The egg was thrown into the bowl by a startled Sorun, shell and all.

After hearing the egg crack against the bowl, both of the would-be bakers looked down into it. Sorun impassively blinked at the sight of the broken egg leaking yolk and whites into the bowl, whereas Charmy made a disgusted face while sticking his tongue out.

"Looks like progress to me," Sorun confidently said.

Charmy's response was to look up at the human with a flat face. "I'm pretty sure we're not supposed to add the shell part in."

Slowly nodding, Sorun reached a hand into the bowl and grabbed the shell, lifted it from the bowl, shook any gelatinous remains off from it, and set it aside on the counter. "Progress," he reaffirmed, turning back to Charmy.

The floating Mobian didn't at all look convinced. "I don't know about this, Sorun..."

Undeterred, Sorun reached to the side and grabbed a bag of flower. "Look, Charmy, baking is like science. It's a whole lot of trial and error. It's chemistry. Chemistry that you get to eat later." He tore open the top of the bag and began tilting flour into the bowl. "I say we just go at it and see what turns up. If we do something wrong we'll just adjust, and if we keep doing that eventually we'll get a cake."

Charmy slowly reached towards a whisk as Sorun spoke, an unsure look on his face. "Are you sure about this?" he asked. "Maybe we

should go get somebody that actually knows what they're doing."

"I don't want to bother anybody with this, and besides, it's fine." After he felt like he dumped enough flower into the bowl, Sorun reached for another egg. "We'll get it done in no time, huh? All we need is a little perseverance."

---

30 minutes later

"I think it's time to call it quits, Charmy."

As it turned out, raw perseverance didn't quite cut it as opposed to having the actual knowledge needed to know how to bake. They'd tried. It'd been a valiant effort on both their parts, but despite their best efforts, they hadn't been able to cobble together a cake. They hadn't even made anything closely resembling a cake.

What they *did* manage to accomplish was making a mess of the kitchen. Bowls were upturned, raw ingredients laid strewn about everywhere, and Charmy was left sitting on the kitchen counter looking about at the mess with a dejected look on his face. Sorun was sitting on the ground, his back pressed against the counter and a bowl over his head and concealing his face.

"We should have gotten somebody to help us," Charmy said.

"Probably, yeah," Sorun agreed. "I think it's important to look at the bright side of these types of things, though."

"There's a bright side to all of this?"

"Dunno, but if you find one, do me a favor and let me know what it is."

A small sigh left Charmy upon hearing this. He opened his mouth to say something, but was stopped cold when he heard somebody enter the kitchen. Sorun, with his head covered by the bowl, wasn't

able to make out who it was, though he did hear the pair of footsteps approach them before abruptly stopping, as if in shock.

"Uh-oh..." Charmy mumbled, voice turning meek and shameful.

Sorun's bowl-covered head lifted upwards. "What? What, who is it?"

"Mon dieu! What have you two done!?"

"Oh, that's who it is..."

After heaving a deep breath through his nose, Sorun reached up and lifted the bowl up off of his head far enough that he could see. The first thing he did was wince upon seeing the kitchen was even more of a mess than he remembered it being in before he'd been blinded by the bowl. And then he saw Antoine, standing at the edge of the kitchen completely frozen with a look of horror on his face like his own mother had just been shot in front of him.

"..." Sorun let go of the bowl and let it fall back over his eyes. "I can explain," he said, voice muffled by the bowl.

"Explain? Explain!?" Angry footsteps approached Sorun, the Earthling not moving so much as a muscle when the bowl was practically ripped off his head to reveal a practically fuming Antoine. Sorun found himself less focused on how angry Antoine was and more on how he could be so red past all the light-brown fur covering his face.

"How? How could zis have happened?" Antoine demanded. "What were you even trying to make to cause such a mess!?"

"A cake."

One of Antoine's eyes began to violently twitch. "A *cake* ...!?" he all but hissed. "You 'ave nearly destroyed ze Freedom HQ's kitchen trying to bake a cake!?"

Sorun made a resigned sigh. "Look, baking's hard, man."

"No eet izn't!" Somehow Antoine seemed even more offended by Sorun's notion than the actual mess that was lying around them. "Look at zis! What iz zis? What even iz zis?" Antoine looked up from Sorun, at a glob of an off-white substance that had been Sorun and Charmy's best attempt at making cake batter. "What have..." Poking the substance, Antoine made a disgusted face. "Zis consistency, ze color, eet iz all wrong! Did you even separate ze eggs, Sorun!?"

"... Define separate." When Antoine's gaze snapped down at Sorun, he asked, "seriously, what does that mean? There's more to eggs than just dumping them in the bowl?"

He didn't get an answer to his question. What he got was Antoine breathing in deeply through his nose, and then slowly exhaling through his mouth. His shoulder relaxed just the smallest bit, followed by the coyote pressing his hands together while mumbling under his breath.

"Happy thoughts, Antoine, happy thoughts, you must be thinking ze happy thoughts..." He sighed after whispering the last word, and then looked to the side, over at Charmy who had been shuffling uncomfortably on the kitchen counter the entire time. "I am assuming zis cake was for ze party later, non?"

Hesitantly, Charmy nodded. "Yeah, that's right..."

"Oui, oui, alright, eet iz ze obvious fact zat you two are ze hopelessness when it comes to ze finer points of ze culinary arts." Antoine reached down, grabbed a very confused Sorun's arm, and hefted him up to his feet. "Charmy, you will be staying weeth me to clean zis mess you two 'ave made." Maneuvering behind Sorun, Antoine began to physically push the Earthling out of the kitchen. "And *you* , Sorun, are going far away from here!"

"Huh?" Rapidly blinking, Sorun turned his head back far enough to look at Antoine as he continued to be pushed from the kitchen. "B-but the cake-"

"I will handle the cake, Charmy will help, you will not!"

"But I can-"

"Non!" His protest falling on unwilling ears, Sorun was pushed out from the kitchen with a final shove. He turned around towards Antoine, and found himself shying back a bit when he saw Antoine glaring at him with arms crossed. "Really, Sorun, you have done quite enough. I would thought someone like you of all someones would behave better zan to let *zis* befall ze kitchen!" After speaking, Antoine gestured back to the kitchen, making Sorun wince a bit in shame. Now that he had a wide view of the place it did look awful, all things considered. He didn't even know how it had gone that bad. He and Charmy had just gotten carried away during their experimenting.

It wasn't like he'd meant for it to go this far out of hand, really, he hadn't. He'd just been really determined to help make that cake- perhaps a bit too determined. But he hadn't wanted to let Charmy down.

He should have listened to him and got somebody that actually knew what they were doing before they wrecked the kitchen.

Antoine's features softened slightly. "Sorun, do not be making zat face."

"I'm not makin' a face." That was probably a lie. Sorun couldn't see his own face, but he could feel the sad pout on his mouth was making. Apparently it was very noticeable to Antoine, who just looked uncomfortable now.

"Agh... Sorun, eef you really want to help, le princess iz just behinded me weeth things for ze party. I am being sure she would appreciate ze help."

Sorun immediately brightened up. "Oh, yeah. I'll go do that."

"Bon, bon, now I need to salvage zis travesty..."

It was no sooner that Antoine walked back into the kitchen that Sorun heard a pair of footsteps descending the stairs into the HQ. He could immediately tell from the blue boots he saw that it was Sally. And that was *all* he saw, as the rest of her body was obscured by the large amount of boxes she was carrying.

She didn't seem to have a very stable hold on the boxes, as they were stacked far above her head and were swaying from side-to-side. The wobbling only increased the further down the stairs she went, and when she finally set her foot down on ground floor, the boxes came to a tipping point. Literally. They began to fall over, with Sally gasping out in shock as she attempted to stabilize the boxes.

Fortunately for her Sorun had been standing on the other side of the room, so when he saw Sally drop the boxes two spectral hands had extended from his shoulders, reached across the room, and caught the boxes. Sally, still holding an armload of boxes in her hands, stared at the blue, feathered arms next to her in surprise, and then followed them to the awkwardly-grinning teen across from her.

"Hi," Sorun greeted, giving a small wave. "Need some help?"

"Thanks again for helping me set all this up, Sorun."

"It's not a problem at all, Sally," Sorun said, though currently his focus wasn't on the princess. It was on a paper cup he was holding in his hand, his eyes scrutinizing the details of the cup. When he decided there wasn't anything interesting to be had with it, the cup just being an ordinary paper cup, he set it down on the long table in front of him lined with dozens of other identical cups. He then turned around to face the rest of the HQ's living room.

All in all, there wasn't that much to be set up for the party that was to come. It was just to be a small affair for the Freedom Fighters, after all. A few tables and some chairs, mostly, and some other small items like the numerous cups that were set behind him. "Cozy" is a word Sorun would use to describe how the place looked. Small.

Simple. With how complicated his life was he often yearned for the simpler things, so seeing that the party being planned was going to be a small, simple thing like this was a bit comforting to him.

He turned to the side just as Sally finished setting down one of the folding chairs she'd brought in. With a satisfied sigh, she nodded at the chair and then turned to Sorun. Sorun in turn found himself asking as the princess approached, "So what made you decide to go through with Charmy's party idea in the first place?"

"With how little has been going on I figured that it couldn't have hurt. That and the fact I figured we were all due something for all the work it took us to get this far," Sally answered as she stopped in front of him. "I think it'll do us all a bit of good to relax a bit for once."

"Mh." Sorun glanced to the side at the kitchen. "They're having fun."

Sally's eyes followed his gaze to the kitchen, and the small smile that had been on her face became strained. The kitchen had been cleaned for the most part while she and Sorun had prepared everything else, though there were still a noticeable few misplaced items scattered about along with some stains. Her attention was less on that and more on the pair that were currently in there. Charmy and Antoine were in a heated argument, the former of which was holding a bowl full of batter and flying around to avoid the latter that was trying to to grab at the bowl.

"You really had to leave those two in the kitchen with each other?" Sally asked as she turned back to Sorun.

"I didn't leave anybody with anything," Sorun denied. "What are they even arguing about, anyways?"

"From what I picked up Charmy wants to add honey into the cake and Antoine doesn't want to because it messes up his recipe," she answered with a roll of her eyes. "Saffron said that she was going to be adding honey into the punch she volunteered to make for the party. It makes me wonder why they're so partial to that stuff."

"I mean... they *are* bees," Sorun pointed out. He found his gaze maintained on Charmy's face, his own turning into a contemplative frown. "Charmy's been through a bunch, huh?" he asked.

From the corner of his eye he noticed that Sally's face dimmed down into a dour look. "Yes, he has. Did he tell you what became of the Golden Hive Colony?"

"Saffron did." A pause. "How does he do it, Sally?"

"Do what?"

"Be him," Sorun sighed out. "I can't figure it out. How a guy like that can lose so much and stay so carefree like that. It doesn't make sense." He shook his head and turned back to Sally. "I know he still has her, Saffron, but that can't be all, can it?"

His questions seemed to have caught Sally a bit off guard from how she'd widened her eyes a bit in surprise. A small breath soon left her, after which she closed her eyes in quiet contemplation for a few moments. She then opened them and focused back on Sorun. "Does this have anything to do with you?" she asked.

The question had been a bit unexpected for Sorun, who stilled a bit as he thought. It was true that he'd lost everything like Charmy had, albeit on a larger scale. What the bee *hadn't* lost compared to Sorun was his own life, which for Sorun was practically on a painfully short countdown timer at this point. A life that had little more value than fulfilling some contrived prophecy. The only comfort Sorun found in it was that it was a life spent saving everybody's lives, though he had to wonder if Charmy would be so cheery if he was in the same position Sorun was in.

Knowing him, Sorun somewhat suspected little would have changed with Charmy even if he had the same looming threat hovering over his head like Sorun did. That's what confused Sorun so.

"... Partially," Sorun eventually said in answer to the princess's question. "He doesn't act like somebody who lost their entire colony and family. There's no way he's a callous enough person that he just *got over* losing them all."

"You're right, he isn't," Sally agreed. "It's not like he was the way he usually is when it happened. He was devastated, Sorun. Both him and Saffron." She paused and looked in the kitchen towards Charmy himself. "I think it'd be safer to say he got *past* it," she continued, turning back to Sorun. "Having Saffron nearby certainly helped, as well as the support of his friends and everybody else around him. But in the end, well... he's Charmy. I think that's just the way he is."

Sorun's response was to let out a single, low chuckle that sounded a bit too sad to even be called a laugh. "It's just a bit upsetting is all," he told her. "You people always seem to bounce back from the worst tragedies. I'm just a bit jealous seeing Charmy cope so well with everything he lost. Because I see that, and then I look at myself and wonder what I am compared to that." He looked towards the ceiling and began rubbing at the back of his head. "I guess I'm a pretty depressing guy to hang around, huh?"

"Oh, Sorun, don't say that." When he looked down, Sorun saw that Sally had taken a few steps closer to him. "We can't all be Charmy. Some of us just take a bit longer to get past these things than others. I can... personally attest to that." That last sentence had been spoken a bit quieter, and she'd moved her head a bit away when she said it. She quickly re-faced Sorun before speaking again. "But I'd say you're doing better than you think." Her features brightened up considerably. "I think the fact you went out of your way to try and help Charmy with this says enough. Just go at your own pace, Sorun. We're here if you need us."

Shifting his eyes away from embarrassment, Sorun mumbled out, "Yeah, I know." His eyes went back to Sally when he heard her make a small laugh, and then turn towards a small box that was sitting near the wall.

"Anyways," Sally said, bending down to pick the box up, "moving away from all that, there's one last thing to take care of."

Sorun hummed as he watched Sally place the box on the nearby table. "Oh, yeah? What's- oh."

He knew what it was the moment she'd opened the box. He didn't even need to wait for her to open it all the way, as he'd seen the golden light shine through the crack of the box's lid as she began opening it. When the box was fully opened, he'd leaned forwards in order to peek into its interior to confirm what he thought was inside of it.

Power Rings. A lot of them, as least ten. Sorun had gawked slightly at the sight of the rings, and then looked to the side at Sally who was grinning at him.

"They're for Nicole," she explained. "I figured that since everybody was going to this thing that she should be a part of it, too, so I got a bunch of these together so she could stay in her body through the whole night."

"You really did that for her?" Sorun asked, almost in disbelief as he looked back towards the rings.

"Well, of course I did. She's one of my closest friends and it wouldn't have felt right excluding her from this."

"I see. That's... that's really nice of you, Sally." There was an air of appreciation and awe in his voice as he reached out towards the box. "Hey, Sally. Is she with you right now?"

He saw Sally shake her head. "No, she's in the lab doing something. Why?"

Sorun's hands grabbed the edges of the box. "You, um... would you mind if I gave her these?"

As he began dragging the box off the table and towards him, he saw Sally tilt her head back a bit in surprise at his question. "I... suppose that's fine," she said after a moment. "Can I ask why?"

"Ah, I just felt like doing a spontaneous act of random kindness. They can change the world, you know," Sorun said as he walked over to the entrance of the HQ lab, box of Power Rings in hand. "I'll make sure to get these to her. See ya in a bit."

The first thing he'd done when Sorun had entered the lab was make sure it was empty of anybody else aside from the person he was looking for. He breathed out a sigh of relief when he saw that the lab for the most part was empty: no sign of Tails or Rotor at all. What *was* there was the small handheld computer plugged into the lab's computer at the other end of the lab.

Sorun stared ahead at the computer, and then down at the box in his hands. He heard his heart begin to beat in his ears, took a breath to steady himself, and then began walking forwards.

"Heyyyy, Nicole," Sorun greeted, setting the box down on the ground as he sat down in the nearest swivel chair in front of the lab's computer. "You busy right now?"

As soon as he finished speaking, the Nicole-shaped icon he'd grown accustomed to seeing appeared on the screen in front of him. "As it happens, yes, I am," she informed him. "I appreciate the visit, Sorun, but I'm afraid I am too preoccupied to do much more than chat for a short time."

"That's fine, I just needed to tell you something." Sorun bent down towards the box at his feet. "Did you know... that there's gonna be a party tomorrow night?"

"A party? No, I was not aware."

Sorun opened the box. "It was Charmy's idea, and Sally went for it. It's not really that big a thing, just gonna be all of us hanging out for a night pretty much, but, y'know, it'll still be nice." Sorun grabbed one of the rings and held it up for the computer's camera to see. "And as it happens you're part of 'all of us', so Sally got you a whole box of these things so you could spend the whole night with us."

There was a noticeable pause before Nicole spoke again. "She... acquired a box of Power Rings specifically for me?"

Sorun glanced down into the box. "I mean if you want a hard number it's, like, ten or so, but yeah."

"I..." The voice being projected through the computer's speaker almost sounded unsure before Nicole began speaking again. "I do not think allocating so many Power Rings for my own personal use just to participate in a gathering is the best use of-"

"Nah, nonsense, nonsense." Sorun tossed the Power Ring back into the box and slid it to the side of the computer with his foot. "They're yours. Besides, the things literally spawn infinitely out of a lake, and the princess already gave the okay. Ten's enough to get you through a whole night, right?"

"It's more than enough, which is why I don't think I should-"

"Nicole. They're yours." Sorun pushed himself away from the computer, stood up, and pushed the chair back in. "If you really have to just consider it a gift for your due diligence or whatever, but the truth is she just didn't want you missing out on the party." He sighed and looked away from the computer. "And... I feel the same as her. To be honest with you I was kind of planning on stealing a bunch of rings for you in the back of my head until Sally showed me the box." He made a nervous chuckle. "I'm, uh, really glad I didn't have to do that."

"As am I. I do not think that you committing larceny against the kingdom would have gone well with Sally." Nicole's icon closed its

eyes, after which a small smiled appeared. "Thank you for this, Sorun. This means much more to me than you know. If it is not too much trouble, could you please relay my thanks to-"

"You can just tell her yourself. Tomorrow night," Sorun reminded her. "She'll be there along with everybody else."

Another pause. "... This is true. Very well," she conceded. "Then... I will see you tomorrow night, then."

Sorun nodded. "Yeah. Totally." His eyes flicked back to the door. "I-I'll let you get back to whatever you were doing. Seeya."

That was as far as he could go before his nerves overtook him and he found himself walking back towards the doors. He didn't hear Nicole say anything to him after he departed, and he couldn't make up his mind on whether or not he was relieved or upset at that. He pushed it out of his mind and focused on trying to regain his normal composure before he exited the lab and went back to everybody else so they didn't notice anything off with him.

"I really would have stolen those rings, too... ack, good on Sally for looking out for Nicole, I guess. Though I kinda wish I woulda been the one to come up with all those rings. Now Sally gets all the credit." He reached the door, held his hand on the handle, and let out a small breath. *"Forget it. I should just be happy for her. She doesn't really get to do this kind of thing. Didn't think I'd ever be going to something like a party with all these people, too..."* He sighed out and opened the door.

"But... I guess it's fine," he continued thinking as he stepped out of the lab and made his way to the main room where everyone else was. *"After everything we've been through we deserve it, and seeing as I'm not gonna be around much longer... yeah. Screw it. We'll have one last night of fun with everybody. And then... then I guess I'll go end this and die."*

Chapter 42

Recursion Error

Episode 42- The actual party

Sorun had seldom been to any parties during the duration of his life, both here on Mobius and back on Earth. He'd been to a birthday party once. David's, and he'd been ten at the time. He didn't have any particularly good or bad memories from the experience, either. It'd just been a unique day for him that day.

With that in mind, he didn't really know what to expect coming into this party they were hosting in the HQ. Being in the middle of it, he couldn't help but recall back to the day prior when Nicole had referred to it as a "gathering". Because sitting down on the couch and seeing it with his own eyes, for Sorun, it was less a party and more of just that: a gathering. It was much too calm to be called a party. Cramped- the entirety of the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix, along with Rouge, were there. But the overall atmosphere was calm.

Sorun liked it. The peacefulness of it. No running around doing crazy things, no fighting robots or anything of the sort like that, no drama, nothing exciting. Just him and everybody else chilling out together. It was nice.

Of course Sonic ruined the moment by practically crashing right into the couch right next to Sorun, causing a rumble strong enough that the red drink inside of Sorun's cup almost spilled out.

"Yo! Sorun!" Why Sonic had chosen to raise his voice so much was beyond Sorun's reasoning. It wasn't like the idle chatter of everybody in the background was so loud that they needed to speak above normal volume. "What're you doin' all over here on your lonesome, huh?"

"I can't enjoy the moment on my own?" Sorun asked, raising an eyebrow in Sonic's direction as he took a drink from his cup.

Sonic vehemently shook his head, causing Sorun to unconsciously squeeze his cup just the slightest amount. "Nuh-uh! Not while I'm around!"

"Oh, leave him alone, Sonic," a chastising voice said from besides the two. Both teens looked over to the left side, where they saw Sally sit down on the free left spot next to Sorun on the couch. "He's just trying to enjoy the party," the princess continued.

"Yeah, but he's not even acting like he's a part of it!" Sonic argued, gesturing his arm past Sorun and towards Sally, the former sinking his back into the couch as he continued sipping at his punch. "I'm glad he came here and everything, but he's just sitting around! Look, he didn't even dress for it!"

At that, Sorun rose both his eyebrows and looked down at himself. He wore the exact same blue coat and black undershirt he always wore, and the same pants and boots. And when he looked around, nobody else was wearing anything out of the ordinary. In fact everybody, including Sonic, was wearing the same thing they always wore.

"... I always wear this," Sorun said, looking back to Sonic. "If anything you're the one that didn't dress up."

For some reason that statement made Sonic confused. "Huh? How is this not dressin' up?" he asked, gesturing at his body and the fact all he had on were his red sneakers and white gloves. "This is casual wear, and this party's a casual party. But YOU-" he said, pointing to Sorun, "- always have to dress all fancy. Since day one you've been covered head to toe in clothes and you never let loose in front of anybody!"

"..." It took Sorun a bit to even wrap his head around what he just heard before he could begin formulating a response. "Is this a

culture thing I'm missing?"

He heard a sigh from besides him, causing Sorun to turn to Sally. "No, Sorun, Sonic just personally doesn't like clothes because he thinks they're too 'stuffy' and make people uptight," she explained.

Sonic scoffed from besides Sorun. "'Course they do, you guys seen Antoine?" He turned his eyes to Sally. "And think about it, Sal. Think about it. Sorun's the most sour guy in all of Knothole. And who's one of the only people in Knothole that wears pants?" He nodded his head towards Sorun, causing the Earthling to roll his eyes. "Is it really a coincidence?"

Hearing enough of this ridiculousness, Sorun palmed Sonic's face and pushed him back to his side of the couch. The blue hedgehog sputtered and tried to resist, but eventually relented and made a pout at Sorun when he was successfully pushed back. Sorun, however, had paused and was looking between his own hand and Sonic's eyes.

"... You know I never really noticed, but your eyes are huge, Sonic," Sorun said, staring at his own hand in wonder. He couldn't even figure out which was bigger- his own hand or one of Sonic's eyes. Or... was it both? "Actually, that's something I wanna ask you," Sorun said, turning to meet Sonic fully. "Dude, I gotta ask. How many eyes do you have?"

"Huh?" He'd been so caught off guard by the question that Sonic's mouth had dropped open in confusion. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean that you have this weird thing going on where, like, the middle part of your face isn't... like there's nothing separating your eyes, they're just kind of connected there," Sorun said. "Amy and Shadow and your family have the same thing going on and nobody else does so I assume it's a hedgehog-only thing, but, like, is it two eyes but they're connected, or just, uh... one really weird eye...?"

Every single word said by Sorun only seemed to make Sonic grow more and more confused. By the end he was looking at the pale teen like he was an alien, completely dumbstruck and seemingly at a loss for words. Sorun was almost afraid he'd said something offensive.

And then he burst out laughing and clapped Sorun on the shoulder, now making the Earthling the confused one.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Oh, man... how many eyes do I have? Priceless," Sonic gasped out, wiping away an invisible tear from his laughter. "Good joke, Sorun, but come on, it's obvious how many eyes I have."

It really wasn't. "Okay, but can I get a number or something 'cause-"

Sonic burst out in another fit of laughter. "Ah, come on, Sorun, you can't play the same joke twice. It gets old too fast." He shook his head and leaned back into the couch, obliviously ignoring the gawking human next to him. "Is there any other 'weird things' you've noticed about me or somebody else?" he asked, making finger quotes.

After thinking for a second, Sorun decided to answer in earnest. "Well, there's Tails. I'm pretty sure his fur is yellow, but sometimes I'll see him in really weird lighting and he'll look almost orange."

Sonic shrugged. "He's just colored like that."

"The stripes along Shadow's eyes makes it look like he's wearing red eyeliner."

Again, Sonic laughed. "Ha! I'm gonna use that the next time I see him." He rolled his head towards Sorun. "Alright, well let me ask you something: how come you humans and Overlanders always wear so much clothing?" he asked him. "I mean, seriously, every single time I've been to Station Square all the humans I saw were completely decked out in clothes. Everyone! You people have some weird obsession with clothes, I swear."

Sorun creased his brows in mild offense. "We don't have an obsession. Honey has as obsession with clothes," Sorun objected. "We just, well..." He glanced towards Sonic's fur-covered crotch, turned around and briefly glanced at Sally's body, and then looked back at Sonic. "We don't really have anything to... y'know..." He became too flustered with what he was saying, and with a small grunt he sunk back against the couch. "Man, whatever, at least I don't walk around naked like all you guys."

To his immense surprise, not only did Sonic looked surprised at what Sorun said, but also Sally. "Huh? Naked?" the princess echoed. "What do you mean naked? Nobody here is naked."

He almost believed he'd misheard her. Indeed, Sorun wished that he had been mistaken in what he heard, but in his heart of hearts he knew he wasn't mistaken. In an almost languid manner, he rolled his head over to Sally, who was giving him a questioning look. Sorun, eyes half-lidded from the absolute absurdity of it all, glanced at Sally's chest exposed from her opened vest, down to her lower body that only had a pair of boots on the feet, and then, slowly, he looked back up at Sally's face.

"... Seriously, Sally?"

All the chipmunk did in response was shake her head, not understanding Sorun's point. "Sorun, I have a vest and boots on. Sonic has gloves and his sneakers. That's the complete opposite of being naked."

"Okay, you know what, I'm not dealing with this." Taking one last gulp of his punch, Sorun crushed the now-empty cup and stood up from the couch. "I'll go *mingle about* if it means getting out of this cursed conversation."

He walked off towards the nearest crowd of people, leaving behind Sonic and Sally on the couch. They both stared after him in confusion, gave each other questioning looks, and then finally

shrugged the whole experience off before they began chatting amongst themselves.

"I'm not really much of a dart guy, Ray."

In Sorun's hand was a regular throwing dart, which he was rolling around back and forth in his palm. And in front of Sorun, pinned to the HQ's wall, was a picture of Eggman. A picture that, to his slight displeasure, he realized was a printout of one of the innumerable selfies he and Nicole had acquired during that one disastrous outing of theirs. He didn't know whether to be happy they were getting use out of those or upset that he had to be reminded of that day.

He looked to the side of him. Two Mobians, Ray and Mighty, were there, with the former glancing back and forth between a dart of his own and the poster set in front of him while Mighty was glancing at him with a smirk.

"Ah, come on. Don't tell me you're afraid of losing to Ray in a little game of darts here," Mighty said, that ever-present smirk still on his face.

"I'm not afraid. I know I'm gonna lose. I've never tossed a dart in my entire life," Sorun said.

The smirk Mighty wore dropped off. "Huh? But you toss those swords of yours around all the time!"

"Yeah, that's way different than darts, man."

"How would you even know that if you've never tried it?"

Sorun opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came out when he realized Mighty was right. He had doubts mentally commanding magically-conjured swords wasn't all that different than actually physically throwing a dart, but he supposed he wouldn't know unless he tried.

"Aw, d-don't be like that, Sorun. It's easy." Ray held up the dart he held in his hand and held it up to his eye, the other one closed. "You just line it up and throw, like this!"

The golden squirrel tossed the dart. It briefly whistled through the air, and hit the picture of Eggman right between the eyes.

"Just like that, huh?" Nodding to himself, Sorun adopted a similar stance Ray had made and held the dart up to his eye while squinting. "Line it up, and then..."

He threw the dart.

It hadn't even hit the poster. It'd just bounced off the wall.

Ray and Mighty both winced, while Sorun just slumped his shoulders. They all jumped upwards when an object whizzed past them and indented itself into Eggman's forehead, right above the dart Ray had thrown previously. When Sorun tilted his head forwards to look closer, he realized the thrown object had been a shuriken.

"You require more practice, Sorun." A purple body materialized on the opposite side of Sorun. Crossing his arms, Espio gave Sorun a sideways look. "Your accuracy is all over the place with that footwork."

"Tch." Clacking his teeth together, Sorun willed a Summoned Sword to appear at his side. "I'll show you accuracy..." he muttered out, the point of the floating sword making small adjustments as it aimed at the poster. With a single mental command, the sword was sent flying towards the poster.

Of course, the sword wad dead-on with hitting its mark. Due to the sheer size of the blade, though, the entire poster had been impaled and cut completely in half from the sword. Sorun cast another glance towards Espio who, to his credit, was staring towards the cut poster with an unfazed expression.

"Mine's bigger," was all that Sorun said to him.

Espio's initial response was to scoff. "Size isn't everything, but I'll concede to the fact that you can at least aim well." He turned his head towards Sorun and gave him a smile. "I heard what you did for Charmy. You have my thanks."

Sorun blinked in the direction of the chameleon, and then looked away. "It wasn't anything special, I just- egh!"

A sudden weight clamping around his neck and weighing his back down cut Sorun off from his words. He gasped out in panic and scrambled his hands up towards his neck, but he'd paused halfway when he recognized the giggling voice behind him.

"Sorun, come on! You gotta try the cake me and Antoine made!" It was Charmy's voice, and based on the force Sorun was feeling, the bee was trying to drag him away by flying backwards while holding onto him.

He became less panicked, though he still felt embarrassment burn through him as Sorun tried to unbind the arms around his neck. "Charmy, let go of me," he demanded, feeling his face burn when he saw the three Mobians he'd just been playing darts with grinning at the display.

"Mh-mh, you have to hurry!" To Sorun's shock Charmy was actually becoming successful in dragging him backwards. "Vector's trying to eat it all!"

"I'm gonna go, just get your hands off me!"

It was with an unsure look that Sorun glanced at the small machine that had been placed on the long table where the punch and paper cups were located. If he didn't know any better he would have thought it was some strange sort of coffee maker with a strange metal tube sticking out of the top at an odd angle. But he knew very

well what it was, and he couldn't help but be somewhat skeptical over it.

"Are you sure this is gonna work?" Sorun asked the purple walrus working on an exposed panel on the small machine. "I mean, I like carbonated drinks as much as the next guy, probably more so, but... carbonated punch? I dunno, man, sounds like a pretty forbidden combo."

"The forbidden combo? Really?" Rotor turned his head away from the machine to give Sorun a flat look. "Yes, Sorun, I'm sure it's gonna work. Come on, can you even blame me? No insult to Saffron or her punch, but I wanted to liven the party up and I just happened to have this lying around in the lab."

"And you had a carbonation machine *why* ?"

"I had a spark of inspiration one night and a lot of free time."

Sorun rolled his eyes at that, but otherwise said nothing. Admittedly the prospect of carbonated punch *was* a bit enticing to him. It'd been a while since he had any of that cola stuff they stocked in the fridge. And the more he thought on it the more he realized he could really go for some carbonated punch, especially as he'd never had any before.

"How much longer is this gonna take?" Sorun asked, a bit impatiently.

Rotor scrunched up his face and flipped a small switch. "I gotta get the pressure here right or something catastrophic could happen."

"Catastrophic. Right." Sorun glanced off to the side. "Pretty sure something catastrophic's already happenin'..."

A short distance away from them he saw Knuckles. That wasn't the strange part. The strange part was that he had Julie-Su was tugging at one arm while Rouge was tucking on the other. Even stranger was

that Knuckles had an incredibly confused and flustered look on his face.

"He's dancing with me, you *bat* ," Julie-Su growled out, tugging Knuckles towards her while shooting Rouge a dirty look.

Rough pulled Knuckles towards her. "Now way! You've been hogging him the entire night so far! Let him dance with someone else!"

Sorun was pretty sure he saw nervous sweat beading down Knuckles' face. "H-hey, guys, can we talk this out...?"

Humming at the sight of the struggling trio, Sorun turned back to Rotor and his carbonation machine. He found himself raising an eyebrow when the silver tube connected to the top of the machine began to violently wiggle around, with puffs of concentrated carbon gas seeping out from the bottom. He looked to the right at Rotor, who had backed up a couple of steps away from the sputtering machine.

"Er, Rotor?" Sorun called out. "What's going on with the thing?"

He heard Rotor gulp. "Something catastrophic."

"Oh, goody."

Before any more words could be said the silver tube was blasted off the top of the machine. Like a small rocket it flew around the room, occasionally hitting a surface and bouncing off only to then fly away at a completely different angle. Both Rotor and Sorun watched the tube with their eyes as it bounced around the room, their irises darting left and right as they tracked the small missile flying around. It ended when the small tube impacted straight onto Knuckles' forehead, causing both to wince and hiss as the echidna tilted backwards and landed on the floor.

The two girls that had been at his side stared down at the fallen echidna with looks of shock on their faces. Their expressions quickly

turned into ones of pure anger as they rose their heads towards the table, where both Rotor and Sorun were standing at.

"Hey!" Rouge shouted, both her and Julie-Su storming over to their location. "Just what do you think you're doing!?"

Sorun heard another gulp from Rotor. He glanced at him and, thinking fast, grabbed the cup of punch he'd brought over and turned away. "All yours, buddy," Sorun remarked, sending Rotor a sympathetic look before walking off. All he managed to catch from the walrus was a hurt look of betrayal before the two other Mobians were upon him.

"I'll pour one out for you, big guy," Sorun thought to himself, drinking the cup empty to the sound of heavy arguing behind him.

"Who the hell do these goddamned degenerate savages think they are son of a bitch goddamn it what the f-"

"Uh, Sorun? What are you doing?"

The speed at which Sorun whipped his neck around at the voice behind him had been fast enough that he'd heard bones in his neck pop. For all he knew he *had* actually broken vertebrae and just didn't feel it, but he didn't find himself caring all that much. What he did care about was why Amy was interrupting him during the middle of a very important task.

Amy herself stood just behind Sorun, looking with one eye squinting at Sorun, and then at the pair of normal arms and pair of blue spectral arms reaching into a sink full of suds-filled water and dishes. Sorun himself had a strained, wide-eyed look on his face, which only seemed to make the pink hedgehog even more uncomfortable.

"Well *someone* has to clean all the plates you guys were eating the cake and the rest of the food Antoine and Bunnie brought over off of. Why Sally didn't just bring paper plates like the cups is beyond me..."

he grumbled out, blue arms furiously scrubbing at the plates in a blur. "Makes me mad, seeing all that stuff just left out."

This statement only caused greater confusion in Amy. "Couldn't you just wait until after the party? We could have all done it together."

"No, Amy, you don't understand, the mess is here *now* and I need to deal with it *now* . It's gonna bug me all night if I don't make it disappear." Why couldn't she see it? He couldn't just leave it there for him to see whenever he just happened to glance in the direction of the kitchen sink. He couldn't do that. He refused to. It needed to go away.

He really hated dirty dishes.

"Ugh, Sorun, come on, you can't do this in the middle of the party." Shaking her head, Amy stepped forwards and reached out to Sorun's hands, which were still in the sink. "Come on, just leave all this stuff for tomorrow morning when we clean- aiiee!"

She'd only dipped her gloved-covered fingers in the water for half a second before she made a small shriek and tore her hand away from the sink, startling Sorun. The pink Mobian shook the hand off, blowing on it before worryingly looking at the sink. "Sorun, why do you have the water on so hot!?"

"Hot?" Blinking in confusion, Sorun removed his hands from the sink's water. He'd been so focused on cleaning dishes that he only now noticed that his hands were completely beet-red, causing him to grimace a bit in realization. "Oh. Whoops," he mumbled out. *"Musta put the water on too hot without feeling it. I got so caught up in cleaning this stuff I didn't even realize... man..."*

"Eh-heh, I, uh... like it hot," Sorun lied, chuckling nervously as he shook the moisture off from his hands. The Bringer Claws also disappeared, the dishes they were holding clattering into the sink's water as he fully turned towards Amy. "You know what, maybe you're right. I'll just let it sit overnight and we can deal with it later."

Amy smiled in agreement and nodded at him. "That's more like it. Now come on!"

Without even waiting for his consent Amy had reached forwards and grabbed at one of Sorun's now-red wrists. The Earthling sputtered out in slight protest, but in the end did nothing as he was dragged outside of the kitchen and into the main room of the HQ. It was only once they were outside of the kitchen proper that Sorun had gently wrenched his wrist free of Amy's grasp.

Amy, however, didn't seem to notice her sudden loss of Sorun's hand in the slightest. In fact she seemed more focused on something across the room. Sorun had quirked an eye at the sight, but when he followed her line of sight he found himself scoffing when he understood what it was the pink Mobian was focusing on.

On the other side of the room was the long table with all the paper cups set up. Over there was Sonic and Tails, who were both stacking empty cups up on a high pyramid that almost reached the ceiling. Sorun looked back towards Amy, not at all being surprised to see how she currently looked. Eyes half-lidded and her entire face set in a lovesick expression as she stared over at the blue hedgehog. Sorun didn't really know how to feel seeing that look, especially after having heard Sonic's feelings over the Amy. Pitying, he supposed, as Sonic had made it very clear to Sorun that he had no intention of reciprocating Amy's feelings.

"Oh, Sorun. This party has been wonderful, but Sonic's been hanging around with everybody around him. He hasn't set any time aside for me yet." Amy hadn't even turned towards Sorun as she spoke. Her light green eyes were perpetually locked onto Sonic. "Haven't you ever cared for somebody enough that your heart just aches not being around them?"

Instead of answering, Sorun looked off to the side towards the other end of the room. His eyes were drawn towards a pair standing near the back: Sally and Nicole. They seemed to be in deep conversation about something, with Sally saying something that caused Nicole to

hold her hand to her mouth and make a small laugh. Sorun sighed at the sight, and then proceeded to place his hands in his pockets.

"Can't say I have, Amy," he mumbled out before walking away. He wasn't even sure she noticed him leaving with all her attention focused on Sonic.

"Why do you want something like that?"

Sorun shrugged. "I dunno, I just... figured the sooner I get this over with and get the rest of them, the better, you know? Less chance of something bad happening." He took a drink of the punch he held in his hand, eyes continually affixed to the yellow fox standing in front of him. Tails, for his part, looked a bit hesitant, but at the same time he had a look on his face that suggested he was mulling Sorun's request over.

Admittedly, a small part of Sorun did feel a bit bad asking something so big from Tails, especially now of all times during a social gathering, but he wanted to get a jump on this as soon as possible after the party. It's what he'd endeavored to do, after all, but if Tails couldn't fulfill his request, then he had nothing to work off of. Not ideal, hence him asking for the fox's help right at this moment. His options were rather limited otherwise.

"Listen, I know this is a bit sudden, and I apologize for that, Tails, but I wouldn't be asking if I didn't really need it," Sorun continued. "I just need this one thing, alright? And besides, the sooner we get them the less risk there is of Eggman getting one or both of them and hurting somebody with 'em."

"Well... I guess you make a good point when you say it like that," Tails agreed. He made a small hum as he closed his eyes to think the request over, and then opened them while nodding up at Sorun. "Alright. I'll talk it over with Rotor and see what we can do. I think we have some spare Chaos energy sensors lying around, so if we

cannibalize some of the parts I could more than likely slap something together for you."

The news was enough to make it feel like a weight was lifted off from Sorun's shoulders, making him breath out from the ephemeral sensation. "Thanks, Tails. It means a lot to me."

Anything further that was to be said between the two was interrupted when the loud sound of cheering drew both their attentions. A large crowd had formed near then end of the room, with everybody clapping at something. Upon observing further, Sorun realized just what it was they were clapping at- Antoine and Bunnie were both in front of the crowd, facing towards it and holding hands while both wore wide, happy smiles. Sorun was left wondering what it was that was happening until a voice had answered it for him.

"You two missed it!" Sorun and Tails turned their heads to the side, seeing Saffron fly over and stop right next to them. She had on a happy smile that was almost as wide as the couple's smile at the other side of the room. "Antoine and Bunnie are finally getting married!"

The reactions between Sorun and Tails varied greatly. Sorun had just merely widened his eyes in surprise, which in itself was a tame reaction compared to Tails'. The fox Mobian had grown so excited at the news that both of his tails began to excitedly wag through the air, while his ears had stood straight up and a wide, happy smile had broke out across his whole face.

"Really!? They're not just engaged anymore!? They're making it official!?" The mere prospect of it seemed to make Tails so excited that he was practically shaking.

Saffron gave him an enthusiastic nod. Her body *was* shaking from excitement. "Mm-hm! They just announced their plan for the wedding! Come on!"

Sorun silently watched as Saffron and Tails made their way to the crowd where everybody else was. From where he was Sorun couldn't even make out any words from all the elated chatter buzzing in from the large gathering, but he gathered the mood was exceptionally positive as he could have sworn he *felt* all the happiness wafting off from them all. He saw that Bunnie was having a very animated talk with Sally, both of them looking like they were bouncing up and down off the floor they were so energetic, while Antoine was being swarmed. It was with some amusement Sorun saw the wide and incredibly nervous smile Antoine held, with Vector having slinked behind him and wrapped an arm around his shoulder while Sonic was grinning widely at him while giving him two thumbs-ups.

"So they finally decided to tie it together, huh? I guess now'd be the time with how quiet everything is," Sorun thought to himself. He looked down into the cup he held and swirled around the contents. *"Good for them. It's about time they finally got married."*

He truly was happy for them. To the point that he felt himself smiling on the inside, even if on the outside he kept up a blank expression. It was enough that he wanted to walk over and join everybody else in congratulating the couple on their decision to finally get married. In fact he wanted to be the one in Vector's position, an arm wrapped around the coyote's shoulders as he teased him for the fact that Antoine was no doubt a nervous wreck on the inside right about now, especially as it looked like he was about to pass out from everybody crowding around him right now.

But he didn't. Sorun just kept his distance away from them as he continued to think.

"Well, I guess that's just more reason to go through with this so soon," he continued to think as he drunk from his cup. *"Congratulations, Antoine, Bunnie. You both deserve it. I'll try to make it so you both get to live happy lives along with everybody else."*

Sorun ran on what he and his circle of gamer friends back on Earth liked to call 'Gamer Time'.

Gamer Time was a simple concept. Sorun played video games, and his room had been set up in a way that absolutely no sunlight ever bled into his room. That meant that, unless he bothered to look at a clock, he never knew what time of day it was on the outside. This combined with long gaming sessions with his online friends meant that his gaming sessions often carried in through the night, oftentimes all the way to morning of the next day. His internal clock shifted over time due to this behavior, eventually getting to the point where he became a nocturnal creature who thrived at night and slept during the day.

Now, of course, this wasn't behavior he could afford to keep up all the time. He'd had to balance a school life during the day, after all, so this kind of schedule was usually regulated to weekends, days off, holidays and vacations. That still left a lot of time for Sorun to shift from living on normal time to living on Gamer Time, though, to the point that his body adjusted to doing both. So what did this mean in essence?

Basically if he wanted to he could stay up all night while at the same time sleep through a whole day and vice versa.

It wasn't exactly a perfect system; it sometimes lead to him being unusually tired at unreasonable hours during the day, and admittedly living somewhat normal hours on Mobius for months on end now had been slowly shifting his internal clock from working on both normal time and Gamer Time to just strictly normal time, but vestiges of his time spent living in Gamer Time was still evident on him, such as him sleeping an inordinately long time through the mornings usually. He remembered trying to explain this concept to Sonic once, though the hedgehog had been completely lost at Sorun's explanations and chalked him sleeping in all the time being a 'weird human thing'.

Well, he hadn't exactly been *wrong* , per se, but Sorun had still felt insulted enough to not pursue the matter any further and let Sonic

think what he wanted.

On the flipside, he still had enough experience living in Gamer Time that he could stay up through the night if he wanted, even if his experience living in Gamer Time had atrophied some. That didn't even account for the fact his failing body sapped more and more of his energy the longer he went on, though tonight he found himself able to go for a fair bit. He partially blamed the punch, because it was so sweet that he doubted it was just honey that Saffron had put into this stuff.

He was pretty sure soda had less sugar than the amount of stuff she'd put in this punch.

It didn't seem to effect the other Freedom Fighters, though. He would have thought that seasoned guerilla fighters like them used to missions that stretched on through the night would have been able to keep themselves awake longer, and that wasn't even considering the fact they were all teenagers like him. But after Antoine and Bunnie had announced their wedding plans, the party had gone a bit... hectic. And all that excitement seemed to have drained everybody of energy, because it was hours later and now Sorun was here, sitting on the HQ's couch all by his lonesome. All around him were the passed-out forms of everybody that had attended the party, all sleeping soundly in various awkward positions on the floor and in some chairs. And a table in Knuckles' case.

A funny enough sight for Sorun, who, left all alone now, only had his own thoughts to occupy himself. He was happy that everybody had a good time and even happier for the soon-to-be bride and groom, really, he was, but thinking of the young couple in love also got Sorun thinking about himself and these concepts. Love, his pending death, his relationships with everybody, his future plans. Dire stuff, really.

"~Dame da ne, dame yo, dame da no yo...~" Sorun downed the rest of his drink in the final cup of punch that he held. Once the paper cup was empty, he tossed it away, watching with some amusement as

the paper cup bounced off of the sleeping Sonic's head. The hedgehog quietly mumbled something in his sleep, and then rolled over on the floor so he was facing the other way.

"Man, I can't believe everybody passed out like this." Sorun spoke when he saw movement in his peripheral vision. He turned towards the source already knowing it was Nicole. "I guess they all got a little too excited with the wedding announcement, huh?"

Nicole glanced to the side at some of the sleeping Mobians around them, an amused smile on her face. "It would appear so." She looked back at Sorun. "I am surprised you are not sleeping along with them."

"Well, you know... one of those nights," Sorun said. "Not surprised you're still up since you don't get tired like us."

"That's... not entirely accurate," Nicole corrected, causing Sorun to tilt his head in interest. "I can feel the power drain from my body used to maintain this form. I found exhaustion to be a rather unpleasant experience, and even so the amount of time I was able to project my body on my own power alone made it impractical. Thankfully the use of Power Rings negated this sensation." Her smile grew a bit wider. "And I would have you know that I do, in fact, possess a sleep mode," she informed him.

"Oh. Huh." He hadn't actually known that. It made enough sense in a roundabout way- draining energy from an artificial being was the closest equivalent Sorun could think of to somebody getting tired, and according to Nicole's words for her it was practically the exact same sensation. He found it interesting. He found the idea of her having a sleep mode even more interesting. "Do you actually use that sleep mode of yours?"

"Of course. More often than not I utilize it whenever my handheld body needs to be shut down for recharging purposes," Nicole explained. "Beyond that, remaining active for extended periods of time can often lead to junk data and other bits of non-important data

to accrue in my memory and processors. Too much of this buildup can lead to my mental faculties being slowed down." She grew a slightly uncomfortable look on her face. "I suppose the closest comparison would be an organic body suffering from sleep deprivation. It's not a sensation I find myself enjoying. I utilize my sleep mode to clear out this useless data so that I can remain running at peak capacity."

"So it's... like rebooting a computer to clear out the RAM?"

Nicole nodded, seemingly pleased at Sorun's understanding. "Yes, that's precisely it. Though, due to the sophisticated nature of my unique construction, it takes more than a simple reboot to restore me to full operational capacity. I usually require hours of sleep, particularly after long nights spent in the lab on my projects."

Sorun tilted his head back a bit, blinking once at Nicole. "Maybe you shouldn't be doing that so much, then," he said. "It's not healthy for people to pull consecutive all-nighters like that, you know."

She'd actually made a single, small giggle upon hearing that. "I thank you for the concern, Sorun, but I believe I am doing well. That project of mine has neared completion anyways."

He wanted to argue the point, but decided not to and just sat back on the couch with a sigh. If she said she was doing fine and knew what she was doing, then he'd believe her. It wasn't like he'd know any better anyways, especially considering he wasn't an AI like her. And with how he'd been treating his body with these Chaos Emeralds, it wasn't like he had a place to talk.

When he looked back up at Nicole, he paused. She was looking at him with a strange, almost contemplative look in her eyes. Her hands were at her sides, occasionally reaching up a few inches before falling back to her side, like she was unsure of something or couldn't make up her mind. Sorun watched the display in confusion, getting ready to ask what it was she was doing before Nicole evidently had made up her mind, as she'd bended forwards to reach for Sorun.

"Erm, Nicole? What are you doing?" Sorun asked, body growing tense when Nicole grabbed at his wrists.

"I want to try something," was the only explanation she gave to him before fully pulling Sorun up to his feet. She'd begun taking steps back towards the center of the room, Sorun being forced to follow her with her hands still gripped around his wrists. They'd stopped in the middle of the HQ's living room and then Nicole, face pointed straight at Sorun with a straight expression, said, "I want to try dancing."

It was very possible that in that moment Sorun had suffered a heart attack and hadn't felt it. "Uh-uh-uh-what?" he stuttered out, his wrists unconsciously attempting to weakly wriggle out of Nicole's grasp. "What made you come up with this idea?"

"I saw some of the others doing it earlier, and they seemed to be enjoying themselves." She looked down at their hands. "It's something I've never experienced before. Now seemed like a good time to ask for your help."

"We can't do this some other time?" Sorun nervously asked, his hands still trying to pull out of Nicole's grasp.

To his dismay, Nicole shook her head. "Some of what I heard from the others suggested this is an act only socially acceptable at gatherings such as this. I don't know when another opportunity to try this will arise."

"That doesn't make it an explicit rule or anyth-" Sorun cut himself off and shook his head. "Nicole, I don't even know how to da- I don't even wanna do this."

He didn't. He really, really didn't want to. Too embarrassing, too much to handle, it was too much everything. He was barely standing up on his feet as it was the mere prospect made him so nervous.

Nicole seemed to pick up on his nervousness. "Sorun, nobody will see us if that's what you're uncomfortable with. They're all asleep." She took a couple of steps closer to him. "You're usually the one to help me with these types of matters. I just want to see what it's like before tonight ends."

A low whine sounded out the back of Sorun's throat. He looked down at his currently-gripped wrists, and then looked back up at Nicole's face. The pleading look she had on her face was impossible to miss, and if he looked hard enough, he could almost see that the small smile she had looked nervous as well. It was such a small detail though that Sorun was certain that he was mistaken and just imagined it to make himself feel better.

He could have said no to her. He realized it was in his power, but then a thought had come to him. The whole reason he'd even bothered coming to this party to begin with was because it was very likely to be his last night of fun before finally dying. Mingling about with everybody over all these hours had been... satisfactory, somewhat, in that regard, but he wanted to close the night off with something special. He didn't know what that special something would be, but he supposed a small dance would be good enough. Doubly so if it was with Nicole.

For all he knew this might be one of the last times he ever saw her, after all. And it wasn't like he could ever bring himself to say no to her.

"Ergh... fine," he mumbled out in a voice that was barely above a whisper, his head turning slightly so he didn't have to look her in the eyes. "Just because nobody is watching. If somebody wakes up, though, we're stopping immediately and I'll deny this ever happened."

His demand made Nicole make a single, unsurprised laugh. "That is acceptable. Now..." She began maneuvering Sorun's hands behind her. "I believe this was the position I saw the others performing earlier."

Nicole had moved Sorun's hands so that they rested on the small of her back. She, in turn, had placed her hands on his shoulders. After that they continued to stand there, Nicole continually staring at Sorun's face with an almost curious expression while Sorun himself was trying his best to keep his composure. As if their close proximity hadn't been bad enough, the actual physical contact was making his heart race. At least, he thought it was. The actual feeling of his heart thumping in his chest was present but a bit dulled these days due to the damage of his body.

"S-s-so, um... what-what now?" Sorun asked.

In response, Nicole looked down at their feet. "From what I observed, we simply just... walk."

"Walk? Yeah, we can- that's easy, yeah." Swallowing the lump in his throat, Sorun carefully took a microstep to the right. "Like this?"

Nicole moved in a way that mimicked Sorun's small movement. "I... believe so..." she said, though her tone sounded wholly unsure.

He hadn't been kidding when Sorun had said he had precisely zero experience in dancing. Quite simply, he'd never done it. Never even expressed an interest in it. And it was immediately evident that Nicole had never done any research into the topic either, as, despite the fact she was the one leading them, their movements were hardly something Sorun could even call slow dancing. It was more them just slowly stepping around, hands locked on each other as they continually went from looking at each others' faces to their feet to make sure they wouldn't accidentally step on the other's feet.

Awkward movements from two people that had no idea how to dance in a living room full of passed out people and absolutely no music, and meanwhile Sorun was internally dying from embarrassment. He didn't think anything could make this experience more awkward.

"Well, this is... certainly new," Nicole had commented. She paused for a few moments as they both continued to awkwardly step around, as if she was searching for an appropriate response. "This is nice," she finally settled on.

"It is?" Sorun muttered, disbelief heavy in his tone. That wasn't the impression he was receiving. Between their clunky movements and the fact he felt like he was halfway to passing out, he felt anything but nice.

Nicole nodded. "It's... difficult to put into words. I'm not so sure myself why it's nice." She glanced down at their feet and made a chuckle. "It definitely cannot be attributed to our dancing skills. I somewhat regret not having researched this prior. I'd thought watching it in practice briefly would have been sufficient." She looked back up at Sorun's face. "My apologies, Sorun."

"She thought it would have been sufficient- I thought she got this idea halfway through the party- oh whatever, I don't care enough to think about it." He made a slight hum that cracked repeatedly in its pitch as he looked Nicole in the eyes. "No, it's fine, Nicole. I'm just... glad you're happy with this. Whatever *this* is."

It was a statement more aimed at himself than towards Nicole, if only to try and calm him down so he could look at the positives to all this. The positives of helping appease Nicole's curiosity, and allowing Sorun to see a smiling Nicole. It'd settled him down somewhat, enough at least that he'd stopped shaking slightly. He was still tensed up enough that virtually every muscle in his body was rigid, though, making most of his movements more jerky than they needed to. It was something Nicole seemed to pick up on.

"You're unusually tense, Sorun," she noted.

"I'm... I'm just thinkin'. Worried, I guess," he said. "Y'know, 'bout... future stuff and all that."

"Am I truly that bad of company that you cannot even bear to focus on me for a minute?"

Sorun began to heavily stutter. "Th-that ain't what I meant-!" he tried to explain, though he stopped when he saw Nicole grinning.

"Merely teasing, Sorun," she said, still grinning at him in that straight and completely innocent face that was anything but.

Sorun pouted and turned away. "You do that too much," he mumbled. "Sorry if I'm kind of being a downer bringing that up, though. I can't... I can't really get it out of my head, you know? Things to come. It's..." He sighed out and shook his head. "I know I'm sounding really stupid right now, but... I don't know." What was he supposed to say, after all? It's not like he could tell her all his fears and beg her to help him find some answer out of this mess, even if he really wanted to.

Fortunately, Nicole didn't seem to mind all that much. "It's fine, Sorun. Admittedly I find myself wandering towards the same subject sometimes. I can't help but notice the toll this war we're all in keeps taking on everyone." She glanced off to the side, towards where Sally was, her sleeping body slumped up against the wall. "It won't last forever, though, and we're closer now more than ever before. But we're not quite yet there, so until then... I suppose we'll just have to enjoy these small moments while we can." She looked back at Sorun. "Thank you for this, Sorun. For making me feel more like one of them, if only for a few brief moments."

He could tell she was genuinely happy. He tried feeling happy for her. He failed miserably with the existential dread of his approaching death weighing down on him. But he didn't want her to perceive any of his negativity, and even though it felt like he was breaking up inside doing it, he gave her a smile. Not a particularly big or impressive one, a smile that barely even moved his lips, but it was all he could manage. "You're welcome, Nicole. What are friends for?"

"Yes, of course. Friends." She looked down a bit, away from Sorun. "Friends," she repeated, quietly and under her breath.

Sorun simply just nodded along. A small, stiff nod that looked anything but relaxed, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances. His composure was nervous enough that he'd felt the hands resting against her back accidentally slip down a bit. He'd felt the sensation of the short tail Nicole had brush over his fingers, and his knee-jerk reaction was to straighten his arms out and take his hands off her entirely. He almost went as far as to push her away out of panic before the sight of her entire body beginning to flicker made him pause.

"Um... your power...?" he'd guessed upon seeing her continually-disappearing form.

"It would seem so." He could hear the displeasure in her voice, which, while not exactly surprising to Sorun, still came as a bit unexpected to him. Her hands were still grabbing onto his shoulders, and she'd even went as far as to squeeze down on them, almost out of frustration. "These limitations of mine..."

"You still have some rings left, right? Couldn't we just...?" Sorun had tried suggesting, though Nicole had cut him off by shaking her head in denial.

"No. It's not necessary." She gave Sorun a half-smile. "I think I would rather save what few Power Rings are left for future occasions."

He wanted to argue that was unwise. That for him there may not *be* any future moments, especially with what he had planned. But on the other hand, he wasn't sure he could do this any longer himself. His nerves were frayed, and even he was beginning to grow tired from this night. So he relented and gave her a nod.

"Sure, Nicole. Do what you want," he said. "To be honest, I... think I want to go and just pass out along with everyone else, if that's okay with you."

She smiled, and then laughed a bit at him. "Perhaps I will be joining you all," Nicole said. "Please do me the favor of putting me in a place where nobody will accidentally roll over on me in their sleep."

"Not a problem."

There'd been no further words between them. The last Sorun saw of Nicole was the grateful smile she'd given him before her form disappeared entirely. His hand snapped forwards immediately afterwards to catch the small handheld computer before it hit the ground, which he carefully cradled in his hands as he walked towards the couch.

"What a night," he tiredly thought to himself. He'd practically crashed onto the couch when he'd arrived to it, and then proceeded to hold Nicole's handheld up for him to see. The green screen had gone dark, indicating she wasn't active at the moment. He chuckled once, closed the handheld, and then carefully set it down on the nearby armrest.

He sunk right into the couch afterwards, eyes beginning to grow heavy. He couldn't help but take a final glance around at all the passed-out forms of the Freedom Fighters around him, making a breathy sigh in the process.

"Man..." Sorun thought to himself as his eyes finally closed. *"I'm really gonna miss this..."*

Chapter 43

Recursion Error

Episode 43- The wedding

The door closed behind Sorun with a small *click* noise. He stepped back away from it, and with a deep sigh he looked up at the home he just exited.

For four odd months he'd lived inside this house with the family of hedgehogs that'd been generous enough to give him a place to stay. He'd never admitted it to them, nor did he plan on doing so, but he'd enjoyed his time living in this home. Living among so many people had been... unexpectedly nice. Sonic's family had been nice. Sonic himself had been nice, even if he had been a bit obnoxious at times.

But, he had a job to do. Sorun didn't know if this would be the last time he would see this house, but the possibility of that being true existed. So he decided to take in the sight one last time before finally turning around. He started to walk away from the home, and then began fishing in his pocket until he found what he was looking for. He brought it out of his pocket, staring down at the small device in his hand with a blank expression.

"So this is it, huh...?"

The device given to him by Tails was a curious thing. A small, little metal box with a screen near the top that looked a bit like a radar. It was light, too, though strangely Sorun felt it was almost heavier than it ought to have been. He wasn't too surprised at the sensation, seeing as what this thing he was holding in his hand represented. The crux to his plan- and also the thing that would accelerate his death if it worked.

He looked up from the device and at Tails. "So what's the range on it?"

"Around... a thousand-ish miles? I wasn't able to test it out to get an exact number, but if you're around that range of one it should be able to pick up a Chaos Emerald," Tails explained to him. "It was actually pretty easy to figure out once I- Sorun, your hand!"

The older teen flinched a bit at Tails' sudden increase in volume, and then turned his right hand holding the device around so he could see the back of his appendage. He hummed a bit in acknowledgement, realizing that Tails had only just now seen the large amount of deep gashes cutting through his entire hand. Wounds he'd obtained yesterday, when he'd been practicing with Yamato. Wounds that made it look like he'd stuck his hand into a blender.

Considering what he'd been trying to do, that wasn't an entirely inaccurate statement. At least he still had all his fingers.

"Oh, yeah. I was practicing something," Sorun nonchalantly explained, looking up at Tails' incredibly worried face. "Sonic told you about my Judgement Cuts, right? Well, it's... like that. I finally managed to figure it out." And not a moment too soon, either. Especially with what he was going out to do.

"But-but your hand, it's..." Tails had stepped forwards a bit and reached out towards Sorun's hand. Sorun had been a bit too surprised at the act to move his hand away, and could only stare as Tails took his wrist, carefully cradling it in his own hands as he inspected Sorun's wounded hand with a saddened expression. "Sorun, you should go see a doctor about this."

"... It doesn't hurt. It's fine," Sorun denied, gently pulling his hand from Tails' grip. "I cleaned the wounds. They're not deep enough that they need stitches or bandages. I'm fine."

"Y-yeah, but..."

Sorun's eyes had widened a bit. Tails looked like he was on the verge of tears just from looking at Sorun's wounded hand. From the way he was acting it almost looked like it was his *hand that had been wounded. But, Sorun wasn't all that surprised at the reaction Tails was showing. Most Mobians were just caring like that, and Tails wasn't an exception there. It was a very charming attribute Sorun found in them. But Sorun didn't like that face Tails was making.*

He reached out with his open left hand and placed it on top of Tails' head. The fox froze a bit in surprise at the contact, and Sorun's expression remained blank as he continued to stare at his face.

"You're a good person, Tails. Maybe a bit too good," he told him. "Hey, I... I forgive you for the... the portal thing. You know that, right?"

If he was being completely honest with himself, Sorun didn't even know if that was entirely true or not. He didn't know what to feel anymore, but he wanted to leave Tails with at least that much. So he didn't have so much guilt in his heart. He felt it was the best he could do.

Tails has opened his eyes wide enough that they may as well have been dinner plates. He didn't even react when Sorun began to lightly ruffle the fur on top of his head. "U-um, Sorun, that's... that's great to hear, but where-where is this coming from?"

"... The wedding coming up, I guess," Sorun blandly answered as he removed his hand. "It's making me irrationally emotional." He pocketed the device given to him by Tails and turned around. "Thanks for making what I asked for, Tails. I'll see you around."

And that was that. He didn't wait to hear what else Tails had to say to him. Sorun had just turned around and walked out of the lab, making sure to softly close the door behind him. He'd gotten what he came for, after all, and had left a bit more than he'd planned on leaving. All that was left was to finish it.

"So this is it..." Sorun ran a thumb over the small, metal box, breathing out another sigh at the sight of it. He wasn't given too much time to think on it, however, as an approaching sound tore his attention away from it. Rapid footfalls accompanied by a loud zipping sound that he associated with Sonic's running. He looked up just in time to see a blurring figure stop right in front of him.

"Hey, Sorun! There you are!" Sonic brightly exclaimed, giving him a wide smile. "What are you doing standing outside the house? We gotta get going!"

Sorun had blinked at the blue hedgehog. He'd done something Sorun had never seen Sonic do before- he wore clothes. A tuxedo, in preparation for the upcoming wedding. At least that's what Sorun thought until he looked down, and then proceeded to perform a mental facepalm when he saw the hedgehog's bare blue legs.

"... You're the only person I know that will wear a tuxedo but go out of his way to not wear pants," Sorun said as he looked back up at Sonic's face. "You really dressed up for Antoine and Bunnie's wedding?"

"Of course I did. Why wouldn't I dress up for the happiest day of their lives? They only get one of those," Sonic said, making it sound like the most obvious thing in the world. "Now come on," he continued, turning around so his back was to Sorun. "We're running a bit behind but I talked with Honey since she has your measurements, and she said she could whip you up a suit before-"

"I'm not going to the wedding."

Sonic completely froze when he heard that.

"... Don't think I heard you right." Sonic slowly turned around to face Sorun yet again. His eyes were a bit narrowed, and the smile on his face became extremely strained. "What did you just say, Sorun?"

"I said I'm not going to the wedding," he repeated, completely straight-faced.

The forced smile Sonic wore dropped into a heavy frown. "Can I ask why?"

Sorun answered him by holding up the device Tails had made for him. "Tails made me this. It's a radar that can detect Chaos Emeralds," he explained. "Since I can use Yamato to make portals to any location on the planet, I plan on teleporting around the whole world using this to locate the last two Emeralds. The range is a bit short, but with the portals, it shouldn't matter that much." He held the radar closer to himself and looked down on it. "Best case scenario is that I find them within a few hours. At worst it'll take me a few days, maybe a week. Two at max. But not matter what it'll end with me getting the last of the Emeralds."

"Okay..." Taking a deep breath, Sonic clapped his hands together and pointed his fingers at Sorun. "Then why don't you just save that until *after* the wedding is done with?"

Why, indeed? It wasn't as if Sorun couldn't, and in fact he truly did want to go to that wedding. He was fond enough of Antoine and Bunnie that he actually regretted planning on missing their wedding just so he could amass more power. But that was precisely the reason why he was choosing to miss the wedding. He was too fond of them.

He was already dying as-is. He didn't want to die leaving happy memories like that with them, with anybody. He was already pushing it with that party he'd went to with everyone. He didn't want to leave too many moments for them to look back on him with. Memories that would just hurt them. And beyond that, Sorun wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. He didn't want to stall anymore, and he didn't want the wedding distracting him, to erode his willpower down even further and make this that much harder for him. He didn't want to be bogged down by any more happy memories than was necessary. He just wanted to get this over with already.

"I don't want to waste time going to a useless wedding," was the only answer Sorun had provided Sonic to his question. He wasn't sure that had been the right thing to say, as Sonic didn't look pleased at all by it.

"Waste ti- what do you mean waste time!?" Sonic shouted at him. "It's their *wedding* ! They're expecting you! For crying out loud, Antoine even reserved a seat in the front row for you!"

Sorun flinched. He didn't want to hear that. "That's their problem," he said, voice cold as he began walking forwards. "I have better things to do. So get lost."

"Are you being serious right now?" Even as Sorun passed him, Sonic had turned around to stare towards Sorun's back. The angry, hurt tone in the Mobian's voice had made Sorun stop in his tracks. "You actually think a couple of Chaos Emeralds are more important than going to their wedding?"

Sorun sharply exhaled. This was hurting more than he'd expected it to. "Evidently." Yamato materialized in his grasp after he'd pocketed the radar. "Why do you even care? Weddings are for friends and family. And I'm neither of those." He grabbed Yamato's handle and unsheathed it. "I explained all of this to you. Get it through your thick skull already."

"That's not what they think. It's not what *I* think, either." Sorun had just risen the blade up in preparation to cut a portal in front of him when Sonic's voice had stayed his hand. "How can you even say that? After everything you've done with us, all that time, the whole party, *now* is when you decide to pull this again? You know better than this!"

He'd hesitated for a few seconds after Sonic asked him the question. Afterwards, Sorun answered by slashing downwards, and then sideways, making a portal appear in front of him. "You don't know a thing about me," he said as he lowered the sword. "Just go to the stupid wedding and try to forget about me, would you?"

Sorun began moving towards the portal. He only got one foot in before he heard Sonic speak again, stopping him once more.

"Fine. Be that way," Sonic said. The bitter tone in his voice made Sorun grimace, and he was thankful he was turned away so Sonic didn't have to see his face. "If you seriously care more about getting powers than showing your feelings in front of everybody, then go. Run away."

Sorun didn't deign to give Sonic another word. He stepped fully through the portal, the environment around him warping into an endless void of blacks and blues. He exited through the other side of the portal, swiftly slashing behind him to close it before then sheathing the sword. With the katana held in his left hand, Sorun then reached into his right pocket to pull out the radar.

"Shouldn't have waited so long before leaving," Sorun thought to himself. He'd hoped to have left without encountering anybody like that, knowing full-well how it would have turned out, but there wasn't anything to do about it now.

He briefly glanced up to look at his surroundings. Some random part of the forest on the other side of the continent. He figured he'd use the radar here, and if it didn't pick anything up he'd keep using portals to go further and further out until he finally picked up a reading. Of course, when he looked down at the radar in his hands, he didn't see so much as a blip on it.

Nowhere nearby here, then.

"Okay." The radar was pocketed, and the Yamato was unsheathed yet again. *"This is gonna take a while..."*

He couldn't remember the last time he felt this upset. Really, he couldn't.

Sonic knew that this wasn't a time to feel this way, but no matter hard he tried he just couldn't get his mind off of it. What made him even more upset was that all around him were his friends and family, all celebrating the fact that two of his best friends were finally getting married. He should have been as jubilant as they all were and laughing and smiling along with them.

But he wasn't. He was over here sitting in a chair like a sad sack. All because of him.

"You know, I've never known you to sulk like this. Especially at something as important as a wedding."

A listless chuckle left Sonic as he looked up at Sally. She'd donned a long, maroon dress for the occasion. Like everybody else she'd dressed up.

Everybody but him. He hadn't even shown up.

"Even his Chao showed up to the wedding," Sonic mumbled, looking off to the side. He saw Virgil sitting off on the side of the confectionary table, eating a strawberry he'd plucked off the wedding cake. "I can't believe Sorun flaked on their wedding, Sally," Sonic continued, looking back at the chipmunk. "I really thought he changed after all this time, but he... he just left like that."

Sally's face formed into a frown. "I know. I haven't had the heart to tell either Antoine or Bunnie yet that he's not showing up. I know Antoine was really looking forwards to him being there," she said. The frown deepened as she looked off to the side. "We're having words when he comes back..."

Sonic found himself wincing at that. He didn't envy whatever the princess had planned for Sorun. He'd been on the other end of her verbal lashings more than enough times to know he didn't wanna be anywhere nearby when that happened.

He didn't know whether to pity Sorun or be mad at him for creating this situation in the first place.

"I just don't know what's going on in his head," Sonic mumbled out, his head rolling upwards as he gazed up at the early afternoon sky. "It's like Sorun acts one way and then does a totally opposite... huh?"

There was something in the sky. Multiple somethings, actually. Dark shapes so far up in the sky Sonic couldn't rightly make them out. The sun shining in his eyes wasn't helping matters, either, and he was forced to shield his eyes with his hand just so he could have a better view at whatever was up there that he was looking at. Even then he could barely make them all out.

"What the... what the heck is that...?"

"Where the hell are these fucking things?"

Sorun realized going into this that he wasn't going to be finding these Emerald immediately. He was essentially looking for two needles in a world-sized haystack, and his only advantage was that he had a way of instantly eliminating search areas while at the same instantaneously transporting to new search locations with the Yamato. The radar Tails had built for him was less for actually finding the things and more for narrowing down where in the world they could possible be at.

But that was still a world's worth of land, and narrowing it down by roughly a thousand miles every time he teleported somewhere wasn't exactly that significant. It was progress - for sure it was progress - but it was slow going. Slow going to the point that he was wondering if he hadn't actually highballed it when he told Sonic this could take a couple of weeks. Because he was hours into this and he had come up with zilch.

"Ugh, this is going nowhere..." Sorun grumbled to himself. He didn't even know where he was. At the edge of some lake in Soumerca by

his estimate, but he didn't know the exact location. It wasn't like he brought a map with him. Something he realized probably hadn't been his best idea.

With a frustrated grunt, Sorun kicked at some of the low grass he was standing on as he gazed out into the lake. At the very least, it was a nice lake. Wide, nestled right in the middle of a large glade, crystal clear water and- who was that?

Sorun blinked heavily in surprise when he realized he wasn't alone. There was another sitting at a small wooden dock near the edge of the lake. A... cat Mobian, from the looks of it. A purple and white one. And probably the hugest one Sorun had ever seen, too- the guy looked so big that the teen was surprised the dock he was sitting on wasn't collapsing in under his weight. Sorun couldn't help but wonder what he was doing until he looked closer, upon which he recognized the long item being held in the giant cat's hands.

A fishing rod.

The Mobian was fishing.

"... Curious." Sorun's shoulders relaxed a bit. It was just some strange-looking Mobian out here fishing. He'd probably accidentally wandered into his fishing spot or something like that while searching for the Chaos Emeralds. He scoffed at the sight, turned around to leave, and then stopped.

He didn't think it was a good idea to talk to him. But, after hours of searching around for these Emeralds, Sorun's patience was already beginning to wane on this endeavor. He wanted a break, and he couldn't just go on back to Knothole or the HQ to get some sleep in. Not when likely literally everybody there would be disgruntled about him intentionally missing out on Antoine and Bunnie's wedding. He wasn't even sure he wanted to show his face there ever again if getting these Emeralds took so long. He just wanted to get them, go kill Eggman, and die in peace.

But he needed to rest a bit to mentally recuperate, and he figured he might as well do it with some company. And it wasn't like this Mobian would know who he was or ever see him again once he left. So, while making a small sigh at his decision, Sorun performed a Trick and teleported right behind the purple Mobian.

To Sorun's surprise, he wasn't even sure the cat had noticed he'd Tricked right behind him. He just kept on fishing, not having even moved an inch. Furrowing his eyebrows a bit, Sorun decided to slowly step towards the end of the dock to where he was sitting.

The large, triangular ears on top of the cat's head flicked, likely from hearing his footsteps. So Sorun knew that he knew that he was there. But he didn't make any action in response to this. He just reeled in his fishing line and recast it back out into the lake, almost like he was ignoring Sorun's presence entirely.

"Very curious..." Sorun had finally made it to the edge of the dock, and stood right besides the large cat. He noticed the large Mobian's yellow eyes had briefly flicked down to Sorun before looking back up at the lake, but even after physically seeing him the cat still seemed to ignore Sorun's presence. He seemed more focused on fishing than anything else.

"Er... hi," Sorun awkwardly greeted, not entirely sure how he was supposed to go about this.

"Hello," the cat greeted back. Sorun was a bit off-put by the overly-friendly, almost goofy voice he heard from the Mobian, but at the same time relaxed a bit when he didn't perceive any ill intentions from him.

"..." Sorun looked off to the side, towards the lake. "So what are you doing?"

"Fishing."

Such a simple answer for what was probably a stupid question. "I see." Sorun looked back to the Mobian. "I'm Sorun."

"Hello, Sorun. Nice to meet you. I'm Big."

"... Sometimes I really wonder about these names." Sorun sighed as he sat down on the dock next to Big. "So how's the fishing life treating you, Big?"

"It's great," he answered, eyes continually locked onto the lake. "Do you like fishing, Sorun?"

Sorun shook his head. "No, I... I don't really fish."

"If you didn't come here to fish, then how come you came to this fishing spot?"

"Ahh... I don't know," Sorun admitted. "I just kind of wandered over here." He looked up at the Mobian. "How about you, Big? How come you're out here fishing?"

Big shrugged. "Because I like fishing. Fishing's fun," he answered simply. "Me and Froggy like to fish all the time."

"Froggy? Oh, I see." He saw the small, green head of a frog peek over from Big's head. It must have been sitting on the other side of the cat on his shoulder. "So you and your pet like to fish, huh?"

"Mmhm. Fishing's fun. Me and Froggy like to fish all the time."

"... Oh boy." Sorun repressed a sigh and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. *"I think he specced too many points into his strength stat from the looks of him. Then again, for some reason the simplest people are always the wisest. Somehow. For all I know this dude's probably the wisest guy on the planet. Screw it. Let's go for it."*

"I got a pet, you know," Sorun said, turning to face the lake along with Big. "He's a Chao named Virgil."

The tip of Big's fishing line began to jerk. "That's a pretty name," he commented as he began reeling in the line.

"Yeah, I named him after somebody I know. Well, not *know* know, just, uh... it's complicated," Sorun explained. "He's not with me, though. I left him behind in a place called Knothole."

"Knothole? Hey, I've been there before!" Big happily stated as he reeled in a fish. "All my friends the Freedom Fighters live there!"

Sorun's ears perked up, and he turned back to Big. "Oh, you know them?" he asked.

"Mmhm!" Big nodded as he removed the caught fish from the hook and tossed it back into the lake. "Everybody there is really nice. I even helped them with a play for the children once when I visited." He cast his line back out into the lake. "Are they your friends, Sorun?"

A small sigh left Sorun. "They aren't... yeah, I guess they are," he admitted. "But I don't really act like it."

"You don't?"

"No, I... not really, no." Sorun looked back to the lake and slumped forwards a bit. "I never act happy around them. I've been overly antagonistic at times. I've been a jerk," he bluntly stated. "I even skipped out on one of my best friend's wedding."

"How come?" Sorun was a bit amazed at how Big's friendly, carefree voice hadn't changed in the slightest throughout the entire duration of the conversation.

"'Cause... well..." Sorun's head dipped downwards, enough that he could see his own reflection in the water. "Because pretty soon I'm gonna... I'm gonna have to go somewhere far away. I'll never be able to see any of my friends once I leave, and they'll never be able to visit me. We'll all be separated forever." He sighed. "It's not that I

don't like them. I do. I really do. I... *really* like one in particular. But I always pretended I didn't like any of them because I didn't want to leave them with good memories of me," he admitted. "I figured if I acted like some antisocial jerk that none of them liked then when I finally left they'd be glad and could move on with their lives without ever looking back at me. I didn't want to be somebody they liked, because that would mean they'd feel sad whenever they remembered me. I didn't go to the wedding because... because I didn't want that to be their last memory of me. Of me being there at their happiest moment before I finally left. Or maybe I just couldn't bear having to see the sight, since that'd be the last I'd ever see of them." He looked back upwards. "So I lied. I lied to them at every opportunity. Kept saying we weren't friends. Hurt them. Distanced myself. All so I could try to spare them as much pain as possible for when I finally left. And what I just pulled with the wedding was probably the worst thing I've done yet. A once-in-a-lifetime event that the best friend I mentioned earlier was expecting me to show up to, because we grew really close. I've probably tarnished the image he had of me forever with what I did. Which, I suppose... is what I wanted all along. But it doesn't feel like I did the right thing." He looked back up at Big. "Tell me... was this fool before you right?"

"Mmmm... nope."

"Geh!" He hadn't been expecting such a blunt answer from Big. It'd been so unexpected that Sorun had visibly recoiled, as if he'd been struck from Big's words alone. Amazing, really, especially as they'd been said with such a friendly voice. "You... think I was wrong?" Sorun asked.

"Yup."

"... Can you tell me *why* ?"

"You lied to your friends," Big said, as friendly and carefree as the moment they met. "Lying isn't good."

Sorun heavily blinked at the cat. "I... realize this," he said, "but I only did it so they wouldn't be hurt."

"But wouldn't lying to them hurt them, too?"

The world felt like it paused for Sorun.

Such a simple sentence that made Sorun realize so much. He kept flashing back to Sonic, to that face he made, to all the different occasions where'd been disappointed when Sorun had turned down his hand of friendship at every single turn. He couldn't even imagine the disappointment that would be on Antoine's face for what he'd done. Or Bunnie's. Everybody's, really, for missing out on that wedding.

What was the point of lying to them all the time to save from hurting them if the process of him lying just hurt them in the end anyways?

"But... I still have to go," Sorun weakly argued. "That's not going to change no matter what. People'll be upset. I wanted to avoid that."

"They'll still remember you, won't they?" The tip of Big's fishing pole twitched, but then stilled. "Sure people are sad when people they know leave, but as long as they remember them they're not really gone."

Sorun shook his head. "Don't give me that cheesy nonsense-"

"And don't they already like you lots if they invited you to a wedding?"

"They..." Sorun couldn't refute that. It wasn't like he'd tried very hard to keep his distance from everyone. If anything, he went into it knowing he probably wouldn't have the resolve to see it through to the end. He *hadn't* saw it through to the end. The fact of the matter was, despite what he thought and what he did, he couldn't change what people thought about him. And his actions had done too many

things to earn everybody's favor and make them call him a friend, even if he actively refused to acknowledge it.

There was no getting out of them being affected by his death. The best he could hope for was that they would mourn and move on to live happy lives. At this point it was unavoidable.

"Tch. Heh." Sorun let out something between a sigh and a laugh as he leaned back on the dock, flattening his palms against the wood as he looked up into the sky. "You know, I've seen a lot of stories where the main bad guy always had their own reasons for doing all the bad stuff they did," he said. "It was always this ends-justify-the-means thing like that, or they'd admit that they knew what they were doing was bad but that the long-term payoffs made it worth it, whatever it was. But they always seemed to make the same mistake. They got so focused on reaching the end that they never noticed all the people they were hurting along the way. Some self-invalidating thing like that. I tried not to be like them, but... I guess, in the end, I wasn't so different. I've been an idiot." He made a long sigh, and then hopped up to his feet. "Well, then again... a man oughta be a little stupid. A blonde guy with a cool tattoo said that.

"I know what I gotta do now," Sorun said as he turned towards the cat, so fired up he hadn't even noticed that Big was just blankly staring out onto the lake. "Thanks a lot for everything you've done, Big. You know, I didn't think it at first, but you're the smartest guy I've ever met." Yamato appeared in Sorun's hands. "I got a wedding to go catch. Seeya... mm, well, never again, I guess, but nice meeting ya anyways!"

After he was finished speaking, Sorun turned around and ran down the dock. The sound of a portal opening was briefly heard, though Big didn't react to this in the slightest, his focus solely on the lake in front of him. It was only after the portal was long-since closed did the cat blink and begin to look around.

"Huh? Where'd he go?"

"Alright, so by now I've probably missed the ceremony, but if I hurry I can probably catch the end of the wedding," Sorun thought to himself as he travelled through the black and blue space towards the other end of the portal. *"Probably gonna have to get down on my hands and knees just to apologize to Antoine and Bunnie for missing most of their wedding. Maaaan... that's gonna be super embarrassing."*

He'd do it, of course, if only because he felt so bad about what he'd done. He imagined that it'd probably turn into an awkward mess, where they'd grow all flustered and ask him to stop going so hard into the apology. He didn't know where it'd go from there. Sorun supposed he'd just play it by ear.

"Did I waste all this time trying to be all distant only for it to end like this? Probably. Kinda wish Sonic woulda been a pal and smacked some sense into me before it carried on long enough that I had to get some wisdom from the mystic cat back there, but I guess he's too nice a guy to do something like that. Oh, wait, Sonic... I'm gonna have to apologize to him too for everything I did. Don't even know how I'm supposed to go about doing that without revealing too much." Sorun walked through the other end of the portal leading into Knothole and closed it behind him. *"Eh, well, I guess I'll just get into it and see what- Jesus FUCK."*

What Sorun expected to come back to was Knothole. And, indeed, he arrived in the approximate location Knothole was situated in. He'd lived here for so long that it was virtually impossible for him to mistakenly have Yamato cut a portal leading to somewhere else. Not when he was so familiar with this location, more familiar here than anywhere else on the planet aside from the HQ. So he'd walked through the portal expecting to see all of Knothole around him.

What he walked out into was a Knothole that was completely burned to the ground.

Chapter 44

Recursion Error

Episode 44- Air cancel the fat man

He'd done it.

The madman had done it.

He blew it all up.

"I WAS ONLY GONE FOR A FEW HOURS, WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED!?"

Sorun knew that the possibility of Eggman using his fleet of ships to bomb out Knothole existed; the man outright flaunted the fact that option was at his disposal to Sorun's face. And Sorun had always felt dread knowing that at any moment an armada of flying ships would just appear over Knothole and carpet-bomb the whole place. He knew it, but he'd been operating under the assumption that as long as he was quick enough and killed the Doctor that this fate could be avoided entirely and become a moot point.

Well, apparently, he hadn't been fast enough.

Eggman destroyed Knothole.

Everything was gone. Homes and other structures were completely leveled into unrecognizable, burning heaps. He couldn't even see the castle anymore- that was just *gone* , debris and all. The entire city was in this state. Destroyed beyond all recognition. Reduced to an uninhabitable wasteland.

Sorun stumbled through the burning streets in a daze, his mind swirling in an incomprehensible turmoil as he looked around at all

the devastation around him. Feelings of shock, confusion, and devastation assaulting him to such a high degree he could barely even see straight as he kept moving through Knothole's ruins.

There was one silver lining, though. One that was probably the only reason he wasn't breaking down from the sight of all this. It was a detail Sorun himself was surprised he'd noticed, but once he had he'd begun examining the burning surroundings further to confirm that small detail.

There were no bodies.

It was the one thing he'd been dreading to see above everything else. Corpses as a result of the bombing. Mangled, burning cadavers that wouldn't even look like the people they used to be. Or, even worse, bodies that he would recognize. Bodies of his friends. The Freedom Fighters' bodies. All mangled and torn apart into twisted messes that Sorun would have to go find to confirm if they'd survived or not. And Sorun wasn't very confident he'd be able to go through with such a gruesome task like that. He didn't think he'd be able to handle seeing Sonic's or Sally's or Antoine's or anybody else's dead bodies, torn apart and mutilated from the explosions of the bombs, their faces eternally set into expressions of pain and horror from seeing their home being bombed to oblivion right before they died.

Except... he saw none of that. There wasn't a single body to be found. Not of the Freedom Fighters, or any of the citizens, the royal forces, nobody. Not a single one. He'd say that the place was a ghost town, but due to the state of things, Sorun didn't think he could call Knothole a town anymore. At first he'd been horrified and assumed the bombing had been so bad that there weren't even any intact bodies, but when he'd looked around some more, using his Bringer Claws to sift through some of the wreckage, he saw that he was mistaken. There weren't even pieces of anybody lying around. No bodies, no parts, not even any scorch marks resembling the shape of somebody being incinerated from the bombs.

The only conclusion Sorun could come to was that nobody had died in the bombing. They were all taken.

It made sense, the more Sorun thought on it. Robotnik was the kind of guy that'd want to gloat about his victory over everybody. What he'd do with them afterwards... well, frankly, Sorun didn't want to think about how horrible that prospect was. But the point was everybody was alive- at least it *seemed* like they were alive. Captured, most likely, but alive.

Probably the only thing keeping Sorun going by now was that one single hope.

"This... must be where they held the wedding..." That's what Sorun thought when he stumbled into... whatever this could even be called. Some large venue covered in ashes. There were a few scraps of burnt, white cloth clinging onto tables that were half-burnt to oblivion, a few chairs standing amidst giant piles of dark ash, and a small stage - what used to be a small stage, anyways - and the remains of an altar in front. Really, with how little remained, he could have been completely wrong.

Clack!

Sorun froze when he felt the tip of his foot hit something mid-step. He looked down to see what he'd made contact with, but he couldn't make it out from all the ash and debris covering it. He lifted his foot up to brush aside some of the fine debris, and then shook it off a bit to help reveal the item. His breathing cut out in a choked gasp when he saw what was under all the ash.

"Oh shit." It was hard not to recognize Nicole's handheld body, even when it was buried under all of that darkened ash. He was less worried about how dirty it was, however, and more with what the state of the AI living in it was, so he'd bent down immediately and began to dig through the ash to get to it. *"Oh no no no wait wait hold on..."*

Frantically, he'd dug out the handheld from the ashes and held it up to inspect it. The handheld was already opened and, thankfully, all the buttons seemed intact and the screen remained uncracked. Aside from all the ash staining it, the handheld seemed completely okay. It was off, though. The screen was dark. Nicole wasn't there, and Sorun didn't know how to force her on or if she was even okay-

The screen turned on.

"... Uh..." Sorun couldn't even utter words. He could barely even think straight, let alone articulate words. The relief he felt seeing the screen turn on was overshadowed by the sheer devastation all around him.

"... Hello, Sorun." The voice that came from the handheld, Nicole's voice, was unusually calm. Calm, but at the same time she sounded despondent. "I am in need of your assistance."

"N-Nicole, I, I don't, what..." Sorun shook his own head to try and think clearer. "What happened?" he asked, wanting to at least start with that.

She didn't answer him. Instead, a small lens on the handheld's screen began emitting a large, rectangular beam of light upwards. Sorun looked up at the light, widening his eyes when he saw what it was: a holographic projection, floating right there in the air above them. Being displayed on the projection was an otherwise relatively un-exploded Knothole. That was, until bombs and munition shells began to rain down on the town.

"Dr. Robotnik's Egg Fleet had suddenly appeared without warning. They... simply unloaded their ordinance upon all of Knothole," Nicole explained. "It was too fast for anybody to do anything. Nothing was spared."

Sorun grimaced at the sight of all the bombs raining down on the homes in the recording, and with a shuddering breath, asked, "And... the people...?"

The holographic projection changed. It was a different angle, in a different location. And what was being displayed in the image had Sorun pause in absolute disbelief at what he saw.

He thought he was looking at a robot at first. One of Robotnik's Badniks, one that stood about five or six times taller than Sorun himself. It looked similar to an Egg Pawn: same red and black coloring, same round main body, same large hands and feet connected by spindly, metal limbs, complete with spikes. The weapons were odd, with the left hand having some strange, circular red and silver shield with a star connected to the back of it and the right one, to Sorun's disdain, was wielding that brown, checkered wrecking ball and chain he'd had the misfortune of encountering once like it was some kind of flail.

But then he got to the head, and the head was most certainly *nothing* like an Egg Pawn's. It wasn't the head of a robot- it was a helmet. A helmet that for some godforsaken reason had a orange, metal mustache bolted to the front of it, but Sorun knew it was a helmet. He knew it was a helmet because its face was a transparent, blue-tinted visor. And inside of that visor he saw Dr. Robotnik himself, wearing that demented smile of his.

It wasn't a robot. It was a... mechanized suit of some sorts. A mech suit.

There were people on the projection fighting Eggman and his mech suit. Freedom Fighters. It was... going exceptionally poorly. Every so often Eggman's mech suit would simply point at somebody, and a yellow beam of energy would fire out, envelop the poor victim, and, to Sorun's shock, they'd completely disappear. Just like that.

He saw Bunnie flying in through the air towards the mech suit, wearing a torn and tarnished wedding gown. She'd been vaporized by one of the yellow beams before she'd even come close. Mighty and Knuckles were there, trying to grab at and physically strike at the suit. They did absolutely no damage. They were vaporized, too.

Sonic was there, too, but not even he could do anything. He didn't get to see the full fight, there were moments where the recording would fizzle out and cut to a new angle, but Sorun got the gist. He also saw that in addition to the laser and the weapons the mech had on hand, the thing even had missile pods on the back of each shoulder. Between all the missiles, lasers, the weapons, and the fact that mech moved deceptively fast and was apparently horrifically strong and *ludicrously* durable if Knuckles *and* Mighty not being able to even scratch the thing said anything, Sonic couldn't beat it. The most he'd managed to do was damage the shield by making a dent in the center of it after flying in from out of the camera's view moving at absurd speeds.

But he'd still been beaten. Bashed around by the shield. Smacked around by that flail. Grazed by yellow laser beams fired out from openings at the back of the mech's hands and blown up by missiles. He didn't seem too badly hurt, and Sorun attributed that solely to the billion-ring durability thing Sonic possessed, but apparently even that couldn't hold up to that kind of assault. That suit of Eggman's beat him down like it was nothing.

He felt anger seeing it. Anger that he'd never felt before, that Sorun himself was surprised at feeling. An emotion that was so intense that it was completely foreign to him. His face seemed calm, though he was lightly quavering, and his irises and pupils had constricted to pinpricks at the sight and were rapidly shaking along with his eyes. Every single time he saw Sonic get hurt by the mech made another spurt of pure rage go through Sorun, and his mind began to unravel into a jumbled mess of furious mutterings as he watched on.

"Sorun," Nicole's voice had called out, soft but still gloomy, "please do not grip the handheld so tightly. You'll hurt yourself."

Nicole's voice brought Sorun back. The shaking ceased, his thoughts returned to normal, and his eyes dilated back to their normal size. He looked down at Nicole's handheld, blinking once when he saw that his fingers were gripping on tightly enough that the knuckles were

white. "Sorry, Nicole," he muttered to her before looking back up at the hologram.

Predictably, Sonic had lost. His defeated form had been picked up by one of the mech's hands. Sonic struggled, and based on how long it was going on Sorun assumed Eggman was giving some hammed-up victory speech to the defeated hedgehog, but without the projection having any volume, it was hard to tell. It hardly mattered, though, as the end result was the same. Sonic was vaporized by a yellow beam of energy like everybody else had been, and meanwhile all around Knothole continued to be relentlessly pounded by the fleet of floating ships above until all that was left were smoldering ruins.

The projection cut out right there. Sorun took a deep inhale, something that failed to calm him down even the slightest amount, and looked down towards the handheld he held in his hands. "S-so that... that suit or whatever Robotnik was in, it... it vaporized everyone?" He gulped. "Did-did they-?"

"They remain alive, if that is what you are wondering," Nicole interrupted. Sorun felt himself breath out in relief, though he still looked to Nicole for answers. "I am familiar with that technology he was using. It was not a weapon. It was teleportation. He simply used that device to transport anybody struck by it. I was dropped and lost in all the fighting."

"Transport?" Sorun repeated. "So everyone-"

"The entire population of Knothole was captured by Dr. Robotnik using that teleportation beam, yes," Nicole confirmed. "I believe it would be reasonable to assume they were all taken to New Megaopolis."

"Of course they were," Sorun sighed out. It was a weight off his shoulders. The complete annihilation of Knothole was still crushing him, but knowing everybody was alive was a small comfort. Small, as he wasn't sure how good alive was if they were all captured and being held there of all places.

A silent beat passed of Sorun continuing to silently stand there, in the ashen ruins of what had once been a wedding ceremony inside of what used to be a small city, holding his AI friend in his hands. Eventually Nicole chose to speak up. "Sorun, we must rescue them."

"Oh, rescue them? From the most dangerous city in the entire world run by the same guy that just bombed out Knothole? That place? We're gonna rescue everybody from that place? The two of us?" A disbelieving, broken chuckle left Sorun. "You gotta be kidding me. You just showed me a video of him personally beating everybody *including Sonic* and you're saying we're gonna march right up to that and go save everybody?"

"Sorun-"

"Argh, I know, I know he have to!" he yelled out. The Earthling began pacing around, nervously and erratically, as he began to rapidly mutter out his thoughts. "I-I mean we have to, there's nobody else, there's literally nobody else that can go and save them, and who knows what's gonna happen to them if we do nothing, we-we just have to, there's no other way."

"Sorun-"

"But you're asking us to walk into impossible odds here, and we-what are we supposed to do, Nicole, I can't just walk up into New Megaopolis and fight off everything in that city, and, and-" he began to hyperventilate from sheer panic, "- oh my god, Nicole, I can't, this isn't, I can't-"

"Sorun!"

There was a flash of light, cubes swirled in front of Sorun, and before he knew it Nicole's holo-lynx body was gripping him by the shoulders and staring the panicking human straight in the eyes. He didn't know what got him to stop: her sudden appearance, the physical contact, or the grim expression she wore, but regardless, she had gotten Sorun to pause and focus on her.

"I know this is bad, but I need you right now," she said, firmly squeezing down on Sorun's shoulders to get the point across. "I realize the odds are massively against us, and I realize that us two being the only able-bodied Freedom Fighters available to rescue all of Knothole from Dr. Robotnik is *far* from ideal and that we are severely under-equipped to carry out such an undertaking, but we have. No. Choice. I have a plan, but I cannot do this without you. So please calm down."

Another shuddering breath left Sorun. He looked down away from Nicole's eyes. "I'm so scared, Nicole," he whispered out.

"I know. I am, too," she said, hands still on his shoulders. "But I'm more scared of what's going to happen to our friends and everybody that lived in Knothole. So we need to do this."

"Our?" Sorun repeated, before then slowly shaking his head. "Yeah. Our."

The hands on his shoulders and the body connected to them disappeared. Sorun looked up at the empty space, looked down at the small lit-up computer in his hands, and sighed. He then found the closest, most intact-looking chair, approached and sat down in it, and then finally addressed Nicole after setting her down in his lap.

"Alright. Alright... so what is this plan of yours and what do you need me to do?"

"Ladies, gentlemen, and Mobians of all ages!"

Once upon a time this storage space used to be little more than a larger-than-average silo connected to the city's power grid via all the devices hanging off of the ceiling. That was a product of a bygone-idea, though, and by now the building had expanded. "Expansion" may have been a generous word, though, as the building itself was still a silo. But bigger, wider. More spacious.

The main purpose remained the same, though, and that was to house the aforementioned devices from earlier: pods. Perfectly spherical, transparent pods with a blue tinge hanging off of metal stalks suspended from the ceiling, like giant, artificial grape vines. And inside of each of these pods was a Mobian.

All of them were in varying states of grief and despair. It wasn't hard to imagine why, seeing as they'd all just seen their home be completely annihilated before they were all abducted by the same man that was currently leering at them from the end of a small walkway jutting out of the wall of the silo, high enough towards the ceiling that it was near the pods. Some of the captured Mobians were harshly glaring towards the round man, others were pressing themselves against the glass-esque walls of the pods to try and reach out towards family members and friends near them, while others were breaking down entirely. Mostly the children.

"I'd apologize for the cramped accommodations, but if you can see it past all the tears I've made some expansions since I first planned this all out," Eggman continued, walking towards near the end of the walkway before stopping and leaning on the side railings. "I've had so much free time on my hands, you see, that I've busied myself renovating all sorts of locations around my city. I saw you all were doing the same thing in Knothole! Eh, you know, before I blew it up, anyways."

A muffled banging drew Eggman's attention to two particular bunches of the grape-like pods. There was one section that contained the entirety of the Chaotix, all of which were glaring at him with the exception of Mighty and Knuckles, who were attempting to punch through the material trapping them. On the other side of them, on a different bunch of pods, was the Freedom Fighters, who were mostly all also glaring at him, except for Amy, who was trying to pound her way out of the pod with her hammer. Nobody was able to do any damage and free themselves, though. Not even a crack was made.

"Don't even bother. I triple-reinforced those Egg Grapes in preparation for all of this. There's very little in this entire world that could break those things," Eggman commented, his eyes staying on the pods containing the Chaotix for a bit before he focused on the bunch containing the Freedom Fighters. He looked up, making a low chortle when he saw Sally standing in her pod and staring down at him in utter contempt. "Oh, don't give me that look, princess. You all knew this was a long time coming." He looked a bit to the side. His smile grew wider when he saw Antoine and Bunnie, both facing each other and pressing their palms against the glass with distraught looks on their faces. "And my, my, my, to think I carried this out during a wedding of all days. I couldn't have had better timing."

"Don't talk about them like that!"

Robotnik's head snapped down towards a pod that was a bit lower than theirs. In that pod was a lone hedgehog Mobian, sitting down with his arms crossed as he glowered towards the Doctor with a deep frown on his face. Failing to contain some of his laughter, Eggman leaned off the railing and walked to the other side of the walkway only to them lean over the other railing while addressing Sonic.

"Oh-ho-ho, Sonic, come now. I'm just having a bit of fun. How are you doing, by the way? I know that enhanced durability of yours gained from all those Power Rings you absorbed in the past took the brunt of the beating, but you're still looking a bit sore over there," he said.

Sonic's scowl deepened. "I'm sore over a lot more things than that, Eggman."

"Is it because of the wedding? I'm being completely serious, I didn't even plan for that. It was a happy accident."

"You call ruining their wedding a happy-" Sonic cut himself off and shook his head. "No! I'm sore because you destroyed Knothole!"

"Huh. Yes, I suppose that would put a damper on your mood, wouldn't it?" Eggman completely ignored the angered snarl Sonic made at him, instead choosing to look around at the grape-like pods all around him. "Huh. You know, I'm not seeing that human lad Sorun in any of these Egg Grapes." He turned around to look at the end of the walkway, towards the short Overlander in a green jacket manning a small console at the end. "Snively, did you happen to see him while you were going around zapping Mobians in that battle suit you wound up wrecking?"

"No, sir, I didn't," Snively answered, a displeased look on his face. "Believe me, I would have taken my time with him if I had."

"You would have had the rug pulled out from under you if a bunch of little furry resistance fighters is all it took to destroy that battle suit I lent you," Robotnik muttered under his breath before turning back to Sonic. "Let me guess. He didn't go to your friends' wedding?"

Eyes still narrowed in anger, Sonic turned his head away from him. "I'm not sayin' anything to you."

"I think I know what happened," Eggman said. "Dear old Sorun wanted to go round up the last remaining Chaos Emeralds to amass more powers for his arsenal, and didn't want to waste time going to a meaningless little shindig, which just so *happened* to be when I attacked Knothole? Am I about right?" Utter silence on Sonic's part, though he did flinch, causing Eggman to hum. "Your silence says it all," he said. "Can't say I'm too surprised. The boy does seem unusually pragmatic like that, especially for his age. And I can't say I blame him for not wanting to attend a wedding by people he hates."

Sonic angrily stirred. "He doesn't hate-"

"Did you know," Eggman interrupted, "that way back when, around when he acquired his first Emerald, I reached out to him?" That got Sonic's attention, along with the rest of the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix who were now staring at him with widened eyes. "So he never told you, then. Strange. I knew of his circumstances through

special means and thought to win him over to my side. I really thought it was a sure thing, too. A human taken from another zone by, from his perspective, strange animal monsters? I would have thought he'd leap at the first opportunity to jump ship and join somebody whose kind was related to his. I even tried spicing the deal up by lying and saying I'd find him a way home."

By now Sonic was shaking in rage at the news. Some of the Freedom Fighter and Chaotix had paused, too, mixtures of surprise, shock, and disbelief flowing into their features as they continued listening to the Doctor. Sonic, through all the anger and shock, looked sad under it all. Saddened to hear that the false possibility of going back to his zone had been dangled in front of Sorun, knowing full-well how much something like that meant to the Earthling.

"But, to my complete bafflement, he refused my offer," Eggman said, causing everybody who cared enough to listen to freeze. "Went on and on about for as much as he hated you all, he hated me even more and refused to work with me and went into all other sorts of tripe. I never could figure out what goes through the boy's head that he refused me. Why he'd choose to suffer alongside all of you when he could have joined me at the drop of a hat. Why he chose to stay with people he utterly detested..." Eggman shook his head. "I just don't understand why he made that choice."

Sonic's arms went limp by his side as his entire form seemed to deflate. "Sorun..."

"I'll give him one thing, though. He's got something none of you animals possess. Something few Overlanders and humans possess that almost no Mobian can ever have. A drive to see things through to the end," he said. "I saw some real potential in him. More than my good-for-nothing and failure of a schemer nephew over there, at least." The dirty glare briefly sent to him by Snively completely unaffected Robotnik. "He's not very high in the brains department, sure, but he has some real grit. But oh well. If he wants to waste his life allying himself with your lot, that's his foolish choice. Ah, well. He can serve another purpose at least."

"What...? What are you talking about?" Sonic demanded, looking back up towards the Doctor.

Eggman, in response, rolled his hand around while sighing. "You know, this whole thing happening right now? Me destroying Knothole and trapping you all in these Egg Grapes? It was supposed to happen months ago," he explained. "In fact, I was getting ready to commit to the whole thing, but then, but then! I acquired the Chaos Emeralds."

"You mean you *stole* the Emeralds." Eggman lazily looked upwards when he heard Sally address him. "You took the gray Chaos Emerald that was being held in Castle Acorn at the time! You had whatever you sent to retrieve it murder Hershey and a handful of guardsmen just to get it!"

"Yeah, and how did you even get all the other ones, anyways?" Sonic asked. "Last we checked the other six Emeralds were supposed to be locked away in the Special Zone with that Feist guy. Now that zone doesn't even exist anymore. What'd you do?"

"Hmph!" Eggman made a loud huff and turned his head to the side. "I'm Dr. Robotnik, you nimrods. Nothing's above me when it come to getting what I want. And I wouldn't want to bore you with the details." He faced back towards Sonic. "With the Emeralds, I concluded that a... change of strategy, as it were, was in order. So the plan was put on halt, and you all know the rest. I'd used my Emeralds to power up production of my forces, you all slowly took them back, summoned the brat, yadda yadda. And admittedly it was fun, taking over the whole world, bending the Kingdom of Acorn and the Overlanders to their knees only to then see them crawl their way back up to power and push me back to my city. It was a blast, really. But the fun's dried up." Eggman slumped over the railing, still looking towards Sonic as he ran a hand over his mustached face. "We've done this time and time again, Sonic. Gone through the same hoops, run through the same loops, the whole shebang. We've come back and forth again and again, and it's just gone droll. Especially after what we went through, because that? The two near-ultimates of both spectrums?

That was the peak of our game, Sonic. It doesn't get any better than that." He sighed deeply, and then used his arms to push off the railing. "So we're done. It's game over. I'm ending things. I'm ending you, your resistance, and the entire kingdom right here before I build my forces back up to take over the world. Again. Originally I was going to spare you from this so I could see you flounder around trying to uselessly overthrow me after I finally pulled the curtain on all your friends and family, but now that the act's grown stale, Sonic, I've decided to just leave that spot to Sorun. He'll give me a bit more entertainment at least before I put him through the same thing I'm about to do to all of you." His leering smile returned, wide enough to show teeth. "Oh, but don't worry, Sonic. You'll still always be my favorite nemesis. So just for that, you get to watch as I drain the life out of every single Mobian here before I finally get to you."

"Are you serious? That's your plan? That's what you've been working on this entire time!?"

It seemed ludicrous even by this world's standards. It had to be true, though- it was coming from Nicole of all people, and he didn't know *anybody* that would make a lie like this in the situation they were in. It didn't make it sound any less insane, though.

"Yes, that is indeed the plan," Nicole plainly stated, the handheld still resting in Sorun's lap.

The Earthling made a small groan and rubbed at his forehead. "Why does he even have something like that just lying around...?" he mumbled. "So this whole time you've been making programs and adjustments and all that, this whole time, *just* for something like this?"

"Do you doubt me, Sorun?"

He shook his head. "No, of course not, it's you and you're amazing, so of course it'll work, it's just..." He cut himself off, sighed, and then continued speaking. "Okay, it at least solves the problem of where to

send everyone after we rescue 'em. There's still the actual problem of actually rescuing them, though," he said. "We don't know where in the city they are, what kind of resistance we're gonna be fighting, if that big mech suit's gonna be there or not, and you need- you need, what, a connection to the network, you said?"

"Yes, any stable accessway so that I can make my way through the Egg Network should suffice."

"Okay, so adding that on top of everything else... what do you suppose we do?"

"We'll have to improvise."

Sorun's mind went completely silent for a few moments after he'd heard that. He'd gone as far as to look forwards with a blank look on his face, after which he looked back down at Nicole once his thoughts resumed. "That's not a plan," he said.

"We have no time to formulate anything past that with everyone's lives on the line, nor do we have any available data as to what we'll be encountering," she reasoned. "Ergo, we will have to work with what we have."

As much as he didn't like what he was hearing, she was right. It really was do or die, and the longer they waited, the worse off they were. There wasn't any time to plan. "... Guess we got no other option. Let's do it," Sorun finally said in agreement. He reached into his pocket, felt around for a bit, and then held out the Chaos energy radar gifted to him by Tails. He stared down at it briefly, and then sighed as he reared his arm back.

"Sorry for wasting your time again, Tails," Sorun thought as he threw the radar away. Nicole then took the radar's place in his pocket, after which he stood up off the chair. One manifestation of Yamato later and a portal was cut in the space in front of him.

And then, not wasting a moment longer, Sorun jumped through.

"Well, I think that's enough words said between enemies. It's been a good game, all, but it's time we ended things." Eggman walked away from the railing and began walking towards the end of the walkway, where Snively and the terminal was. "I think a little demonstration of things to come is in order, to get you all good and terrified." He nodded towards Snively. "Do it."

Wordlessly, Snively began to tap away at the console. A long, robotic arm reached down from the ceiling and grabbed at one of the pods. Cries of protest and outrage were heard as the pod was disconnected from the main branch and brought right in front of Eggman, who did little else but smile at the occupant of the pod as he leaned against the railing.

"Charmy Bee!" Eggman exclaimed as he pointed at the pod. "Haven't I already..."

If there was an upside, it was that Sorun had the foresight to stick to the rooftops in New Megaopolis. Surprisingly, most of the robot patrols were relegated down to the streets and alleyways. And he supposed that traversing by rooftop may have been a challenge for some, especially from how spread out some of these buildings were, but he could teleport. And fly. Traveling via rooftop was trivial to him.

He knew this city used to be New York in the old world, but traversing through it now he saw almost no architecture that was familiar to him. Granted he'd only ever seen the city through screens from movies and games, but even then nothing here screamed "New York" at him. A result of all the buildings having been replaced by these tall, metal ones, he supposed.

The Statue of Liberty was still there, though. Somehow. Half-sunk into the river at the edge of the city and eroded to hell, but it was there. So there was that.

"Ugh, this is getting us nowhere," Sorun grumbled under his breath as he stopped on a rooftop. All around him were nothing but metal buildings. A whole city full of nearly identical-looking metal buildings. "They could all be in any one of these places and we don't have time to search 'em all."

"Are there any buildings with any identifiable features?" Nicole's voice asked from inside his pocket.

"No, nothing. There's-" Sorun stopped when he turned around, his eyes focusing in on one structure in particular. It was a large silo-like building out in the distance, connected to another building by what looked like a small, enclosed walkway. What really caught Sorun's interest was the words "Egg Vineyard" stenciled on the side of the silo in red, along with a red drawing of Eggman's face right below it.

"Egg Vineyard?" Sorun thought. *"Why does that sound so familiar? Wait..."*

"This was all just because I found a shell-like artifact while raiding and destroying some lost, ancient civilization I found in a hidden valley in down the way in the lower continent. Inhabitants seemed like a cheerful bunch. I put them all in Egg Grapes and harvested their life energy for fuel before destroying their home and putting an oil refinery there."

"Eggman said he destroyed some lost civilization for this thing. Mentioned grapes or something."

Sorun's eyes narrowed in the direction of the silo. "I have a sneaking suspicion..."

White energy began to race down the robotic arm holding the Egg Grape that Charmy was trapped inside of. The Doctor and his

nephew watched on in sadistic glee as the energy came closer and closer to the pod, while the bee inside looked on in a mixture of defiance and slight fear. Those in the other pods were mainly just looking on in horror as the white energy came closer, with members of the Chaotix and Freedom Fighters calling out his name while uselessly banging on the surface of their pods.

Before the energy had reached the pod, though, something had happened that drew everybody's attention. A thin, blue line instantly appeared on the wall of the silo, opposite of the walkway both Eggman and Snively stood on. Line upon blue line was cut into the wall, a few at first, and then ten.

A blue form crashed through the wall that had been cut by the blue lines. It streaked through the air, propelled by two spectral wings as it shot straight towards the arm holding Charmy's pod. Right before the white energy had reached the pod, the winged form flew by the pod, after which a blue line appeared on the mechanical hand holding the pod.

The hand fell away, having been separated by the cut made into it. Charmy's pod had been spared from the energy that had been threateningly close to it, though now the bee was screaming as his pod began to fall down towards the ground. It had only dropped a few feet, though, as a blue, clawed hand had reached out and grabbed the pod before it dropped too far.

The pod's sudden stop had made Charmy slam into the rounded wall of the pod, causing him to elicit a small grunt. He recovered quickly, a hand reaching up to rub at his sore head as he looked up at what had caught him. His hand fell limply to his side, and his eyes widened along with everybody else's when he saw what was holding him.

The arm holding Charmy and the Egg Grape he was in was a long, feathered, spectral arm attached to the back of the Earthling that was currently dangling above Charmy's position. A second blue, feathered arm was holding onto a stalk of Egg Grapes to keep

himself aloft, while his left hand held an empty black scabbard and his right a katana. Sorun's eyes, however, were focused out in front of him, where he was level with Eggman and Snively who were both still standing on the walkway and staring wide-eyed at him.

"Haven't you done enough to him already?" Sorun asked the both of them in a quiet, hollow voice. He didn't give them the time to answer, as dozens of blue, spectral swords instantly appeared all around them.

To Sorun's surprise, though, Eggman was quick on his feet. Quicker than any man his size had a right to be. Probably from all the adrenaline that began pumping through his system when he realized he was about to get skewered by swords. He hadn't even said a word; he'd simply grabbed Snively and began *sprinting* down the walkway towards the silo's wall. Sorun had tried hitting him with the Summoned Swords, but to his frustration, Eggman had been too quick. The door on the silo's wall was closed behind Eggman, with the spectral swords sticking right into it.

Making an annoyed "tsk" sound, Sorun willed the Bringer Claw to lift up Charmy and the pod. It was set down on the vine of Egg Grapes containing the Chaotix, in a position so that it was wedged between the other pods and wouldn't fall away. Sorun's Bringer Claws then pulled him up against the pod, the teen landing in a small crouch as the arms disappeared.

"All this for orange juice..." Sorun sighed to himself. "... Hey, Charmy," Sorun softly greeted. He sheathed Yamato and looked to the side at the bee Mobian who was pressing himself against the pod's surface as he looked at Sorun. "I really panicked when I went back to Knothole and saw the place, you know? I thought you all got turned into Mobian jerky. Don't scare me like that."

"S-Sorun...!" Charmy's voice began to waver. Some tears began to fall down his face, happy, relieved tears, though his mouth kept changing from a smile to a worried expression. "Eggman, he... he almost...!"

"I know, Charmy, I know." Sorun reached his free hand out and placed it on the pod, over where one of Charmy's hands was. "I'm not gonna let him hurt you or anybody else, alright? It's gonna be fine. Don't worry."

"I'm reading a port access nearby, Sorun." Sorun removed his hand from the pod and reached into his pocket, bringing out Nicole's handheld. "Plug me in there. Hurry!"

Blinking, Sorun squinted at the walkway Eggman and Snively had been on prior, towards the end where the console was. "You mean that dinky little middle-of-nowhere co-"

"I already told you I just need a stable accessway!"

"Alright, I'm on it!" Straightening up a bit at Nicole's raised voice, Sorun Tricked to the console he'd been looking at. A Bringer Claw briefly appeared to rip the front plate off to reveal the electronics within, where he saw a cable with a port that matched the slot on the handheld's underside. He set the handheld down and plugged the port in. "So how long are you gonna need?" Sorun asked.

"As long as I need to do what is necessary."

"That... tells me nothing, but alright, I'll do what I can." Sorun turned around, and then looked back towards Nicole. "I'll come get the handheld before we all leave."

He left Nicole behind after teleporting away once more, this time towards the bunch of Egg Grapes that held the Freedom Fighters. He appeared kneeling down on one knee in the middle of the grouping of pods, with him kneeling down on the one Sonic was kept in specifically. The teen immediately felt all eyes on him, making him lower his head a bit.

"... Hi, guys," he said. "So... this is lookin' pretty bad, huh?"

"Sorun!" Looking to the side, Sorun spotted Tails trapped in an Egg Grape next to him. "You're here! How'd you find us!?"

"... Dumb luck and a halfway decent memory, mostly." He took a quick glance around. It didn't take him much looking to confirm that every single person that had been inside of Knothole was here, something that twisted at something in his gut. From all the civilians that lived there, to a few familiar faces he recognized at a second glance, to even the entirety of Sally's royal family all being bunched together on a single bunch of Egg Grapes nearby.

And then there were the Chaotix and Freedom Fighters. For some reason the intense looks they were giving him affected him more than everybody looking at him. He would have figured having the entire city's population focused solely on him would have done something to his nerves, but given the situation... he felt oddly calm. But the looks the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix were giving him disrupted that. He wasn't sure why.

Sorun took another glance to his side, spotting Antoine and Bunnie. He winced slightly and turned away, and then looked up. Sally was above him, staring down at him like everybody else. The same was said for Sonic, who was below Sorun's feet.

"So, uh... Sorun," Sonic started. He seemed like one of the most relieved-looking persons in there, but there was something else behind his tone of voice and the way he was looking at Sorun. From all the mixed emotions showing on Sonic's face, though, Sorun couldn't tell what was on his mind. "Er... glad you're here and everything, but what now?"

"Mm." Sorun looked forwards. "Don't worry too much about it, Sonic. I have a plan." He paused. "Well... Nicole has a plan. I'm just the guy following it."

"A plan?" Sorun looked up at Sally. "She has a plan?" she asked him.

The Earthling nodded. "Yeah. It's a pretty crazy plan, but it's better than anything I have. Which is nothing."

"Does that plan involve getting us all out of these grape things?"

"Erm... yeah. Eventually." He shook the sheathed sword held in his left hand. "Yamato should be able to cut everybody out of those easy enough."

Sally blinked in confusion. "Sorun, what do you mean 'eventually'? We need to get out of these things now!"

"Yeah... about that..." Sorun slowly inhaled and looked back forwards. "So here's the thing. Nicole's... she's handling it."

"Handing it?" Sonic parroted. "Handling it how?"

Slowly, Sorun reached up and scratched at his cheek. "I think she'll be mad if I spoil the surprise. Nicole's been planning it for a while now. But don't worry. She's doing something that'll fix this, but she needs time to finish it. And I really doubt Robotnik's gonna just sit around for us while we wait. Case in point..."

A loud, hydraulic hissing noise drew all eyes in the room downwards. A circular aperture down on the ground began to open up, and flying out from the aperture was something that made Sorun give out a low sigh. The mech suit from the video Nicole had shown him. The one that beat everyone. He'd already managed to get into it and pilot it here.

As the opening on the floor closed back up as the mech flew up via jet rockets on the underside of its feet, Sonic let out a loud gasp and began banging on the pod he was in. "Sorun! Sorun, that thing's bad news! You gotta get us all out so we can leave!"

"It's too late for that, Sonic, and Nicole still needs more time," Sorun denied with a shake of his head. "Besides, he'll just use that

teleporter beam he has on you all again if I try that. Don't have a choice. Gotta beat it here and now."

"Then at least let us out so we can help you fight it!"

Sorun frowned at the mech suit that was slowly flying up to his position. "Nicole showed me what happened when you all tried fighting it, Sonic. None of you can even hurt it."

"What, and you can!?"

"Yes, because I'm the one with the magic sword that cuts through everything!" Sorun exclaimed, looking back down at Sonic. "Look, I get this is a bad idea, alright, I get it! But there's nothing else I can do! He's just gonna teleport you all again if you try helping me, and I don't want to risk losing you somewhere I can't find you!"

"You can't just fight that thing by yourself!" Sonic yelled at him.

"It's... not ideal, no." Breathing in a deep sigh, Sorun stood up to his feet. "Listen, everyone. I'm going to get you all out of here. If something bad happens to me, though, well... I got a backup plan. No matter what happens, you're all getting out of here." He wrapped the fingers of his right hand around the katana's handle and slid it out of the sheath. "Just hold on, alright? It's gonna be fine. I promise."

He heard everybody begin to call his name out. For the most part he ignored them, choosing instead to look up. He Tricked up to the highest point he could see, at the top of one of the metal grapevines near the ceiling. Once appearing there, Sorun turned around just in time to see the round mech suit floating right across from him, Eggman's own face just barely visible past the visor on the mech's head.

Sorun spun his sword around once, and then pointed it at the mech.

"I've come to retrieve my friends. You can't have them." He took a quick glance around the large room before focusing back on Robotnik. "I'm taking the rest of Knothole back, too, while I'm at it."

"Oh, is that right? Just you and your special sword there?" Eggman asked, voice projected out from the suit he was inside of. "I'll applaud your temerity, Sorun. It's up there with some of the best. It really is. But I think-"

Sorun slowly sheathed his sword, and blue arcs of electricity began to dance along the black scabbard.

"- you've gone a bit far with this one. You are aware I defeated the entirety of the Freedom Fighter with this wonderful machine of mine, correct? Sonic included? With nary a scratch save for the dent on my shield, I might add! And you think that *you* , with all your powers and your little sword pulled from a storybook, have any chance of-"

A sphere of warped space enveloping the mech suit shut Eggman right up. A myriad of blue slashes assaulted the mech before the warped space dispersed, leaving it floating in the air. Sorun frowned at the sight, slowly pulling Yamato back out of its sheath as he gazed at the mech. He'd done damage- he saw multiple deep scratches over the front of the mech's round body. But that's all he saw.

"Judgement Cut should've cut that thing to pieces," Sorun thought to himself. *"The hell's going on here? It shouldn't matter what that suit is made of; Yamato's ability to separate is absolute. It can cut space-time. So how is that thing still in one piece?"*

Eggman, or rather, the mech he was inside of, looked down at its frontal half where it had been wounded with the scratches made from Sorun's Judgement Cut. He stared for a few seconds, huffed, and then looked back at Sorun. "Okay. So the sword *can* cut me. I'll give you that much."

"... What exactly did you do to make that mech resistant to the Yamato?" Sorun questioned him. "That shouldn't be possible."

"Oh-ho-ho! Surprised, are you? Well, Sorun, I'll confess one thing to you: this battle suit I'm using has seen some design improvements since when I first planned this scheme of mine out." The mech suit fanned its arms out to the side. "Formally introducing to everybody present: the Egg Beater!" The arms lowered to the suit's sides. "Mark Two."

"Mark Two?" Sorun repeated.

"Admittedly most of the improvements were some software patches to improve performance and a few new features here and there, though there was one single addition I think you'll specifically appreciate, Sorun." A small seam in the chest of the mech suit appeared. The chest opened up like a pair of cabinet doors, folding outwards to reveal what was inside of the chest cavity.

Sorun felt his grip on his katana tighten when he saw what was inside of the mech.

It was a Chaos Emerald. A gray one. It was locked right into the chest of the mech, with multiple cables attaching the Emerald to the robot it was embedded inside of. The teen was only allowed a single glance, though, as the chest cavity closed right back up and the seam disappeared, leaving behind the floating, slightly-scratched mech that was right in front of Sorun.

"That's right. It's a Chaos Emerald," Eggman confirmed, voice smug. "This puppy can practically run forever with this bad boy powering it. Why, with all of this Chaos energy running through the Egg Beater Mark Two, it's practically invincible, too! Not even that freakishly strong armadillo over there could harm this battle suit with the added durability afforded to me by the energy provided by the Chaos Emerald."

"So he's powering the suit with a Chaos Emerald... and the energy provided by it gave it a huge defense buff. Kind of like what Sonic got with all those Power Rings..." Sorun thought. *"If all that Chaos energy powering the mech is the reason why it's resistant to*

Yamato..." His eyes widened in realization. *"Oh,* that's *why I couldn't cut them out of me... was wondering about that..."*

Well, that was incredibly bad if that was the case. He hadn't had any illusions that it'd be as easy as him performing a Judgement Cut or two and that would be the end of it. He didn't think it was going to be *this* bad, though. He was going to have to fight Eggman and his mech suit for real here if he was going to save everybody. The only saving grace he saw was that it wasn't *entirely* resistant to Yamato. He could perform damage on it; that was more than anybody else who fought the mech could say they could do. He'd have to chip away at it, but Sorun saw that it was possible.

He just didn't know what would give out first: the mech, or Sorun's own body.

"This isn't good at all..." His hands tightly gripped around the empty scabbard he held in one hand and the katana in the other. He felt slight trembles in his body as he realized that there was a very high chance he'd die right here fighting this thing. He felt more afraid for all the others, though, and what would happen to them if he were to die right here fighting this thing. *"Alright... this is the real deal. You're not gonna get any help for this one, Sorun. This isn't like every other time you fought something where it was so weak it was easy or where it was so strong you needed help from others to take it down. You gotta kill this thing on your own. Everybody's depending on it. They'll all die if you lose here, so don't fuck it up. Kinda nerve-wracking, though... knowing everybody in Knothole and all my friends are gonna have to watch this..."*

Sorun took a deep breath to help steady himself as best as he could. Do or die time, then.

"... You know, sometimes I think about how unlucky these guys were to get a useless nobody like me when they opened that portal to Earth up all those months ago," Sorun said. The Bringer Claws appeared, folded over his shoulders. "Don't get me wrong. I'm glad they didn't get some psychopath that would of have used the powers

they got out of the Emeralds to kill everybody. Because there's people back where I'm from that would have done that. Out of spite for trapping them in this world or 'cause of the power trip or whatever the reason. I guess that's why I can't be too surprised at all the things you do, Eggman. Humans, we're... kinda weird like that, aren't we? Though I can't say there's many people back home whose standards are as bad as yours. Then again, you're not really passing the bar by a very high margin, and in other areas you fall way below it." The Bringer Claws rose up off of Sorun's shoulders. "I'm glad they didn't get somebody like that. I'm not so happy they got somebody as bad as me. Some useless idiot that's never made a good decision in his entire life. Some worthless guy who shafted all his friends for stupid reasons. It just keeps going over in my head again and again. Like a circle." One of the Bringer Claws clenched into a fist, and was then grabbed by the other. "I guess, in the end... we're both pretty terrible people, Robotnik. I'd like to say I'm a bit better, though, since I never enslaved anybody."

The Bringer Claw cracked the other's knuckles. The sound reverberated throughout the entire room, making everybody, even Eggman to an extent, flinch from the sound.

"I don't really know. I'm just rambling at this point." The other Bringer Claw clenched and had its knuckles cracked by the other one, making everybody flinch again. "Useless or not, though, I'm taking everybody here back if it's the last thing I do."

"Oh, is that right?" Eggman asked. "And where exactly do you plan on bringing all these Mobians once you've rescued them from me? In case you've forgotten, I destroyed their only home in this world."

"Who knows? Guess we'll have to see what happens."

"Hmph." The arms and legs on the mech suit slowly shifted into a more battle-ready stance. "It's a nice fantasy, Sorun, but that's all it is: a fantasy," Eggman claimed. "Here's the reality of the situation: you're outmatched and outclassed. Now, I can't just go and teleport you into an Egg Grape as you are since you'll just cut your way out

with the katana. So I'm going to use this battle suit to beat you within an inch of your life in front of all your friends here so you're too battered to even lift a finger. Then I'll teleport you into an Egg Grape and suck the very life out of you. Why, with all that Chaos energy running in you from the Emeralds, you alone could probably power my empire for decades! And after that I'll activate the rest of the Egg Grapes, and harvest the lifeforce of every single Mobian here to fuel my empire even further. And it is only after I've drained the life out of every single person here and see the hope drain from his eyes will I finally end that meddlesome hedgehog down there once and for all."

"..." Sorun's eyes narrowed in the direction of the mech suit. The Bringer Claws fanned out to his sides, spectral claws slowly flexing and at the ready. "Try it."

And then, without waiting a moment longer, Sorun Tricked right in front of the mech midair and sliced his katana downwards on the dented shield that had been moved to protect the mech's body.

Dr. Ivo "Eggman" Robotnik

The Nefarious Mastermind

White sparks flew out from the point the katana's blade made contact with the round, dented shield, the sword's power of separation struggling to cut through the shield. It proved unable to do so, as before any real damage could be applied the robotic arm holding the shield had pushed Sorun away. His body had flown through the air for a brief period before he Tricked and appeared on top of a grouping of the spherical pods. He looked up at the flying mech in front of him, staring intently as he saw the wrecking ball in its right hand be swung towards him.

Right before the wrecking ball swung into Sorun, he'd Tricked to the left by a few meters on a different pod to avoid it. The ball swung right past him, after which one of his Bringer Claws extended

outwards and clamped down on the chain the ball was attached to. The ball snapped to a stop, its momentum swinging it around back towards Sorun, who willed the second Bringer Claw to reach out and catch it in its claws before it could hit him. And then, with the chain being held right in front of him, Sorun swung his sword down on one of the links.

Just like the shield, the sword didn't cut through. It just emitted white sparks as its edge struggled against cutting the link.

"The chain too, huh...?" Sorun mumbled out. He glanced to the side at the mech the chain was attached to, focusing in on the shield and the deep gash in it his sword had made. "Tch... what absolute hax."

The teen released his hold on the chain, and then willed the Bringer Claw holding onto the wrecking ball to throw it back towards the mech. The throw was successful, as the ball had hit the suit head-on, though, of course, it had done absolutely no damage. It had knocked it back a bit though and seemed to disorient Eggman for just a second, which is when Sorun Tricked.

And then Tricked again.

And again.

Over and over Sorun would teleport all around the mech, so many times that it appeared like he was in multiple places at once. He'd only stop briefly to slash at a random part of the mech suit, and then he would resume repeatedly and rapidly Tricking all around the mech in order to confuse and disorient the pilot. Deep cuts began to form all around its body as Sorun continued doing this, and even though Eggman had gone as far as to try and swing the mech's arms at him, they caught nothing but air as Sorun continued to teleport all around it and Robotnik.

"Well, it's resistant, but not outright immune to Yamato's separation power. I just gotta keep chipping away at it." Sorun performed a final Trick, this time going back on top of one of the grape-like pods

surrounding the room they were in. He briefly tasted a coppery taste in his mouth, frowning a bit at the sensation. *"Problem is my body's falling to pieces here and I can't keep up a prolonged fight. I can't even feel pain anymore, so that'll actually work with me here, but... I don't know how long it can go before it fails completely. Especially if I keep spamming my powers like this."*

A loud whirring sound drew Sorun's attention towards the mech. He saw the two gray missile pods on the back of the mech's shoulders move slightly. Two silver tubes that Sorun recognized as missiles slid out of each pod, four in total, jets of fire spraying out behind them as they launched towards Sorun, who quickly panicked at the sight of them. Fearing that the shockwave from the missiles' explosion would harm those in the pods near him if he simply dodged, the teen willed Summoned Swords to appear next to the missiles and impale them. A set of four swords impaled each missile before they'd even come close to Sorun, causing the jets of flame at the end of each missile to fizzle out. They each harmlessly impacted the pods around Sorun, none of them detonating as the inert weapons fell down to ground floor.

Sighing a bit in relief at the disabled missiles, Sorun glanced back up at the floating mech. He narrowed his eyes a bit, and then began to Trick again, going lower and lower towards the ground floor of the massive room they were it, away from the pods. The teen managed to teleport onto the ground floor just as the mech reached his position, still hovering just above Sorun with the thrusters under its feet. The round, robotic suit lifted both of its arms up, fists both pointed towards Sorun. He saw small, yellow lights in openings on top of both of the wrists and, upon seeing them, Tricked away by a few meters, with two yellow beams firing out from the wrists right after he'd teleported. They struck the position Sorun had been previously standing on, while the human himself was far away from the impact zone, hands around his sheathed katana. He slid Yamato out and back into the scabbard in one motion, and Eggman let out a loud grunt through the mech's speakers when the suit was caught in

the middle of another Judgement Cut, adding in dozens of more scratches along the machine's surface.

"Erghh...! Quit moving around like that!" Robotnik growled out. He continued to furiously mash down on multiple buttons in the control seat of the mech, forcing it to continually aim and fire its wrist lasers at Sorun, but every time he'd do so Sorun would just Trick to a different area on the floor to avoid it entirely. He was rocked around in his seat after the mech suffered through another Judgement Cut, causing him to practically smash his fist down on a second button. "Snively! This nuisance is proving more problematic than I anticipated. Send over Metal Sonic to help smooth things over."

In a building nearby to the storage silo both Sorun and Dr. Robotnik were fighting in, a blue, metallic form flew through dark, dimly-lit hallways towards that very destination. The Badnik modeled after Sonic's very visage flew closer and closer towards the battle with but one objective programmed into it: to assist in the fight and detainment of the sword-wielding combatant currently in conflict with its creator. And it had every intention of fulfilling that order.

At least it did until it'd rounded a corner, saw something red blur into its visual sensors, and then heard a loud screech of metal assault its audio sensors as critical damage indicators began flashing in its vision.

Completely stopped in place, Metal Sonic looked down at its chest. The straight blade of a long sword was piercing right through its torso and out its back, through the thruster that propelled it forwards. When it looked up, it saw the end of the sword being held by a figure concealed by a red, hooded cloak, who held both the sword and the robot impaled to it aloft with a single hand.

"No interfering," Rubrum said, swinging his sword to the side. Metal Sonic's body slid right off the blade, crashing to the ground in a roll before stopping on its back. The damage to its body had been

catastrophic enough that it could barely move its head enough to see Rubrum walk up to it, sword resting on his shoulder.

He kept walking past the Badnik's body, though right before that he'd kicked Metal's head hard enough that it was whipped to the side, with the sound of multiple gears and sprockets snapping resulting from the kick.

"Tch. Worthless scrap," Rubrum mumbled out as he continued moving away. It was the last thing Metal Sonic's audio receptors were able to pick up before its body went offline completely.

"What do you mean Metal Sonic isn't responding!?" Eggman roared out. When the suit he was in was shaken around due to being assaulted by another Judgement Cut, he continued with, "Then just send me whatever reinforcements we do have! Hurry!"

Light pants began to exit from Sorun's mouth as he stared up at the mech suit floating above him, its surface marred in multiple scratches and cuts suffered from the Yamato. The teen himself didn't know if he was faring any better. On the outside he was without a wound, but he didn't know what the state of his body on the inside was like. Impossible to know without a sense of pain to tell him, but pain or no, the fight was starting to become exhausting for him. Not overly so, for now at least, but enough that he was getting worried.

That worry was multiplied tenfold when Sorun saw multiple hidden panels in the walls nearby begin to open up. Green shapes began to fly out from the panels. Flying robots that Sorun instantly recognized as the Egg Flappers he'd fought on occasion. He stared unblinking as around a hundred of the machines began to surround him, floating in the formation of a long pillar all around him. He was completely closed into the formation of flying Badniks, all hundred of them aiming the laser cannons on their undersides right at him.

"Well, Sorun, I'll give you this much. You did better than anybody else did against my Egg Beater. It's over now, though," Robotnik

called out. His flying mech suit continued to hover far above the ground floor of the room, far enough that he saw Sorun and the squadron of a hundred Egg Flappers surrounding him on all sides. "You're through. Completely surrounded and outnumbered. So be a good boy, put down the sword, and go inside of an Egg Grape to save yourself any further embarrassment."

Ignoring Eggman completely, he slowly spun around while looking around at all the flying, plane-shaped Badniks surrounding him. He made a small hum, blinking in acknowledgement to all the robots before stopping in the direction that Eggman's mech suit was in. "Hm... they're kind of close. Aren't they?" He slid the tip of Yamato into its sheath. "Eggman?"

"Hm...?" The head barely visible past the mech's head visor leaned in closer as Sorun fully sheathed the katana. "Just what are you doing?"

Sorun didn't answer. He instead took his right hand off of Yamato's handle, holding the sword completely with his left by the scabbard. He spread his feet out slightly, bringing the sheathed sword down to his waist as he closed his eyes and took a deep, calming breath. He slowly exhaled, the hundred robots continuing to surround him with charged weapons as Eggman and all the captured Mobians of Knothole looked on.

And then he'd opened his eyes, and at the same time a ring of raw power began to emanate out from his body.

The more Chaos-sensitive Mobians watching the fight, such as Sonic and Knuckles, were immediately sent reeling to the back of their pods from the sheer *weight* of the power that they sensed building up from the bottom of the room, all pouring out from the katana held in Sorun's hand. Surrounding him was a perfectly circular ring of blue energy, almost invisible save for the glowing blue border on the ground and the swirling, shifting blue clouds of energy on the ring's walls. Sorun stood at the center of the ring, while the

ring itself was wide enough that it encapsulated all hundred of the Egg Flappers that were surrounding him.

Sorun took another deep breath as his right hand slowly reached for the Yamato's handle. "You're going down..."

"What is this? What are you doing!?" Eggman's mech suit was just outside of the range of the barely-visible, blue circle surrounding Sorun, though he'd piloted the suit to fly back a bit further just to be sure. "Don't just float there gawking!" he yelled down at the robots surrounding Sorun. "Open fire!"

It was too late, though. Before even the first Egg Flapper managed to discharge its laser, Sorun's hand gripped around Yamato's handle. The entire sword briefly flashed a solid blue the instant the teen firmly gripped it.

And then he disappeared.

To most outside observers, time itself came to a standstill. Inside the circle of power there was a slash. A slash that appeared so quickly it seemed to just materialize in the air, as if by nothing. A slash that was so intense the air it cut through was warped, as if space itself had been cut apart. Dozens and dozens more of these slashes appeared in the span of milliseconds inside the frozen time, with multiple blue, phantom outlines of Sorun's body appearing and disappearing within the ring. By the end the phantom images converged back to the center of the ring, forming into Sorun, who was kneeling down on the ground with one knee while holding Yamato and its scabbard at a vertical angle. All around him was a world frozen in time, surrounded by a ring of power and the hundreds of lines segmenting space all around him completely localized in the ring.

Slowly, Sorun began to insert Yamato into its sheath. As he did so the lines of cut space began to slowly converge in on themselves, as if the cut space was knitting back together. It was only when he fully sheathed the sword with a loud *clink* did three things happen

simultaneously: time resumed at its normal pace, and all the cut segments of space completely disappeared, with a few pieces of cut space resembling shattered glass falling down and disappearing. And then the hundred Egg Flappers that had been surrounding him were instantly cut apart to pieces.

Judgement Cut End was what Sorun considered to be the final, ultimate move of the Yamato's, one he'd been striving to figure out ever since he'd acquired the sword. In the games the sword originated from it was known as a "screen clearer" move- as in, any enemy that was visible on the screen when the move was performed was outright killed, if not heavily wounded in the case of the stronger ones. Even on bosses the move would remove entire chunks of the health bar. It was a potent offensive ability indeed.

Recreating the move in reality had been tricky for Sorun, but after some practice in secret away from the others he'd figured it out. The move involved using Yamato's power of absolute separation to separate time itself from it and its user for a brief time, and then cut away space itself inside a predetermined area whose range was dictated by how much Chaos energy Sorun's body would allow to output from the sword. Anything within that circle would be cut apart completely. Not from being cut by the sword, but from the space they occupied being cut by Yamato. It was a cutting ability so absolute there was no defense against it, done at a speed only possible due to time being cut away that hundreds of slashes could be performed before one could even blink.

Really the only limits were that Sorun's body, incompatible with Chaos energy as it was, made it so that Judgement Cut End's absolute range was around ten meters in diameter, and that the ability itself needed some few seconds to fully charge. Sorun considered that the cutting ability of Judgement Cut End more than outweighed the downsides.

Sorun fully stood up to his feet, the blue power that had been radiating around him dispersing completely after his sword had been sheathed. Vestiges of the energy in the form of blue electricity

sparking around his body had briefly appeared before vanishing entirely. All around him the cut-apart Egg Flappers fell down to the ground in cut-apart heaps, every single one having been completely sliced apart into unrecognizable bits. A veritable rain of scrap metal fell all around him as Sorun glanced around, searching for where Eggman and the mech suit was.

And then a missile had cut right through the curtain of raining scrap metal, causing Sorun to dramatically widen his eyes and Trick straight upwards. Even so he'd seen the missile too late, and hadn't teleported upwards quite far enough. The missile directly impacted the ground he'd been standing on, the shockwave from the missile blasting outwards and pushing Sorun out, the teen grunting in the process. Even worse was that the shockwave had flung an exorbitant amount of metal shards towards Sorun as a result of the missile's explosion as he was tossed backwards.

Due to his sense of pain being completely dulled, Sorun wasn't entirely sure what happened. He was tumbling over and over through the air and towards the ceiling, though there were multiple points he felt muffled 'thuds' impact his body. Where those points were, though, he couldn't tell, nor could he tell how serious the impacts were. He'd been hit with something- that's all he knew. That was all he could process before he'd made it to near the ceiling, where his body impacted with one of the Egg Grapes. He bounced off of it, fell down, and rolled across the spherical surface of multiple pods before finally sliding to a stop. Sorun coughed once, and then shakily got up to his feet as he glanced upwards at where he hit.

The first thing he'd noticed was that there were streaks of blood along the surface of the pods. He looked down, noticing that there were multiple bits of metal shrapnel that had been blown into him sticking out of his torso. The undershirt he wore under his blue coat was too dark for him too see how bad the bleeding was, but when he touched his hand near where some of the shards were poking out of his body, it had been stained completely red when he brought it out.

The second thing he noticed was that the vision in his right eye was completely blind for some reason.

Confused, Sorun held up his right hand towards his right eye. He felt that there was a stream of blood leaking down his face, a heavy amount. And when he felt around his eye, he felt, to his shock, what seemed to be a long shard of jagged metal. When he looked towards the side, at his own reflection that he could barely make out on the surface of one of the Egg Grapes, he immediately understood what happened and felt a pit drop in his stomach.

"Oh. That ain't good."

One of the pieces of shrapnel that'd been blasted at him had gone straight through his right eye. He couldn't even see if there was any of it left, as the metal shard had gone through the whole socket. He even heard some of the captive Mobians around him gasp out in shock at the sight, though Sorun was less concerned about those and more on his lost eye. Even when Dr. Robotnik and his mech suit floated up to the center of the room, the jets propelling the suit around Sorun's level, the teen continued to hold his hand up to his obliterated eye as he stared at his reflection.

"Oh-ho-ho! Whoops! I didn't mean to hurt you that badly, Sorun," Eggman called out. "It's your own fault for not submitting when I'm the clear winner here, though. And I suppose, in the end, a lost appendage or two isn't going to matter much when I'm just going to convert you into fuel by the end of the day. So hurry up and concede so I can get this show on the road. You've dinged my battle suit up enough as it is."

Sorun never turned towards Eggman, or even made any motion that said he was acknowledging him. He was still staring towards his reflection.

"Really? Oh, for the..." The missile pod on the mech's right shoulder whirred to life. "Here. Maybe another one of these will wake you up."

A missile fired out from a pod and streaked towards Sorun, who continued standing still at his reflection. Not even the sound of the missile screaming towards him, or the sound of some of the Mobians and Freedom Fighters shouting his name, roused him from this state.

And then, just before the missile hit him, his left Bringer Claw snapped upwards and grabbed the shaft of the missile, stopping it in place.

"... Whatever. It's just an eye." Finally, Sorun turned towards Eggman as the Bringer Claw holding the missile crushed it, rendering it inert. Despite the bloodied shard sticking out of his face, his overall expression was overly calm and blank. "I only need the one."

"Theeere we are." The crushed missile was roughly tossed towards the mech, who simply batted it away harmlessly with its shield. "Still got a bit of fight in you, eh? You would have went far if you'd just joined me, Sorun."

Instead of responding to Eggman, the teen Tricked right in front of the mech and slashed at it with Yamato.

Predictably, he'd defended himself with the mech's shield, with Sorun adding another deep gash into the dish's surface. Sorun Tricked around the backside of the mech to try and cut behind it, though, to his surprise, Eggman seemed to have anticipated this and whirled the round mech around. Fast. Startling fast. Fast enough that, in the time it took for Sorun to swing the katana while the mech's back was turned, it whirled completely around in a one-eighty and defended itself with the shield once again. He'd tried Tricking under it, though his Bringer Claws were forced to fly him backwards when Eggman had responded by having the mech kick at him.

He'd tried again and again to get a hit in on Eggman's suit with his katana. To his credit, once in a while Sorun would manage to get one single cut in. They were seldom delivered, though, especially compared to the rate he'd been damaging the robotic armor at the

beginning of the fight. He wasn't able to Trick as often, wanting to conserve his strength to try and prolong the fight. His swings were getting incrementally slower and slower. The loss of half of his sight and depth perception was throwing Sorun off, too, making him outright miss some sword strikes.

Eggman, on the other hand, only seemed to be moving faster somehow. That mech suit of his was moving faster than Sorun himself despite its size, and the fact they were fighting in the air seemed to only benefit it further while hindering Sorun. It'd defend itself with the shield too fast for Sorun to counter, or it'd kick and punch at him and he'd be forced to either Trick away or have his Bringer Claws fly him to a safer location. There'd been a few times where he'd had to Trick away just to avoid getting shot at by one of the built-in laser guns on the mech's wrists, and doing that repeatedly was beginning to become taxing to Sorun.

Judgement Cuts weren't working anymore, either. Eggman seemed to have begun to recognize when Sorun was about to perform them, and then adjust accordingly by flying away before getting enveloped in the bubble of warped space. No matter how hard Sorun tried, he kept dodging the Judgement Cuts.

"Getting slower!" Eggman mockingly called out. "I think it's time we brought this to a close!"

The flail with the wrecking ball on its end was extended out from the mech's right hand. It started swinging that around along with the shield and kicking with its legs. It was one more thing for Sorun to keep track of, who was already reaching his limit with how much the robotic suit was pressuring him. At this point Sorun could barely get any hits in, either because the shield kept blocking him, or he had to dodge a kick or the wrecking ball being swung at him. He was too afraid of trying to grab at the ball, too, with his previous experience from the factory. When it'd struck with such force that it'd destroyed his Bringer Claw completely. And he needed them to stay in the air to save on Tricking so much.

He thought of grabbing the chain like he'd done during the beginning of the fight, especially after the wings narrowly pushed him away from the ball hitting him, but he was too worried about Eggman using the mech to resist him if he tried doing that again. He didn't know how much strength its arms had compared to the Bringer Claws, but he wouldn't be surprised to learn it was greater. And he still needed them to fly around with the mech just to keep up.

"None of this is working," Sorun thought after Tricking to the other side of the mech. This proved to help him very little, as Eggman had turned around and resumed his attacks so much that Sorun didn't even get a second's break. *"The sword's the only thing that can even hurt it, but he's throwing so much at me that I'm not getting opportunities to cut the suit. The Bringer Claws and Trickster is only good for mobility and dodging at this point, and Summoned Swords are practically worthless except for taking out the missiles. He learned Judgement Cut's timing and is dodging it. Judgement Cut End has too long of a windup, and he already saw it, so that won't work... I'm gonna have to pull* that *out at this rate."* The Bringer Claws harshly flapped and dragged Sorun's body to the side to avoid the wrecking ball being flung at him. *"I'm already juggling too many powers as it is, though... don't know how long I could handle adding it on top of everything else... but with how this is going, don't think it's gonna matter if-"*

Sorun's own thoughts were cut off when he was forced to Trick to the side when the ball and chain was swung at him again. What happened next, though, was that Eggman had the mech position it's shield in front of the chain it held. The chain bended around the edge of the shield, changing its trajectory and causing the ball to veer around and sail right back towards Sorun.

Unfortunately for Sorun, the wrecking ball approaching him was on a bad angle. His right side, which was completely blind at the loss of his eye. And so, with his focus solely squared on the floating mech in front of him, he was unable to perceive the wrecking ball

approaching him from the right side until it was visible in the peripheral of his left eye. By then it was too late.

He'd tried avoiding it. The Bringer Claws attempting to fly him away, and he'd avoided getting hit directly because of it, but he'd still been tagged by the checkered wrecking ball. There was a loud, wet *squelch!* sound as a result of the hit, and Sorun felt a dull impact somewhere on his body. The force of the hit was strong enough that he was thrown completely backwards, near towards the ceiling where all the bunches of Egg Grapes were.

Once again he found himself bouncing across the rounded surfaces of the pods. The hit had broken his concentration and caused the Bringer Claws to disappear, so they couldn't help reorient himself. He'd at least managed to catch himself with his left hand, both it and the bottom of his feet sliding along the pods until he'd slid to a halt. It was only when he stopped moving completely did Sorun breath out a single sigh, lightly panting from the exhaustion of the fight. He stood up to his feet, rather easily after he noticed his body felt a bit lighter than usual, and then reached his right hand out.

Only... nothing happened.

Blinking his one eye in confusion, Sorun tried reaching his hand out once more. Again, nothing happened. He turned his head out to the right side so he could see what the problem was, and then froze immediately when he saw what it was.

His right arm all the way up to the shoulder was completely gone. Not even the sleeve from the coat was there anymore, having been torn completely off when the wrecking ball had hit him. All that remained was an empty shoulder socket that was gushing a stream of blood.

"Oh. That... really ain't good..." Sorun thought, still staring towards the missing arm in surprise.

He couldn't hear much besides his own shallow breathing and the sound of the blood from his wound splashing onto the pod he was standing on. He faintly made out people calling out his name, forcing his eye to glance out to the side. He caught the shocked and horrified faces on all the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix staring at him, and seeing those faces caused a twinge of guilt to flash in Sorun as he looked at the wound. *"Well, could be worse. 'Least I can't even feel this. I don't wanna think about how it'd look for them if that wasn't the case..."*

Eggman and the robotic suit he was in had flown right in front of the grouping of pods Sorun stood on top of, though the teen was more focused on the missing arm than the mech. Even after he began speaking Sorun didn't bother to turn towards him.

"Er, Sorun... this is going kind of far. Wouldn't want to prematurely end this by accidentally having you bleed out in the middle of the fight," Eggman said. "How about we end it right here, huh? I think we all get the point, but you've lost."

"You know... Honey put a lot of effort into this coat." It was only then did Sorun turn his face back towards the mech, his expression still mainly impassive and his voice calm and even. It seemed to unnerve Eggman by the way his mustache, visible from beyond the mech's visor, seemed to straighten out in shock. "She's gonna kill me for wrecking this thing. Guess I can't blame her. She's got a real screw loose, but the stuff she makes is premium. I'll never tell this to her face, but I really appreciate the effort she goes through for me." He blinked his eye and began to glance around. "Oh, wait, I guess she'd be here somewhere, wouldn't she? Man, she better not have heard that..."

"How are you doing this?"

"... Hm?" Sorun focused back on Robotnik. "Doing what?"

"This! Acting so... nonchalant!" he exclaimed, forcing the mech to wildly gesture towards Sorun. "You lost an arm and an eye! You

should be rolling around screaming in agony, not worrying about the stupid coat! Nobody has the kind of mental fortitude needed to just completely ignore wounds like that the way you're doing, so how are you doing it!?"

"I dunno." Sorun shrugged. "Maybe I'm more scared of what you're gonna do to all these people than the wounds. You ever think about that?" That wasn't the real reason, of course, but it brought Sorun a bit of satisfaction seeing Eggman flounder like this. And he needed the breather.

"Hrrgh... fine, don't tell me. It doesn't matter," Eggman claimed. "You can't fight me after losing your sword arm, Sorun. It's over."

"Lost an arm? What do you mean?" The right Bringer Claw appeared over Sorun's back. "I have spares."

After speaking, something odd began to happen to the Bringer Claw. It began to shrink down and reform slightly, while at the same time the base of the blue, spectral arm began to move forwards. By the time it was done slightly shifting its shape and position, the Bringer Claw had perfectly fit itself over where Sorun's arm used to be. In its place was a blue, transparent arm, one with claws for fingers and spectral feather sticking out of the forearm. Sorun held the spectral arm up to his face, experimentally flexing the arm's clawed fingers before nodding in satisfaction and lowering it.

"There, see? Good as new. Sorta." The Yamato was re-summoned in Sorun's left hand, after which he grabbed the handle with his spectral hand an unsheathed it. He rose an eyebrow in surprise when he willed the arm to experimentally lift the sword up and down, and then had it spin the sword around a few times in a wheel too fast for his eye to perceive before he caught it. *"Huh. Can't actually feel anything with this thing, but... it's way more dexterous than my regular arm. Maybe I can run with this after all.*

"Still... this isn't good at all. I already have to worry about my body giving out from overusing my powers. Now I gotta worry about

bleeding to death from all these wounds I have," Sorun continued to think. *"My flight ability's gonna be completely crippled now, too, since I need to use the right Bringer Claw to compensate for the missing arm. Shit... I'm really running out of time here. Don't know how much longer I can keep going..."*

"You're seriously still dead-set on fighting me? Really?" Eggman sounded exasperated at the prospect, even the mech slumping over in weariness. Beyond that, though, he sounded almost confused at Sorun's actions. "I don't understand it, Sorun. Why? Why them? Why are you fighting so hard for them? It doesn't make sense."

"Ohhhh, Eggman. All this time and you still don't get it?" Sorun began to slowly walk closer to the floating mech, leaving behind bloodied footprints in his wake. "All that intelligence and no wisdom to spend it on. See where it gets you? Shoulda balanced your stats."

"Quit talking nonsense and answer the question!" Eggman yelled out.

"You'd be able to see it for yourself if you didn't have the wisdom of a brick, Robotnik. How you can simultaneously be the smartest and most moronic person in the world is beyond me," Sorun said. "It took me months of living with all these people to finally see it. They have something somebody like you will never have." He pointed his spectral hand at Robotnik. "What you lack... is this!"

He stuck both of his thumbs behind his back after de-summoning Yamato. At the same time a number of Summoned Swords appeared behind Sorun, all positioned in a way so that they made a distinct shape: a heart. A large, blue heart that was floating behind Sorun's back. It quickly dissipated, after which Sorun lowered his real and spectral arms back to his sides.

"... Heart?" Eggman said, tone disbelieving. "You must be joking."

"'Fraid not, Robotnik. It honestly scared me seeing how strong all these guys are, especially compared to me, but after a while I finally

saw why. They all have more heart in them than I've ever seen in anybody else." Yamato was re-summoned in his hands. Sorun held Yamato's blade up at a horizontal angle after unsheathing it, gazing into his warped reflection in the blade. "Strength, true strength... is all about fighting to protect what's important. That's what it means. But you... a heartless guy like you would never get something like that. You threw away any chance you ever had of making bonds of your own and understanding what heart really means when you fell to hedonism and tried to take over the world!" Sorun pointed the tip of the katana at Eggman. "No wonder you have no true power of your own and have to rely on machines for everything!"

The jets on the bottom of the Egg Beater's feet roared to life. It flew straight towards Sorun, who remained rooted to the spot as he watched the mech approach. The left Bringer Claw flashed to life and extended forwards, grabbing the mech's right shoulder to help slow its advancement. The right one mimicking Sorun's lost arm and holding the Yamato flashed out at the same time, clashing with the edge of the shield held in the mech's hand. It was set in a deadlock, the mech floating just above the pods while Sorun stared deeply into Eggman's spectacles past the visor on the large helmet he was staring at.

"I won't allow you to harm a single one," Sorun intoned in a deadly-serious tone. "Not one."

"All for a bunch of animals that ruined your life!?"

"They only did it because you ruined theirs!"

A metallic grinding sound was heard as the spectral arm holding the katana, in conjunction with the larger, winged arm holding the robot suit at bay, began to push it back. It was with a final burst of effort that Sorun pushed the mech back far enough that it tumbled backwards through the air. He even went through the trouble of firing off a few Summoned Swords to push it back even further, even if they wouldn't do any damage.

But then something strange had happened.

Eggman's mech suit bounced in the air a little bit when it was hit by the Summoned Swords.

"... What?" Sorun blinked in confusion as he stared out at the mech. It reoriented itself in the air quickly enough, and past the helmet's visor Sorun could see that even Eggman looked a bit confused at what just happened. *"There's no way the Summoned Swords hit hard enough to bounce it in the air like that. It's way too heavy. That's not even factoring in the Emerald protecting it. So why did-"* His single eye widened as memories began to surface. *"Hold on just a second here...!"*

Curiously, however, each and every single sword that had struck the robot propelled it high enough that it made up from the amount it dropped down before the swords hit it. Even as the eight swords hit Metal, it was still the same place in the air as it had been before the swords hit it due to the small amount of lift afforded by being struck by the swords.

"... Huh?" *Sorun scrunched his brows in confusion.* "The swords, they..."

With a mechanical growl, the wolf tore its face out of the ground, its red eye flashing as it noticed movement to the side. Sorun was still approaching with his katana held out to his side, and in anticipation, the wolf opened its mouth to try and howl at him. Right before it could, though, twenty Summoned Swords appeared over it and began raining down and impaling themselves into the robot's backside.

While this was happening, Sorun kept up his approach, noticing with some interest the wolf was jittering in place and struggling to open its mouth to try and howl at him as it was pelted with swords.

"Huh."

"Have I been using them wrong the entire time?" Sorun wondered to himself. A single Summoned Sword appeared next to him, causing Sorun to cast a contemplative look at it. *"If these really mimic Vergil's Summoned Swords... in the games, they had functions outside of just pelting enemies with minimal damage at a long range. Their primary function was to manipulate enemy positions to open them up to combos. Continually firing swords at enemies knocked into the air would juggle them and keep them stalled in the air for aerial combos. Back then, with Metal Sonic... that's what they did. I didn't get it back then, but the same thing happened when I shot the mech just now..."* He looked back towards the floating mech suit. *"Is it possible... that the Summoned Swords don't follow normal logic, but follow the games' logic...? I guess it wouldn't be the most 'out there' thing Chaos energy has done for me, but... I need to see."*

The Summoned Sword next to Sorun shattered. At the same time, eight Summoned Swords began spinning around Eggman's mech suit in a ring, all eight swords pointed towards him.

"An enemy struck by Storm Swords was automatically lifted into the air in the games. If I'm really right about this, then something similar should happen here."

"What is this? Your paltry little phantom blades or whatever you call them?" Eggman asked, chuckling at the end of his sentence as he glanced around at the swords surrounding him. "Oh, come on, Sorun, these aren't going to do anything to me!" he continued as the swords stopped spinning. "If that oh-so-powerful katana of yours is having a hard time wounding my suit, then what do you think- huh!?"

The eight swords flew forwards and simultaneously struck the round mech. Of course, they'd all shattered on impact and left no lasting damage on the mech. What happened next, however, was that the mech was flipped on its back and lifted a few feet above its position

by a seemingly invisible force, as if something had pulled on its chest and lifted it.

"Well, whaddya know?" Capitalizing on the moment, Sorun Tricked right above the mech, sword held up above his head. *"How'd I not see this sooner?"*

He sliced downwards. With the strength of the spectral arm behind the strike, the mech was sent shooting downwards towards the ground. The jets on its feet caught it, though, halting its momentum and maintaining its position in the air. By then Sorun had already Tricked onto its back.

"Blistering Swords deal exorbitant damage compared to normally firing off Summoned Swords." Four swords appeared at each of Sorun's sides, all aimed towards a small joint connecting the mech's left missile pod to its shoulder. They rapidly fired off in pairs, all striking the joint in the same spot. He tilted his head in approval when he noticed the joint dent horribly from the swords' assault. *"Now that's some damage."*

His left Bringer Claw extended out and grabbed the missile pod. To his satisfaction the pod was easily torn off, and, with it disconnected from the Emerald inside of the mech, Sorun was able to easily crush the pod and toss the remains away onto the ground below.

When Sorun noticed the mech's hands reaching up to its back to try and grab at him, Sorun Tricked back up to the pods near the ceiling. He'd barely appeared there before he saw the mech flying directly towards him, Eggman wasting no time. Sorun responded by impassively staring at the approaching mech as twenty spectral swords appeared up in the air right in front of him, pointing downwards.

It was right when the mech entered the range of the swords did Sorun will them to fall down. As such, they'd all fallen down on the mech and, of course, had all shattered. However, from the moment the first sword made contact with the mech, the swords' effect had

activated. The mech seemed to freeze right there in the air, still slowly moving and jittering in place, as if struggling against something, but still going slowly enough that Sorun was able to calmly step to its side as it remained frozen to the spot.

"Enemies hit by Heavy Rain Swords get stunlocked."

"What is this? Why won't the controls respond to me!?" Eggman roared out. "What have you done, Sorun!?"

"Couldn't tell ya." His spectral right arm swung the katana out, the cutting power of the sword behind the strength of the arm proving sufficient at removing the right missile pod. "You feeling accepting of your loss yet?"

"Not... happening...!"

"Hey, your choice." Sorun sheathed Yamato. "Now stay right where you are..."

The wide, blue circle from earlier reappeared and spread out from Sorun. He slowly exhaled again as he prepared to initiate another Judgement Cut End, with Eggman's mech frozen in the air and right next to him. He slowly reached his hand out to the sword's handle-

Movement suddenly returned to the mech's body, causing Sorun to widen his eye in surprise. Its shield struck out towards him too fast to counter, forcing his left Bringer Claw to guard him as best it could. He was still sent flying away after the hit, right towards the nearest wall. He was spinning around too harshly for him to get an accurate reading of where to Trick to to avoid hitting the wall, so he'd instinctually done the next best thing: Sorun had his left Bringer Claw hit the wall as hard as it could to halt his momentum as much as possible.

It mostly worked. The spectral fist had punched a deep crater into the metal wall, and the force of the hit had lowered the teen's speed enough that he didn't outright splatter against the crater when he hit

it. He'd still hit it, though, and although he couldn't feel anything, he was fairly certain he'd heard some things in him crack.

"Right... getting stalled in place by Heavy Rain Swords doesn't last that long... I forgot..." Sorun felt himself tumble out of the freshly-made crater in the wall. He would have fallen down entirely if the cuff of his left boot didn't catch on a random piece of jagged metal jutting out of the wall, making it so that Sorun's back hit the wall and he was left hanging there, upside-down. *"Why the hell does this gotta be so hard? It's such bullshit..."*

His spectral arm still managed to hold onto Yamato, even if it was slowly slipping from his grasp with his arms hanging downwards. He didn't know where he'd dropped the scabbard, but seeing as it could be re-summoned, Sorun didn't care that much. He did care about the copious amounts of blood dripping down his body and over his face. About the fact his body was feeling weaker and weaker, and he was beginning to feel his senses grow duller over time. Tired, too. He was getting tired to the point he felt his one working eye fluttering open and shut repeatedly.

But then something reached Sorun's ears that caused him to open the eye widely. His own name. He heard his own name being shouted by a myriad of different of voices. It was hard to see from his vision being halved and now slightly blurred from the damage he'd sustained, but he could make it out good enough. People in the pods were shouting out his name. Everybody in the bunches of pods containing the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix. He saw some people in the bunch containing the royal family calling his name out, too, Elias among them. Others Mobians he knew spread out among the pods, and even some he didn't know, were calling out to him, too. It made Sorun groan out in an exhausted fashion.

"Gah... this is really fuckin' embarrassing. I didn't ask for a damn pep rally." He looked up at his boot and the piece of metal it was hooked on. *"Doubt I'm gonna make it through this. If by some miracle I do I'm gonna deny I ever heard them doing this. I'll say I went deaf or*

something." His arms twitched. *"Gotta save 'em all before I do that, though. Alright. Guess I better use it."*

Before Sorun managed to even attempt to free himself, a loud whirring sound drowned out the names of all the Mobians calling his name. He couldn't do anything when a giant, mechanical hand grabbed him, tore him off of the wall, and then slammed him back into it while keeping a firm grip on his torso. He coughed out once, blood splashing onto the chrome hand holding him in place as he looked upwards.

"Hah... hah... it's all over now, Sorun." The Doctor certainly looked like he'd seen better days. His mustache was a frazzled mess at this point, and though the visor made it hard to see, Sorun could see massive beads of sweat beading down the sides of Eggman's face. The round, blue-tinted glasses hid his eyes, but Sorun didn't even need to see them to see how worn-out he was. "No magic sword's gonna get you out of this one. Concede. Concede right now and I won't squeeze down and leave you a crippled, agonized mess before I put you in an Egg Grape."

"... As tempting as that sounds," Sorun said, "I'm going to have to deny that request. I don't really want to."

The hand holding him squeezed down slightly. He heard bones creak.

"I'm serious, Sorun. You're done. Beaten. Look at yourself- you already look like you have one foot in the grave. Don't make this any harder than it needs to be and just give up already."

Eggman sounded desperate. It wasn't wholly clear, but it was there. In his voice. In the slightly panicky tone he had and the way his voice wavered ever-so-slightly. It was enough to give Sorun a bit more confidence.

"Yeah. I guess you did beat me." Small sparks of blue electricity began arcing over Sorun's body. "But what about the second one?"

"Huh? The second one...?"

As Eggman repeated Sorun's question in a confused manner, something appeared behind the mech suit. The Doctor had only noticed its presence by the shadow it cast on the wall, but by then it had been too late for him to properly react. Two Bringer Claws, a completely separate set from the one Sorun had, extended outwards from behind the mech suit and clamped down on the hand holding Sorun in place. It pried the hand open, freeing Sorun and allowing him to Trick forwards, right in front of the mech's helmet-head. A helmet-head Sorun proceeded to punch with his left Bringer Claw.

The mech was sent spiraling away, Eggman screaming in confusion and rage alongside with it. Sorun, instead of pursing it, teleported onto the surface of a nearby Egg Grape just as the mech managed to reorient itself in front of him.

Something else teleported alongside Sorun.

By all appearances, the thing that had Tricked right next to Sorun seemed to be... Sorun himself. Something that looked exactly like Sorun, clothes and all, save for the fact it was blue and completely transparent in the same way as the Summoned Swords and Bringer Claws were. A spectral Sorun, which even featured its own set of Bringer Claws and a spectral Yamato held in its two normal arms.

"Doppelganger. It's the power I got from the fifth Chaos Emerald," Sorun muttered out. A few more arcs of blue electricity sparked around his body, the same happening to the spectral double standing right besides him. "It can do everything I can do. Have fun with that."

Both Sorun and the Doppelganger began Tricking from pod-to-pod in different directions, both heading right towards Eggman. The mech was aiming its wrists in two directions at once, continually shifting its aim as if its pilot couldn't decide on who to fire on. It was too late to make a decision, though, as by then both of its opponents had appeared in front of it.

Eggman's first attempt was to raise his wrecking ball flail up. Twenty spectral swords falling from above and freezing him in place stopped the round, robotic suit in its tracks, opening up for Sorun and the Doppelganger to attack it. The Doppelganger began to madly slash at the mech's chest with its spectral Yamato, preoccupying it. Sorun himself had gone to the left side of the mech's body, where the shield was. He began cutting at the joint connecting the shield to the mech's left hand with his Yamato, while both his left Bringer Claw and both of the Doppelganger's Bringer Claws began pulling away at it. This proved successful, as the combination of Sorun cutting away at it and the efforts of the three Bringer Claws managed to pry the shield completely off. Sorun immediately tossed the shield down to ground level, and then Tricked away to the top of a nearby pod.

Sorun whirled towards the direction of the mech after teleporting, panting harshly as he watched it and his Doppelganger fight. Blood was now continually streaming out of his mouth and nose, his wounds were still leaking blood, and even his functioning eye was leaking blood out of it. The blood vessels had burst, too, causing Sorun's white sclera to dye completely red. By now his vision was a red, blurry mess, but he was still able to see well enough to see the fight happening in front of him.

"Well, I talk a big game, but... in actuality, Doppelganger isn't that great a power." Sorun Tricked to another pod to avoid a stray laser that had been fired out from the mech in an attempt to blast the spectral Sorun fighting it. *"It's true that Doppelganger possesses all of my abilities, but it doesn't possess my durability. One or two good hits and it disappears completely, and it takes a lot for me to make that thing. It doesn't even have any autonomous movement of its own. I have to consciously control its movements just like I do with the Bringer Claws, and it's hard enough focusing on the fight here without splitting my attention completely in half between two bodies."*

He coughed uncontrollably a couple of times, blood splashing out of his mouth each time. He sighed out in frustration, his grip on Yamato's handle tightening as he watched the fight.

"It's really draining to keep the Doppelganger up, too... so I need to end this quickly." His head perked up slightly. *"I got an idea. C'mon, you fat bastard... swing it already..."*

The Doppelganger floated back from Eggman and the mech suit, held aloft by the Bringer Claws acting as wings on its back. Summoned Swords continued to appear at its sides and fire towards the mech, shattering against its surface to no effect, but seemingly making Eggman more and more angry by the second. The mech began to swing its right arm around, the chained wrecking ball spinning 'round and 'round faster and faster. The Doppelganger, however, remained hovering in place, simply continuing to fire swords at the mech.

Eventually, the mech tossed the ball straight at the Doppelganger. The Doppelganger, on the other hand, made no move to Trick out of the way, or even dodge in any way. It only continued to float in place and fire out Summoned Swords, so when the wrecking ball came, it impacted the spectral clone directly, killing it and dispersing it into a cloud of blue energy.

Right behind the Doppelganger, hiding behind its body and wings, however, had been a portal cut open by the true Sorun and Yamato.

The wrecking ball flew right through the portal, appearing through a second one that was right next to Sorun. His left Bringer Claw instantly snapped forwards, grabbing at the chain of the wrecking ball while he himself turned towards the portal.

"Alright..." Sorun gripped Yamato's handle with his flesh and spectral hands and lifted it up. *"Let's see if this works."*

He sliced downwards, closing both portals simultaneously. The chain connecting the wrecking ball to the mech, due to having been crossing through the portals at the time, had been severed completely upon the two holes in space closing back together. The chain Sorun's left Bringer Claw held went slack, the ball at the end drooping downwards. He willed the spectral hand to to begin

spinning it around by rotating its wrist as he turned back towards the mech, which was currently holding its severed chain up to the helmet's visor for Robotnik to see.

Without a single word, Sorun's Bringer Claw threw the severed wrecking ball towards the mech. Eggman didn't seem to have been too distracted by his lost weapon, as the jets on the mech's feet brightened in intensity and lifted the robotic suit high enough for the thrown wrecking ball to miss it entirely and embed itself in the wall it had impacted.

Moving upwards to avoid the wrecking ball Sorun had thrown also made it so that the mech couldn't dodge the new cloud of floating swords that had spawned just above it and rained down in the same breath.

Eggman released another frustrated shout when the mech was frozen mid-air again from the swords impacting it. Another set of eight swords began rotating around it at the same time, and they'd converged just as the freezing effect of the Heavy Rain Swords wore off. The mech was flipped onto its back again and lifted up into the air, and at the same time blue sparks arced over Sorun's body as another Doppelganger was summoned.

A spurt of blood splashed out from Sorun's wounds, mouth, nose, and eye upon the Doppelganger being summoned, and for a split second he'd blacked out. He managed to keep himself awake, widening his eye in effort while biting down on his own teeth. He willed the Doppelganger to Trick under the mech, where it proceeded to fire a continuous stream of Summoned Swords at the mech. Each sword that impacted the mech kept it aloft in the air, prompting the real Sorun to Trick up to to mech, just above it. Yamato was sheathed and held at his side.

"If the Summoned Swords follow the logic of the games... then this should, too..."

"Air canceling? What's that?"

"You don't know what air canceling is? The fuck kinda third-rate gamer are you?" A loud scoff exited Sorun as he leaned back on his bed, game controller lazily held in his hand as he glanced at the other human teen sitting down next to him.

"Eh, fuck off, I'm first-rate just like you," David exclaimed, turning his head to meet Sorun's glare. "Besides," he continued with a small grin, "wouldn't it be two-bit? Y'know, like those classic 8-bit and 6-bit games?"

Sorun's expression turned flat. "... Never make that joke around me again."

"Pssh, you're no fun." Waving his hand at Sorun, David turned back towards the TV monitor sitting in front of them. "Anyways, oh mighty wizard, what's this hip air canceling tech you're talking about?"

Rolling his eyes, Sorun gripped his controller with both hands and turned back towards the TV and the video game it was displaying. The game in question? Devil May Cry Four. And currently displayed on the screen was a white-haired player character donning a tri-tailed blue coat and a katana.

"Canceling is when you interrupted a character's attacks and animations. The most common way to do something like this is usually by jumping, so it's mostly referred to as jump canceling or air canceling," Sorun began. "Vergil has this thing where some of his abilities can cancel. It's useful for prematurely ending attacks mid-combo so you can set yourself up for something else. So, for example, if you're doing a multi-hit combo you can interrupt it halfway using canceling to do something else, or do the first half of that same combo over again. There's also some repositioning stuff you can pull off to zip around mid-combo without having to chase the enemies that get knocked away by the combos."

David made a confused groan as he rubbed tiredly at the side of his face. "Ain't he got the teleport for that, though?"

"Looks more fluid and stylish using canceling instead of spamming the teleport, plus this helps to extend your combos. But that's the thing with Vergil: his Tricking power can cancel."

Sorun's fingers pressed down on the controller. The game character on the screen slid backwards, hands on the katana with the screen locked onto a nearby enemy. A shambling, scarecrow-looking monster nearby Vergil. He slid the sword out and back inside of the scabbard in one quick motion as the enemy scarecrow was consumed by a Judgement Cut.

More buttons were pressed. Vergil performed a Trick and teleported a few inches into the air, his hands still on the sword. Once again a Judgement Cut was performed, not even a second after the first one. Again and again he would repeat the cycle of making a Judgement Cut, Tricking up by a few inches, and then doing it again and again. Sorun watched on with a focused look. David just looked one part amazed and one part puzzled.

"Uh... I ain't getting it, m'man..." David mumbled out, his eyes practically glued to the screen.

"Usually Vergil can only do a limited number of consecutive Judgement Cuts, but if you Trick like this it cancels it out," Sorun explained. "It also makes use of Just-Frame Judgement Cut- which is, if you release the button to charge Judgement Cut at just *the right frame Vergil'll do the Judgement Cut instantly without the big animation, which shaves some time off. Does a bit more damage, too. So you use Trick to air cancel his Just-Frame Judgement Cut, and because he ends the Trick in the same position you can chain 'em together to bypass the Judgement Cut limit and pretty much just do it forever until you mess the timing up. Which I never do, so hey."*

"Whoa... so it's, like... the Infinite-Frame Judgement Cut..." David said in awe, eyes widened and shining like he'd just witnessed

perfection itself. It was wiped off immediately when his expression turned back to normal as his head snapped to Sorun. "Dude, how do you even figure stuff like this out?"

"It's just a mastery of the mechanics," Sorun said with a shrug, still chaining the Judgement Cuts and air cancels together on the enemy on-screen. "And it's not unique enough to give it its own name like the 'Infinite-Frame Judgement Cut'. It's... just combining air canceling with Judgement Cut. The Just-Frame version, but whatever, same difference."

"Ah-huh, yeah, sure." David nodded in an unconvinced manner, and then glanced down at his watch. "Ah, shoot, it's gettin' kinda late actually, Sor'. It's been an experience, but I gotta book it."

"Why do you always say that?" Sorun asked as he watched David hop off the bed, having paused the game. "'It's been an experience.' What does that even mean?"

Halfway through the doorway to Sorun's room already, David turned back towards him and flashed a smile. "It means a real man can only become a true man through the experiences he shares with others."

Sorun's face scrunched in confusion. "But wouldn't a real man already- that doesn't- what- that's stupid."

"Well, a man oughta be a little stupid." David ducked out of the doorway. "Gotta go, seeya later!"

"... You aped that last one from the guy in 'Yakuza Two'!" Sorun yelled after him.

"Yeah, well he was a smart guy!" David yelled back, voice trailing off due to the distance between them.

Shaking his head at the doorway, Sorun grumbled unintelligible mutterings under his breath. He turned back towards the TV, unpaused the game, and resumed playing it.

"You're finished if this actually works, Robotnik..."

Sorun was in position. The mech was vulnerable, still being juggled in the air by the Summoned Swords being shot by the Doppelganger under it. He was there, just above the mech with Yamato sheathed at his side. All that was left was to try and execute the technique he'd learned from playing those games.

He made one Judgement Cut. It hit Eggman's mech suit right in the center of its chest. At the same time it connected, he'd Tricked a few inches into the air.

There was some sensation Sorun felt doing so. Something that clicked in him, mentally. He tried performing another Judgement Cut in response to the sensation he received. Sorun was almost surprised when he saw another Judgement Cut cut deeper into the mech, but seeing him perform a second Judgement Cut after air canceling himself confirmed it.

That single confirmation was all the motivation he needed to keep going.

Sorun continued doing it. While the Doppelganger below continued to juggle the mech with Summoned Swords, Sorun would air cancel into his Judgement Cut. Over and over and over again. The result was that he would continually teleport slightly higher and higher each time, performing a Judgement Cut at each interval. It was a rapid process, rapid to the point that there was almost no conceivable break to the Judgement Cuts rending the mech's chest apart.

It was doing significant damage, too. Splinters of metal was shredded off more and more each time. At first it was enough that Sorun saw the electronics underneath the metal shell protecting it, further fueling his motivation to keep the combo going. But then, the further he went, he saw it. Rays of blinding white light that began to bleed through some of the cuts his Judgement Cuts were making on the mech's chest.

"S-stop it! Stop it this instant!" Eggman screamed out. "This isn't fair! You're just using the same move over and over!"

He'd concede to the Doctor's point. It was a really cheap strategy, and Sorun would wager that he probably looked ridiculous doing it. He didn't much care seeing as it was going to end in his win at this rate.

"Getting... harder to stay awake here..." The edges of Sorun's red, blurred vision were becoming blacker and blacker. Moving was getting to be a struggle, and Sorun's mind was beginning to swim from the exhaustion. He kept pushing on, though, going as far as to fire his own Summoned Swords into the gaps in the mech's chest made by the Judgement Cuts. *"Keep concentrating... just a bit more here..."*

By now the white light bleeding out of the suit's chest was overly obvious. It was almost drowned out, though, by the blue light of the dozens of swords stabbing into the mech's chest, between all the wiring and electronics. Sorun ceased the Judgement Cuts immediately after seeing this, keeping his left hand around Yamato and its scabbard while he held his spectral right hand out. *"I remember that at the end of some basic combos Vergil would throw out a single Summoned Sword that would lift an enemy up in the air. Dunno if that skill translated, but... I put a bunch of them into that thing. And if I get enough of them together I can detonate them. Just like I showed Shadow once."*

Sorun pressed his spectral thumb and middle finger together.

Snap!

It was a snap loud enough that it would have reverberated throughout the entire room if it weren't for the fact all the Summoned Swords sticking out of the mech's chest exploded all at once, drowning the snap out. The explosion, in addition to exposing the machine's chest ever further, lifted it straight upwards towards Sorun. The teen slammed his spectral right arm down, with the mech

flying right into its path at the same time. Metal crunching and snapping was heard as the blue hand invaded the chest and rooted around towards its center.

The hand clamped around something. Sorun reacted to this by having his arm heft the giant mech suit over him, the spectral hand's fingers clamping down tightly on the item it had grabbed inside of the mech.

"JackPOT!"

The arm was swiftly swung downwards. The result of this was that the mech was thrown down towards the ground, Eggman screaming all the way. Sorun's spectral right arm had been torn out of the mech's chest in the process, a gray, shining gem held in its hand.

Sorun didn't even have the time to appreciate the prize before the arm fizzled out of existence around the same time he heard the loud *THUD!* of the mech hitting the ground floor. Then he fell down along with the Emerald.

Staying awake was becoming a struggle. He was momentarily blacking out more and more frequently, even as Sorun fell towards the ground. Merely breathing was becoming hard for him. He managed to recognize the approaching ground, fortunately, and scraped up enough power to perform a small Trick right before he hit. This resulted in him Tricking directly onto the ground and rolling to a stop, just faintly hearing the Chaos Emerald plink against the ground somewhere near him.

"Okay... okay, alright..." Shakily, Sorun rose up to his feet. He gazed upwards towards the fallen Egg Beater, which laid right in front of him. The jets on the bottom of its feet were off. In fact, it seemed to be completely disabled based on the fact that it wasn't even moving at all. *"Tearing out the Emerald must've disabled it. Fuckin' finally."* The Bringer Claw mimicking Sorun's right arm reappeared. *"Alright... how's Eggman doing ...?"*

He stumbled forwards. Yamato was torn free from its scabbard, which was then tossed aside. Sorun heard the wood scabbard clatter against the metal ground, but paid it no mind as he Tricked up onto the top of the mech lying flat on its back.

Sorun saw Eggman immediately. The helmet to the mech suit had been lost somewhere, revealing the Doctor all the way down to his shoulders. He was sweating intensely now. Fear and intense panic was written across his panting face, with the Doctor looking down into the mech as his hands continued to fiddle with the dead controls. Sorun briefly noted that his blue-tinted eyeglasses had been knocked away at some point, and even with his poor vision, he could make out his eyes. Beady little things. Red irises and black sclera instead of the normal white most everyone else had. They looked genuinely afraid.

Eventually, Eggman froze and looked up at the figure standing over him. He shrunk backwards, ginger mustache withering at the sight and his breath escaping him when he saw Sorun. Clothes torn, shredded, and drenched in blood to the point it was mostly dyed red. A missing right arm, replaced with a blue, spectral replica holding a katana. A paler-than-usual face streaked in blood, with black hair matted in blood sticking to it. An obliterated right eye with a metal shard sticking out from the eye socket, resembling a horn. A functioning left eye, completely bloodshot and hatefully looking down at Dr. Robotnik.

It looked like a demon was staring him down.

"You have... really freaky eyes..."

They were the only words Sorun bothered uttering before he held the Yamato up in preparation of chopping Eggman's head off.

Eggman shrieked, genuinely shrieked in fright, and hit a button. The mech underneath Sorun rumbled, enough that the exhausted teen lost his balance and fell off completely. The upper half of the mech's round torso separated completely, revealing a set of jets on its

underside keeping the upper half Eggman was sitting in afloat. It floated upwards, with Eggman himself pulling upwards on a throttle stick so tightly it threatened to snap out of the control console he was using.

The floating chair he was in rattled when Sorun Tricked onto it. He maintained that baleful glare at Eggman with his one eye, the left hand holding onto the edge of the escape chair while the right one still held Yamato. He actually slashed at the Doctor in an attempt to cut him. He'd missed. It'd been by mere millimeters, the tip of the sword *just* missing Robotnik's neck, but it got the point across. Eggman responding by hitting another button as the chair floated higher and higher.

Beep!

It was a small noise, but just loud enough for Sorun to hear. And he had enough lucidity to understand just what it meant. He looked downwards, at what remained of the mech where he'd heard the beep originate from, and then glanced back up at Eggman. He had the gall to actually grin at the teen, even if that grin was shaky and still fear-filled, but the absolute hatred Sorun felt at seeing that smirk was overpowered by his sense of self-preservation.

So he Tricked. He teleported far away from the chair. Due to his waning power he wasn't able to go far, so when the remains of the mech suit exploded, Sorun, once again, was sent barreling upwards. He didn't make a single sound when his body hit an Egg Grape, and continued to remain silent as he slid off of it. He showed signs of consciousness when his right spectral hand flashed out and stabbed Yamato into the pod directly below the one he hit that Sorun fell past, the hand keeping a grip on the sword's handle to keep Sorun aloft above the ground. He breathed in deeply, shaking his head to keep himself awake as he craned his head backwards.

The mech suit itself was completely gone. Blown up and little more than an unrecognizable hunk of metal. Eggman was still in the floating chair that had separated from the mech's main body, flying

towards a hatch in the wall nearby that had opened up. Their eyes met briefly, though Eggman didn't even say a single word. Sorun couldn't even place the expression on his face. They'd just simply looked at each other for a single second before Eggman flew the floating chair through the hatch. It closed behind him, and that was that. He was gone.

Sorun sighed. He'd wanted to kill him. Ironically, for him, at least, it was a secondary objective compared to saving everybody here and getting them out, but it still would have been nice to cross him out while he was at it. Or at least take his nephew's life as a consolation prize.

Oh, well. At least he still had enough energy to move around for a bit longer. He could still save everybody. He wasn't so sure about himself.

"What an ordeal..." Sorun muttered out, turning back to the pod and the sword stabbed into it. "Be a Freedom Fighter, they said... it'll be fun, they said..." he continued muttering as he placed his left hand on the pod. He pushed slightly, and before he knew it the sword was pulled free, and he was sent falling backwards.

Sorun gazed up at all the Egg Grapes holding every citizen of what was once Knothole as he fell down. It was with great effort he channeled Chaos energy into Yamato, the silver blade of the katana glowing blue. He slashed out with the blade as he fell, over and over. Blue lines of energy appeared over every single Egg Grape, only for the lines to then fade to reveal a clean seam running through the pods.

And then, the pods all fell apart from the lines cutting through them. Just like that, all the captive Mobians were freed and began dropping to the ground along with Sorun. Unlike them, though, he couldn't survive a fall like that, especially in his current position, so he was forced to Trick again right before he hit the floor.

He stumbled a bit as a result of the Trick. A blue light reached his peripheral once he caught his footing. Sorun looked towards it, seeing his spectral double standing right besides him. "Go and get Nicole's handheld and the Chaos Emerald, would you?" Sorun asked, voice low and exhausted. "I gotta finish up here."

The sound of the shards from the pods he cut apart clinking loudly against the ground behind him reached Sorun's ears, followed by another noise. Cheering. Sounds of happiness. He turned around to see everybody, hundreds of Mobians, all standing behind him. Most were looking around for their friends or hugging loved ones and family members. Most of them just looked happy to be out of those pods. Sorun had found himself glancing upwards to make sure he'd cut apart all the pods, and when he was satisfied at seeing them all cut apart, he glanced back down.

There was one group that didn't look to be as jubilant as the rest of the town. Sorun had the misfortune of looking down directly at them. The Freedom Fighters were all staring directly at him, and they looked anything but happy. His vision was too compromised to tell how they looked exactly, and he'd turned away too quickly to figure it out. He didn't want to see their faces. He didn't have time to think on it. He just wanted to finish this.

Something dropped down in front of him. Sorun blinked once in surprise, seeing the Doppelganger holding the gray Chaos Emerald in its left hand and Nicole's handheld body in its right. His left Bringer Claw manifested and grabbed the Emerald, while Sorun's real left hand gripped Nicole's handheld. The Doppelganger disappeared as a result, though Sorun paid this no mind as he looked down at the handheld's screen display.

A set of coordinates was being displayed on the handheld's green screen. There was no other sign of life or Nicole. Just the set of numbers staring Sorun in the face. He breathed out, and then lowered the handheld to his side.

"Guess she managed to pull it off. Good on you, Nicole. Knew you could do it." His blue fingers ran over the blood-soaked handle as the sword was risen up. *"All I need to do is open a portal up here... that's all I need..."*

Blue power, faint and barely even visible, gathered around the edge of the katana. Sorun attempted to cut a hole in space with it. The sword's tip in front of Sorun, seemingly struggling against an invisible force as the spectral arm holding the katana shook. Before he could do anything further an uncontrollable fit of coughs wracked Sorun's body. The sword was lowered as he bent forwards, coughing more and more blood onto the ground in front of him. His vision darkened more.

"Sorun..."

He just barely managed to feel a hand land on his left shoulder. He knew it was Sally right away from the brown fur on the hand and the voice. He turned his head to her, stopping in surprise when he saw her face. There was such a mixture of conflicting emotions on her face that he couldn't quite pick out a single one. She just looked... sad. So downcast to the point Sorun felt bad just looking at her. There was even the threat of tears showing up from the way her eyes were glistening. "Sorun, you... you need to stop moving-"

"I still have one thing I must do," Sorun denied. "I'll stop after."

She didn't seem to like his answer. The grip on his shoulder tightened, as she began shaking. "No, Sorun, you- you can't keep going. Not with those wounds..." Sally shook her head when Sorun didn't react to her. "Sorun, just please-"

"Do you... have a better alternative for getting everyone out from here...?" Sorun slowly asked, still out of breath. When Sally froze and continued looking at him, he said, "Robotnik and his robots are... they're all still out there. We've time, but... not much." He looked down at Yamato. "You all could... probably fight your way out, but

there'd be casualties with the... the hundreds of non-fighters back there. Civilians. Children. I can get us all out instantly with this."

"But-!"

Sorun lifted his bloodied left index finger and held it above Sally's lips. "I don't want to hear it." He stabbed Yamato into the air in front of him after brushing Sally's hand off. "Just help me by leading everyone through the portal once I open it."

He didn't wait to hear her response. His focus was solely on the Yamato, and opening a portal wide enough for hundreds of people to get through. Tired after tired breath rattled out of him as he poured more power into the blade, power that was only making his condition even worse the further he went. He saw a blue seam appear in front of him, a hole being torn open through the sword's power, but it wasn't enough.

"Come on... just a bit more..." He couldn't even feel his extremities anymore. He heard his own heartbeat growing fainter by the second. But Sorun pressed on, putting his all into opening this one single portal as he intensely focused on the coordinates he saw written on the handheld. *"Just one... more... thing..."*

With a final push, Sorun tore the sword through the air in front of him. As a result, a wide portal was opened up. The biggest Sorun had ever opened- it was almost as wide as the room itself that they were all in. A portal leading to that place Nicole had described to him.

"... It's your new home." Sorun glanced back at Sally, who was staring wide-eyed at the portal. He held Yamato in front of her eyes, which somehow widened even further when she saw the silver blade crumbling and disintegrating away. "I can't keep it up forever," he said. "I'm really... counting on you here, Sally..."

"... Right." To her credit, she'd steeled herself quickly enough. She cast one last, worried glance at Sorun before she'd turned to the others and began shouting out orders to them. Sorun would have

laughed if he had the energy. As it was he was barely standing on his feet.

"She can handle getting everyone through." Sorun turned towards the portal. *"Guess I get to see with my own eyes what Nicole whipped up for everybody..."*

If somebody told Sorun that there was an entire city's worth of nanites Eggman was just sitting on the entire time and doing nothing with... well, he probably would have believed them, because he'd seen crazier in this world. Far be it from him to think a giant pool of microscopic machines capable of mimicking any form of matter whose function was virtually limitless would be useful for anything. But it was there. He never did anything with it for some reason. But it was there.

Sorun didn't know the details. Nicole had been scarce with them due to time constraints. It was during this big adventure the Freedom Fighters had, before he showed up and before the incident with Eggman getting all the Chaos Emeralds. Something something nanite city, something something an AI called A.D.A.M. that was dead now. Whatever happened happened, and now there was an entire city of nanites in the middle of Northamer just... sitting there. Alive and fully functional, but without anything operating it. Inert, basically. And while Eggman still technically had control of it, he'd never utilized it in any fashion.

Maybe he just didn't want to mess around with nanites anymore. From what he got from Nicole that A.D.A.M. AI was a creation of his that went rogue, and things had went extraordinarily bad for both the Freedom Fighters and Eggman. Sorun couldn't say he blamed him if that was true.

Well... the prospect of a nanite city had interested Nicole for whatever reason. So she'd divulged to Sorun right before he'd went to go save everybody from Eggman that she'd been working on various software and firmware programs all this time so she could

basically upload herself into the city to fully take control of all the nanites. He didn't know the exact details when it came to the technical side of it. Just that it was incredibly complex, even for somebody of her caliber. But she'd told him she was confident she could do it. She just needed time, which she'd gotten, and then a way into the Egg Network so she could cut through it via the digital world, go to the nanite city, and then cut it off from the network so she could have it to herself. Sorun couldn't really understand past that.

It was meant to be a surprise, and she'd apparently been planning on letting Sorun in on it early so he could help her get into the network without anyone knowing, though Knothole being bombed out had tossed that plan out the window. She'd told him she'd simply wanted to give all the Mobians a new home, since Knothole was kind of cramped as it was and didn't really compare to the home they all *used* to have. She'd told him the Kingdom of Acorn used to have a proper city called Mobotropolis, back before Robotnik - the first one - did his coup, took it over, and renamed it Robotropolis. But then that city had been destroyed entirely due to circumstances Sorun wasn't clear on. Nicole saw the nanite city nobody was using (something Sorun could still hardly believe) and saw an opportunity to give the Mobians back a proper city instead of the makeshift one in Knothole.

She was nice like that.

Unfortunately the bombing curbed her scheme, so she'd thought up a new plan on the spot: Sorun would bring them to New Megaopolis, where he'd then plug her into an accessway so she could get into the Egg Network. She'd work on the nanite city and fix things up so that everybody would have a home to go to once Sorun rescued everybody, since Knothole was a smoldering crater now and officially a no-go. Sorun, quite simply, would free everybody and then use the Yamato to make a portal to take everybody there. Everybody saved, nanite city and new home acquired, all would be well.

Of course it hadn't gone quite that simply; Sorun was fairly certain him getting maimed fighting Eggman in a mech suit wasn't part of

her plan, but the plan itself called for a lot of improvisation. He didn't care much since he was dying anyways, and it wasn't like he could feel it. And the important part was that he got everybody out of there and to the city.

And what a city it was. Maybe not a "city" city in terms of size, more like a large town than anything, but still big enough to fit the hundreds and hundreds of residents in it with room to spare. Sorun couldn't see much since he hadn't gone much further than just outside the portal leading into the city. He'd transported everybody into what looked like a small park that was in the city Nicole made, near a small lake. Nearby he saw more structures: paved sidewalks, lightposts, off-white huts near the size of small houses nestled between trees in neat rows, she'd even thrown in some fancy archways. Fake, all of it. Everything from the houses to the trees were made of nanites. But it looked real and smelled real, and he wagered it probably felt real. Either way she'd actually done it. Nicole had made a whole city.

Everybody who Sorun had gotten through the portal (more he'd just made the portal while Sally and the rest of the Freedom Fighters lead everyone through) was going around and marveling at the city, everybody in various states of disbelief and wonder. Sorun was more or less standing on his lonesome, having finished looking around. Still missing body parts. Still on the verge of blacking out. Not bleeding as much, which was... probably a bad sign.

"Nicole really goes all-out on her surprises, huh? Man... never heard of anybody making a whole city as a gift before. This world's wild." He glanced downwards at the left Bringer Claw holding the gray Emerald, the gem now stained with his own blood. He'd bent down to gently lay Nicole's handheld down on the ground, and then reached up to grab the bloodied Emerald as the Bringer Claw disappeared. *"Probably a bad idea to do this while I'm bleeding out here... eh, fuck it."*

He gripped the gray gem with his real and spectral hands. Sparks of energy arced around his arms, the Emerald was converted to pure

Chaos energy that was absorbed into his body through his arms, and that was that. He, of course, hadn't felt a thing. He did feel magnitudes more tired, however, if that was even possible. He wasn't even able to keep up the Bringer Claw mimicking his right arm anymore, so that had disappeared. But otherwise there was no change with him.

"Well... so much for that..."

"Sorun...?"

He looked up at the voice that called his name. All the blue invading his red-tinted vision and the voice immediately identified the speaker as Sonic. He was standing right in front of Sorun and looked even worse off than Sally had when she'd approached him by a wide margin. A grief-stricken look was set on his face as he looked at the Earthling, eyes wide with tears freely falling from them. More than that, he looked scared.

It was almost enough to make Sorun laugh. He'd never seen Sonic scared before. At the same time, he wasn't too surprised it took somebody falling apart and near-death like Sorun was right now to draw that kind of expression out of him. It was just like Sonic.

"Hi, Sonic..." Sorun quietly greeted. He glanced down at his torso, at the metal shards and shrapnel still sticking into him, and looked back up at the crying hedgehog. "It seems I... overdid it a little bit..."

"S-Sorun, I don't- you- I don't know w-what I'm supposed..." Sonic took a step forwards. He seemed to be at a loss for words, tears still streaming from his eyes. "I-I-I'm so sorry I couldn't- I should've- you need a doctor-"

His distressed, sorrowful ramblings were cut off completely when Sorun poked Sonic's forehead with a bloodied finger.

"I promised everything would be okay, didn't I?" Sorun asked, voice barely above a whisper.

A small hiccup left Sonic as he attempted to choke back his tears. "Th-this isn't okay. *You're* not okay..."

Sorun couldn't help it. He'd actually smiled at Sonic out of sheer bemusement. "You're seriously crying... over a loser like me...?" He began to tilt backwards. His finger left Sonic's forehead, leaving behind a single string of thick blood that broke and fell against Sonic's face. "You really are lame..."

That was as far as he could go. Sorun collapsed onto his back right after finishing speaking. He faintly heard panicked voices calling after him, but by then he'd closed his eye completely. He lost consciousness the moment everything went black.

A/N- The whole "I've come to retrieve my friends" line sounds cool until you realize Sorun's just straight-ripping Vergil's lines from the games since emulating his favorite video game character is one of the only ways he can cope living in this really wacky nightmare world.

Took us like 600k words to get here, but we finally got the first boss fight in the story. So yay for that.

Chapter 45

Recursion Error

Episode 45- With friends like these

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

"God, this is the most annoying sound to wake up to..."

That was the first thought that came to Sorun when he woke up to a white-tiled ceiling right above him. Considering where he'd been for so long in his recent life, it looked completely different from anything else he'd seen on Mobius. Like a modern piece of architecture on Earth. It was enough to make him believe maybe this whole adventure actually was a fever dream and he just woke up from a coma.

And then he discovered his right eye was blind, recent memories caught up to him, and he realized that he was probably in a hospital Nicole had made in the nanite city. And that he survived. Somehow that latter fact was more surprising to him than the former.

"Holy shit, how did I actually pull through that?" From what he remembered he'd been in rough shape. Missing arm, missing eye, body torn by shrapnel, massive blood loss, internal injuries, he didn't even want to think about what kind of hell overusing his powers like that wreaked on his body, not even mentioning absorbing the sixth Chaos Emerald... he'd expected to die right then and there. But he was still here.

"Yeah, of fucking course it wouldn't be that easy. Gotta fulfill this big ol' role of mine, right, Aurora?" Sorun rolled his remaining left eye and moved his head to the right. He got a bit of a better view of the room he was in. It really did just look like a modern hospital room, from the clean smell to the bright lights and white-tiled walls. There was even a window letting in a large amount of bright sunlight, which, in conjunction with the brightness surrounding him, had made Sorun wince in displeasure.

His moved his head a bit further, this time downwards. His upper body was covered by a white sheet, but he could see his left arm over it. His right one was... simply missing. He saw white bandages tightly wrapped around the socket where his right shoulder used to be, but, as expected, everything below that was gone.

"I'm afraid it's been... nine years... pfft, if only," Sorun thought. *"Sheesh... This is gonna be annoying as hell to get used to. Gimme the fake one."*

His right Bringer Claw materialized, reshaped and resized to fit over the wound to mimic the lost right arm. He held the spectral, blue hand up to his face, flexed the clawed fingers, and, after nodded in satisfaction, looked down at the sheets. *"It's no Devil Bringer, but it'll do. Alright, let's see the damage..."*

Sorun's spectral limb tore the blanket off of his body. They'd left him with his pants, thankfully, but that was all they left him with. The rest of his pale body was bare, with multiple white bandages wrapped around his torso. Some were around his head, too, now that he felt around. Over where his lost eye was.

And tubes, too. Tubes sticking out of his nose, some stuck to his body and others taped on. Various sensors and nodes and other such implements connecting him to various machines off to the side; a heart monitor and an IV drip were the only pieces of equipment he recognized out of the bunch. An annoyed hum left him, and he proceeded to disconnect all of the tubes from his body, and then

extended his spectral arm to unplug the heart monitor when it started to let out a singular, drawn-out beep.

"Alright." He sat up, spun around, and stepped barefoot onto the floor. *"Let's- oh, oh whoa..."*

Sorun had only been able to stand up on his feet for a few moments before he listed off to the side, and then was forced to hold onto the metal frame of the hospital bed for support. The problem wasn't physical pain- though he didn't doubt there was probably something wrong with him that should have been causing him pain if it weren't for the fact he couldn't feel it. He just felt weak. Physically weak and exhausted, to the point he couldn't stand on his own for long without needing support.

"That's gonna be even more annoying than the missing arm and eye," Sorun thought to himself. *"Guess I'm not doing so well after all. Damn. Wonder if- the hell...?"*

There was something at the end of his bed. A lot of something, actually. So much something that it was all practically spilling out onto the floor. Balloons with things like "Get Well Soon!" written on them and flowers and baskets full of all sorts of odds and ends. Cards and candies and things like that. So much that it almost encompassed all of Sorun's vision.

"W-wow... did... everybody seriously leave all this for- oh shit, is that chocolate? I haven't had that in forever."

"Huh. This one's from those kids that threw that rock at me way back... go figure."

So apparently people were a little grateful he'd saved all of Knothole from getting killed off and turned into fuel. It was to be expected, he supposed- he knew that Mobians were generally and overly nice, but the amount of effort they went towards getting him all this stuff seemed... excessive. It wasn't even an exaggeration to say he had

quite literally *hundreds* of get-well cards that had been written for him, not to mention the gifts. Which were... mostly candies, baked goods, and flowers. Actually that's all it was, in addition to the balloons and the baskets holding it all. But it was still a lot.

It was... touching, to an extreme degree. Uncomfortably touching. He'd been in a shocked stupor for quite a while when he realized what all of this was. He was still somewhat shocked, even after having gone through some of the cards that had all been hand-written for him. Most of them were the same- bunches of heartfelt thank-yous and wishes of good health. He could tell a lot of them were written by children from the awful handwriting, bad grammar, and how they'd all described him looking "super cool" fighting Eggman.

He damn well better have looked super cool seeing as he lost a limb and an eye in that fight.

There were cards written by older people, though. Adults and teenagers. Some strangers, some he knew. Acquaintances of his like Honey, Mina, Sonic's parents and uncle. Elias. Even Elias' wife and mother.

Wasn't much to say about the cards themselves. More of the same when compared to the rest. The only one that stood out to him was Mina and how she said she was going to write a song in his honor. He supposed he should have felt flattered at the prospect, and admittedly it did sound neat. He hoped it'd sound good if she actually did go through with it. He doubted he'd be around long enough to hear it.

Some cards from all his friends, of course, though they were all oddly brief when compared to all the other cards. Sorun supposed that just meant they wanted to say their words personally. It was still nice of them.

And then the door had to go and open when Sorun was in the middle of biting down on a chocolate bar.

The person that walked through the door was, by all appearances, a duck. A yellow duck Mobian man with an eyepatch. Sorun somewhat recalled seeing him once, when he'd had to go to that infirmary in Knothole once. He was fairly certain he was a doctor, which would support the white scrubs and the weird circular dish thing doctors wore on their foreheads that he had on. He'd only made it a few steps into the room before he'd looked up from the chart he was looking at and froze when he saw Sorun. Sorun himself was completely frozen as well, still holding the chocolate bar.

"... Yo."

"Just what do you think you're doing of bed?"

"..." Sorun took another bite of the chocolate bar.

The duck responded by deeply sighing and rubbing at his forehead in a frustrated manner.

"Well, at least he doesn't sound like Donald and just sounds like a normal man. Was really worried about that." Sorun put down the rest of the chocolate before speaking out to the duck doctor. "Woke up, wanted to stretch my legs."

"You..." The duck squeezed down on the chart hard enough that Sorun was fairly certain he saw cracks appear. "This is why I hate treating people like you. What, exactly what, possessed you to get out of bed and disconnect everything I had connected to you?" he demanded. "Paint me the picture, tell me what on Mobius you think you're doing."

"Ah, c'mon, Donald, I feel fine," Sorun said, turning around and leaning against the metal bed frame.

"Quack."

"... Hm?"

"Quack. It's my name. I'm Dr. Quack. And you shouldn't be feeling alright after what you went through."

"... These fucking names." Sorun rolled his eye up at the ceiling and let it fall back on Quack. He almost would have preferred Donald over that name. "So I lost an arm and an eye, big whoop, I'm feeling fine now," Sorun claimed. "Feelin' a bit weak, but otherwise good."

" *No* , you're not good. I had you hooked up to all that stuff because you're *not* good!" Quack shouted out. "I was there along with everybody else, so I know exactly what you went through. And I'm telling you right now that you shouldn't be walking around like that." He deeply sighed and leaned a hand against a nearby counter. "I really don't see how you're even moving. You're seriously not in any pain?"

Sorun shrugged. "Always had a high pain tolerance."

"Yeah, Sonic said something similar. Guess it goes to explain how you managed to keep fighting through all that damage. You're freakishly tough for a Ov- ahem, human."

The Earthling huffed a breath through his nose and looked to the side. Wasn't the most eloquent explanation, but it'd have to do. "So," he said, focusing back on the Duck, "what's my damage?"

"Other than the obvious?" Quack looked towards his chart. "Multiple fractures, lacerations, external contusions, organ contusions, severe blood loss due to hemmorhage..." He sighed and glanced back up at Sorun. "You really shouldn't be out of bed and moving around, Sorun. It's bad enough you did that thing with the Chaos Emerald right after that fight... what were you even thinking, kid?"

"I was banking on getting a regeneration power." Sorun's eye flicked down to his spectral arm. "Didn't quite pan out." What he did end up getting was still nice and all, but he would have preferred having depth perception.

"Obviously," Quack drawled. "We almost lost you, you know. I kept it vague when the Freedom Fighters kept asking so they wouldn't worry so much, but you came really close to dying on us."

"..." Sorun looked back up at Quack. "How close?"

"Blood loss is almost what got you," he answered. "Nicole managed to use her nanites to make us all the medical equipment we needed along with the hospital, but she couldn't make human blood to transplant into you." He made a light chuckle and looked to the side. "Sonic... went as far as to run all the way down to Station Square. From what I heard he raided a blood bank and grabbed as many bags as he could before coming back here. Rumor has it Sally had to smooth things over with their president and explain it was an emergency, but that's all I know about it."

Sorun stiffened up a bit and made a low sigh. First at the mention of Nicole and how he wasn't looking forwards to her reaction to his state, and secondly to what Sonic did. *"He went that far just for me?"* he thought. *"Station Square's on a whole other continent. If I was dying and he went back and forth just like that... just how fast was he running for my sake?"*

"There were still some... complications," Quack continued. "We didn't know what your blood type was, so we had to take a bit to do a test to confirm that. You're O negative, by the way," he added. "Still, even with the right blood type your body didn't take too well to the donor blood."

A small hum came from Sorun. "Well... I'm not exactly local. Can't say I'm too surprised."

"That's the conclusion I came to as well. I did some bloodwork analysis comparing your blood with the Station Square blood Sonic brought back in case there was anything extra I needed to know while treating you. You're quite a bit different from them on the inside, interestingly enough."

Not surprising to Sorun. Different zone, different era of time with a separation of thousands of years, lack of a natural link to the Chaos Force, too many variables such as those to consider. He'd already figured out on his own he may as well have been a completely different species entirely compared to Station Square humans. Hearing it was hard-confirmed by science though hit a bit harder than Sorun thought it would have.

"So what ended up happening?" he finally asked.

"Well, without being able to transfuse any blood into you, we had to do the next best thing and perform an autologous blood transfusion to keep you stable."

Sorun nodded. "Oh, that's..." he paused and snapped his fingers while he thought, then perked his head up when he remembered what he was thinking of. "It's when you recycle loss blood back into a bleeding patient so they don't bleed out, right?"

"Yes, that's correct," Dr. Quack said, looking a bit impressed. "I'm honestly quite surprised you knew what that was."

"My mom was a doctor."

"Ah. That would explain it."

Sorun didn't say anything further. He was too focused on the fact he *had* come close to biting it after all. He felt he should have been shocked by this news, disheartened to some extent. He didn't really feel much of anything, though. If anything, the only thing he did feel was pleasantly surprised at knowing he'd made it after all.

"Guess finally committing to this whole thing with the Emeralds really shocked the idea of dying out of me," Sorun morosely thought. *"Knew I was gonna die from the start anyways no matter how this turned out. Even now I got six out of seven Chaos Emeralds. One more and that's it, I'm done. How much more time am I even looking at here? Hell's the point of saving my life when I'm gonna die later on*

anyways? Just so I have another shot at killing Eggman when I get that last Emerald?"

"- would really appreciate it."

"Huh?" Blinking his eye, Sorun focused back on the doctor. "S-sorry, man, I spaced out a bit. What were you saying?"

"I was saying I would really appreciate it if you got back in bed, Sorun," Dr. Quack said. "I'm not too worried about you if you're able to move around on your own, but you're not fully healed yet and if you overdo it you're just gonna exacerbate your wounds and make your recovery period that much longer."

Solid reasoning. Sorun still didn't like the idea of sitting in a hospital for an extended period. He liked angry doctors even less, though. "Ugh... I'll sit down, happy?"

"I will be once you actually do it."

Sorun scoffed, but still followed the doctor's orders and ambled back to the bed. Even he would admit he was probably more jacked up on the inside than he looked on the outside, even if he couldn't feel it. Not feeling injuries didn't mean they weren't there, and not being able to feel pain wouldn't mean much if he injured his body to a point it *couldn't* move period. He had that much sense with his extremely limited knowledge of medicine. So, much to his chagrin, he sat down on the bed, though refrained from lying down.

"So," Sorun said, glancing to the side as Quack walked closer to Sorun, "doctor. Out of curiosity... you saw how I lost mine, so how'd you lose yours?" he asked, pointing to the bandge covering his empty eye socket.

"Got hit by a landmine while treating patients on the battlefield."

"Jesus..." Sorun cleared his throat and glanced away. "A-ah, I... didn't mean-"

"Hah! Don't sweat it, kid. Not like it's a secret or anything to how I lost the eye," he said. "Speaking of which, concerning your own lost eye. And limb."

"Yeah?"

"There were some talks of fitting you with some cybernetic prosthetics, and especially now that we have the tools-"

"Eh, yeah, 'bout that." Sorun held up his spectral right arm for the doctor to see, and then shook it slightly. "As much as I've always wanted a cool robot arm, I think I'm just gonna stick with the cool ghost arm. I'm already kinda used to it."

"And your eye?" the duck asked.

Sorun sighed a bit. It wasn't like he didn't want to fulfill one of his lifelong dreams of being a cyborg, but he also didn't want to waste anybody's time installing that stuff into him and having to waste time getting used to new, artificial pieces of his body when he was dying soon anyways. Waste of effort. Waste of resources. He just wanted to spend what little time he had left as he was without anything like that getting in the way.

"I'll learn to live with it. Just gimme an eyepatch or something," Sorun said. "Preferably one with a snake on it."

"... Excuse me?"

"Forget it, it's a stupid thing, just get me a regular eyepatch," Sorun said with a wave of his hand. "Other than that, how long do you expect me to stay in this bed?"

Dr. Quack made a hum. "You had some pretty bad muscle sprains and tearing in addition to everything else. That along with the fractures, well... you already told me you have a hard time standing up. Sounds to me like your body's still recovering, which is good, but it's not finished yet. I'd like to give it some more weeks at the least.

I'd give it a month or two, but I know you Freedom Fighters can't stand to sit still that long, so we'll do what we can. Check up on you regularly and let you go when you seem good."

Not the news he wanted to hear. Wasn't much to do about it, he supposed. All the more reason he would have liked that regeneration ability, or some approximation of that.

"Alright..." Sorun looked to the side, away from the Mobian. "And... how is everyone else doing?"

The doctor tapped on the chart he was holding, humming again. "I don't really think I'm the best person to ask on how the general mood of the populace is doing. I'm a doctor, not a politician or something like that. Generally speaking?" He shrugged. "I think everybody was a bit shaken up by everything that happened, from losing Knothole to... everything else. Lasted for a couple days, but I think everybody's adjusting to living here."

"Couple days?" Sorun repeated. "How long have I been out?"

"About a week," Quack answered, causing Sorun to nod. "Lot of talk about you. You... well, I don't even know what to call that fight you had with Robotnik. I think you actually went and scared some folk."

Sorun rose an eyebrow. "Scared?"

"Maybe that's not the right word," he said with a shake of his head. "I don't know. Having your arm torn off and acting like it never happened, well... that's not exactly normal. In fact I'd go as far as to say that's actually a sign of some underlying problem. You're... absolutely sure there's no underlying problem or something along those lines I should be aware of?"

"What do want me to do? Lie and I say I was born with congenital analgesia or something like that?" Sorun asked. "I was focusing less on the fact I was missing an arm and more on the fact you all were gonna die if I didn't do anything. Mix that in with the pain tolerance

and the adrenaline rush I was probably in during the time and, well, you get the idea."

The doctor's bill frown a bit. He tapped his clipboard once, and then made a small, accepting hum. "I didn't mean anything by it, Sorun. I was just asking. I'm sure you know us physicians like to do that." The Mobian doctor paused to think over his words. "I suppose it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say everybody was just surprised by what you did. Everybody already knew of you, of course, word of everything you'd been doing with the Freedom Fighters got around over the months, but... I'm not sure. Everybody was touched by what you did, I guess I could say." He adjusted the circular dish on his forehead. "Ah, but I can't really speak for everybody. And, well..." He nodded his head to all the baskets and balloons at the end of the bed. "I think all that says enough. Everybody's really grateful for what you did, me and my own family included. I know all your friends in particular came here to visit you every single day you were under." He glanced over at a wall clock. "Speaking of which, your AI friend is usually due to show up sometime this hour. She checks on you regularly."

"Oh. Nicole?" An uneasy hum left Sorun. "Doc, I'm not really mentally prepared to handle her right now. Can you do me a favor and tell anybody I'm still unconscious if they ask? Just for, like, a day?"

The doctor's answer was immediate. "Yeah, no, I'm not doing that."

"... Fair enough," Sorun sighed out. "Ugh, man... was there anything else?"

"Not as far as I can see." The duck Mobian stepped even closer to Sorun, and even went as far as to lay a feathered hand on his shoulder. Sorun glanced up at his face to see a smile stretching along his bill. "Chin up, kiddo. You saved the day and all your friends are there for you. Take it easy and relax."

"Yeah, I know," Sorun said, brushing the hand off his shoulder. "How much is this hospital stay gonna cost me, anyway? I'm kind of broke on account of all my worldly possessions got blown away along with Knothole." He was pretty sure he'd left that gum wrapper from Earth he'd inadvertently brought to Mobius back at Sonic's house, too. So it was likely burned to smithereens like everything else was. Another thing to hate Eggman for. That was his favorite good luck charm.

Dr. Quack blinked in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"... Don't I owe you something for treating me?"

"Why... why would we charge for healthcare?"

"Wow, you guys are progressive," Sorun gasped out, and then proceeded to scoot further down the bed. "Gimme a second, you might need this bed more than I do once I tell you how bad the healthcare system back in my world was."

Ironically getting horribly crippled worked out pretty well for Sorun.

As far as the doctors were concerned his physical weakness was a result of the injuries he'd sustained fighting Eggman and his mech suit. And, admittedly, a large part of that probably were those injuries. But Sorun alone knew that him absorbing the sixth Chaos Emerald likely also contributed to his weakness.

It was something he'd been afraid of happening. Growing physically weak as a result of absorbing Emeralds. He technically could move around on his own, but it wasn't without great difficulty. Whether that would remain true or if he would get most of the mobility he used to have back when his injuries healed up was something Sorun didn't know, though he chose to be optimistic on the subject. On the other hand, he'd already been suffering some kind of nervous damage from the fifth one, along with the damage all the others wreaked on his body to shorten his lifespan more and more.

But... there wasn't anything to do about it. What was done was done, and Sorun already foresaw something like this happening anyways. So he'd continue to lie, make the doctors think his weakness was from the injuries and say he'd just toughed through the nonexistent pain during the fight. If anything, it gave him a good excuse to fall back on in case he ever started bleeding or showed other negative signs as a result of the damage the Emeralds were inflicting on him.

That was probably the only good news out of all this. That and he'd successfully saved everybody's lives and gave them a new home with Nicole's help. What he wasn't looking forwards to now was actually confronting everybody over it. And Nicole.

He didn't know what the hell he was going to do with her. He was still debating on pretending on still being unconscious despite Dr. Quack saying he wouldn't lie for him just so he could avoid her entirely.

"Why the hell did I say all that embarrassing stuff during the fight with Eggman...?" Sorun wondered to himself. He was still sitting on the edge of his hospital bed, staring out towards the window at the small city beyond it. *"Christ, I even did the stupid Dante EX taunt with the heart and the- man, fuck."* He rubbed a hand over his face. *"Ugh, Sonic'll never let me live it down. Now what am I supposed to say to Nicole when she gets here?"*

"... Yeah, I got nothing."

There was a knock on the door to his room.

"Aw, damn." Sorun's head snapped towards the closed door. He bit his lower lip out of anxiety and felt his mind began to race. *"Maybe if I'm quick I can get back in bed and pretend I'm still aslee-"*

The door handle began to turn.

"Aw, damn."

The door opened.

"Damn, damn, damn..."

It was Nicole on the other side.

"I don't even know what I'm supposed to say here."

In his defense, he'd tried on thinking up some game plan on how he was supposed to approach this conversation so he'd be able to work his way through it with relatively little emotional duress. He'd failed in every sense of the word in that Sorun had come up with nothing, but he'd tried.

The only thing he could think to do was look over at her for a couple of seconds and then look back towards the window without a single word.

She didn't say anything either. What she did do was cross over to the other side of the hospital room and sit down on the bed next to him, still completely silent. It felt like whole minutes passed with them just sitting there, with Sorun kicking his legs back and forth out of the angst of the situation, before he finally took in a big inhale and turned towards the lynx.

"So, I see you're walking around on your own," he said, sounding completely ordinary as if it was a normal conversation he was trying to start. "Is there some kind of new development I missed while I was out, orrrr is it somethin' else?"

Nicole didn't even look towards him. In fact her head was dipped downwards a bit so that her black hair was shielding her eyes.

"..." Sorun looked back towards the window. "It's nice weather out."

"Is that truly all you have to say?"

"I mean, pretty much. Yeah." Sorun turned back towards her, sighing a bit. "You okay?"

She finally decided to look at him. She had that upset look on her face again, and Sorun couldn't decide if it was the angry kind of upset or just general sadness upset. All he could figure was that whatever she was upset about it was directed right at him from the way she was looking at him. And it gave Sorun the urge to jump out of the window so he could avoid what was about to happen entirely.

"Am I okay?" she repeated in a disbelieving tone. "I come to greet you after you manage to rescue everybody from Dr. Robotnik only to see everybody standing around your mutilated body lying in a pool of blood on the ground, and I'm supposed to be okay? I'm told by the doctors that you came uncomfortably close to dying while they were trying their best to save you, and I'm supposed to be okay?" She sounded more intense with every word she spoke despite the fact her volume remained at a neutral level, causing Sorun to shrink back further and further. "I have to worry every day that my friend is going to die in the hospital and I'm supposed to be *okay* ?"

"You don't sound very okay," is what Sorun wanted to say. He very wisely kept his mouth shut.

"Do you have any idea what that was like? To be so glad that I managed to refurbish the nanite city to give everybody a new home, to be so relieved seeing everyone was safe thanks to you, only to have to then see that horrible sight? I thought... I thought you had died, Sorun." Her head dropped even lowered. She went from looking upset at him to just looking plain sad, nearly devastated. "I didn't like that feeling. It happened in an instant, too fast for even me to calculate. I'd gone from being so happy to... to what I felt when I saw you. I cannot even describe what I felt when I saw you, Sorun. Only that I never want to feel it again."

Sorun slowly exhaled from his nose, thinking over his words carefully as he rubbed at the back of his head. Maybe acting so casual wasn't such a good idea. He hadn't realized he'd scared everybody that badly, but then again, seeing what shape he'd been in before going under, he probably should have seen it coming. And he himself was feeling brought down just having to listen to this. He was in part

upset at himself knowing she had to go through that kind of grief, just at his expense.

No wonder she was acting like this.

"Yeah, it... didn't really go smoothly back there for me," he finally admitted after a long pause. "In my defense I lived."

She went back to looking upset as her head snapped up to him. "You always do this," she said. "You're always acting so reckless."

"Despite my best efforts to the contrary, it seems to happen a lot more than I'd like," Sorun agreed. "I'm not going to apologize for saving everybody."

"I know you're not. I don't expect you to. I..." Nicole stopped herself, pausing to think before speaking again. "I just... didn't think it would go so badly for you," she said. "I'm not upset at you. I'm upset at what happened. You... suffered so many wounds..."

"Yeah, but look, I got a cool ghost arm now." Sorun gave her a small smile and lifted up his spectral arm, waving it at Nicole. "I'm probably even gonna be even better at video games now since this thing is way faster than my normal arm."

"But you're still missing an eye," she argued, "and your body's scarred now, and I just keep thinking if we'd come up with a better plan this could have been avoided-"

"There was no better plan," Sorun interrupted, causing Nicole to focus back on him. "Said it yourself. We were working with practically nothing." He sighed and looked back out the window. "Let's be honest, Nicole, what we managed to pull off was a miracle. I'm honestly surprised I managed to get everybody out of there without losing a single person. An arm or an eye isn't anything compared to somebody's life," he said. "I mean, if anything it's my own fault for not being good enough to make it out in one piece. You did your part perfectly since you managed the whole city thing." He ran spectral

claws over the bandages over his head. "And sure, yeah, losin' an eye's really irritating, not gonna lie, but hey. I'm still here, aren't I?" He turned back to her. "There's an adage back where I'm from that goes along the lines of 'you shouldn't curse back luck, because you never know if it saved you from even worse luck'. Got no idea where it comes from, completely forgot, but what I'm trying to say is don't worry about it." He interlocked his fingers behind his head in a casual manner. "You're here, I'm here, everybody's here, we got a shiny new city courtesy of you, and everything's good. Could it have gone better? Yeah, sure, but it could have went way worse, too. If anything, I... guess I should be saying I'm sorry for not being better and not getting hurt so bad so you wouldn't end up worrying so much."

"No, Sorun, you shouldn't be apologizing. You did nothing wrong. You..." She paused again. Mouth pressed firmly shut and eyes looking downwards, looking like she was in deep confliction. It eventually relaxed into a small look of acceptance as she locked eyes with him again. "Everything you say is true. I do wish you'd have taken better care of yourself, but... I cannot express just how glad I am that you managed to save all of our friends and the rest of the citizens of the kingdom. You have my thanks for that."

"So you're not mad at me?" Sorun asked in a hopeful tone.

She seemed to have to think on the question for a second, which made Sorun a bit concerned. He relaxed when she gave him a small smile. "I was, since your reckless nature ended up injuring you so... but you made valid points, and I cannot stay mad at you. So we'll say all is forgiven." She glanced at his spectral arm. "I just hope what you say about your skills not being inhibited by the arm are true."

"Oh yeah, totally. Thing's super fast," Sorun assured her. He kept looking towards her and noticed her smile had dropped off a bit as she continued to stare towards the arm, prompting him to ask, "You alright?"

"It... doesn't hurt too much, does it?" she asked. "I just... think back to what you must have gone through in that fight, and it hurts to know-"

"Hey hey hey, enough of that. I said I was okay." Sorun reached his spectral hand out and placed it on the top of Nicole's head. The action caused her face to morph into a surprised expression, as well as make her body and ears stiffen up straight. "See? I'm totally fine," he said, closing his eye and giving her a smile. "Now enough about me. Tell me about how you and the city have been."

He removed his hand after finishing speaking. Nicole remained sitting completely still with the same expression with the same face, almost frozen, until she seemed to notice Sorun staring at her oddly with his now-open eye. She blinked a couple of times and glanced towards the window, away from him.

"Yes, the city. Of course." She looked back to him. "For the most part my annexation of the nanite city went without issue. Integrating myself into the city's systems went smoothly, and I've currently relocated myself to the city's systems. Currently I am in full control of every single nanite within the city."

"Wow," Sorun commented with a raised eyebrow. "So what's that like?"

"I'm not sure how I could describe it in terms you would understand. It felt strange at first, being connected to so many machines at once, but I've adapted to the sensation. The programs I writ helped in the adjustment." She rose one of her hands up to look at it. "What you see before you is still my holographic projection. I'm able to be anywhere in the city I want now. It feels liberating, in a way, to not be limited to that handheld anymore. And since I'm able to draw upon the city's own power supply, as long as power isn't being diverted to the city's defenses, I'm able to remain this way as long as I want."

"Wait, really?" Sorun's eye embiggened. "That- that's huge! Hah... I'm really glad for you, Nicole." He truly meant it, too. He'd noticed

that there'd been multiple times she'd seemed rather displeased with the limitations her handheld body provided her. Even Sorun himself often felt annoyed by the limitations and having to hunt around for Power Rings all the time so he could help her maintain her form.

If she could just make her body wherever she wanted for however long she wanted while hooked into the city, though, well... that eliminated all of those grievances of theirs.

"It's been an eye-opening experience for me," Nicole admitted to him. "I'd desired for so long to live among others and interact in the physical world in the same way they can, and now it truly feels like I have a chance at living life the same way as them." Her smile brightened a bit more as she glanced back at the window, towards the city outside. "Otherwise, the city itself is coming along well. There are no issues as far as I can see, and the Mobian populace have expressed their gratitude towards everything I've provided them. So far all is going perfectly well."

"That's great," Sorun said. "So no problems with Robotnik or anything like that?"

"Unfortunately so." Nicole turned back to Sorun. "I do not think he has been very appreciative of us stealing his nanite city. There have been skirmishes where he's sent some of his ships from his fleet to try and attack us." She smiled again. "The protective force field proves more than sufficient at deterring their attacks. They've been little more than a nuisance."

Well, he hadn't been holding out for him leaving them completely alone, but knowing that so far there was nothing he could actually do to them sounded like the next best thing. He didn't really know how Nicole managed to figure out force fields, but, well... Sorun had long since concluded technology in this world was a bit weird. The fact he was sitting in a hospital completely comprised of nanites said enough. Or the laser that turned him into a digital being from that one time.

But, he pushed those thoughts out from his mind. It seemed that everything was going fine. He was glad. Less things for him to worry about, and Nicole seemed to be doing great herself, so that was an added bonus.

"So what about everybody else?" he asked her. "How are they doing?"

"Well enough. Any Freedom Fighter operations are currently on hold to give everybody a chance to settle in." A beat passed. "And... the others have been visiting you frequently out of concern for your health. I think you should talk to them as soon as you can to ease some of their concerns."

"Ah, yeah, I was getting to it-"

"I'll take the liberty of informing them for you."

"Y-you really don't-"

"It's the least I can do to help assuage everybody's worries. I'm sure you're eager to put them to rest as well. I'm more than happy to help."

"... Yeah, of course," Sorun said, some of his facial muscles twitching as a response to Nicole's reasoning. He took a calming breath to quickly clear his head, and then said, "Guess it's gotta happen sooner or later. Send 'em over. Just..." He held a finger up to stop Nicole as she made to stand off the bed, "not all at once, yeah? Only so much of this I can handle, know what I mean?"

"I see. No need to worry, Sorun. I'll do what I can." She made to turn around after standing, but then stopped yet again to address Sorun one more time. "And Sorun... I'm really happy you're doing well. I'll come and visit when my duties of managing the city aren't preoccupying me."

"Alright. Seeya then." They both waved to each other, and before he knew it Nicole's form had disappeared entirely in a flurry of small cubes. He sighed, and then leaned back far enough that his back was resting against the hospital bed.

"Well, that didn't go terribly," he thought. *"Feel bad about making her worry so much, but I guess there's no helping it."* He made another sigh as he rose his spectral hand up. *"But damn, she sounded like me almost dying on her really made her... actually scared. Which makes me wonder what's gonna happen to her and everyone else when I actually do die."* He made a harsh click with his tongue as the arm flopped to the side, making him stare up at the ceiling. *"Fuck. This is exactly why I didn't want to be friends with anybody. Nothing to do about it now, I guess."*

Could have been worse. At least the situation concerning everybody else sounded relatively stable. To a point that once he and Eggman were gone Sorun could safely say he'd be leaving everybody in a good place. The whole goal of this whole thing, he supposed. At the very least, there was that. All he had to do was make it to the finish line.

Before that he had to get through this day, though, and somehow he felt like he'd rather get into another death match with a mech suit than go through everybody's reactions over him.

"Sorun!"

"No."

The yellow object that was flying through the air towards Sorun was quickly grabbed by Sorun's spectral arm and planted into the mattress right in front of him. The two Mobians by the doorway looked on in amusement, while Sorun stared at the two-tailed one being pressed onto the bed with an annoyed expression.

"Already told ya I don't do hugs, Tails," Sorun said. He released his arm's hold on the fox as he sat further back on the bed. "For cryin' out loud, man, I'm wounded here."

"Eh-heh, sorry, Sorun..." Tails gave him a sheepish chuckle as he slid off the bed, only to then approach at an uncomfortable distance while hopping up and down. "But are you okay!? You got really hurt and we were all worried so we wanted-"

"Space, man, space," Sorun mumbled out, using his blue arm to push Tails back a bit. "And yeah, I'm fine."

Tails finally got the hint and chose to step towards the end of the bed. Breathing out a bit in relief, Sorun then looked up at the other two guests, Sonic and Sally, as they entered the room. They both had extremely relieved, if not a bit apprehensive, looks on their faces. The apprehensiveness intrigued Sorun a bit, but seeing everything that had happened, he didn't find himself too surprised at seeing it.

"Hey, buddy." Sonic was the first one to speak, with the hedgehog stopping right next to Sorun while Sally chose to stand next to Tails at the foot of the bed. "How you doin'?"

Sorun shrugged. "Fine as can be. I'd be even better if the doctors would just let me out of bed already, but you know how they are."

"Heh, yeah, I hear ya," Sonic agreed with a nod. "Must totally bite, being chained down to a bed like this."

"I wouldn't call it chained exactly, but I get your meaning." Sorun nodded to the baskets at the end of the bed. "You all, uh... got me a lot of cards and stuff, huh?"

Sonic smiled and gave him a nod. "Well, yeah! 'Course we did! It wouldn't have felt right doing nothing after everything you did to save us all from those icky pods back in New Megaopolis! Did you read any of them yet?"

"Eh, I got through most of them. Read all you guys' cards," Sorun informed him. "Er, thanks, by the way. Was really touching. Y'know, even though you spelled my name wrong in your card, Sonic."

The smile on the hedgehog's face dropped off into a mortified expression. "Huh? What?"

"There's no 'a' in my name," 'Soarun' deadpanned. "It's S-o-r-u-n." To be fair it wasn't something he could hold solely against Sonic since a fair number of the townsfolk that wrote him cards made the same mistake. And in his defense the way his name sounded did make it sound like an 'a' was in there. But then again everybody else in the Freedom Fighters had gotten it right. So he felt he could tease him a bit over it.

"Uh-uh-uh- I didn't know!" Stuttering, Sonic turned to Sally in a panic. "How was I supposed to know!? He never told us how it's spelled! Why didn't any of you tell me before I wrote that card!?"

To the foot of Sorun's bed, Sally made a small groan and palmed at her face. "Sonic, how could make a mistake like that?"

"I didn't mean to- agh..." Sonic made a defeated sound and turned back to the bedridden human. "Sorun I'm so sorry. I'll make you a new card if-"

"It's fine, Sonic, really, I got enough cards as is," Sorun assured him, laughing lightly while raising a hand up. "There were actually a bunch of people that misspelled my name. Doesn't really bug me too much." Wasn't entirely true; it did disturb him the smallest bit at some level, but at the same time he didn't care enough to bother to correct anybody other than Sonic.

"Oh. Heh heh, that's a load off," Sonic sighed out.

"I'm sure." Sorun turned from looking at Sonic towards Sally. "So what brings you all here, anyways?"

"Nicole told us you woke up," she answered. "We all wanted to visit you to make sure, but she said you didn't want to see us all at once."

"Yeah, well..." Sorun took a quick look around the hospital room before focusing back on the princess. "I don't think the room could hold everybody."

Sally didn't say anything immediately. Instead, Sorun saw her looks downwards. Towards the missing arm being substituted by the spectral one. The whole room had gone silent, and Sorun didn't even need to look to see all eyes were on him. Him and the injuries.

It was gonna be a long day if he had to deal with this with everybody.

"Sorun..." Sally tentative began, "we... I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to say." She looked away from him. "We're all thankful for what you did, but... we never intended for-"

"Nah, don't worry about it. Happens."

"People don't just 'happen' to lose a limb," she argued as she turned back to him. "You never should have been hurt so badly-"

"Ugh, I'm not dealing with this." Sorun rose a hand up to stop her mid-sentence. "It's a raw deal, I get it. But what's done is done." He paused to look at his spectral hand. "Look, I'm touched that you all were so worried about me, really, I am. But I don't wanna dwell on it, and if I wanna move past it, I don't see why you all have to be so hung up on it. And I even managed to replace the arm." He looked back at Sally, who was looking at him in surprise. "I'm already over it, so can we just drop it?"

There were a few seconds where Sally just continued to stare towards him in surprise, completely silent. Eventually she sighed a bit and began to rub on one of her shoulders. "It's not so easy," she said. "We were all there and all we could do was watch as... as all that happened to you. It doesn't help that I feel partially responsible for you given you were, well... somewhat pushed into being a

Freedom Fighter." She looked down a bit. "It's not like we've never lost people before, but... well, seeing somebody we care about hurt like that still doesn't sit well."

Sorun exhaled through his nose and drummed his fingers across his thigh. "I get it, Sally, but I'm still the idiot that decided to go fight the thing," he told her. "Maybe if I was a Mobian like you guys and was a bit more physically apt I could have avoided getting messed up so much, but nothing to do about it." He lifted his hand up and rubbed at his head as he turned away. "Still, I... really do appreciate you all looking out for me like that. But I'm fine and I can't exactly regret saving everybody and getting them to the city. So just call it good already. Can't handle this kind of attention."

When he looked back at the others, much to his relief, they were all glancing towards each other with light smiles on their faces. He supposed that mean he'd said something right, which would hopefully make them worry less about him. Win for him as long as it got them to drop the subject about his injuries.

"I... suppose you're right," Sally finally said with a nod. "We're just glad you're alright."

Sorun clicked his tongue. "... Yeah."

"Still, uh... Sorun? Can we talk about some things?" The human turned back to Sonic, whose smile had dropped off his face. He was looking straight at Sorun, an unreadable expression on his face. "So, before you got there, Eggman, he, uh... I'm just gonna come out and say it, how come you never told any of us he tried tricking you into going over to his side?"

Sorun started a bit at the question. He could feel Sally's and Tails' eyes on him, too, in addition to Sonic's... ocular organ that may or may not have been a pair, Sorun still wasn't sure on that. He slowly breathed out as a result, sat back against the bed, and decided to just give them the truth.

"Didn't seem relevant, so I never brought it up," he said. "He seriously told you guys that?"

Sonic nodded. "Yeah. He... even said he offered to try and find you a way home."

"What do you want me to say, Sonic?" Sorun groaned out as he rubbed a hand over his face. "What, you woulda preferred I did switch sides?"

"No!" Sonic quickly exclaimed. He froze when Sorun turned his eye on him, causing him to sigh quietly and speak again in a calmer voice. "I was... just wondering what you were thinking is all."

"..." Sorun rolled his eye and brushed some of his dark hair out from his face. "The guy was an unpredictable, maniac scientist man and I didn't have a guarantee that he could actually get me something like that. And I make it a policy not to work with genocidal maniacs."

Sonic made an empty, dry chuckle. "What, is that a common policy back on Earth?"

"Eh, genocidal maniacs are more common there than you'd think, so yeah," Sorun truthfully stated, causing the three Mobians to stiffen up. "Look, I don't know, I... even though I was pretty against you guys back then I wasn't gonna do a total turn for a guy like *that* . You know I got higher standards'n that, man."

The answer seemed to just barely satisfy Sonic. He still held some air of discontent about him, though, from the way he looked so uneasy standing next to Sorun. "During that fight, you... you said a bunch. A lot of stuff I never really thought I'd hear you say. And you also said some stuff I... didn't like so much," Sonic said. "Sorun, why... why do you put yourself down so much? Calling yourself a loser and someone who's never made a right choice and all that stuff you said about yourself? I don't get it."

"Of all the things for him to pick up on..." Sorun thought with a sigh. He looked up towards the ceiling, away from Sonic, before answering. "I never really had all that much self-confidence. Woulda figured that'd be obvious by now," he said. "Geez, Sonic, look at me. I'm a terrible person. I run away from weddings and push people away from me. I ran away from everything that one time because I was so focused on my own problems I never even stopped to consider everyone else's problems." He reached up and ran a hand over his face. "Even back on Earth I was nothin' but some trash kid that never made any right choices. Just some loser that whittled his time away playin' video games while grindin' away at school with no real vision of the future. Someone with a loose group of friends and only one guy he could call an actual friend, no family but a single mom, but they're all on the other side of the multiverse so... ugh, I don't even know what I'm saying." Sorun looked back down at Sonic. "So yeah. I called myself a loser. 'S what I am, especially compared to all you guys. I only made it this far 'cause I lucked out with Earth biology and ate some magic rocks for super powers. Even then I'm nothin' without 'em. So what does that make me other than some random loser?"

"Nah."

It was an immediate response from Sonic, one which made Sorun blow out in exasperation. "'Nah' he says. I pour my heart out and all he says is 'nah'." Sorun affixed Sonic, still staring directly at him, with a tired look. "I'm not even surprised, that's the thing. But I gotta ask anyways. Why would you say that, Sonic?"

The blue hedgehog took a deep breath before speaking. "Sure, Sorun, you... I gotta be honest, I think you maybe make the wrong decision every now and again, but so does everybody else! No one's perfect, and I don't know anybody who can say every choice they made in their life was the right one. You just, well... make a couple more mistakes than the average person."

Sorun rolled his eye. "Failing to see your point here."

"Lemme finish," Sonic requested. "Yeah, you made some bad choices, but you always made up for 'em. You came back when you ran away, you apologized to people, you... you stopped looking for the Chaos Emeralds to come back to the wedding, didn't you?" he asked, making Sorun freeze a bit. "You made it sound like you wouldn't come back until you found them, but during that fight you only used the five powers, so..."

Sorun clicked his tongue and looked away. "Yeah, fine, I felt bad and came back to catch the back end of the wedding if I could. Some smarty-pants purple cat guy I found in the sticks fishing gave me a reality check and pointed out how dumb I was being. *Had* been beeing."

Sonic's eyes lit up in realization. "Oh, I think that's Big you're talking about. We know him."

"Yeah, Big! That was his name. Smart guy."

"Well, listen, Sorun... what's important is, you came back. And then you, you..." Sonic held a hand to his head after half-laughing in disbelief. "I mean, you went from the way you were when you left to dropping everything in an instant and pulling together some big plan with Nicole to rescue all us." Sonic reached over and tapped Sorun on his left shoulder. "And that fight! I didn't even know you could do half of the stuff you were doing there! What was- what was that big thing you did!? The thing with the circle and the- the weird lines everywhere!?"

"It's, uh... just a sword thing I can do," Sorun mumbled out in surprise at seeing the hedgehog's excitement. "Sonic, you-"

"And everything else you said to Eggman was really cool, too! Especially the heart thing you did!"

By now Sorun couldn't take it completely. He was forced to turn away from Sonic, face burning from embarrassment as he covered his face with his hand. "C'mon, man, forget the heart thing..."

"Nuh-uh! Never forgettin' that one!" Sonic said to him. He even went as far as to do the exact same pose while grinning at him widely- body leaning back and two thumbs pointing behind him. Embarrassing enough that Sorun couldn't help the small groan he made.

He wasn't sure why he decided to make the heart-shaped formation of Summoned Swords behind Sonic when he made the pose. A sudden, unexplainable urge to do a nice thing for him since he was going so far for him, perhaps. Or maybe it was just a knee-jerk reaction to make it once he saw Sonic made the pose. Whatever the reason, Sorun made the heart of blue swords behind the blue hedgehog. He also regretted doing it the second he'd done it, but there was no taking it back now.

Sonic had only noticed it either because Sally and Tails flinched a bit in surprise or he noticed some of the blue light reflecting off of the floor and walls. Either way he'd turned his head around just enough to see the heart. The regret Sorun had felt at making them made him dispel them almost as soon as Sonic saw them, but by then it was too late. He'd seen the heart.

Then he had to go and break out into mirthful laughter at it.

By now Sorun was practically burying his face in his hand. Sally and Tails had even joined in on the laughter. It was enough that eventually he tore his hand away from his face and whipped his head back towards Sonic.

"One. You get one. You get one of those and that was it," Sorun exclaimed, voice in a slightly high pitch from the embarrassment. "You get one and if anybody asks I never did it, do you hear me?"

"Ha ha ha! Ahhh, sure, Sorun." The laughter from all three Mobians had thankfully died down. Sonic had breathed out one last laugh and then leaned against the bed frame on Sorun's right side. "It's stuff like that and everything else you did during that fight, Sorun. All the cool stuff you did, the cool things you said, all of that. Like the way

you insulted Eggman right in his face, your whole speech thing about what you thought true strength was, that was really cool..." The enjoyment on his face dimmed a great bit as his voice went quieter. "You kept... getting hurt, kept losing body parts. I felt like I was gonna lose it every time I saw you get hurt like that. I just felt so helpless, y'know, stuck in that pod watching the whole thing going down without being able to do anything. We all were. And I was... really scared we were gonna lose you there." A humorless laugh left him. "But you kept acting like it wasn't even happening. You were more focused on making cool speeches than a lost arm."

"Yeah, well..." Sorun mumbled out, "I always said I had a high pain tolerance."

"Don't I know it," Sonic said. "You're just... way past cool doesn't even begin to describe it. You went through all that just to save us. You're just one of the coolest guys ever, period. That's what I think. But even cool guys like you make mistakes, so... can you do me a favor and not worry about it?" He gave Sorun a hopeful smile. "It's not like any of us do."

"I..." Sorun hesitated, unable to find the words. Forgiveness was one thing, but from the way Sonic was going he was making it sound like a whole other thing entirely from sheer effort alone. It was more than Sorun ever thought anybody here would go out of their way to give him. And he couldn't deny it felt nice, nor could he deny any of Sonic's words.

He also aware that the Sorun Sonic describing, at some level, was a fictional Sorun. The Sorun Sonic was describing sounded like some cool, unshakable Freedom Fighter with all the coolest moves and who was super strong. Who ignored any and all danger no matter how severe the threat if it meant saving people. An ideal hero. That's all Sorun heard when Sonic talked about him.

The real Sorun wasn't anything like that. He cared for them all and genuinely wanted to save their lives, sure. That was most of the reason he was bothering with all this. But the real Sorun was also

just somebody who stole all their powers from a video game. A liar. He wasn't brave. He just didn't care anymore since his life was practically forfeit anyways. He was able to ignore the lost body parts because he couldn't even feel it and because it didn't matter in the long run. It wasn't bravery. It was cold pragmatism and a lack of value on his own life.

Even so, there was some truth to what Sonic said. He did desire to correct his mistakes, and did want them all to live, even if he couldn't. So it was with a resigned sigh Sorun admitted, "Well... not like I was gonna leave you all hangin'. I care about you all too much."

"Say, branchin' offa that subject..." Sonic leaned in closer to Sorun, even going as far as to drape an arm over him as he gave the human a knowing grin. "You said something when Egghead showed up with his dumb suit. Pretty sure I heard a word startin' with an 'f'..."

"Musta misheard," Sorun immediately said. "Those pods looked pretty thick. Who knows how much the sound was distorted."

"I dunno, Sorun, sound was pretty clear to me. I'm almost positive I heard a word sounding like 'friend' tossed around..."

A deep sigh left Sorun. "You're seriously gonna make me say it, man?" He supposed there was no getting around it at this point, as much as he hated to admit it. So he took in a deep breath, and said it. "Fine, I admit it. I forgive you all. We're friends. Happy?"

Sonic's eyes brightened up to a uncomfortable degree. "You really mean it!?"

With a groan, Sorun shoved the hedgehog off of him. "Yeah, yeah, friends forever, now get off."

"Ha ha! Sure, buddy." Sonic thankfully obliged him and stepped back after Sorun pushed him away. He still had that blinding smile on his face, though. "I'm real happy you finally went and said it, Sorun."

"I'm gonna take it back if you don't drop it already," Sorun snapped at him.

"Nope, too late. No takin' that one back." Sonic hopped back towards the end of the bed with the other two Mobians, lightly laughing all the while. "You're stuck with us forever now."

"Yeah, for however long that lasts." Sorun scooted a bit forwards on the bed and turned his body so his feet was hanging off. He hopped off the bed afterwards, though he stumbled a bit after standing up on his feet and was forced to grab at the bed frame for support. His vision had begun swimming and he'd been hit with a strong sense of vertigo the moment he'd stood up.

He saw some movement from the corner of his eye, and turned his head to see the three Mobians directly. They'd all at once almost made to move towards him, though the three stopped when they saw he'd managed to steady himself. They still had worried expressions on their faces, though, and he felt a sense of annoyance begin to bubble up in him. Touched annoyance, but still annoyance.

"Sorun," Sally spoke up, "I'm not sure you should be moving around-
"

"Ah, there's a lotta things I shouldn't do but still do," Sorun interrupted with a wave of his spectral hand. "So besides you guys is anybody else coming to visit?"

Sally, still looking a bit wary at how carefree Sorun acted, slowly nodded at him. "Knuckles and the rest of the Chaotix said they wanted to come by and check on you."

"Rotor wanted to come, but... he couldn't," Tails added, looking a bit downcast all of a sudden. "His back got hurt real bad during the fight in Knothole. The doctors say he's fine, but, well, he's not really moving around like he used to."

Sorun noticeably flinched a bit. He hadn't known somebody had been hurt that bad in the raid. Or somebody he knew, at that. The relief he felt at hearing he was doing generally well was overshadowed by the anger he felt. Another grievance to add to all the others.

"Yeah, he took a nasty hit. Doin' better, though," Sonic stated. "Besides that I know Rouge called Shadow and told him everything that happened. He said he's coming right over here the moment he gets some time off at G.U.N. to see you."

Sorun found himself blinking in surprise as he turned to Sonic. "Is that so?" he asked.

"Mhm," he confirmed with a nod. "Dunno how you got so buddy-buddy with that guy."

"I mean, he's really not that bad when you get to know him. You could *try* to get along with him, Sonic."

"Ha! It's not like he makes it easier for me. I'd put more effort into it if he'd just admit he's the faker already and not me."

"So it really does go both ways, huh...?"

A knock on the door cut Sorun off and drew his attention towards the door, as well as everyone else's attention. Nobody had even spoken a word before the door finally opened up and a head poked through.

"Errr, pardon moi? I was hearing voices beyond ze door and thinked-" The speaker, whom Sorun immediately identified as Antoine, stopped himself when he briefly scanned the room and saw Sorun standing there along with the other Mobians already in the room. "O-oh, Sorun," he stuttered out, "you... you are being awake."

"I'm 'being' a lot of things, Antoine." Sorun couldn't even find it in himself to look directly at the coyote; the guilt from having flaked his wedding was still too strong in him. So he'd turned his head away

enough that he didn't have to look at the Mobian in the doorway and then spoke again. "Bunnie there with you?"

He didn't get a verbal answer. What he did get was the sound of the door opening up all the way, and Sorun only needed to take a quick glance up to confirm that the cyborg rabbit was, in fact, standing there behind him. He couldn't bite back the large sigh that left him from just being in their presence.

"I never even thought about how I'm supposed to apologize to them for what I did. I mean, fuck, the wedding got ruined anyway but..." But he'd still chosen to not go to their wedding when everybody else had. Sorun couldn't even say for certain if the results of that had been good or not; what he did resulted in saving everybody but him getting hurt. Maybe if he'd stayed things would have went differently. Possibly better. Or worse. Sorun tried not to dwell on what-ifs like that and instead focused on appreciating how well it'd gone at the end of the day, but to him, none of that erased what he'd done. He wanted to think that him changing his mind at the last second and trying to come back or him saving everyone the way he did made up for it, but he didn't know if they'd see it that way.

"... Eh, I'm already kinda going all-out here anyways." It was with a low whine in the back of Sorun's throat that he straightened up and rolled his head towards Antoine and Bunnie, who by now had both stepped into the room. *"Screw it. I got it comin' anyways."*

And so, with his mind made up, Sorun Tricked into a position so that he was sitting on his knees right in front of the married couple with his head bowed down. They'd both jumped a bit in surprise at what he did, and then proceeded to stare down at him with wide eyes as he began to speak.

"I'm super sorry, you guys," Sorun said in an apologetic tone. "I... screwed up and missed out on your wedding just because I thought I bunch of stupid mystical crystals were more important than seeing two of my friends get married. And granted, it... kind of worked out really well since it lead to, you know-" he briefly rose his spectral

arm, "- this happening an' me savin' everyone, but I don't think that's a very good excuse. I know an apology doesn't really cut it considering what I did, but-"

"Oh, goodness' grief, cut it out and stand up, mon ami."

The words spoken by Antoine caused Sorun to freeze in confusion. He was even more confused when he felt a pair of arms grip him and lift him up to his feet. He was greeted to a sight of both Antoine and Bunnie looking at him with some strange expressions halfway between amused and bemused. Despite that, they were both grinning at him.

He didn't get it.

"You're... you're seriously not mad?" Sorun asked, voice quiet and disbelieving.

Bunnie sighed at the question, shaking her head while also brushing a blonde lock to the side. "Sorun, hon, we can't exactly hold any ill will towards the feller that put his life on the line tah save the whole city, now, can we?"

"B-but the wedding-"

"Non, non, we are not wanting to hear any more about ze wedding," Antoine interrupted with a shake of his head. "Eet iz bad enough zose two demented maniacs had to go and ruin it and our dear home. I do not weesh to have heard you being upsetted." He stopped to allow Sorun a chance to speak, though the human found that he didn't have the words to respond to anything Antoine had said. This caused the coyote to roll his eyes and place a hand on Sorun's shoulder. "I will not pretended to understand why you did not go, Sorun, but, well, I am... I really am being the doubting one when I think of you getting on your knees to apologize to moi and mi amor."

A quiet, dry chuckle left Sorun. "Well... it's for when I made a really bad mistake. And you just happen to be two of the only people in the

world I'd go that far for," he admitted to them. "You're seriously just gonna forgive me? Just like that?"

"We ain't exactly the type to be holdin' grudges, now," Bunnie told him. "Ah think ya already made it up plenty with what ya pulled back in New Megaopolis. 'Sides..." She trailed off, looking down at Sorun's arm. "You, um... Ah think ya've lost enough without needin' tah lose a couple friends, too. An' I don't wanna be hearin' anymore about it, y'hear?"

"I could not 'ave said eet better myself," Antoine said.

Sorun was still driven speechless. Even after all this time, when he'd got to a point where he almost expected this saint-like benevolence from these people, it still shocked him to no end when they actually accepted an apology for the things he'd done. That they were so easy to just forgive and forget like that. He couldn't help but rub his face with his hand in a poor attempt to hide his grin. Especially when they kept smiling at him like that.

"Alright, fine. We'll call it good since you guys won't leave it alone otherwise." He was forced to look away from them when he realized the grin on his face wasn't going away. "Thanks, guys. You're all too good."

"Don't mention it none, Sorun." Bunnie looked down at Sorun's arm again and pointed at it with her cybernetic hand. "Say, since we're on the subject, what do you plan on doin' with, y'know..."

"Oh, this?" Sorun took a few steps back and lifted his spectral arm up. "Well, the doc offered to get me a neato cyber-arm, but I'm not gonna lie I kinda dig this one already so I don't think-"

"SORUN!"

There probably wasn't anything on the whole planet that could have prepared Sorun when a black and yellow missile crashed right into him hard enough that he was almost sent onto his back right there.

How he managed to stay upright was a mystery even to Sorun. Not so much as a mystery was what slammed into him to begin with and was currently hanging off his neck with their arms wrapped around his neck. He only knew two bees, after all.

Just 'cause he knew him, though, didn't mean Sorun really appreciated being hung off of like this.

"Charmy...!" Sorun hissed out, reaching up to try and pry the bee Mobian off of him. Unfortunately, he held firm. "Charmy, c'mon-!"

"Why didn't you tell us you were awake, you big dummy!" Large, exaggerated tears were practically flying out from his eyes as he cried right onto Sorun's bare, bandage-wrapped chest. "You know how worried we all were when you wouldn't wake up!? You made us wait for days!"

"Man, come on, seriously!" Sorun's tugs became more frantic when he noticed five pairs of eyes fall on him. He couldn't recall the last time he felt so embarrassed when he registered the five amused smiles everyone was giving them. "I swear if you don't get off right now-!"

"Oh, come on, Sorun, give him a break." The human groaned out loud when he recognized the voice and looked up towards the doorway. He wasn't at all surprised to see Knuckles there. Or the rest of the Chaotix right behind him that were currently crowding into the room. The warm grins on all their faces weren't lost on him, either, and unfortunately, he'd reached his limit on warm grins for the day. "It's your fault for scaring us so much anyways."

"I will hit you if you do not get him to release me," Sorun growled out, still trying in vain to pry Charmy off of him. *"Thought I told Nicole I didn't wanna deal with so many people at once...!"*

"Yeah, lighten up!" A strong, green-scaled arm draped over his neck, locking Sorun in place. Sorun could have sworn he felt a grinding noise in his head as his eye slowly swiveled up to Vector. Bastard

had a knowing look in his eyes along with the grin the crocodile wore. "Ya can't seriously say you're gonna try and worm your way outta here before we get a chance to catch up, are ya?"

Another arm from Sorun's other side draped over his neck, overlapping with Vector's. There was enough strength pressing down on him that Sorun couldn't even move if he wanted to. He knew from that alone it was Mighty's arm, and the voice alone was enough to confirm it definitively. "Gotta say I agree with him, Sorun," he said, and the mischievous tone in his voice was clear to Sorun's ear. "'Sides, you're still wounded, ain'tcha? Ya shouldn't go strain yourself on our behalf."

Gritting his teeth in indignation, Sorun turned his head forwards. He saw Espio there. Leaning against a wall and examining a shuriken in his hand, acting like he was ignoring the entire thing. He may have been stone-faced and lacked any and all amusement in his features, but Sorun knew he wasn't dense enough to not read the room.

But, when he sent the chameleon a pleading look, he'd just shook his head at Sorun.

"You know as well as I do any attempt to escape from them would be futile," he said. A small smirk played on his mouth. "And you'll have to think again if you think I'd let you leave here without us all thanking you for saving Charmy from what Robotnik tried to subject him to."

Biting back his growing insults, Sorun took another quick glance around. Knuckles was wearing the same grin as they were. So were Julie-Su, Ray, and Saffron. And everybody else, of course. Even with the ability to teleport he doubted he'd be able to get away, and even if he did Dr. Quack would probably just yell at him for being so active. So, with a deep sigh, he finally gave up and let his arms fall away from Charmy to hang limply down his sides.

"I think all my friends are a bit too good..."

A/N- RIP in pepperoni gum wrapper.

Chapter 46

Recursion Error

Episode 46- And now revolution, apparently

"~Black night, dark sky, hm hm-hm hm-mmm~"

Life at the hospital was boring. The good technically brand-new Tommy Turtle Memorial Hospital. Sorun didn't really know where that name came from, just that Nicole picked it out. He did, somewhere in the back of his memory, recall Rotor mentioning someone named Tommy once, when Sorun mentioned a turtle. His best guess was that he was someone the Freedom Fighters knew that died. He chose to refrain from ever asking out of respect seeing as he figured the dots he connected painted a good enough story. If not that, then the small statue of the guy out in front of the hospital said enough.

He guessed he really wouldn't be the first guy they knew that would die on them.

Thinking of Rotor now made Sorun quietly scoff and turn away from the window he was staring at while humming a song out. He got to leave the hospital today from what he heard. Sorun was still stuck here until Dr. Quack said he could leave. And while it wasn't like he was bored to tears since he often got visitors, at the same time, being stuck in a white room with absolutely no entertainment was leaving his mind dull.

He wanted his Chao to keep him company. Or to at least alleviate this boredom. He didn't exactly want to spend the last of his days wanting to bash his head against the wall.

He'd asked around. Virgil had been there with everybody else during the whole Egg Grape incident. From what he was told, they'd found

somebody to look after the Chao until Sorun was well again, a mother and daughter pair that apparently arrived in Knothole a mere two days after it came to be. Sorun didn't know the details. Apparently Amy did, though, since she was the one that brought them here, but that was all he knew. He supposed he'd ask when she showed up to take him to where they and Virgil were later on.

Hope he hadn't given his temporary caretakers too hard a time.

A knock on the door drew Sorun's attention away from the window.

"Amy? That you?" He stumbled a bit when he distanced himself from the window, but soon after Sorun managed to right himself as he walked towards the door. "'Bout time," he said as he grasped the door handle and opened the door. "I'm going insane cooped up here, so can we-"

He cut himself off when he saw that the person on the other side of the door was not Amy. In fact, he didn't rightly know who the person standing in front of him was. A light brown fox Mobian that had on the same blue and red jacket that Antoine and some other members of the royal forces wore. He had an eyepatch, too, just like the one Sorun currently wore. Only his was on the left eye. An light blue eye that looked rather curious as it eyed Sorun.

"..." Sorun stared at the stranger for approximately one second and then reached his hand out in the hallway to point to the left. "Wrong room, dude."

"Actually, I'm quite certain this is the right one." Right when Sorun moved to close the door the Mobian stuck his hand out to halt him. "Your name is Sorun, right?"

Breathing through his nose lightly, Sorun opened the door back up and stared the Mobian in the eye. "I'm literally the only human in this city with a blue demon arm. I'm probably the only human on the whole continent. I know for a fact everybody that lived in Knothole

was there in the thunderdome along with me and Eggman during that whole mess. You know who I am, man. What do you want?"

Whether the Mobian was at all taken back by Sorun's bluntness or not wasn't clear, but either way Sorun didn't find himself caring all that much. He didn't have the patience right now to deal with it, and he was expecting somebody. The only reason he hadn't slammed the door in the guy's face to begin with was because he wanted to be polite, but even now he felt that urge beginning to wane.

Fortunately, the Mobian seemed to get the point and cleared his throat. "May I come in to speak with you?"

Had he not asked so nicely, Sorun would have said no. Alas, he did, and Sorun felt himself compelled to respect his niceties by opening the door further. "I guess. Just please make it quick. I got plans."

The one-eyed fox nodded, and stepped into the room. Sorun closed the door behind him, remaining in place and staring at the door handle while wondering what was going on before sighing and turning towards the fox.

"So," he began, "these things usually start out with an introduction, right? You know who I am. What's your name?"

Sorun found it hard to get a read on the fox as he turned towards him. He kept his hands folded behind his back at all times, and he had a kind of... steely expression. Something that mostly just went to confuse Sorun as he stared at his eyepatch-covered face while nervously standing towards the door waiting for a response.

"My name," the fox said in an even tone, "is Amadeus Prower. General in the royal forces. I believe you know my son?"

The pale teen scratched his chin in thought. "Prow- oh!" He snapped his fingers in recognition and pointed at the other male. "You're Tails' dad? Yeah, I know him. He kidnapped me."

There was a noticeable flinch in Amadeus' form when Sorun's words registered with him. "I, uh... was made aware by him of your circumstances. I've actually been meaning to talk to you for some time now regarding-"

A short laugh from Sorun cut him off, causing him to regard the teen with an odd glare. "Don't sweat it, man, I'm kiddin' around. We're cool," he said. "If you really wanted to talk about that, though," he added, "you sure did wait a long time to get to it. I've been here for months, man."

"Yes, well... I've been busy." Amadeus briefly rose one of his hands to awkwardly cough into it before folding it back behind his back. "I'm glad to hear you hold no ill will towards him, though. He tries not to let it show, but I'd be a poor father if I didn't notice something had been eating at him for some time now. But, lately, he seems to have been put at ease. I suppose I have you to thank for that, along with, well, securing the safety of the entirety of the Kingdom of Acorn." His eye glanced up at Sorun's own eyepatch, and then down to his spectral arm. "You have my respect for everything you've done, and my thanks for saving my family along with everybody else."

There was a strong urge for Sorun to scoff and act flippant towards the fox's respects, but they sounded genuine. And it was hard to turn those down when they came from somebody who lost an eye like he had. So he made a simple "Mm" and nodded at him, and then asked, "Well, thanks, Amadeus, that means a lot, but I'm assuming you coming all the way here to say that wasn't the only thing you wanted to say? I mean it'd be really nice of you if that was, but..."

"No, you're right. There was one other matter." Without another word Amadeus turned towards the window and walked towards it. He stopped right in front of the window, choosing to remain completely still as he stared out at it. This continued on for tens of seconds, during which Sorun just awkwardly stood behind him while shuffling his feet, unsure of what to do. It carried on long enough that Sorun opened his mouth to say something, but right before he could

Amadeus spoke up again. "What do you see when you look out this window, Sorun?"

The Earthling closed his mouth and thought on the question while quirking an eyebrow at the fox. "Er... a city?" he tried. "A really nice-looking city."

"Yes, true, but what do you see beyond that?"

"Nanites? I don't kn- man, where are you going with this?"

Sighing, Amadeus turned his head halfway so that his eye met Sorun's. "Let me rephrase," he tried. "What do you think of the kingdom's government?"

"The monarchy?" Sorun asked. He reached his blue hand behind his head to scratch at it in thought. "I mean, it's... it's fine, I guess. Elias keeps things together well enough. City's not on fire, so that's good for him."

A scoff left the fox. "That's apt of you to say," he said, now fully turning around to meet Sorun. "Also apt of you to mention how it's a monarchy."

"'Cause it is...?" Sorun blinked and shook his head. "W-where are you going with this?"

Amadeus didn't answer immediately. What he did was turn his head to look out the window again, his body still pointed at Sorun. "Did my son Miles ever tell you of what befell me and my wife?"

"Uh... something about you being stuck in space until Sonic and Tails brought you back." He wasn't that privy to the details. He thought he remembered Tails explaining to him once. He also vaguely recalled blanking out for most of the story because of how ridiculous it sounded and because he'd had his mind on other things at the time. Something about them being stuck in space with a colony of aliens.

He forgot how that even happened in the first place. Or if Tails even told him.

Probably should have paid better attention in hindsight.

"It was an interesting government they ran up there, the Bem," Amadeus stated as he looked back at Sorun, who could have sworn he'd heard that name from somewhere before. "Did you know they ran a republic there?"

"No? Good for them I guess?" Sorun heavily blinked and ran a hand through his hair. "Is there a point to any of this?"

"My point is that my experience in an alien colony showed me a far more efficient form of government than what is currently operating in this city. When I came back to my true home in the Kingdom of Acorn all I saw around me were deficiencies in the system."

"The hell's this guy going on about?"

"Do you truly think that the current system of government is the correct one we should be operating under?" Amadeus asked Sorun. "One who has had a singular family line rule it for generations? One that landed us in a war with the Overlanders? One that was foolish enough to let it get completely overthrown and had the world thrown in chaos by giving a singular Overlander and his nephew a high position of power? One that was defragmented enough it was forced to allow children such as yourself to pick up the pieces and rebuild the kingdom back up from a small village hidden in the forest? A kingdom that is now currently ruled by a king that has no prior experience ruling and is only in his position *solely* because of a birthright?"

... As far as Sorun was concerned he had a lot of valid points, most of which he couldn't refute. "Well, uh... yeah, admittedly that does all sound pretty bad, but so far things with Elias has been going good."

"Yes, so far, but I'm not one to let things remain as they are because things have been well *so far* ." Amadeus took in a deep breath before speaking again. "I'm vying for a change with the system of government."

"Okay, alright, time out." Sorun held up a hand to stop the Mobian from speaking. He shook his head in disbelief for a few moments, and then refocused on him before he began talking. "So what you're saying... is that you're trying to start a revolution?"

"Yes, essentially."

"You fucking kidding me?" The sudden use of harsh language sent Amadeus reeling back a bit in shock. Sorun, meanwhile, continued to speak in the same breath as his eye narrowed at the brown-haired fox. "It's barely been over a week since Knothole got obliterated. A week! A week since that disaster and you decide that's what the people need right now? Civil upheaval? The fuck's going through your head?"

"It's because we're all safe from Robotnik thanks to the city's defenses that now is precisely a perfect time to do this!" The fox argued at him in a raised voice. "Without having that madman looming over our shoulders we can focus on fixing a system that's held us back, a system whose negligence is in part responsible for Knothole being lost in the first place!" He paused, eye narrowing a bit when he saw Sorun groan and rub at the bridge of his nose. "I'm not alone in this, you know," he told the human. "Half of the city's population is in agreement with me on this subject."

The statement made Sorun freeze up a bit in surprise. He slowly lowered his hand, and then looked towards Amadeus' face. He seemed to be truthful, which only went to go and make him even more surprised. "Seriously? You got half the city in on this?"

"Not everybody has been completely content with how things have been run for some time now," he informed the human. "They're scared. Scared now more than ever with the loss of Knothole. They

want change. But change isn't exactly going to happen when the all the power in the kingdom is held in the hand of one man." He took a single step towards Sorun, and the sharp look he'd been giving the human softened a bit. "You really don't think there's an issue with that? One man holding all the power of the government? A man who gets to choose whether or not he has to listen to the people's wishes? Somebody who probably doesn't even know what he's doing compared to some of the citizens he's responsible for?"

A pale hand being rose up stopped the fox from speaking once again. He respectfully obliged, allowing Sorun to think to himself as the fox patiently waited. *"I mean, he's not wrong. Monarchy ain't exactly the best government system to be rocking. There's a reason it kinda fell completely on the wayside back on Earth. And if half the people agree with him... shit, but Elias has been doing really good so far. For the most part, at least. Decent. He's been decent."* He made a small sigh and looked away. *"Then again, he's not really that enthusiastic about the job. Told me himself he doesn't think he's a good fit for it, but because of the whole monarchy lineage thing he's kinda stuck with it. And yeah, there's probably people with actual experience running things that'd do a better job than-"* Sorun shook his head to interrupt his own thoughts. *"Why am I even thinking about this? I'm not even a citizen here, and I'm dying soon anyways. It ain't my problem."*

It wasn't as if government was his forte anyways. Far from it. And at the end of the day, this didn't really affect him, and quite honestly... he didn't care all that much. And the last thing he wanted to do was get in bed with what was apparently a revolution. He had better things to do. Like go die.

Still, there was one question gnawing at Sorun from all this. "What does all this have to do with me?" Sorun asked him. "Why did you bother to come all this way just to tell me this?"

"Well... I was hoping you'd join in with us on the protest."

A dry, humorless laugh left Sorun as he buried his face in his hand. "Oh, now I know you're messing with me..."

"I speak the truth," Amadeus stated. "You're, well... something of a local hero due to recent events. The one who singlehandedly confront Dr. Robotnik to save a kingdom of people who wasn't even the same species as him at the risk of his own life."

"You're gonna bring race into this now?"

"What I'm saying," the Mobian rephrased, "is that people deeply respect you for what you sacrificed, and if somebody like you was with us then our voice would be heard all that much clearer."

In other words Sorun had a lot of credibility 'cause he almost died saving everybody's lives, and if he was in on this it'd turn a lot more heads. Amadeus wanted to use him to gain more clout. It's how Sorun saw it, and the pale Earthling honestly couldn't say he appreciated the sentiment all that much. He couldn't rightly blame the fox for trying this, either, but he still didn't like it.

Because of this reasoning, his answer was immediate. "Yeah, I don't wanna do that. Sign me out."

Sorun's answer seemed to have the effect of stunning Amadeus a bit. His body had flinched, and his eye had blinked in surprise as he eyed the human with an unsure expression. "You're saying no?"

"Listen, Tails' dad-"

"Amadeus."

"Tails' dad, listen," Sorun reiterated, causing the fox standing across from him to grow a bit annoyed. "I can't say I really like the idea of you trying to use your son's friend for political gain. Don't feel like protesting with a guy who rolls like that. More importantly, though, I just don't want any part of this. It doesn't have anything to do with me." He turned to the side and then began walking towards his bed.

"That said," he continued, "I'm not exactly opposed to what you're doing, either."

"You're... not?" Amadeus asked, voice hesitant as he watched Sorun sit down on the bed. "Why not?"

Sighing through his nose, Sorun craned his head up at the ceiling. "Look, most of the countries in the world where I'm from switched to various republic and democratic governments. Hell, my own country America did the same thing. so I get where you're coming from," he explained. Amadeus perked up just the slightest bit and made to speak up again, but Sorun stopped him by raising a hand. "But listen, don't think switching the government to a republic system's gonna solve all you're problems. It's got its own issues, saw it all the time in America. Bureaucracy's slow as shit when it comes to changing and adding laws and the senatorial in-fighting's a nightmare, among other problems. But, otherwise... I guess it kinda worked for the most part. No government's perfect." He kicked his feet out onto the floor, crossed his arms, and turned his head away. "And far be it for me to interfere with the people's wishes. Ability to protest's a basic right. I ain't gonna interfere with that. So if you wanna round up half the town and go protest at the castle, then go ahead. I'm not with ya, but I ain't goin' against ya, either."

Sorun's words hung in the air for a few moments after he finished speaking. Amadeus continued to silently regarded Sorun, and then finally let out a resigned sigh as he slumped his shoulders a bit. "I... suppose that alone is more than I should have asked for. I apologize if I made it seem my intentions were less than pure. I merely want what's best for the people living here."

"Yeah, I know. Now get out of my room."

The fox didn't even hesitate in turning towards the door. Sorun had turned his head just slightly so his eye could watch the fox cross the room, and it was only when he'd opened the door halfway did he speak again. "One more thing."

Amadeus paused, hand still on the door's handle as he looked to Sorun. "Yes?"

"It is a peaceful protest you're planning here, right?" the human asked him. "Just a big rally where you all yell at the king? That it?"

"That is what my wife and I indeed planned, yes."

"Good. That's good." Sorun glanced towards the window. "'Cause I'm all for peaceful protest. Emphasis on the word 'peaceful'." He looked back at the fox. "I don't care what you people do as long as nobody gets hurt. If somebody does get hurt, though, or if even so much as a brick gets tossed through a window... then I don't care what your intentions are. I'll tear my way out of this hospital and drag you back here with me." He nodded his head towards the IV pole next to him. "Specifically I'll take that IV pole right there and break it across your face. Them's street rules. But that's only if things get a tad bit too rowdy. You understand."

The threat loomed in the air between them for a solid ten seconds. A legitimate threat, too, seeing as Sorun knew Amadeus knew Sorun could do it if he wanted to. He'd seen the fight, after all. And Sorun fully intended on fulfilling that promise if things really did turn violent, regardless of whose father Amadeus was. The Mobian himself stiffened up at the threat, while Sorun merely continued to stare at him with a half-bored, half-relaxed expression, going as far as to drum his spectral claws along his real flesh-and-blood arm.

"... Don't use that course language around my son." Amadeus stepped through the opened door. "Have a good rest of your day. And get well soon."

The door closed behind him a bit harder than it ought to have as Amadeus left. Sorun simply breathed outwards as he relaxed his body and looked back towards the window.

"I swear, the whole Prower family is out to kill me from stress alone. Merlin, Amadeus, Tails, I'm just waiting for his mom to get a shot at

screwing me over. Huh. Miles 'Tails' Prower. Miles Prower. Ower, hour, miles per hour- OH GODDAMMIT-!"

It was official. This was the most humiliation Sorun had ever endured. Nothing topped this. It was the pinnacle. The summit of embarrassment. He couldn't stand it.

"Amy, please let me get out of the chair."

"Nope. Doctor's orders."

That was the summation of why he was sitting in a wheelchair being pushed around by Amy.

Granted, it was... somewhat relaxing, being pushed around the city's streets by the pink hedgehog. Nicole really had done a fantastic job designing the place from how immaculate it looked. How all the bushes and trees everywhere mixing and intertwining with the artificial architecture made the place look hyper-modern and at the same time natural and almost fit in with nature. It was nice. Homey. And admittedly it was very soothing being able to take in the sights as he was wheeled around.

Didn't stop him from hating being so restricted.

"So how are you doing, Sorun?" Amy kindly asked as he was gently pushed down a sidewalk by Amy. "I'm sorry if things have been a bit lonely in the hospital. We've all been a little busy reorganizing and getting used to things since we all moved here, and that's been a really big adjustment. I know Knuckles had to back to Angel Island yesterday to check up on things up there and for me personally it's been an utter struggle getting everything in my new home organized-" She cut herself off with a bit of a guilty chuckle. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to go on like that. You're feeling okay, right?"

"I've been good," he answered, eyelid twitching a bit as Sorun kept his head forwards. "So... what's the deal with these new people? And

why did you give my Chao to them?"

"Oh, well, about that..." Amy made another chuckle, this one more nervous. "Virgil, um... he kind of just does what he wants. None of us could really keep him in our homes since he kept getting out and, well, nobody wanted to try and, you know, grab him." She made a soured face and turned to the side as she continued to push the wheelchair. "Your pet's kind of nasty, you know."

"You couldn't have just put him in one of the server rooms or something so Nicole could keep an eye on him?" Sorun asked. "He actually listens to her. Sometimes more than me."

"She said she was too busy," she answered with a shake of her head. "While we were trying to figure that out I had to go all the way to the Southern Baronies because we got a distress call. A mother and her daughter who had their home next to a Chao Garden all destroyed by you-know-who's nephew."

"Oh, yeah, Mr. I'm-Gonna-Cut-His-Head-Off-Next-Time-I-See-Him-'Cause-I-Don't-Gotta-Worry-About-Eggman-Bombing-The-City-Anymore." Sorun made an affirmative sound. "What was he doing harassing some random folks?"

Amy made an annoyed scoff. "Chao have a bit of Chaos energy in them and we guess he assumed the readings he got from the Chao Garden were a Chaos Emerald or Power Rings or something. He's made the same mistake before according to Sonic. Then he went and destroyed the place anyways, and the family's home along with it," she continued with a small sigh. "I saved the family and all their Chao but their homes were gone. I had to let them stay at my house until Nicole built them a new one, and I had to convince her to make a Chao Garden in the park where she put the artificial Lake of Rings she made. So the important thing is they're all fine."

"Okay... but why'd you give my Chao to them?"

"Because nobody else wanted to watch him and one of the people I saved, Cream, is really good with Chao. She even has some of her own and managed the Chao Garden she used to live next to; she's got a lot of experience. So I decided to just hand him off to her until you got better."

"Ah-huh." The sidewalks began to disappear as they entered into the park area of the city. With a small frown, Sorun craned his head around to face Amy. "It kinda just sounds like you foisted Virgil onto some random stranger just 'cause you didn't wanna look after him."

"He ripped one of my dresses, Sorun! I don't have many of those left since most of my stuff got lost in Knothole!"

Sorun's head flinched back a bit when Amy all but screeched that at him. He made a single sigh, and then faced back forwards while sagging in the wheelchair. "Alright, fair enough," he mumbled out as Amy resumed pushing him. "So this girl, er, Cream and- what was her mother's name again?"

"Vanilla."

"We're onto food now?" Sorun made an exasperated noise, shook his head, and asked, "So how is she with Virgil?" The last thing he wanted to hear was that his pet Chao had acted untoward a little girl that had been looking after him. He didn't even know if he should expect such a miracle like him behaving since Amy had went and dumped him with a complete stranger. Of course, the last thing he expected was for the Chao to do something seriously bad like accidentally poke a hole in the girl by mistake with one of his bladed arms, he wasn't that vicious, but then again he liked cutting Sonic at every available opportunity. Even so Sorun was fairly certain he only did it because he knew he couldn't actually physically harm the hedgehog.

At least that's what Sorun thought.

"I don't know," Amy said in answer to Sorun's previous question. "I've been so preoccupied I haven't really checked up on the both of them since they moved out of my home. But I'm sure everything's fine with-"

"No Mr. Virgil! No! Bad Chao!"

"Oh dear."

The part of the park Amy had wheeled Sorun onto looked relatively like a Chao Garden. Lots of grass, some trees here and there, a big pond in the middle surrounded by a bunch of Chao. All the same, default-looking blue and yellow things Virgil *used* to look like before he got his own form. And mostly they were all meandering about and minding their own business.

A disturbance towards the end of the Chao Garden was what drew Sorun's attention. There were two figures wholly different from the Chao all around, one Sorun recognized, and one Sorun didn't. The one he did recognize was Virgil's blue and black form, sitting up on a branch of a tall tree and looking down at the second figure, whom Sorun didn't recognize. A small, cream-colored rabbit Mobian in a white and orange dress.

"Alright, so... that's gotta be the Cream girl Amy mentioned." With a sigh, Sorun looked back up at Virgil. *"Why's he gotta go and terrorize children while I'm not looking?"*

The rabbit girl was reaching up towards the branch Virgil was sitting on while trying to hop up to him, but she was about ten feet too short for that. When Sorun looked closer he noted that there was something hooked on one of the blades on Virgil's arm. A small red bowtie. And he was also scowling down at the Mobian kid.

"Ugh, for the..." With a small groan, Sorun sat up off the wheelchair. "I'm gonna go deal with that."

"Are you okay to move?" Sorun paused and turned around at Amy, who was giving him a worried expression. "The doctor said-"

"Doctor, shmocter," he interrupted. "Amy, c'mon, I don't want the kid or Virgil to see me in a wheelchair and it'll only take me five minutes. Just give me this."

She looked ready to argue with him, but when he sent her a pleading look, Amy held her tongue. She looked towards the rabbit child in the distance, back to Sorun, and then made a small sigh as she shook her head. "Five minutes, and then as soon as we're out of sight it's back in the chair, mister," she said. "I don't need somebody yelling at me because I let you move around so much."

"Thanks Amy you're the best." Sorun flashed her a quick thumbs-up, to which she made a small groan and shook her head, seemingly already regretting her decision. Sorun ignored it and turned towards the distressed child and Chao, humming slightly as he thought on what to do.

"Could just walk up to them. In truth, though, just standing up on my own's kinda exhausting as it is. Could just teleport there... but I don't wanna freak the kid out." After deliberating with himself for a few moments, Sorun finally shrugged his shoulders and made up his mind. *"Eh, Mobians're tough. She can handle the shock."*

And so, his decision made clear, he Tricked right behind the rabbit girl that was shorter than even he was and appeared in a small crouch. She didn't register his sudden appearance, it seemed, though she did freeze completely when Sorun reached out and placed his right hand on top of her head between her large ears.

"Yo, kid. I want my Chao back."

The child continued to remain frozen even after Sorun finished speaking. He blinked a bit in confusion and removed his hand, still staring towards her even as she continued to stand in place. He started to worry he'd scared her too much, but finally she seemed to

regain her senses and slowly, almost painfully so, turned around towards Sorun.

"H-hello...?" Her high voice came out as small and meek as she finally turned to meet Sorun's blue eye with her own brown ones. She'd made a small "Eep!" noise the second she registered Sorun's appearance, and then took a step back with widened eyes as she covered her mouth with her hands, eyes still affixed to him.

Sorun, in response, made a small hum and tilted his head. It almost looked like the child was afraid of him in some way from the way she was just standing there and staring at him with that wide-eyed expression. She was even shaking lightly. He wondered why until he looked down at himself, and then clicked his tongue in realization.

She was a child from outside of Knothole and this city. She probably had never even seen somebody like him before. Some weird, pale person in a black t-shirt and blue pants. The demonic-looking blue, spectral Bringer Claw replacing his arm and the eyepatch over his right eye probably didn't help his appearance, either. Or the way he'd just suddenly appeared behind her like he had.

He was probably downright terrifying from her perspective.

"Okay, maybe I could have approached this a bit more tactfully." Mentally kicking himself, Sorun stood up, placing his hands in his pockets, and tilted his head back straight. "Er... hi. Lemme try that again," he requested. "I'm Sorun. You're Cream, right? The person looking over my Chao Virgil?" He nodded up the tree. "That Chao up there?"

"S-Sorun...?" The name seemed to register with her, as he saw a bit of recognition flash in her eyes. The hands slowly lowered from her mouth, and she appeared to become much more relaxed. "Oh, you're Ms. Amy's friend!" she realized, her previous fear all but evaporating. She'd brightened up so quickly to him, in fact, that Sorun himself was slightly startled from how fast her demeanor had

changed. "She told me you were hurt and couldn't look after your Chao. She seemed really worried about you."

"Er, yeah. Lotta... lotta people were worried." Sorun removed his left hand from his pocket and nervously scratched the back of his head while turning away. "So, Cream..." he continued as he looked back down at her, "what's the problem with little ol' Virgil?"

"Oh, Virgil..." Her demeanor shifted again, this time into a slightly displeased one. "Mr. Virgil's being very mean right now. He stole poor Cheese's bowtie and won't give it back!"

"..." Sorun tilted his head to the other side. "An' Cheese is...?"

"Cheese! He's this Chao right here."

She gestured to the side of her. Sorun followed the gesture, eyeing a Chao that was floating besides her. By all appearances, other than the small apple slice it currently held it looked the exact same as all the other Chao, so he'd quickly glossed over it when he'd first examined the girl thinking it was just one of the local Chao. It must have been Cream's Chao, then.

"Still... she called her Chao Cheese? For real?"

It took a monumental amount of willpower not to sigh out loud at that name right in front of the Chao's owner.

"Okay, lemme take care of this, Cream," he told her. "He'll listen to me."

"Are you sure?" she asked him. She looked hesitant at the idea, and even looked down with her hands behind her back while lightly kicking at her own feet. "It was my job to look after him, so I would feel bad if-"

"Nah, nah, he's a bit unruly, I get it. Just lemme deal with him, it's fine." He he leaned down to pat the top of her head again and gave

her a small grin. "Sit tight and relax, huh?"

She looked back up at him after he removed his hand and gave him a small smile. Sorun had only seen a glance of it, though, as by then he'd already moved away from her and towards the tree. He stood a few steps away from it, sighing and looking upwards at the branch where his Chao was currently sitting on. He noticed that he was staring right at Sorun.

"Virgil, get down here."

Sorun saw that the Chao was staring at him with wide, surprised eyes. He'd obliged immediately and zoomed right off the tree branch, flying towards Sorun so fast that if Sorun didn't know any better he'd assume he meant to ram right into him. Fortunately his spectral arm managed to snap upwards out of his pocket and snatch the Chao in its grasp right before he hit him.

It was almost amusing to Sorun, seeing the look on the Chao's face. The wide smile he had on just didn't fit the appearance. The silver, crest-like horns, the sharp features, the pointed teeth; the smile just didn't fit with them. But here Virgil was, squirming in the spectral hand as he reached out towards Sorun with his bladed arms.

"Chao! Chao chao-chao! Chao!"

"Heh-heh. Glad you missed me, little guy. I'm touched."

Virgil froze almost immediately, and his mood changed in such a way he may as well have been a different Chao. His expression turned back into one Sorun recognized: a perpetual, grumpy-looking scowl. He even crossed his arms and turned away from Sorun, or at least as much as he could while still being grabbed.

"Chao." The tone was low and tersely delivered, like it was said in denial. Sorun understood immediately and shook his head as a result.

"Yeah, that's more like it. Sorry I worried you so much, pal," he said. "Did I at least look cool during the fight?"

"... Chao."

"Thattaboy." Sorun reached over with his other hand and rubbed at the spot between his silver, cylindrical horns. Virgil made a displeased noise and swiped at the finger, causing Sorun to pull back and grin a bit more.

"Alright, alright," he said, releasing Virgil so he could float in front of him with his v-shaped wings. He saw Virgil eyeing his arm, and asked, "What?"

Virgil didn't speak at first. Instead, he pointed down at the spectral arm that had been holding onto him. "Chao." He looked up at the eyepatch covering Sorun's lost eye. "Chao."

"I got a bit dinged up, so what? We're not talking about me right now," he said. "Now why don't you tell me why you're bullying the other Chao over there?"

Making another displeased sound, Virgil turned to the side, towards the Chao floating next to Cream. The plain-looking, saddened Chao holding the apple slice. Virgil scowled even deeper and turned towards Sorun.

"Chao. Chao-chao chao. Chao chao. Chao. Chao-chao. Chao. Chao."

"... I didn't get a word of that."

Virgil twitched, and then suddenly looked annoyed. "Chao." He gestured to the apple slice Cheese held. "Chao." He shook his left arm, which had the bowtie hooked to the black, organic blade on the back of the arm. "Chao."

"Ohhhh. Gotcha." Nodding in understanding, Sorun turned from his Chao to Cream. "He says Cheese stole his lunch and he's not giving the bowtie back until he gets his apple."

A gasp came from Cream, and she whirled right towards the Chao at her side, who suddenly looked very guilty from the way he shied away from her. "Cheese! Is this true?"

"... Chao..." the light blue Chao shamefully admitted.

"How could you!?" Cream exclaimed in an affronted tone. Sorun refrained from laughing due to how non-threatening her high voice and small stature made her. "Mr. Virgil is a guest of ours! You can't be mean to him like that!" She pointed up towards Virgil. "Please give him back his food so you can stop being mean to each other, Cheese."

Meanwhile, while they talked, Sorun and Virgil both turned to eye each other. "You gonna make up with her Chao at the end of this?" he asked him.

Virgil shook his head. "Chao-chao."

"Come on, man, you'll make the kid upset. And it's just an apple. You're seriously gonna hold a grudge over an apple? Just make up with the guy so the rabbit girl stops looking so sad."

After thinking for a moment, the black and blue Chao made a small sigh. "Chao."

Right after agreeing to Sorun's request, the lighter blue Chao floated into both of their views. Cheese apprehensively held the apple slice out towards Virgil, lip quivering in regret and the yellow dot above his head formed in a spiral. Virgil had taken one look at the saddened Chao before him, glanced back at Sorun, and then sighed again as he undid the bowtie secured to his arm.

"... Chao." Virgil tossed the bowtie up in the air. Cheese's eyes stared off after it, during which Virgil snatched the apple slice from his arms. The light blue Chao caught the bowtie and affixed it to his chest, while Virgil nipped at the apple slice he'd taken back.

After securing the bowtie to himself, Cheese looked back towards Virgil. "Chao?" The spiral turned into a question mark.

"Chao," Virgil replied as he took another bite of the apple.

"Chao-chao?"

"Chao-chao."

"Chao?"

"Chao." A pause. "Chao."

"Uh... problem solved, I guess." He glanced to the side at Cream. She was beaming a wide smile at the two Chao. *"Er... yeah."*

"Hello? Cream, dear?" Sorun's attention was drawn away from the three when he heard the sound of rustling and a womanly voice calling out behind him. "Are you here- oh my..."

"This her mom?" Sorun wondered as he turned around. *"Ah, great, I don't really deal well with mo- what."*

Oh, it was Cream's mom, alright. The Mobian woman he'd turned around to face was practically the spitting image of her, right down to the looks and clothing. What wasn't the same was the height. At all. In fact Sorun had never seen a Mobian as tall as the woman he'd turned around to before. His eye only came up to her chest. He had to look up just to see her bewildered eyes staring down at him.

"Why does she get to be so tall?" Sorun wondered as he took some steps back. *"This is bullshit."*

"Um... you must be Cream's mom," Sorun mumbled out, slightly flustered at the Mobian woman's height. "Vanilla, right? I-I'm-" he turned away to cough, "- I'm Sorun, nice to meet you."

"Oh, yes, hello." The older rabbit had gotten over her initial surprise over Sorun's appearance and straightened herself out. "You... would be the one who primarily cared for the Chao my daughter has been looking after recently, correct? I remember Amy kept speaking of you."

"Yeah, that's me." Sorun turned his head towards the smaller rabbit who, along with the two Chao, had apprached them. "Sorry if the li'l guy's been a bit of a handful for you two. I know you're both new here, so having to look after someone like Virgil probably isn't helping all that much."

To his surprise, Cream had shaken her head. "Oh, it isn't so bad. Mr. Virgil usually behaves himself really well. He hasn't ever misbehaved like this before."

"... That right?" Sorun's eye flicked up to Virgil. He avoided locking eyes with the Earthling, even grimacing slightly out of embarrassment it seemed like. "Huh." He focused back on Cream. "That's actually kinda surprising. He usually doesn't get along with that many people."

"Chao." That came from Virgil, who was still floating behind Cream with his arms crossed. It had come out sounding like a scoff.

He tried downplaying it, but he was honestly shocked that Cream called Virgil well-behaved. He usually was... but only around either himself and Nicole. Sonic's parents, too, on the occasion he was absent on a mission back in Knothole, though that was just for feeding purposes as he was usually left to his own devices otherwise. He tolerated people, but tolerance usually didn't go outside of that: basic tolerance. All the ire Amy had expressed earlier over the Chao said enough.

"Hm..." Sorun gave the small rabbit child a thoughtful look. She'd used to care for a Chao Garden according to Amy. Probably cared for this new one, too. Compared to everybody else he'd ever talked to about Chao that probably meant she was more an expert with them than anybody he knew, himself included. She had a parental figure to boot, and Vanilla seemed like a responsible person. She was a mother, she had to be.

Probably more responsible than Sorun was. Hell, individually they both probably were.

"... To hell with it. I'm not gonna be around much longer, and there's nobody better qualified. Not really sure about leaving him with total strangers, but... egh, I'll leave him with 'em for now and think on it. Come to a more final decision later."

Well, that's what he thought, but Sorun really doubted he'd find anybody better than the small rabbit family surrounding him at the moment. If they decided to do it, great. Worst case Sorun would just have to leave Virgil in the Chao Garden here when he finally died, and all things considered leaving him in a small park filled with his own kind in a safe and secure city surrounded by Mobians he implicitly trusted wasn't exactly the worse idea in the world. But he'd make up his mind on that later. For now he'd see if the family would take him so he could see if that would work out.

"Hey, Cream," Sorun said as he kneeled down in front of her. "You mind holding onto Virgil a little longer for me?"

Virgil's head whipped in Sorun's direction in surprise. "Chao?"

Cream seemed equally surprised at the request. "R-really?"

"Well, you see, I'm not really sure the hospital I'm staying at right now allows pets." He gave her a small grin while scratching the back of his head with his spectral hand. "I know he's a bit too smart to be called a pet, but I dunno if the doctors would see it like that."

"Chao."

Sorun looked up at the Chao when he heard the displeased sound he made. "Come on, don't be like that. I'm on thin ice with the doctors there as-is. You know how much they keep yelling at me over there?" He nodded his head to the light blue Chao with the red bowtie floating nearby. "'Sides, don't you wanna hang with your new friend for a bit longer?"

An affronted expression crossed Virgil's face. "Chao!" he said in denial.

"Sooner you accept it the less of a headache it is in the long run. Trust me on this one." Sorun looked back down at Cream. Her mouth was downturned, which made him pause a bit before speaking again. "Sorry if I'm asking for a bit too much here. I'm not saying you have to. I can just leave him in the Chao Garden and get him when I finally get out of the hospital, so-"

"No, no! It's completely fine. I actually wouldn't mind looking after him for a little bit longer if mother allows it."

At once, both of the Chao, Cream, and Sorun looked back at the older Mobian in the group. She looked about just as surprised as Cream had when Sorun made the request, though at the same time she still had that easygoing smile that looked downright motherly. And it was focused mainly on Sorun, forcing him to turn away a bit. "I don't think that would be much of a problem at all, Sorun. You don't need to worry. We'd be happy to keep him a while longer for you."

"T-that's great, thanks..." he quietly mumbled out.

"Mr. Sorun?" A tug on Sorun's pant leg drew his attention to the smaller rabbit. She still had that small, sad look on her face. "Mrs. Amy said you were really hurt. Is that why you have to stay at the hospital?" he saw her eyes look towards his spectral arm replacing his missing one. "Is your... is your arm supposed to look like that?"

She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"Aw, geez, come on, no, don't cry, not in front of your mom, I can't handle crying kids." Thinking fast, Sorun put on a faux smile that looked as genuine as he could possibly make it and waved it at the small rabbit child. "What, this? Nah, the arm's supposed to look like this. I'm kinda special like that." His left Bringer Claw appeared over his shoulder, making Cream jump a bit. "See, I even have an extra third arm. If anything I have too many arms." The Bringer Claw disappeared as Sorun pocket both his hands and stood up from his kneeling position. "I, uh... just kind of got a bit hurt. Y'know, doin' Freedom Fighter stuff. Hazardous position. I'm completely fine, so don't worry about me."

"O-oh. Okay." To Sorun's immense relief, Cream looked to calm down. The corners of her mouth even started to upturn a bit, which was a welcome change to how it did look. "I only asked because Ms. Amy seemed really worried about you when we moved in with her. She and a bunch of her friends in the Freedom Fighters kept talking about you."

"Yeah, uh... some stuff happened. And they're really great people like that. But like I said, it's all good now, so... yeah." His tolerance needed to keep a straight face was running short. He couldn't do this much longer. "Listen, speaking of which, I gotta go back. Nice meetin' ya Cream, Vanilla. Cheese." He turned around to give the tall Mobian a brief nod, and then faced back forwards and downwards to give the smaller one and the Chao next to her the same nod. "I'll see you around, I guess."

"Bye, Mr. Sorun!" Cream waved to Sorun as he began walking away. "Please get better soon!"

"It was wonderful meeting you, Sorun," Vanilla called after him. "We'll make sure to look after little Virgil, so do make sure to focus on your own recovery."

"Chao!" Similar to his owner, Cheese waved after Sorun.

"Yeah, guys, I'll do that. Again, thanks." Sorun stopped moving when he crossed next to Virgil, turning his head so the two's eyes met. "Seriously, man, behave yourself around them," he quietly mumbled to him. "They seem really nice and I got enough stuff to worry about here."

Virgil rolled his eyes at Sorun, but then stopped when his eyes fell on Cream, who was looking towards them. He paused, continuing to stare after her for a few moments before the Chao sighed out and looked back to Sorun. "Chao." The sound came out as low and resigned, and with it came a small nod.

"Thanks, pal." Sorun gave Virgil a quick thumbs-up, and then quickly turned around towards where he left Amy and the wheelchair. Without another word, he continued moving forwards, choosing not to look back at the group.

"I don't know. I probably am just gonna end up leavin' Virgil with 'em," Sorun thought to himself. *"They seem like a nice bunch. Might do Virgil some good if he's around another Chao like him, too. Give him a little friend he can act all cool around to stroke his ego further. Pfft, yeah, like that's the last thing he needs."* He took a small breath and looked towards the sky. *"It's all comin' together. Kinda scary to think about."*

He passed a tree and saw Amy from the corner of his vision while he mused to himself, chair right besides her. He'd given her a single curt nod and continued walking forwards. He only made it a few steps before she called out to him.

"Sorun. Chair."

"Aw, come on, Amy," Sorun complained as he turned back to her, "do I really need-?"

She had her hammer in her hands.

Sorun froze when he saw it, and then looked up at Amy. Her eyes (eye?) was narrowed at him in a threatening manner. "You'd really hit a cripple, Amy?" he asked her.

"Won't have to if you get in the chair."

With a loud, resigned sigh, Sorun hung his head and made his way towards her and the wheelchair.

"Push me down the hill."

"No."

"Oh, come on!" Sorun turned his upper half around to look at the person holding the handles of the wheelchair behind him. "I barely ever get any fun while tied to this thing, Nicole, and the hill isn't even that steep!"

Nicole glanced her green eyes down at Sorun. Her mouth was in a thin line, and her expression was a cross between looking amused and stern. "My apologies, Sorun. I hadn't realized me taking time to personally come and visit you didn't provide you with adequate amusement."

Sorun opened his mouth to retort, but only wordless sounds came out as he failed to formulate a good enough response. He settled with sighing and turning back forwards, crossing his arms in the process. "That's not what I meant and you know it," he mumbled out.

All in all, behind all the teasing Nicole had a point. He could have just been left in his hospital room to rot, but the ever-merciful Dr. Quack allowed him movement in the form of a wheelchair outside of that place on the condition someone was there to wheel him around. Only reason he got Amy to take him out earlier was because of that. And it was the only reason Nicole was wheeling him around outside right now.

The AI lynx had wanted to show him around the city. Or parts of it, at least. Sorun had noted that no matter where she took him the hospital was always somewhere in sight or at least close by, and he wasn't even sure she had any specific destinations in mind. She was kind of just wheeling him around wherever, seemingly aimlessly, as they both talked about whatever was on their mind. Sorun didn't awfully mind too much, something that slightly surprised him. But it was nice just being there, talking with her, even if he was confined to a wheelchair. He didn't care where it was or what they were doing.

He still would have liked to go down that hill, though, if only because he'd never rolled down a hill in a wheelchair before. Not for any particular reason other than he just wanted to see what it was like. A spontaneous urge. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like Nicole agreed in letting him act on this urge.

"C'mon, it'll just take a few seconds," he eagerly said in an attempt to get her to push him down the grass hill they were on top of. "There's not even anything in the way, it's a clean shot. I'll be fine."

Nicole shook her head. "I am aware you have a proclivity towards unusual activities, Sorun, but I'm afraid I cannot allow that. You're still recovering."

He made a "tch" sound, and then gripped the arms of the wheelchair. "Look, how about I just get up and carry the chair halfway down the hill so it's not as dangerous-"

Sorun was stopped midsentence when one of Nicole's hands placed itself on his left shoulder, and then pushed down hard enough that he was forcibly sat back down in the chair. "I think you're fine here," she said.

Grumbling under his breath, Sorun finally relented and released his hold on the wheelchair's arms, choosing to fold them in his lap. "Alright, fine," he muttered out. "So, going back to what we were talking about before," he continued in a lighter voice, "What made you want to name this place New Mobotropolis?"

Nicole began pushing the wheelchair along again. When Sorun glanced back at her he saw that the stern look had completely vanished, leaving behind the small smile Nicole had on beforehand. "Originally the Kingdom of Acorn inhabited a city named Mobotropolis. It was renamed to Robotropolis at Dr. Robotnik's behest following his conquer of the city, though the city itself now lays in ruin."

"Oh, yeah, it got nuked 'cause of a foible in one of Robotnik's schemes, right?" Sorun asked. "I'm not really familiar with what happened exactly but that's the gist, isn't it?"

"Yes, essentially," Nicole answered. "There were many that were disheartened by the destruction of the city, even though much of what it had formerly been had been stripped away by Dr. Robotnik. One of the reasons I devised to create this city in the first place was to try and give the Mobian people here back a piece of what they had lost." Her features brightened up a bit more. "As it happens, the city ruins itself is contained so none of the nuclear material and fallout bleeds out into the surrounding nature, though I made it so that radiation from those ruins runs off to New Mobotropolis via an underground conduit. It gets filtered and transferred into the power generators that power the nanites that comprise the city. It's the primary source of power here," she explained, smile ever-so wide and sunny, with just the smallest bit of pride detected underneath Nicole's humble attitude.

"You decided to power the nanite city with... nuclear runoff?" Sorun asked, quirking his eyebrow. "Why?"

"More siphoning off and purifying the ambient radiation from the Robotropolis ruins, but yes, that is correct. It was a readily-accessible and abundant supply of energy that was doing more harm than good merely existing in city reduced to rubble," Nicole succinctly answered.

"Sounds... practical, I guess," Sorun admitted. Practical, if not a bit strange. If it worked, he supposed... "Won't the city run out of power

though once all the radiation is clear?"

"That is why I created a Lake of Rings. The hope is that one day the energy conversion process will clean the Robotropolis ruins so that nobody will be harmed by simply being near them. Perhaps then a new city could be rebuilt there."

"Yeah, but they already got this city," Sorun said.

"True," she agreed, "but there's only so much space here. I would very much like it if this city remained indefinitely to give Mobians a home, but population numbers do not remain static. These are what-ifs for events that will not happen for decades from now, though. For now I believe everybody is content with this home, and I myself am content with the freedom it has afforded me."

Sorun turned around to look at Nicole again. A wry grin grew across his features. "You didn't make this city *just* to give everybody a new home, did you, Nicole?"

"Well... perhaps not, no." She turned a bit away from Sorun as the smile on her face turned a bit shy. "You know I always wanted a chance to live life among Mobians, away from that handheld. In a way that wasn't restricted by all the power requirements and time limits. I saw no reason why I could not benefit from the city the same as everyone else."

Sorun smirked, but said nothing as he turned back forwards. Not like he could blame her for wanting something like that after being stuck inside that handheld for practically her whole life. It made him wonder if she wanted that almost more than giving everyone a new home, but considering she'd done both at the same time, he didn't see any point dwelling on the question.

The wheelchair stopped. Sorun made a small, questioning hum, and glanced back up at Nicole. She'd stopped walking and chose to look down at Sorun with a strange look. The smile wasn't on her face anymore, though her green eyes were still staring into his one. She

looked almost... discontent with something from the way she was looking at him.

"I made this city to help everybody... and yet, it seems not to have been able to help you all that much, Sorun," she quietly stated.

"Huh?" He gave her a confused look. "What do you mean? I woulda died if you didn't make the hospital and all the equipment in there for the doctors to save me. You've helped me more than anybody else here." In more ways than one, but he didn't feel it appropriate to go that far with it.

The corners of Nicole's mouth had briefly twitched upwards in appreciation of Sorun's words, but it hadn't gone to completely improve her mood all that much. "That means more to me than you know, Sorun, but... I'm not satisfied with just that." She looked downwards to his arm. The spectral one.

Oh. He knew where this was going immediately when she looked at the arm.

"I don't like seeing you like this. Missing body parts. Being... incomplete." She looked up at his face. Sorun couldn't help but note she was focusing more on his eyepatch than his actual eye. "Why won't you allow anybody to transfer cybernetic replacements on you?" she asked. "I could ask Rotor and Tails for assistance with the designs. We could make them in a way that would suit your tastes. It would only take me minutes to construct them from nanites, and the doctors are accomplished in their field. There would be absolutely no risk to you and you would have everything you lost back."

"I don't need them," he answered simply, raising his spectral arm up. "I have all the arms I need right here." He lowered it back into his lap. "If you count my Doppelganger I technically have seven arms."

"At least let me replace your eye," she pleaded with him.

He shook his head. "I'm fine."

"Are you that worried about having to adjust to cybernetics? You can talk to Bunnie; she could help you. I promise it won't be bad for-"

"It's not that," Sorun interrupted. "I just don't want them."

"Sorun, please."

"It'd be a waste of your time and nanites."

"It would not be a waste!"

They'd both flinched back when Nicole raised her voice. Sorun in surprise, not having expected her to take it that far. Nicole seemed more shocked than anything, having went as far as to release her hold on the chair to cover her mouth with her hands as she looked at him with wide eyes. A few beats passed, and she slowly seemed to calm down as she lowered her hands while looked down slightly.

"It would not be a waste to help you," Nicole quietly reiterated. "I would not be offering to give what I would consider a piece of myself to you if it were a waste. I'm doing it *because* you're you. Please just consider it, Sorun. For me?" she asked him. "I just want to help you."

It took all of Sorun's effort not to groan out loud and cover his face. He knew where she was coming from - he almost wanted to go through with it just to make her stop feeling bad - but he meant what he said. No point in becoming a cyborg when he was dying soon. No use in wasting everybody's efforts like that. No use in getting inhibited by hardware he wasn't familiar with when what he had right now worked just fine. And he for sure didn't want Nicole using her nanites on him. It was already eating him alive knowing what him dying might do to her without adding that onto it. If things were different he would have said yes. But they weren't. He just didn't have a use for them with the time he had.

But, he could at least give Nicole some hope. False hope made from a lie, but that wouldn't be so different compared to everything else he did to her and everybody else. Just a lie to placate her for a while

longer until he finally died. It'd make him feel horrible, but at least it would improve her mood for the time being.

"I'll... I'll think about it, alright?" he said, causing her to look back up at him. "It's just not easy for me to get into something like that immediately. But I don't like seeing you so worried, so... I'll think it over. Just give me some time with it."

It tore at something in him to say that, knowing he was lying, but at least it got Nicole to brighten up considerably. She even started smiling again. "That's all I'm asking for," she said. "You needn't worry, Sorun. I'm confident we can get the resolution in the artificial eye's lens to a point that you will not even be able to tell the difference between it and your organic eye. I'll even see about making it resemble your organic eye. You won't notice a thing."

"Yeah, that's... that's real great, Nicole," Sorun mumbled out, lacking all energy as he looked to the right. "Real great... hm?"

He noticed there was somebody down at the bottom of the grass hill they were both on, sitting on a bench with their shoulders slumped over. When he squinted to look closer, he realized he recognized the regal red and blue uniform the person wore. He found it especially hard not to recognize the tail and the crown on top of their head.

"Hey, is that Elias down there?" Sorun asked, pointing towards the person in question. Nicole followed his gesture and looked towards where he was pointing.

"Yes, I believe it is," she said. "He looks rather unwell, Sorun."

"Yeah." A few sparks of blue electricity danced along Sorun's body as a small smirk played over his lips. "Yeah, he sure does."

Before Nicole could say anything else, she felt somebody tap her shoulders. She turned completely around to greet whoever it was behind her, but then stopped halfway when she realized it wasn't a person at all behind her. It was Sorun's spectral Doppelganger, who

was playfully waving at her before it dissipated. When she turned back around towards Sorun, she saw him wheeling towards the edge of the hill, no doubt with the intent to roll down it.

"Yeeeaah- oh come on."

He'd barely even gotten any momentum before the grass in front of him rose up a few feet in the shape of a rectangular, green wall. The wheelchair had softly collided with it, halting all his momentum and causing Sorun to grow a flat, disappointed face. The wall was only lowered back down when Nicole had calmly walked behind him and grasped the wheelchair's handles.

"I believe we'll be taking the safe way down the hill," Nicole said as she turned Sorun's chair around. "There just happens to be a paved walkway right over there that leads to the bench Elias is sitting on."

"She's literally omnipotent here with all these nanites, isn't she?" A small, unenthused sigh left Sorun, and he found himself slumping into the wheelchair as Nicole gently pushed him along down the path. *"All I wanted was a bit of fun, damn..."*

Slowly - agonizingly slow in the most unenthusiastic and mind-numbing way possible all in the name of something as trite as *safety* - both Nicole and Sorun had reached the bench Elias was sitting on. He didn't even seem to acknowledge their presence. He wasn't even staring out into the pond that was in front of him. Just staring down at his own boots.

Nicole and Sorun glanced at each other with unsure expressions that mirrored each other, and then faced back towards Elias. It was Nicole that took the initiative and spoke out to him. "Your highness?"

Blue eyes darted up to the pair of them. The most Elias did was breath out slowly and look back down. "Hello Nicole, Sorun," he glumly greeted. "I'm glad to see you're doing well, Sorun."

"... You really don't sound like it," Sorun pointed out. His statement caused Nicole to raise a hand up and slightly nudge the side of his head. He hissed out in surprise and swatted the hand away.

"Do I not? Forgive me, I'm... I'm a bit out of sorts." Elias sighed again and looked up at the pond. "I presume you're here about the riot?"

"Uh... riot?" Sorun blinked in confusion, and then looked up at Nicole. He was even more confused when he saw she didn't seem fazed by the news at all. Like it wasn't even news to her. "What-what riot, there was a riot?"

And now they looked confused at him. "The riot," Elias repeated. "Half the town was lead by general Amadeus Prower in a massive protest. They kept demanding I step down from power."

"The guy actually went and did that? And I missed it?" Sorun thought. "When did this happen?"

"Sorun, it was this afternoon," Nicole informed him, sounding a bit stunned. "You... what were you doing this afternoon that made you miss all of that?"

"Well, uh... in the morning Amy wheeled me to the park 'cause I had a whole thing with Virgil going on, then I went back, and after that, uh..."

"~And the notches on his pistol numbered one and nineteen more- man, what is with the racket?" Sorun muttered out, interrupting his song as he looked towards the window. He could faintly hear what sounded like a crowd of people, though it was too faint for him to pick up anything intelligible. It mostly just served as annoying white noise.

White noise that made him lose track of where he was in the song.

"Damn, where was I?" he muttered to himself. "Man... I'm starting to run out of songs I heard in video games from back home..."

"... I dunno."

Elias looked a bit skeptical at Sorun's claim, as did Nicole, though he didn't act on it at all. He just looked back towards the pond. "I was forced to detain the general and disperse the mob."

"You... detained him?" Sorun asked. "Why?"

"Because what else was I to do when half of the city comes knocking on the castle's front door demanding I step down so they can reorganize the entire government?" Elias looked back to Sorun. "Do you think I made a mistake?"

"Well, um... did things get violent?"

"No."

"Was there any property damages? Like a thrown brick, or...?'

"No."

"Ah, ooh, oh..." Sorun nervously scratched at his cheek with his spectral claws. "You, um, you sure that was the best idea?"

"I don't know, Sorun. That's why I asked you if you thought I made a mistake."

"... That was a real question?" Sorun asked. "I thought you were being rhetorical." Nicole nudged the side of his head again, a bit harder this time. "Man, quit it," he quietly whispered as he softly batted the hand away.

"Yes, it was real." Groaning, Elias slumped forwards and held a hand to his face, shaking his head while muttering out in a voice so quiet Sorun had to strain to hear it. "I visited Amadeus in the detention

center, and he... he made a number of valid arguments, Sorun. Time and again for decades the royal family has come up short. The war with the Overlanders, everything having to do with Dr. Robotnik, we've lost both Mobotropolis and Knothole now..." He made a deep sigh. "It seems like it's only because of the Freedom Fighters that anything ever got done. They're the ones that pulled the royal family back together, rebuilt the government, kept things in order under Robotnik's tyranny. And the good general was quick to remind me how a band of children was needed to keep the kingdom from falling apart in those dark times." He slowly turned to Sorun. "And how the only price we needed to pay to survive the invasion of Knothole was to watch a Freedom Fighter fight the Doctor one-on-one and get dismembered in front of all of us."

"I mean he's not exactly wr- don't you do it." Sorun turned just in time to see Nicole's fingers near his head. "Anyway, you don't think he maybe has a-" he briefly cut himself off to quickly glance at Nicole again, and when he saw no hand near him, he continued, "- point? Listen, I don't blame you or anybody else for what happened to me back in New Megaopolis, that was all on me, but the other stuff..." Sorun exhaled and looked up. "Well, I've only been around for about four and a half months so I can't really say I'm in a good position to criticize all that other stuff, but, well... it sounds kinda legit." He looked back down at Elias. "You seriously arrested him over a peaceful protest?"

"Don't make me ask again, Sorun. Just say you agree or disagree with me."

Shrugging, Sorun said, "Alright, I disagree." He waited a second, and when Elias looked for him to continue, he elaborated. "I know, like, nothing about the king game, RTS games were never really my thing, but I think it's reasonable to assume that a king's supposed to listen to his people, right? And when they tried talking to you, you... kinda just locked up the guy speaking for them," Sorun said, making Elias hang his head again. "If things went violent then yeah, that's

when you step in, but they didn't. That's less keeping the peace and more stifling the public voice."

"And riling up half the people in the city is meant to keep the peace?"

"I mean when you say it like that-"

"And what am I to do, Sorun?" Elias continued. "Disband the monarchy that has been ruling the kingdom for hundreds of years? Hand the city over to people who want to be in power just because they asked? Is that the precedent I should set here? Is that what I'm to do?"

"... I don't know, man, I suck at politics," Sorun said, genuinely clueless at what to tell Elias. "Don't you have a sister to talk about this to?"

Nicole flicked his head.

"What did I ever do to you!?" Sorun exclaimed as he turned to the lynx. He froze in place from the stern look she was giving him, after which she leaned down to whisper in his ear.

"Sorun, king Elias is clearly in distress right now and you making foolish comments and adopting flippant mannerisms is not helping matters," she quietly informed him. "Please be more thoughtful to him and try to take this seriously."

"Come on, Nicole, I don't even want to have this conversation with the guy," Sorun whispered back, eye flicking back and forth between her and Elias, who didn't even seem to be paying attention to the pair. "Why can't Sally do this? She's his sister! And even more than that she'd actually know what to say here! She has real experience with this kind of thing!"

"Because Sally isn't here right now and he trusts you as someone close to him and as someone who saved the entire kingdom. Your

input is not insignificant to him," she whispered, "and we wouldn't be here if you hadn't chosen to approach him in the first place."

"What, so just because I wanted to say hi to the guy suddenly I gotta deal with all this heavy political nonsense?"

"Friends are there when needed, Sorun, not when it is convenient."

"You're seriously gonna drop this wisdom on me right now?" That's what he said. Inside, he knew she had a point, and it was far too late for him to just wheel away. Nicole probably wouldn't even let him if he tried. And admittedly he didn't like seeing Elias look like this. "Ugh, why do you have to be the right one all the time...?" Sorun muttered to the lynx as he turned to face Elias once more.

Choosing to face Elias, however, didn't meant that Sorun still had a clue on what he was supposed to say to him. He was still completely blank in that area. Government jargon and shifting political systems wasn't his forte, and he actively avoided it. He had nothing for Elias, because he genuinely didn't even know who was in the right here. He didn't exactly agree with locking up an innocent protestor, but he didn't know if he agreed with what they were trying to do, either. Because they both had good points Sorun agreed with and he didn't feel like he was embedded in the kingdom enough to actually have a good opinion in the matter.

He wasn't even a technical legal citizen, for crying out loud.

Still, he had to say something. Or at the very least string together some random words until some miracle happened. That's how he got through most conversations in life, Sorun felt.

"So, Elias-"

"Maybe they're right," the king interrupted, causing Sorun to quiet down. "I'm no king. I've barely any experience running a kingdom. I only have the crown because I was born into it. Because I came

back to Knothole after spending my whole life up on Angel Island beforehand. And now I feel like running away all over again."

"Hhhhh..." Sorun glanced away from Elias for a moment in thought, and then looked back to him. "Hey, man, I have doubts all the time, too," Sorun said, gaining the king's attention. "I know I usually exude this aura of utmost confidence in everything I do, but I really don't. I mean, especially back when I first got here, 'cause boy, that..." He paused just to shake his head. "You remember how I was. The whole fish out of water thing I had going on. Admittedly it still kind of goes on every single day, but, well... I kinda get what you're coming from."

It may have been a trick of the light, but Sorun almost saw Elias' mood brighten up just the smallest bit. A minute amount. Miniscule. But it looked llike something Sorun said got through to him somewhat. "And how do you deal with these doubts, Sorun?" he asked, almost desperately.

Unfortunately, all Sorun could offer was a shrug. "I don't know, never figured it out." He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up on end when he *sensed* Nicole's hand near his head, so he spoke quickly to stay her motions. "Most of the time it feels like I don't even know what I'm doing and everything I do end up doing is done in a blind panic. I'm a joke of a strategist. Never really plan all that much. So when I'm in doubt, and don't know what to do, I just do whatever feels right, without even thinking about it, and a good chunk of the time I'll have made... maybe not the right choice, but still a good choice."

The black-furred hand stilled in the air next to Sorun's head, and then lowered back down to Nicole's side. Sorun found himself exhaling in relief.

"I'm not sure I know a single person in the entire world that thinks like you do, Sorun," he heard Elias mutter out. The statement was followed by the squirrel making a bitter, sorrowful chuckle. "You really are unique like that, you know? I truly mean it."

"So does that mean my advice took?"

Elias chuckled again. "Oh, no. It's complete rubbish." Sorun frowned a bit, though it dropped when Elias spoke again. "Then again, this entire situation is rubbish, Sorun, so I truly think that rubbish advice is the best possible advice you could have given me."

"... Yeah, man. Totally." He was just winging it at this point, but it seemed like whatever Sorun was saying was working. He decided to roll with it. "So what are you going to do?"

"I'm still unsure. If I'm to be completely honest, if I were to follow your advice my first reaction would be to agree to Amadeus so we could hash out terms, but..."

"But...?" Sorun hedged.

"But there's still the issue of-" Elias cut himself off mid-sentence, looking at something behind Sorun with widened eyes as his posture straightened up. "My father."

Squeak.

"Speak of the devil..." He knew that menacing squeak from anywhere. The sound of a creaky wheel on a wheelchair. Even more, he knew that *specific* squeak. That was the squeak of the former king's wheelchair.

Taking in a sharp inhale, Sorun slowly turned his head around to where Elias was looking. He noticed Elias' mother there at first, Alicia, who was behind a wheelchair that most certainly was not Sorun's. Because in that chair was an aged squirrel Mobian, glaring towards his own son. Maximillian.

"He won't 'cause of his dad? Yeah, I guess I can see that. Don't really think the idea of giving up a monarchy spanning hundreds of years would really go well with an old-fashioned guy like..." Sorun's

thoughts paused when he saw Maximillian's face. *"Wait, what's wrong with him?"*

There was something amiss in the old Mobian's eyes. They looked... strangely vacant, for some odd reason. Sorun couldn't place it. Even his general expression was only half-focused on Elias. He didn't seem distracted, but he didn't seem all there, either.

"Hey, Maximillian?" Sorun called out. He inwardly cringed when the Mobian turned his way, but didn't seem to be facing him completely. "Uh... hey, look, now we both have wheelchairs. Isn't that cool?"

"..." Maximillian's eyes just barely managed to focus in on Sorun. "What is an Overlander doing in the kingdom?"

"Uh... I'm a human. An Earthling human," Sorun corrected. "I'm Sorun. Remember? We talked about the wood tablet thing, and it was... it was a really awkward conversation? 'Member that?" No response. "I... saved literally the entire kingdom by fighting Dr. Robotnik in a mech suit of death in front of everybody? Lost an arm and an eye?" Still no response. "... Dude, come on, that was like a week ago."

"..."

Now Sorun was just uncomfortable. He looked up at Alicia, and then internally winced when he saw the pained look on her face. He looked back at Elias and saw he had a similar expression. A pained, pitying look.

"Sorun, erm... could, could you please give us the room, as it were?" Elias softly requested. "My father, he... he really only responds to familiar faces these days. I mean no offense, but your appearance... I fear it might upset him-"

"No, yeah, I get it. I'll... we'll leave." Sorun glanced up at Nicole, who was also giving Maximillian a sad look. "Hey, Nicole? Can we please go back to the hospital?"

"I think that would be best." Nicole gripped the handles of the wheelchair and slowly spun Sorun around. "We'll be taking our leave now." She offered Elias a hopeful smile. "King Elias, I'm sure things will turn out for the best, so please try not to strain yourself too much."

"Mm. Take care you two."

And then, they left. Not soon enough, as far as Sorun was concerned. Even as Nicole pushed him away Sorun couldn't help but look back towards the setting sun. He focused less on the orange horizon and more on the family trio that was slowly shrinking away due to the growing distance.

"All respect to Elias, but... I think his dad's going senile," Sorun muttered out, his eye still on the family. "Like... legitimately. Guy's really old, isn't he?"

"He is rather advanced in his years, yes," Nicole said in a tone a bit more quiet than usual. "I have doubts that Dr. Robotnik's attack, the destruction of Knothole, and the abduction of the entire kingdom helped his mental state."

"Yeah, probably not..." Having seen enough, Sorun finally turned his body forwards on the chair. *"Must be really rough to be Elias right now..."*

Sorun hadn't been able to sleep all that well that night. He hadn't slept at all, really. He'd laid in bed for a solid thirty seconds before he realized he just wasn't tired. And now it was the middle of the night and his room was probably the only one in the whole hospital with the lights on.

Too many things had happened today for him to just sleep on it. He tried to keep it out of his mind, but all that served to do was leave Sorun alone in an empty hospital room. Boredom led to him laying in bed and staring up at the ceiling. Boredom from that lead to pacing.

The exhaustion following that lead him to sitting at the window and looking out at the city.

"Dead of night and all lights are out. 'Cept for the ones in the castle." His eyes traveled to the center of the city, where the brand-new castle was. He couldn't help but look at the lit-up window he could see even at this distance, compared to all the other houses and structures in the city that were all dark. *"Wonder if Elias is as sleepless as I am right now? Guy probably has almost as much stuff on his mind as I do."* He exhaled to fog the window. *"What am I even doing? My last days left alive and I'm spending 'em angsting away. Guess I really don't know how much longer I got, though..."*

In truth, he hadn't been putting any effort forwards towards locating the last Chaos Emerald. Nobody had, really, but Sorun hadn't been pushing for it, either. Never even asked or inquired about it. Knowing it'd all end with that last Emerald had him dragging his feet towards the finish line. No more than delaying the inevitable, perhaps, but it was the best he could do with what he had.

"Wasted so much time being the standoffish guy in the corner when I just folded in the end anyways..." Sorun began dragging his index finger along the fogged glass to form a shape. *"I don't even know what I'm doing anymore. Just... waiting? Is there anything I can do?"* His finger curved upwards. *"Just wanna spend a bit more time with them. With her. 'Til the end."*

He'd only half-finished the heart he was drawing in the window until he saw a green flash of light reflect off the glass, coming from the middle of the room behind him. Sorun's eye had squinted in confusion as he stared towards the window's reflection, and then it widened dramatically when he saw it was Nicole's reflection.

There'd been a great, heavy wheeze of panic that left Sorun as he quickly wiped away the half-finished drawing with his hand before spinning himself and the wheelchair around completely. Indeed, Nicole was there. Staring right at Sorun. Before she'd even opened her mouth, though, Sorun had gotten the first word in.

"Nicole, jeez! You scared me," he sighed out. "You can't just teleport into people's rooms like that without a single word. It's super rude." Not even he went that far with his Trickster power. Scare people for laughs, sure, but he didn't invade privacy with it.

Nicole started, straightening up a bit while glancing away from Sorun with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Sorun. I'm still adjusting to corporeal life. I'll knock next time." She looked back towards him, and he saw her eyes brighten a bit in relief. "I just wanted to come check on you."

sorun relaxed a bit, though he was still a bit puzzled. "Okay...? Why?"

The relieved look in Nicole's eyes went away. She made a small frown before addressing him. "We're currently undergoing a small crisis," she told him. "Tails and his mother are currently attempting to break general Amadeus out of prison."

"Wow, really?" Sorun found himself so surprised that he actually laughed a bit, and had to cover his mouth as he stared down at the floor with a widened eye. "Wow, way to go, li'l guy. Never thought you'd take things that far." He always seemed too mild-mannered to do something like that. And here he was. Committing borderline-treason against the kingdom. Sorun had to respect it.

Nicole didn't look nearly as amused as Sorun did. "Sorun, this is serious," she said.

"I know, I know." The amused grin fell off his lips as he looked back up at her. "So what's gonna happen?"

"I went to inform Sonic of the break-in at the detention center, but he took off before I had an opportunity to tell him it was Tails. I'm going to the castle now to alert king Elias of the incident so he can decide how we proceed. I just came to ensure nothing was amiss here." She paused, glanced towards the empty bed, and then looked back at Sorun. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

As much as Sorun found the prospect Nicole randomly checking on him strange, if not a bit pleasant, he found the question stranger. "Because I couldn't sleep," he answered in a simple tone. "You seriously teleported in here just to see if I was okay?"

"Yes. I did. And now I must talk with the king." Nicole's form slowly began to disappear. "Please try and get some sleep, Sorun. You need your rest."

"I mean I'm not really that tir- and she's gone." Sorun probably stared at the spot Nicole had been standing for a good thirty seconds before he breathed out and wheeled back towards the window.

"Amadeus Prower. Gotta be honest. Don't really like ya too much. You seem like kind of a user," Sorun thought as he looked towards the castle. *"But, on the other hand, guess your heart is in the right place for what you're trying to do for the people. And you seem like a straight-shooter of a dad for a guy who was absent most his son's life since he was stuck in space with aliens. I fucking hate the fact I can think that unironically and it's true.*

"Still, you tried your little protest and it went absolutely nowhere. Got you locked up. Now your own family's putting themselves on the line for ya, so what's a desperate guy to do? You gonna skip the whole game and try to run to the final boss up there in the castle? Hell, putting myself in your shoes, I can't think of any other options. It's what I'd do. Don't really feel like letting you go all Julius Caesar on Elias, though.

"Ahh, Amadeus... you put me between a rock and a hard place. I really didn't wanna get involved. Maybe things'd go fine if I did nothing, but on the off chance it doesn't, well... that wouldn't sit well with me." He wheeled the wheelchair around and rolled it towards his bed. *"Sorry, Tails. Looks like I gotta go feed your dad his own teeth."*

He reached forwards and grabbed at the IV pole next to his bed. Maybe he was being paranoid. In fact, Sorun *hoped* he was being

paranoid and that the first thing the fox Mobian would do after his family sprung him from jail was go straight to the king to try and enact some bloody coup in an ill-fated attempt at changing the government. Because that would be stupid.

It was because it was stupid that Sorun strongly suspected that exactly just that was happening, because that's what this world operated on: stupidity.

"Just in case I need that little saline electrolyte top-off on the way there," Sorun thought as he jammed the IV needle into his arm. *"Alright. Full speed ahead! No stopping 'til I get to the castle so I can smash this over Amadeus' face in case he really did do a dumb."*

With the IV pole in hand, bag of clear fluid hanging off of it and the tube connected to it stabbed into his arm, Sorun manifested his left Bringer Claw and began pushing the wheels on his wheelchair towards the door to the hospital room. One quick twist of the handle later and the door was opened, after which Sorun wheeled right out of the room.

It hadn't even been a full minute after the door to Sorun's hospital room swung closed after he left that it opened again. What popped inside was a head covered in a red hood, which slowly scanned the room to ensure it was empty. After confirming that the room was, in fact, empty, Rubrum quickly opened the door, slinked into the room, and then shut it behind him.

"Lookin' smooth," Rubrum mumbled under his breath as he stepped away from the door. "So I guess I just leave this lying around for him to find later. Where's the cabinet- oh, there."

After taking another brief look around the room, Rubrum spotted what he was looking for: the series of white cabinets above the sink in the back of the hospital room. He slowly began to approach it, all the while rolling around a syringe full of a clear fluid in his right hand.

With his left hand he reached up and opened the cabinet, gently placed the needle inside of the cabinet, and then shut it.

"Easy peasy." Giving himself and accomplished sigh, the red-cloaked man then turned towards the room's window and approached it. He opened it up, and then began crawling through it with some difficulty due to its small size. He'd finally made it all the way through, though right as he did and closed the window behind him his grip on the window had slipped, resulting in Rubrum yelling out a curse as he fell away from the window.

"Deja vu... I've just been in this place... before..."

So New Mobotropolis' layout wasn't that intuitive. In terms of the shape of the perimeter, it was circular in nature. A protective barrier surrounded the whole city (thank god, Nicole knew the value of walls), and beyond that was a small, artificial forest that circled the city. It was past that the city actually started.

The outer perimeter of a good half of the city was a residential district where all the homes were. Nice place, orderly layout and lots of grass and trees. Right in front of that was where the hospital was, and it was because of that Sorun had a good scope for how big the city was, because the park where the Lake of Rings and the Chao Garden were was clear on the other side of the city, a fact he'd learned when Amy took him there prior. So he had a rough idea for how big the city was, which was why he hadn't been looking forwards to taking a wheelchair all the way to Castle Acorn in his state. Because Nicole had placed the castle dead-center of the city.

Wasn't the worst distance in the world, but it was far from ideal.

"Hi-higher on the street, and I- and I know it's my time to... to go..."

Sorun's worries were justified as he'd already become winded a quarter of the way there.

"Calling you... and the search is... is a-a mystery..."

And that lead him here: crossing the New Mobotropolis streets in the dead of night. Singing with an exhausted voice. Body slumped forwards in the wheelchair in a panting mess as his Bringer Claws slowly and lethargically pulled him along by crawling on the ground at a slow pace, their forms flickering every so often.

The doctors had probably had a point when they said his body needed time to recover.

"Standing on my feet, it's so... hard, it's... man, this is hard, fuck it, you push me."

Sorun's Bringer Claws disappeared in the same moment his Doppelganger appeared behind the wheelchair. It automatically grabbed the chair's handles and began to push it forwards. Sorun, meanwhile, was just doing his best not to fall out of the chair.

"Hah... hah... deja vu...!"

Amazingly enough he'd made it to the castle. Even more amazing there weren't any guards. Whether it was because of the prison break-in or some other reason Sorun wasn't aware of wasn't clear, and he didn't care at all. All he cared about was that he finally made it to that damn castle.

Front door hadn't even been locked.

"What'd I tell you about locking your shit, Elias?" Sorun that as the Doppelganger wheeled him through the front entrance of the castle. *"Doors unlocked, no guards... Elias is practically leaving the place wide open for Amadeus to just stroll up on in."* He blinked. *"Oh my fucking god, that's literally what he's doing, isn't it? He's trying to pull some one-on-one man-to-man final confrontation type deal- man, he's the kind of guy to do that, too."*

It was completely absurd, but it was the only reason Sorun could think of as to why there were no guards and why the doors were completely unlocked. There'd be no other reason to do something like that unless Elias was vying for some kind of final confrontation whatever with the general. And the worst part was Sorun could see him doing that. And it was just absurd enough to be true by this world's standards.

"Goddammit, Elias, you weren't supposed to actually act like a stupid final boss," Sorun thought as his Doppelganger wheeled him forwards. *"I'm gonna beat both of them up for being idiots, I swear. If it's really going down like that-"*

Thunk.

Sorun's thoughts ended at the same time the momentum of the wheelchair halted. He tilted his head back a bit in surprise when he saw a wide staircase right in front of him leading up to a second floor. And when he looked down, he saw the wheels of the wheelchair pressed right up against the first step.

"Son of a bitch."

He ended up just abandoning the wheelchair to walk up the steps.

Worst choice Sorun ever made.

"Hah... how the fuck... does this place not have wheelchair accessibility... when old man Max is in a wheelchair...?" Sorun panted out as he made it to the top of the steps. He'd had to start using the IV pole as a walking stick halfway up, but he'd still made it.

Tired. He was just tired and out of breath from moving around so much. He would have just Tricked up the steps but it was hard enough maintaining the Bringer Claw replacing his right arm, and at this point that was the only limb he had capable of swinging something.

It was probably by a miracle he managed to find the room he presumed Elias was in. He'd just wandered down the biggest, most important-looking hallway he could find until he came to a door from which he heard voices behind it. It was another miracle he'd even made it that far considering he was barely standing on his feet. But here he was. And all he had to do was open the door.

The door that he realized was locked when he tried opening it.

"..." Eye narrowed at the door, Sorun passed the IV pole to his left hand, and with no hesitation punched the door with his blue right hand. The wood-like wood crumpled inwards, and at the same time all the voices Sorun had heard inside of the room ceased immediately. The pale Earthling paid none of this any mind as he slowly walked into the room, IV pole in hand.

"Both of you," Sorun called out as he walked into the room. "I'm gonna slap both of you fooooooorrrr- wait, what's going on here?"

Well... he'd been right about finding Elias here. He'd been right about Amadeus being here, too, so it turns out his intuition had been on point. What hadn't been so on point was that the mood he'd stormed into seemed... extremely relaxed. They weren't locked into some battle of mortal combat like he'd been expecting. They didn't even look that upset if Sorun was being honest with himself. They were sitting at a short table having tea of all things.

He crashed a damn tea party.

They weren't the only ones there, either. Elias' wife and adopted child were there, sitting on the bed next to who he presumed to be Tails' mother, another brown-furred fox, all of whom were giving him the same wide-eyed, bewildered look both Elias and Amadeus were giving him. Sonic, Tails, and Sally was there, and also had the same looks. Nicole was even there holding a tray with a tea pot and- oh boy Sorun didn't like that look she was giving him.

"Well, don't I look silly? I dragged myself all the way from the hospital just to find them having a completely amicable conversation." He honestly would have preferred if he'd arrived to break up some stupid fight instead of this. That way he wouldn't have looked like an utter fool right about now. More than that he probably could have avoided that glare Nicole was beaming at him.

How anybody could look so threatening while holding a tray of tea was a mystery to Sorun. And he didn't want to stick around to find out the answer. So he decided to do what he did best: run away.

"... Well, seems I made a mistake. Have a good night, all." With a small wave of his spectral hand, Sorun turned around in a desperate attempt at escaping.

Evidently Nicole had put the tray down somewhere because she'd teleported her lynx body right behind him, hands on her hips and face set in a deep frown. A very angry frown. One aimed right at him.

"..." Sorun turned back around to the room, only to encounter Sally standing in front of him with practically the same posture and expression Nicole had.

"Huh. Guess I'm dying sooner than I thought."

"Care to explain yourself?" Sally asked. Her eyes were boring straight into Sorun's one eye with such intensity he couldn't help but fidget on the spot.

"... Hold that thought," Sorun requested in a small voice. As calm as he could, which wasn't much, he turned towards the tube connecting him to the IV bag on the pole and flipped the small switch on the tube to allow the clear fluid to flood into him. "Okay, listen-"

"You're supposed to be recovering in the hospital," Sally continued in an icy tone. "You busting down the door to my brother's room is not recovering in the hospital."

"W-well I thought- you know, the whole riot thing- it sounded bad- I th-though Elias and Amadeus were gonna do something stupid like fight," Sorun stammered out. "So I want-wanted to, to... you know... avoid that."

A slow, deep exhale left Sally. The stern look didn't drop off her face in the slightest, but her shoulders did relax a bit. "They *were* fighting," she informed him. "Nicole and I handled it. And now we're talking. Peacefully." She eyed the door fragments at their feet. "At least we were until you punched the door in."

"Eh-heh, yeah, I... hah, ha-ha, I, I goofed up, yeah..." The laugh that came out of Sorun was one he couldn't control. Nothing too big; just a small, high-pitched giggle, but he couldn't have stopped it. And oddly, he didn't find himself caring about it too much.

Come to think of, everything felt kind of funny. Sorun couldn't tell why. Every second that ticked by was... doing something. Easing the tension, making the heart-splitting anxiety melt away.

Why was the whole room moving around?

"Sorun?" Sally's voice came to his ears muffled and distorted. And her face for some reason looked warped and really funny-looking, making Sorun giggle again. "Sorun, what's going on with you?"

"Ha ha, Sally, I don't... I don't think that's saline," Sorun giggled out as he pointed to the bag hanging off his IV pole.

His vision grew more distorted by the second, though he was able to make out Sally reach for the bag and turn it around to read it. By the time she was finished he was too far gone to see her give him a deadpan expression. "Sorun, this is morphine."

"Yyyyyep, that'd do it." In hindsight he probably should have read the bag befojrnfyerfpiernvyrfehbf-

It was hard to disappoint Sally even on a bad day. She liked to think she was an understanding person who could see all sides to an argument and could understand people well enough to see where they were coming from. Being mad or upset or annoyed at somebody for something they did was one thing, because that could be forgiven and made up for in most cases. Straight disappointment was a rare thing for her to experience.

She came awfully close when she saw Sorun collapse on the floor right in front of her. she would have thought he'd passed out completely if it weren't for the fact he made a small giggle every now and then. The only thing that stayed her from full-on disappointment was because she understood immediately why Sorun did what he did when he stuttered out that explanation to her with that terrified look on his face.

Sally couldn't put it past him. The Earthling had been proving a lot as of late he cared much more about people than he let on. A startling amount, even. The words he said alone during that awful confrontation with Eggman while they could do nothing but watch were still words she played over in her head sometimes. They'd been words that surprised her to no end, and she'd even felt a bit of pride hearing the words from how much she resonated with her. From hearing that to seeing everything he'd done, it'd been clear to her and everyone else just how much he actually cared. She still caught Sonic smiling from time to time about the fact he'd finally decided to call them friends. So with all that in mind, she couldn't too disappointed in Sorun when this was something she would expect out of him.

Didn't change the fact that he shouldn't have left the hospital, but in the back of her mind she was already thinking about letting it slide since she figured him being scared so much by her and ending up in this state in front of them all was punishment enough. And hopefully he'd learned from the experience.

Nicole didn't look like she was going to let him off as easily, but that was Sorun's problem.

"So careless..." Nicole mumbled out, reaching forwards to flip the switch on the IV tube to cut the flow of morphine. "Why is he like this, Sally?"

Sally found herself wincing a bit at Nicole's tone. She couldn't quite place how the AI was feeling other than she was unhappy, and even from looking at her it was clear she was displeased from the way she was looking at Sorun's fallen form.

"His heart was in the right place, Nicole," she offered, "he just..."

"Never thinks about himself?" Nicole interrupted. "Or how the way he treats himself affects others?"

"He just cares, that's all," she reiterated in a soft tone. "In his own weird way." She saw Nicole's body relax a bit, though she was still staring down at Sorun, prompting Sally to ask, "You're not upset at him, are you?"

"... No. Just worried," she answered. "I think I'm going to have to keep a closer eye on him with the security cameras so this doesn't happen again. At least until he can last without the wheelchair."

"That might be for the best," Sally admitted with a small nod. "Just try not to hold it against him, Nicole. You, well, you know his type."

It was by sheer coincidence that Sonic chose to zoom into the empty spot right next to her, looking down at Sorun in concern.

"Hey, is Sorun doing alright?" he asked.

"He's fine," Sally answered with a small sigh. "He went and accidentally drugged himself with painkillers."

A barely-contained snort of amusement left Sonic's lips as the worried look vanished. "W-wait, seriously?"

Sally didn't even look over at him when she'd smacked the side of his head.

The hedgehog quietly exclaimed from pain, holding the spot on his head that had been hit as he mildly glared at Sally. It only lasted a few seconds before he relaxed and looked back down at Sorun along with the rest.

"I'll take him back," Sally volunteered, walking over to and crouching down next to Sorun. "I think things here are calm enough anyways. And somebody needs to have a word with the doctors about letting their patients roll out the door while under their watch."

"It's kinda hard to keep an eye on a guy that can teleport, Sal," Sonic pointed out.

"Don't start with me now." Sally briefly glanced up at Sonic with a pointed look, which caused him to quiet down and back up a few steps. Satisfied, the chipmunk looked back down at Sorun and reached for him. "Come on, Sorun, let's go."

"We're goin' somewhere?" Sorun mumbled out in a half-slur. He had a dazed, unfocused look in his eye as Sally picked him up in her arms while Nicole helped by placing the IV pole above him. He didn't move around once during the process. In fact his body remained completely limp even as she began walking away with him.

"Mm-hm, yeah." Sally gave him an acknowledging hum and a forced half-smile before turning towards the others, at which point the smile dropped and she shook her head at them. They all nodded, prompting her to reciprocate the nod and then silently exit the room, Sorun's limb body in her hands.

She almost thought he'd fallen asleep with how quiet he'd been until she saw him turn his bleary-looking eye towards her.

"Where going?" he asked her.

"Back to the hospital," she answered, the forced smile returning to her face as she continued walking forwards. "Where the people

whose job it is to look after you can actually do their job and make you all better so we don't have another incident like this."

"Noooo..." With weak, flaccid movements Sorun attempted to sit up in Sally's arms and reach behind her. He failed miserably. "Wanna stay with the pretty lynx lady..."

Sally stopped walking and looked towards Sorun's face for a moment. She couldn't get anything due to the absolute lack of clarity in his languid features, though, causing her to make a small sigh and continue walking. "You can talk to Nicole tomorrow," she said.

A childish whine left him. "No, don't wanna wait."

" *To-mor-row* ," Sally reaffirmed in a slow voice. "When you're in a better mindset and... what the?"

When she made it to the stairs and looked down, Sally saw that there was an abandoned wheelchair sitting next to the bottom step. She gave the empty wheelchair one questioning look before focusing back on the human in her arms.

"Sorun, did you... did you wheel yourself all the way here from the hospital?"

"Mhm."

"... Why didn't you just make a portal?"

"Kitty."

All in all it was a more coherent response than the princess had been expecting, and yet it still told her absolutely nothing.

"Okay," Sally mentally sighed out as she began descending the steps, *"a t least it saves me the trouble of carrying him all the way back."* She approached the wheelchair immediately after making it to ground floor, and then proceeded to carefully set Sorun down in it while laying the IV pole across his lap. She double-checked to make

sure he was secure in the chair, and it was only after she was satisfied did Sally begin pushing the wheelchair.

While pushing the chair, Sorun's body had completely stilled in the chair, making Sally think he finally passed out. When they'd left the castle interior he remained motionless in the chair, and when they'd departed from the castle proper he was still completely silent. When they'd started moving along the paved street towards the hospital, though, Sorun began to lowly mutter out words in a voice quiet enough that Sally had to lower her ear closer to him to hear properly.

"I'm so scared of what's coming, Sally..." the human muttered.

"It's not that bad, Sorun," she mumbled back in an comforting voice, one hand on the wheelchair's handle while the other patted his shoulder. "We'll look back on this and laugh one day, alright? It really isn't that bad. We just need to get you back to the hospital."

"You're all gonna be so upset..."

"No, no, Sorun, it's okay. We're not mad. You sure don't make it easy, though," she said. "Just take it easy for now, alright, Sorun? You can go back to doing stupid stuff when we're all not worried about you falling apart on us."

"Mmmhhhh..." Sorun's breathing stilled as his body sagged forwards. Sally briefly stopped just to lean down further to Sorun's level, where she heard soft breathing and saw his chest slowly and steadily rising and falling. She made a sigh of relief at him finally falling asleep, and then wordlessly continued pushing him forwards towards the hospital.

"So it all worked out in the end?" Flat on his back and body covered by the shade of the tree his was lying under, Sorun cracked his eye open at the squirrel Mobian that was sitting right besides him. "It's all talked out? Everything finalized? Don't gotta worry about riots in the streets or anything like that?"

It was around mid-afternoon of the next day. A few hours after Sorun had come to from last night's escapades, of which he remembered little. All he did remember was going to the castle, walking into Elias and Amadeus calmly talking over tea, and then for some reason Sorun was hit with a sense of foreboding and doom before everything afterwards became a blank for him. He kept wondering why until it was explained to him he'd mistaken morphine for saline.

Not his brightest moment, right next to him having realized right after he could have just teleported himself to the castle and saved burning himself out using the wheelchair. Not his best morning, either, having to listen to Nicole speak in that quiet, subdued but intense voice she used at him whenever she was upset when she'd explained this all to him, followed by Dr. Quack yelling at him for leaving the hospital without a chaperone. It'd been a verbal lashing so intense Sorun was still surprised he'd made it through alive.

But he had, and now he was here. Sitting under a tree next to Elias as he explained everything that had happened to Sorun so he could catch up on everything he missed. The breakout at the prison, Sonic and Tails making amends because of something that happened between them during the night, and what had actually concluded as a result of it all.

"Yes. My sister had to be the one to talk some sense into the both of us," Elias shyly admitted to him. "We discussed our points, saw each-other's perspectives, and came to a decision we could both happily agree on. In the end it all worked out."

"Wow, so... talking with your sister, the thing I suggested you do, turned out the be the right answer all along instead of everything else you all tried to do. Amazing."

"I hear that tone in your voice," Elias said with a small pout as he turned towards Sorun. "What do you want me to say, Sorun?"

"I want you to say I was right," he said.

"Really, now?" Elias demurred. "I seem to recall you said I should just do what I felt like without thinking on it, or something along those lines. Which ended up with me dueling with Amadeus until we were stopped by Sally."

"..." Sorun scoffed and slung one of is legs over the other, closing his eye. "It's your fault for misinterpreting my golden advice."

Elias made a single, tired-sounding half chuckle as he turned away from him. "Yes, clearly..."

"So what ended up happening in the end?" Sorun asked. "What'd you agree to?"

"The power of the king is to be split between six democratically-elected council members, with me and any future holders of the crown acting as a seventh member," he explained.

"... Sounds kinda like a monarchy with extra steps."

Elias shook his head. "It isn't. Having a council that can outvote the king on matters gives the people a voice and say in how our government is run while still technically preserving the monarchy. To that end, we're no longer a monarchy but a republic, but... I think it's worked out for the best. I'm happy the royal line can continue, Amadeus is happy the people have a voice, the people are happy that positive change is happening, everybody is happy..." He trailed off as a slight sad look overtook his features. "Everybody but my father, at least. He won't speak with me."

"Surprised he can speak at all," Sorun thought, though chose not to voice this. "Don't worry about him. Tryin' to please everyone's a waste of time," he told Elias. "As long as most everybody's good with it then just be happy with it and move on."

"And what of you?" Elias asked. "What's your opinion on this?"

"It's your kingdom, man. Run it how you want. I don't care."

Nonplussed, Elias shook his head with a small grin as he stood up to his feet. "And here I thought you would have been a bit more warm to the reception of the kingdom changing to a governmental system that slightly resembled the one of your home," he said as he dusted off his blue and red jacket.

"Again, don't care. I'm glad it worked out for you all, though," Sorun said in earnest. "So you're gonna take off now?"

The Mobian nodded. "Diminished political power or not, I'm still king and have an election to oversee," he said. "Would you like me to take you there, Sorun? I could even leave you at one of the voting polls if you wish."

"Nah. As much as I'm raring to be a part of the democratic system, I'd have to be a citizen to do something like that. Which I'm not." In other words he was too lazy to vote, but Elias didn't need to know that.

The small grin on the king's face transitioned into a frown. An apologetic one. "Right, I... I never did get those papers to you, did I? Goodness, I never even started them," he mumbled under his breath. "Sorun, you... you're the one who saved the now-former kingdom. You've earned the right more than anybody else, citizenship or not. Nobody would question it. And I promise I'll do everything in my power to rectify this situation as soon as possible. I'm terribly sorry I didn't sooner."

"It's fine, man, no harm no foul," Sorun said, making Elias' posture ease out. "Just go do your thing. I'm just gonna relax here for a bit longer."

"Should I at least send someone to help you back to the hospital when you're ready?" he asked, nodding towards the empty wheelchair nearby.

With a small sigh, Sorun took his spectral hand out from under his head. "I think Big Sister up there's got it covered," he said, gesturing

up to the tree. And the camera lens sticking out of the tree. The one that was looking down directly at Sorun.

"Right, of course." Elias blinked up at the camera, and then looked back down at Sorun. "May I ask why there is a camera growing out of the tree?"

"Oh, that's the beautiful thing about nanites all connected to a central computer system Nicole is in control of, Elias," Sorun stated in a sarcastic voice. "Literally anything in the city can turn into a camera. And Nicole thinks I have glass bones and paper skin so she's keeping me under twenty-four hour surveillance 'til I get better," he explained.

He couldn't be too upset at her over it. "For his own safety" had been her justification of it. And honestly, she was probably right with the stunts he kept pulling. Sorun didn't really mind all that much since it didn't inconvenience him. However it did leave him with a somewhat creeped-out feeling all the time knowing he was under temporary full-time watch by Nicole.

Elias offered the human a comforting smile despite the fact his eye was closed. "Well, Sorun, hang in there. It isn't forever." He turned and began moving away. "I must be taking my leave now. Until next time."

"Bye," Sorun called out. He placed his hand back under his head and settled in a more comfortable position, and then sighed out as he began to relax.

The quickest and most non-violent revolution ever having occurred to Sorun's knowledge aside, things were relatively easy for Sorun. Living inside of a cozy, protected city like this had perks. He may have been bored out of his mind in that hospital, but at least he wasn't getting stressed out of his mind going on risky, dangerous missions. It was nice, not doing anything for once. He didn't know how long it'd stay like this, but the break was welcome, and he'd take

it for all it was good for until the end caught up with him. Whenever they got wind of that last Emerald.

'Til then, though? He was taking it easy. Both for his own sake and so people stopped worrying about him. It'd do everybody some good.

"Where can I find Knuckles?"

A voice. An unfamiliar one. Male, aged and... oddly had a sort of tinny-sound to it. Like it was filtered through an electric speaker.

Sorun made an unsatisfied groan. So much for peace. "Heck if I know, man. Ask somebody else."

"There is nobody else nearby. I require your assistance in locating Knuckles."

"We're in a town full of people, man. Go bug somebody else with this. Go bug a Freedom Fighter, any Freedom Fighter other than this one. Geez, go ask somebody in the Chaotix, they're the ones that hang around him the most. Just leave me alone."

"I beseech you-"

With a frustrated groan, Sorun opened his eye and bolted up into a sitting position. "You are really starting to test my patience here with- uhhhhh..."

... Well, he had absolutely no idea what he was looking at. It was a head inside of a floating, clear ball. A metal head with red sensors for eyes. A head that oddly looked like an echidna like Knuckles was. A floating metal echidna head.

"..."

"..."

"... Uhhhhhh..."

A/N- Yeah I know Cream and co. didn't show up 'til way later in the comics, but we're technically months in the future anyway 'cause the story's events made the canon timeline jank, so bleh.

Chapter 47

Recursion Error

Episode 47- Essence of stabbing a god in the face

There was little for Sorun to think as he regarded the floating metal head in a ball in front of him. Because that was just it: there was nothing. His mind came up blank as he looked at the head. He just plainly didn't know what to think.

What does one do when a floating head floats up to them and starts asking questions? Do they humor it? Scream and run away? Wonder why there's a floating head talking to them in the first place? Sorun didn't know the answers to any of these questions, as the answers were far beyond his mental capacity to grasp.

He did know he didn't want to deal with this, though.

Sorun pointed up and past the head. "Hospital's that way. If you're lucky there's a sanitorium you can admit yourself to," he said to the head before lying back down and closing his eye.

"You imbecile, I do not need medical attention!"

"You sure? You're missing a whole body. Seems pretty medically alarming to me."

There was an angered scoff, followed by Sorun feeling a presence settle next to his head. He opened his eye back up with an annoyed groan as he spotted the floating head right next to his face.

"Why even is there an Overlander here in this city?" he asked him. "It was my assumption this was a Mobian city."

"World's full of exceptions, pal. Some people live with a completely different species than them. Others get to live without a body despite the fact it shouldn't be physically possible. Do the impossible, see the invisible, row, row-" Sorun cut himself off by snapping his spectral arm towards the bubble. Blue claws wrapped around the clear sphere, causing the head to gasp out in surprise as Sorun lifted him up. "Twenty words. You get twenty words to explain why I have to deal with you."

The head's mechanical eyes darted around as they looked at the hand gripping him. He quickly regained what little composure a head could have and spoke out to Sorun. "My name is Dimitri. I come from Angel Island. A grave threat named Enerjak has arrived and I need help."

"... I didn't think you'd actually perfect-score the word limit," Sorun admitted after a long pause passed. He hummed a little and leaned his head back on the grass, his curiosity piqued. "Dimitri... and Enerjak, huh? Those names sound familiar... did Knuckles tell me about them...?"

There was some vague source of familiarity with those names. Sorun could have sworn they were names mentioned back when Knuckles had been explaining echidna lore to him. The problem lied in the fact that Sorun hadn't been paying all that much attention because the history of his people was so confusing. The names definitely rang a bell, though. Somehow. He knew they were relevant, Sorun knew it, and he tried digging deep into his memories to try and pull up everything Knuckles had told of them.

... Nah, he didn't remember.

"Those names mean nothing to me," Sorun said. "I think Knuckles told me about you, but-but I'm not gonna lie, man, I didn't pay much attention. I kinda just tuned him out after a while. I'd have an easier time decrypting the Zodiac Killer's messages than understanding echidna history."

It was almost astonishing how so much confusion could be shown on a metal disembodied head's face. Eventually confusion morphed into slow understanding as the echidna head's mouth set into a deep frown. "You really are an imbecile, aren't you?" he asked.

"I like to think I'm the smartest idiot on the planet. Unfortunately, insulting me will get you less than nowhere." Sorun lifted the head up more, much to his protest. "Farewell, Dimitri," Sorun blandly stated. "Go bother someone else."

Before the echidna head could get another word in edgewise, Sorun's spectral arm threw him. Where, he didn't know- he hadn't been looking. He didn't care, though, as long as the head was out of his hair.

Deeply sighing, Sorun settled back into a comfortable position on the ground. Somebody else could deal with the freaky cyborg head or whatever that was. Maybe Sonic would find him. Sorun hoped Sonic would find him. He coped with weird stuff well. Floating heads were right up Sonic's alley, not Sorun's.

No, sir, Sorun wouldn't be dealing with that at all. All he'd be doing is sitting here, relaxing and enjoying the day to his heart's content without a care in the world. Maybe he'd go and talk with Nicole later. That sounded nice. In fact, it sounded like the perfect idea-

"I have absolutely no idea what a zodiac is, but it is imperative that you at least lead me to somebody that can be of assistance!"

"..." Sorun deeply inhaled, and then slowly exhaled. "It takes a special kind of conviction to show your face after getting yeeted like you just did. For that, you have an infinitesimal amount of respect." Sorun sat up to lock his eye with the red eyes of the head right in front of him. "But that's all ya got," he continued, "so I'll give you one chance to tell me why I should care about your problem."

"The whole world will be doomed if you do nothing."

"As far as reasons go, that's a pretty solid one." With a groan Sorun stood up to his feet. Seemed like there was no getting out of this one if it was that severe- which it probably was. Floating heads didn't just come out of nowhere to undersell global threats, after all. "Hold, please," Sorun politely requested, before turning around to the camera in the tree. He frantically waved at the camera with his blue, spectral arm, and in less than a second Nicole's body appeared next to them.

"Sorun?" she began. "Do you require assistance with-?"

Nicole wasn't able to finish before Sorun placed the head-sphere in the surprised AI's arms.

"Here, take this. His name's Dimitri. He's a talking head. *He's your problem now* ." After handing the head off Sorun sat back down and leaned his back against the tree. Nicole, meanwhile, began trading odd looks with Dimitri. "Take him to Sally. Or Sonic. Or somebody else other than me. I don't care. Just get him out of my sight, please."

"Well... I suppose that is a reasonable request..." Nicole hesitantly stated, still eying the head in her hands with a mixture of curiosity and wariness. "I am afraid Sonic is currently indisposed at the moment, however."

"Finally ate himself into a food coma eating all those chili dogs, huh? I told him those things were poison."

"No," Nicole denied with a shake of her head, "as of this moment he is occupied conversing with Sally on how to deal with Dr. Robotnik, who is currently outside the city's defensive barrier-"

Sorun Tricked away.

"Sometimes I wonder how such a smart guy like Robotnik can also be an absolute moron. It's the wisdom thing. It's gotta be."

It wasn't really news for Sorun to know that Eggman absolutely loathed the fact that everybody from Knothole he captured managed to slip through his fingers and make a home in the nanite city they stole from him. He himself saw that sometimes he'd send a ship from his fleet to the city just to pelt them with ordinance from on high, probably out of spite. The dome-like force field that protected the city made it so it was little more than an annoyance more than anything else, but it made it pretty obvious Robotnik was frothing at the mouth in rage for what they pulled off.

All the more power to everybody in Knothole who collectively gave him a middle finger everyday by thriving in New Mobotropolis. Not a term Sorun would ever share with anybody he cared about, of course. At least not so crudely. But it's what he felt.

It absolutely bewildered Sorun that, after all that, the mad scientist would come here personally to carry out some stupid scheme, but if it meant him getting another shot at saving some years of life by killing him now so Sorun didn't have to hunt down that last Emerald, hey, he'd take it. And as a added bonus it got him away from the talking head and whatever nonsense he was carrying around with him.

"Still, fate of the world, huh...? Eh. I'll let the others deal with it. More their thing. I just wanna cut Eggman's head off."

So, after a series of Tricks, that left him here. Just on the outside of the wall that surrounded Knothole, in a small grass field. He didn't even need to look around long to spot Eggman in... something. Some machine that looked so ridiculous it made Sorun do a double-take.

It looked like some kind of weird robotic crustacean thing. A robotic red shell, not unlike a hermit crab's shell, with multiple mechanical tentacles waving out of it. Eggman himself was sitting out in the open inside a pilot's seat in the opening of the shell.

"Well, Nicole said that Sonic was busy getting briefed by Sally on how he's to proceed... which'll probably get accelerated once they learn I booked it out here," Sorun thought to himself as he manifested Yamato in his grasp. *"Got seconds at best. And he's got no Chaos Emerald protecting this one. I'll make it quick."*

There was no hesitation as Sorun pulled Yamato in and out of its sheath in rapid succession. Judgement Cut after Judgement Cut consumed and cut away all the mechanical tentacles writhing outside of the robot's shell. Eggman himself barely had any time to gawk at all the severed, disabled tentacles before Sorun Tricked right in front of him on the lip of the metal shell.

"Tell me, 'cause I really wanna know," Sorun began before Robotnik could get a word in. "The hell was your plan here?"

"Hrrgh..." The previous shock transformed to ire, and a frustrated growl left Robotnik's throat as he looked up at Sorun. "None of you would even have this city if it wasn't for that infernal AI Nicole," he angrily grumbled up at Sorun. "My plan was to upload a computer virus I had coded to end her so I could finally attack the city."

"Shit plan. I've seen what's she's capable of in that digital world, and trust me, it wouldn'ta worked," Sorun said.

"Well, we'll never know now, will we?" Eggman snarked. "You cut my Egg Nautilus' tentacles up before they could even do anything." He leaned back in his seat, frown still on his face. He oddly just looked more disappointed than angry now. "I get you're the practical type, but there's an order of operations to these battles you have to adhere to if there's any fun to be had in it. I took your arm and eye away, Sorun, not your brains, and you need as much of those as you can get."

"Ha-ha, die."

No sooner had the word "die" left his throat did Sorun stab forwards with the katana. No hesitation. No remorse in his eye as he plunged

the sword's tip straight towards Eggman's face. It'd approached so quick that Eggman hadn't even had time to make an expression of terror as the sword neared him.

Unfortunately, the sword never made contact. Because a familiar voice just had to shout up at Sorun to make him freeze right before he'd plunged Yamato into Eggman's irritable face.

"Sorun, stop!"

Oh, he'd stopped. The point of the sword was mere millimeters away from Eggman's large, pointed nose, but he'd stopped. Eggman, meanwhile, head let out a heaving sigh of relief, while Sorun's face became strained in anger. Slowly, the both of them turned their heads, Sorun's right and Eggman's left respectfully, towards the voice.

It was Sonic. He was down on the ground in front of the Egg Nautilus, hands on his hips and foot tapping rapidly against the ground with an unhappy expression. And for some reason his green eyes were glaring up at *Sorun* , and not Eggman. A fact that made Eggman begin to grin, irritating Sorun all the more.

"What!?" Sorun shouted down to the blue hedgehog. "What do you mean stop!?"

"I mean stop!" Sonic shouted back up, and Sorun almost felt insulted that he had the gall to actually sound upset at him. "What are you even doing here, Sorun!? You're hurt! You're suppose to be resting in the hospital, not out here fighting Eggman! Get down from there!"

Sorun couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What the- no!" he shouted in refusal.

"Sorun, you have one eye!"

"And I'm still trying to figure out how many eyes you have!" Sorun tore his gaze away from Sonic and looked to Eggman. "Seriously,

how many eyes do hedgehogs have?" he asked. "You see what I mean, right? The weird thing going on with their eyes?"

He couldn't help but be surprised when Eggman offered him a helpful shrug. "I'll be honest, Sorun, I don't know, either. I have a running theory that it's an evolutionary trait meant to give them higher depth perception, though I've yet to discover if the eyes are separate or just a single organ with two irises. Or if this theory is even true for that matter."

"... How does squishing a pair of eyes together give someone better depth perception?"

"Biology isn't perfect, Sorun. There's a reason I stick to machines."

"This is getting me nowhere." Shaking his head, Sorun focused back down on Sonic. "Can you just give me, like, a single second!? I'll get down after!"

"No! You'll get down *now* !" Sonic demanded. "You know how much you keep stressing everybody out by doing this!? I get it, you don't like being chained down, *believe me* I get it, but you gotta slow it down!"

"Yeah, Sorun," Eggman added, face-splitting grin on his face as he leaned back with his hands behind his head, "that's rather rude of you to be so inconsiderate of your friends. They're just worried about you."

With a barely-contained growl, Sorun reared back at Eggman and hissed out, "You stay out of this." He paused, eye blinking as he realized something. "Why am I even arguing about this?"

He stabbed forwards with the sword again, though this time Eggman didn't even flinch away from the relaxed pose and smug look he was giving Sorun. The pale teen didn't bother wondering why that was, although he got his answer when the tip of the sword was once

again stopped millimeters away from the Doctor's face. It wasn't because Sorun had paused like last time, though.

No, this time the sword was stopped when a gloved hand reached out and grasped the blade before it pierced Eggman.

A deep, heaving sigh escaped Sorun as he slowly looked upwards. Sonic, in a burst of speed that had been all but imperceptible to Sorun's eye, had appeared right in front of him and was keeping a firm grip on the blade of the sword. And he was still maintaining that serious glare he was shooting Sorun, which only served to make Sorun that much more irritated.

"Hey. Just what do you think you're doing?" Sorun questioned the hedgehog in a low, even tone.

"Stopping you from making a terrible mistake," Sonic answered back in a tone equal with Sorun's. "Put the sword down, and go back into the city."

"Better idea. Let go of the sword so I can end the war in approximately two seconds."

"You're gonna end the war by taking a life?"

"Oh, come on! Do you hear yourself!?" Sorun shouted at him. "This is Eggman! There's not a single government in my world that would hesitate to kill him for a fraction of the things he did!"

"Well, you're not on your home world right now. You're on Mobius. And that isn't how we do things." Sonic shoved the sword away from Eggman. Sorun had stumbled back a bit, his eye still affixed to Sonic even with the blade held at his side. "Besides," Sonic continued, "we need him."

There probably wasn't a stranger sentence that could have been uttered to Sorun to make him as confused as what Sonic just told him. It was so unexpected that Sorun had nearly dropped Yamato

and the scabbard held in his left hand, and he'd gone from glaring at Sonic to looking at him with a completely bewildered look. Even Eggman seemed completely floundered by what he just said, his hands falling away from his head as his spectacled eyes looked up at the blue Mobian.

"You... need me?" he repeated. "What exactly is running through your rodent-sized brain, rodent?"

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm with Eggman on this," Sorun said. "What in the world do we need him for?"

"That talking head you met, Dimitri. Nicole brought him to me and Sal at the same time she told us you ran out here on your own," he said. "And he told us that Enerjak's back. So we need Egghead's help."

Some small part of Sorun had been hoping that Sonic could *somehow* pull some justifiable reason for why the hell they needed Eggman of all people's help in dealing with whoever that person even was. Sorun didn't feel any satisfaction from it, though. In fact he felt even more lost than he had before, and all it caused in him was frustration. He genuinely couldn't understand why he thought they needed the help of the man who ruined the entire world. For some random guy named Enerjak no less.

"Shoulda fucking locked myself and Eggman in a pocket dimension before he had a chance to stop me."

Even now Sorun still wanted to, but he couldn't when Sonic was this close. And he didn't have any illusion of being able to pull it off now, not when Sonic was actively against it. The guy could move faster than the electrical signals needed for Sorun to make conscious movement. He couldn't do anything. And that just made it all the more frustrating for Sorun, knowing Eggman was right there, mere feet away and completely vulnerable, and Sorun couldn't do a thing about it because Sonic wouldn't let him.

"We could do that. Alternatively," Sorun offered as he pointed his sword at Eggman, "you let me drop the crackpot over there and we just go deal with it ourselves."

Rolling his eyes, Sonic placed a finger on the sword and pushed it down back to Sorun's side. "A, we don't take things that far, and B, that's a mondo bad idea. We can't just 'go up' against someone like Enerjak. Not without some major preparation, at least."

"Why," Sorun angrily hissed out, "is this Enerjak guy such a big deal that we need Eggman's help?"

"Didn't Knuckles tell you about him?"

"Probably. Refresh my memory."

"Ah, for the..." Sonic's ears flattened against his head briefly in irritation, and at the same time he'd rubbed at his nose. His ears straightened back up as he took a deep breath to explain, during which Eggman had leaned forwards in interest to listen to him. "Okay. Enerjak: literal god. No good. If we fight him, we lose. If Eggy fights him, he loses hard."

"Watch it, Sonic," Eggman warned, though was quieted down when Sonic held a finger to his lips.

"Tut-tut-tut, the sane people are speaking," Sonic said, and then turned back to Sorun. He'd quickly smirked for a single second when he heard a growl of indignation from the scientist behind him. "Look, bottom line, every side's cooked goin' up against him alone. So as bad as it sounds, and I know it sounds bad, we gotta truce up for a bit."

Sorun scoffed. "A god? Sonic, come on," he said with a shake of his head. "He can't be that tough-"

"He is!" Sonic refuted with a raised voice. "Look, I-I don't know all the details, okay? It's mostly Knuckles that dealt with him all the time,

but he went to Angel Island the other day to check on things and we haven't been able to raise anybody there, Julie-Su and the rest of the Chaotix are freaking out, it-it's a whole big mess, and you running off like this isn't helping anybody."

There was a beat of silence as Sorun paused. He thought over Sonic's words, and slowly Yamato and its sheath began to dissipate. "Knuckles is...?" he hesitantly asked, causing Sonic to shrug his shoulders and sigh.

"We don't know. Best case he lost all ways of contacting us, worse case he got captured by Enerjak," he said. "Sally's thinking of sending me and Tails up to the island along with a drone Nicole made so we can all scope things out. So I am asking you to *please* go back to the hospital so everyone can focus on the literal god coming for all of us."

"... Fine. Maybe this actually is a more pressing issue." He had serious, serious doubts it was until the detail with Knuckles came up. He'd seen the echidna in action enough. Suffice it to say he was... tough. Extremely so. Up there with some of the best fighters he met in this world. Hearing something bad might have happened to someone as capable as him did more than give credence to the threat. It all but confirmed it for Sorun.

But still, a god? That alone was too vague a word for Sorun to go on, which made it so he couldn't accurately gauge how big a threat Sonic was implying here. At the very least, someone powerful. Scary powerful if it was making Sonic desperate enough making truces with Eggman of all people.

"I still think you're overhyping this guy by a wide margin, Sonic, but... sure. I'll go," Sorun agreed with a small sigh. "On the condition," he added, halting Sonic from forming a relieved face, "that I go to where Sally is to check things out. Alright? I'll go to the hospital afterwards."

"Seriously, Sor- ugh, fine, sure, works for me, but you're gonna have to take it up with Sal," Sonic reluctantly agreed with a wave of his

hand. "Just please go back into the city. I gotta hash out terms on old sunny-side down here."

Another scoff, smaller this time, left Sorun as his eye drifted towards Robotnik. The guy was practically eating all this up from that wide grin on his face, and Sorun knew he was doing it just to mock him for the fact he couldn't kill him because of Sonic. Sorun could practically feel the smug wafting off of him.

Another chance lost, then. But if Sonic was to be believed, which Sorun doubted, this was more important.

"Yeah," Sorun airily muttered as he began turning around. "You do that."

"Until next time, Sorun," Robotnik mockingly called after him in a faux-friendly voice. "Do try and get better for next time, you hear?"

Sorun didn't bother to deign him with a response before Tricking away.

"Ludicrous. All of this is just... so ludicrous."

That was Sorun's sole opinion on the matter as he stared up at a metal ceiling. The room was somewhere in the science center, one of the buildings in New Mobotropolis Nicole had built. In particular this room was a communications hub of sorts, or a makeshift one at least given the current situation. He wasn't actually doing anything, though. He was just in the back of the room sitting flat on his back on a bench, idly kicking his crossed legs every so often with his hands tucked under his head.

The teen turned his head a bit to look at the people in the room that *were* actually doing something. Sally was in front of a large computer and a bunch of monitors, one of which was displaying drone footage of Sonic and Tails on the floating island- which, according to Dimitri, was approaching the city. Not in of itself a good sign. Nicole was in

the room concentrating on controlling the drone. Julie-Su was pacing around looking like a nervous wreck, likely, Sorun presumed, because of Knuckles. Dimitri was just... there. Existing. Kind of like Sorun was right now.

If Sally was upset at him, she wasn't showing it, probably because she was too focused on what was going on. He'd asked to stay for a bit and she'd just immediately ordered him to sit on the bench and do nothing, and if he disobeyed her Nicole would force him back into the hospital.

Nicole wouldn't even speak with him. He'd like to think it was because she was occupied controlling the drone. He also didn't really believe this was wholly true, and that maybe he'd pushed things too far with rushing after Eggman like that. Even she had limites, after all. Sorun feared he may have pushed them too much.

"I get they're worried for my health, justifiable worry admittedly if not for the wrong reasons, but goddamn, I'm not gonna fall apart from moving a little bit. And can they really blame me for taking a shot at Eggman?" The answer, apparently, was yes. *"Really makes me feel like that one guy in the room nobody wants to deal with. Like I'm a liability or something. Christ, I'm not fuckin' fragile."*

He didn't even know what was getting to him worse: that or this whole Enerjak situation. A situation which had come completely out of left field, right out of the blue. A threat that was apparently so great everybody was dropping everything and scrambling to deal with him. A freshly-elected council was already mobilized. Guards around the city were at the ready. It honestly felt like everyone was preparing for war.

"Over one guy I'm just hearing about now, though? Isn't it overkill? And god? Really?" He still didn't know what that implied. The word "god" meant a lot of things, too many to simply list. Sorun didn't even know if a title like that was applicable to the guy, even if everybody was acting like it did. Was he omnipotent? Omniscient? How far did his powers span, if he even had any? *What* was he, actually? Or

who? He didn't know anything other than this was a threat that originated from Angel Island.

Because of course it did.

"Angel Island..." Sorun thought. *"Fucking... echidna. Why do they always gotta complicate everything with their mere fucking existence?"*

It all boiled down to a confusing mess for Sorun. He didn't know what was what, nobody was talking to him because they were either so preoccupied they couldn't afford the time or were too frustrated at his actions, or both, and he was sitting here twiddling his thumbs like the kid shoved in the corner at school.

He tried not thinking about Eggman, because thinking about how Sorun failed to kill him *again* on top of everything else was too much.

Some movement in the corner of Sorun's one eye drew his attention. He turned his head more to the side, enough to see the floating head stop next to him. A head that really did just look like Knuckles if Knuckles was a robot head, down to the mechanical dreadlocks. It, he, Dimitri, somehow looked old past all the electronics, though. Sorun couldn't quite pin down why. Or even what the hell he was.

So much was happening and he didn't have a clue on any of it...

"Hey there, Dimitri," Sorun muttered out in greeting. "It seems I vastly underestimated just how severe your problem was, because everybody's freaking out over it. Thanks for bringing all this trouble."

"You would rather I have remained silent and left you all in ignorance?"

Sorun snorted through his nose. "Sarcasm just flies right over your head, don't it? Guess it wouldn't be too hard, seein' as how low to the ground you are."

"Pah! Sarcasm," Dimitri all but spat. "The-"

"The last refuge of the witless, yeah, yeah, I know it's the lowest form of verbal combat," Sorun interrupted with a roll of his eye. "Doesn't stop me from using it as my go-to, though. I try to mix it up sometimes, but it's easy to default to it. Doesn't help how great a coping mechanism it is."

The floating echidna head paused. The red, mechanical eyes he had widened in surprise at the human. "That... you said what I wanted to say better than I would have said it," he admitted. "I'll admit, you confuse me. You strike me as someone that is somehow wise beyond their years and yet not wise enough at the same time. It's a confusing conundrum."

"Told ya already. I'm the smartest idiot," Sorun said. "Put too many points in wisdom and not enough in intelligence."

"Er... right." A beat passed. "'Sarcasm, the last refuge of the witless.' That quote. I quite like it. Is it yours?"

Sorun shook his head. "Nah. Stole it from a video game character. Like everything else." He sighed through his nose. "Don't even know if I got it right; I only ever heard it once and it's been a while. It was from this scientist guy in an RPG. Had a cool story, lots of themes about the devaluation of human life and real-life parallels to the soul-crushing reality of working in a corporation all alongside a really quirky cast of characters. You play video games? You seem like a guy who plays video games."

Dimitri's expression turned lost. "I... I'm afraid I don't follow a single thing you just said."

"..." Sorun turned his head back up to the ceiling. "You've lived a sad life, dude."

"On that, I sadly say we must agree." Dimitri's artificial eyes looked focused in on Sorun's body. Specifically, the blue, spectral arm

replacing his lost arm, which was currently folded under the teens head. "What exactly are you?" Dimitri finally asked. "That arm. It's not natural. Just what is it? Who are you?"

"Question of the hour." Sorun turned his head back to Dimitri. "I'll tell ya if you give me the details on this Enerjak guy everyone's panicking over. Deal?"

The first step to unraveling this mess, Sorun supposed, was getting to the bottom of the mystery surrounding this Enerjak guy. Offering his own origin story in exchange didn't seem like a big price. Not like he cared about keeping himself a secret, unlike other things about himself. At the very least he hoped to get a rundown of his abilities.

Fortunately, Dimitri seemed to be in agreement with Sorun's logic. "That is fair enough," he decided. "Very well. Enerjak, simply put, is an entity who resides in the Chaos Force. I myself know very little on how he came to be, though I do know that, for all his power, he cannot sustain a physical form to interact with this world. He requires a compatible vessel. I myself was at one point Enerjak."

Any other time Sorun might have made some over-exaggerated response. Made a sarcastic response about how he sounded more like a ghost than a god, make a parallel to some piece of fiction from his world. Something like that. But Sorun was too mentally exhausted to do anything but slowly breath out. "So how'd that happen?" he asked.

"I was a young and ambitious echidna. For various reasons that are irrelevant to the conversation, I had infused myself with the power of a Chaos Emerald."

Sorun's interest was piqued with that statement. "Really?" he asked in a slow drawl. "I assume this was back when there were a lot more of the things, before the... great joining or whatever when they became the seven. So you juiced up on a lot of Chaos energy and became... what, little-g god, big-G God, what's the power scaling, what are we actually dealing with?"

"As Enerjak, my power was near-omnipotent," Dimitri informed him, making Sorun groan out. "The power allowing me to remain as Enerjak was lost to me, however, some part in thanks to... certain events that had transpired with the current Guardian."

"... Y'mean Knuckles?"

"Yes, that's correct. I harbor no ill will towards him. It's only afterwards I realized being Enerjak had corrupted certain priorities of mine, but such things do not matter at present," Dimitri said. "With a body aged hundreds of years and with no Chaos energy to sustain it, I was forced to undergo a full cybernetic conversion so save my life. My current... disembodied state," he'd grumbled out in a low voice, "was due to the demented curiosity of what can only be described as a mad scientist. An echidna by the name of Dr. Finitevus currently located on Angel Island who, until as of late, we'd thought had the interest of the echidna species at heart. Obviously we were incorrect."

"Ah, great, just what we needed. Another psycho-doc. And he's an echidna to boot, of course..."

"Somehow, in some way, he has found a way to reincarnate Enerjak," Dimitri continued in a grave tone. "I can't say I know for certain what his or Enerjak's true goals are, but I do know it can only mean disaster for all on Mobius. But I cannot hope to do anything in this meager state, and with the Guardian currently missing, I had no choice but to seek the Freedom Fighters out for help."

A small hum left Sorun's throat. "Alright, so... the lore is you juice up with Chaos energy, become Enerjak, get knocked out of the Enerjak state and get borged, crazy scientist guy on floating island brings Enerjak back somehow for some nefarious and nebulous purpose, got it, don't need any more details." He wasn't sure he even wanted more details past that. His brain hurt just catching up with that much. "Man, it figures," Sorun mumbled out as he lifted his right blue hand up above his face. "Some random echidna beams some Chaos energy into himself, and he gets omnipotence. I go out of my way to

eat Chaos Emeralds, and the strongest thing I get from that is a nifty sword." He clicked his tongue in annoyance. "'Least I get to keep my sense of self. This Enerjak thing don't sound like that good a deal."

"You... what?" Sorun tore his gaze from his hand to the cybernetic head floating next to him. "You've absorbed Chaos Emeralds?" Dimitri repeated in a disbelieving tone. "How? Such a thing should not be possible. To absorb Emeralds in their entirety is... is unthinkable."

"Well, start thinking," Sorun retorted. "I don't have a link to the Chaos Force like everything else. Not even a weak link like most everyone else has. Just nothing at all. Zip. Nada. I'm a void-type."

"That's even more impossible," Dimitri claimed, though he sounded believing from the slight awe to his male, electronic voice. "Chaos energy fuels all life. It's present everywhere, in every facet of the universe, of the multiverse! It's ubiquitous in its nature. Nothing, absolutely nothing, should be able to exist without even the weakest link to the Chaos Force." His red eyes stared intently at Sorun's one blue eye. "If you did not have a link to the Chaos Force, you would be dead. Your cells would not function. Organs wouldn't be able to operate. Your very soul wouldn't exist. Life *requires* Chaos energy to function."

"Take it up with my home universe. Apparently it gets to defy all the rules." Dimitri quieted down at that, prompting Sorun to elaborate. "Yeah, I'm not from this zone. I'm from one that's apparently so far away they needed the power of all the Chaos Emeralds just to get there. That's how removed from the multiverse Earth is." He formed Yamato in his spectral hand's grasp, causing Dimitri to bob back a bit in shock. "The ability to get powers from Chaos Emeralds is a trait unique to my entire species. I'm the only one that ever got the chance to utilize it since I'm the only one that's ever been on Mobius, or anywhere else with Chaos energy for that matter." The sword disappeared, followed by the hand flopping down and hanging limply off the bench Sorun laid on. "To answer your question, I'm a human from Earth. Either call me that or an Earthling, though that latter

identifier never really seems to take off all that much." He lifted his head up a bit. "And don't mix me up for an Overlander. I don't like being compared to them."

"Fascinating..." Dimitri's head leaned in closer to Sorun as he rested his head back down on the bench. "The sheer amount of Chaos energy in your body must be... staggering. Truly astounding. You do not even seem to be suffering any debilitating mental side effects due to your abilities, unlike the corruption of Enerjak..."

"From the powers, no. The stress of living, eh..."

"If only Albion hadn't been decimated by Eggman's fleet. I would have been quite interested to learn what the scientists there would have made of you," Dimitri said, making Sorun's eye flash to him. "Echidna resided there. They had a greater understanding of Chaos energy and its effects on living beings than anyone else on the planet I would think. I'm sure they would have been very interested to meet somebody as you."

A slight frown found its way on Sorun's face. "Don't take this the wrong way, Dimitri, but asides from Knuckles and Julie-Su, your entire species gives me a migraine. This whole Enerjak kerfuffle is happening because you echidna screwed around with Chaos energy. Why would I *ever* trust some pencil neck echidna to get anywhere near me with the intent to study me?" That just wasn't happening. He'd be liable to kill anybody that tried, not just for his safety, but because he plain didn't trust them not to mess up somehow and endanger multiple people around them. Like his friends. And Aurora and Athair's actions still rang heavy in his head.

He wouldn't say he hated the echidna species, but it was hard for him not to dislike them for how much their presence inconvenienced him. It was a drastic generalization Sorun tried to avoid. He didn't do a very good job.

"Perhaps I was too forwards," Dimitri admitted as Sorun sat up on the bench. "And, in truth, your fears are not unfounded. In terms you

would probably use... our track history is not the greatest."

"You don't say?" Sorun shook his head, lightly scoffing as he looked up. Sally was still at the computer, now giving orders to Sonic and Tails on the island. Nicole was still focusing on the drone. "They're busy."

"Yes," Dimitri agreed, and then turned to Sorun. "I sense things are tense between you and the rest of the Freedom Fighters."

"Tense is putting it lightly. Nicole is getting ready to put me in a straight jacket and toss me in a padded cell until I heal from injuries I got in a fight because everyone's worried a slight breeze will atomize me."

He glanced up a bit after finishing speaking. He spotted Nicole still holding a hand to her head while focusing on controlling the drone. He also saw one of her eyes was half-opened and looking at him. She didn't look very pleased at what she heard, either. Sorun wasn't hopeful enough to assume it was just because she was concentrating on the drone.

Making an unsettled hum, Sorun turned back to Dimitri. "She'd probably be right to. Can't rightly blame them for the way they keep reacting around me," he continued, noting from the corner of his eye that Nicole's own opened eye widened just the slightest bit. "I don't like worrying them all the time like this, but it's hard to just sit still and do nothing. All this power, Dimitri, and sometimes it feels like I can't do anything with it."

The green eye that was watching Sorun continued to be trained on him for a few seconds after he finished speaking, and then it closed as Nicole turned her head back up to the front of the room. Her expression didn't change even the smallest amount, causing Sorun to make a sigh.

"Dunno if I saved it or not."

"So what do you plan on doing?" Dimitri questioned him.

Looking back to the floating head, Sorun said, "You know, believe it or not, I actually do think swinging a katana at a literal god would be the stupidest thing I've ever done and would like to avoid this entirely. And I'm sure everybody else would, too, since I'm a bit busted at the moment. What'll actually happen, though..." Sorun blew a lock of black hair out of his face and leaned back on the bench. "I don't know. I'm just gonna see where the chips fall and go with it. Plannin' ain't my style."

"Surely with all your power a more active role in this is warranted," Dimitri argued.

"Maybe, maybe not." Sorun shrugged. "We'll see."

Dimitri didn't look overly satisfied on Sorun's answer based on the scowl his mechanical face wore. "Then I hope for all our sakes you end up making the right choice."

Sorun remained silent as he watched Dimitri's head float off towards the front of the room where everyone else was. A commotion towards the biggest monitor Sally was sitting in front of had drawn everybody's attention, Sorun's included. And it was from there that Sorun finally got to see what all the fuss over.

There he was, right there on the drone's camera. Right in front of a small army of echidna, most of which Sorun saw sporting various cybernetic bits on their body. Part of that Dark Legion whatever he'd only paid half attention to. He was less focused on them and more on Enerjak, who was standing right in front of him. Seeing him alone made Sorun think everybody may have been right to worry about him.

He couldn't see his face. He had some kind of blue outfit on fitted with gold, regal-looking pieces. Even the helmet he wore that obscured his face looked to be made of solid gold, and also

resembled something the Egyptian pharaohs of old from his world would wear. Something that brought great confusion to Sorun.

"Guy looks like he walked straight out of the pyramids with that getup, right down to the gold miniskirt and weird circle neck thing." An unsettled feeling began to grow in him when he actually saw the so-called god at work. A green aura of energy continually flowed around him. Cannon fire from tanks and lasers from weapons bouncing harmlessly off of him. Sorun had to watch as Enerjak effortlessly did little more than wave his hand and cause the legion of echidna in front of him to change. Just change, instantly, with but a single gesture. In a single blink of an eye Sorun watched as the echidna he fought changed from being cyborgs to full flesh-and-blood echidna. *"So we got nigh-invulnerability to conventional arms and heavy munitions, the ability to selectively disintegrate anything just by looking at it, ability to regenerate damn-near anything on anybody just by thinking about it if he managed to de-cyborg all those echidna... holy fuck, he actually is omnipotent. Or at least really close to it. Teleporting, too?"* He wondered as he saw some of the echidna he'd changed be enveloped in a green aura and shoot up into the sky. *"Or at least some form of fast travel he can use on others, but I wouldn't be surprised to see him use raw teleportation at this point. Probably doesn't even have a range limit like my Tricks do."*

None of what he saw just was good. He could say one thing for certain: nobody had undersold just how dangerous he was after all. Because Sorun was starting to get nervous looking at him. *"Maybe Sonic was right to ask for Dr. Robotnik's help after all. Can they even beat this guy?"* Sorun looked down at his spectral hand. *"Could Yamato even hurt him? Maybe..."* He glanced up at the screen again. *"Dimitri* became *Enerjak from infusing himself with Chaos energy from an Emerald, right? But he's here, and Enerjak's there. Dimitri himself said he's a separate entity. So what does that make him, some... some concept of sorts? One that needs a host to exist?"* Eyes back down to the arm. *"Yamato can separate concepts..."*

"Why is this even a matter of debate!?" Sorun was interrupted from his silent musings when a raised voice caused him to look up. The voice had come from Dimitri, who had risen his head up to be at eye-level with Nicole. "If you truly have limitless control of the nanites in this city, than construct a weapon to aid us in defeating Enerjak!"

The look Nicole shot at Dimitri was one Sorun had never seen on her before. He thought he'd seen her be angry before. From that time she'd been upset at him for avoiding her, or more recently for pushing himself too far despite everybody asking him to dial it back. Looks of exasperation and frustration. He thought he'd seen the worse she could do be thrown at him.

But what he saw right now, that look she was giving Dimitri, she'd never given him that look before. Something that looked like genuine anger. Eyes intensely narrowed, posture rigid, teeth bared. She'd never used anything even close to that on Sorun. She looked downright scary.

"I will not," Nicole asserted in a low and threatening tone, "devote the nanites or this city to weapons of any kind."

Unlike Sorun, Dimitri didn't even seemed fazed by Nicole's anger. "You cannot seriously-!"

Scraaaaape.

Both of them snapped their heads towards Sorun. The teen had manifested Yamato bare of its scabbard and had scraped it along the metal floor. Not hard enough to cut, but just enough to make that loud, unbearable sound. "Hey. Chrome Dome," Sorun intoned in a blank voice as he stared towards the floating head. "Leave her alone."

"You agree with her!?" Dimitri cried out, tone cynical. "You would take her side-!?"

"I look like someone who'd side with a guy he met half an hour ago over a friend?" Sorun muttered out. "Her nanites. Her choice. Deal with it or I'll drop you in the ocean." He tapped Yamato against the floor. "I'm not kidding around with that, either. I'll do it if you don't stop bothering her."

Dimitri had stared after Sorun for a couple of seconds, and then without a word scoffed and floated away. Sorun released the breath he'd been holding, though he'd only been allowed a moment's reprieve before Nicole appeared right in front of him, arms crossed and face... not nearly as angry as she'd looked with Dimitri, but still agitated.

"I can handle myself, Sorun," she said.

"I'm just trying to help." Sorun lifted up Yamato. "Speaking of which-"

"Absolutely not," Nicole interrupted with a shake of her head. "Sorun, you shouldn't even be here right now. I understand you wished to be informed of what was happening, but we only allowed you to stay here on the condition you go to the hospital and *stay* there right after."

"That was then. This is now. And right now I have an idea." He Tricked right behind Sally at the other side of the room before Nicole could get a retort in. The chipmunk started in her seat at his sudden appearance, but before she could get a single word out Sorun beat her to it. "Sally, hear me out. I need you to let me stab Enerjak in the face with my katana."

The sentence spoken by Sorun seemed to leave Sally absolutely mystified in her seat from the way she was looking at him like he'd sprouted a second head or something. She was quick to regain herself, though, and then adamantly shook her head at Sorun. "Not a chance. You're not joining the battle with the rest of us. Not when you're still recovering."

"No, listen, Sally," Sorun tried, "you don't understand. Yamato can-"

"Sorun. That is enough." A black-furred hand fell on Sorun's left shoulder. He turned around, purple and brown filling his vision when he perceived Nicole standing right behind him. "You are still in no condition to be doing anything as strenuous as combat. The entirety of the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix, with the exception of Knuckles who is still missing, as well as the forces in the city are ready to fight him. Sally is even calling for outside help in assisting us. I realize you wish to help as well, but it is unnecessary."

"Nicole-" Sorun weakly protested, though was quieted down when the AI began to lead him away from Sally.

"Please, Sorun, just *please* let us handle it. You've done enough." The lynx lead Sorun all the way back to the bench at the back of the room, where she'd sat him back down. By the time Sorun opened his mouth to speak back to her she'd already moved away back to the front of the room. This caused Sorun to sigh out as he sagged on the bench, Yamato disappearing from his hand.

"This is unreal. Frustrating. Infuriating. I get where they're coming from, I know they mean well, but they're seriously planning on fighting that *?"* It may have sounded a bit hypocritical from him considering how skeptical he'd been of Enerjak at first, but seeing him on a screen, seeing those near-omnipotent powers at work... of course he had doubts they'd be able to actually do anything. He'd taken out an entire army by *looking* at it.

That was power. Power Sorun had doubts anybody in even the Freedom Fighters could fight against. Power Sorun didn't have, either. But maybe he had something that could cheat around it.

"I'm really fearing for them here. I don't want them fighting that guy." He looked back up at the front of the room. Nicole had gone back to controlling the drone, Sally and Julie-Su were in an argument, Dimitri had just straight-up *left* at some point, Sorun didn't know where... it was practically chaos. *"If I'm right I'd only need a single shot at the guy- wait, wait..."*

Enerjak was back on the screen. Looking right at the drone's camera. *Uncomfortably close* to the drone, mere inches away. He'd raised his hand, glowing green with Chaos energy. The monitor was barely able to pick up the drone being telepathically crushed before the feed cut out completely.

And then Sorun heard Nicole cry out in pain and stumble back a few steps while holding her hand to her head.

All the ambient noise in the background was deafened to Sorun's ears. His single eye had snapped right up to Nicole as the rest of Sorun's body froze, the pupil constricting to a pinprick. His heartbeat began to grow louder as blood rushed through his body at a faster rate. Underneath his completely blank face true anger began to roil in Sorun.

"Enerjak destroyed the drone Nicole was linked to. He hurt Nicole. He hurt her."

Sorun Tricked to Nicole's side without even thinking. He held a hand out to her, but refrained from touching her when she quickly managed to regain her composure and shake off whatever had hurt her. He still couldn't help but to call out to her even after seeing she appeared fine. "N-Nicole?"

"My link to the probe being cut so abruptly proved to be a bit more than expected," she mumbled out as her eyes turned towards Sorun. "I'm fine. More importantly, Enerjak is coming. Angel Island is already nearly over the city."

A small amount of relief flooded through Sorun. It wasn't enough to quell any of the quiet anger inside of him. "I'm not sitting on the sidelines while you all go out there."

Nicole grimaced. "Sorun, you said-"

"You're seriously gonna bench me when a god's about to come down here and-!?"

"We are not 'benching' you," Nicole argued, "we are making sure you don't get hurt any worse than you already are!"

"Nicole-!"

"Go to your room, Sorun!"

A flash of white-green light flooded Sorun's view, causing him to cry out in surprise. He felt a strange sensation along his body - like static running over him - followed by another strange sensation. Him sitting down on something soft.

"... Huh?" The white-green light faded from Sorun's vision, only to replaced by more white. The white of a hospital room. A hospital room the teen was certain he hadn't been in a few seconds ago. "What- what the- she... she teleported me? She can do that?" Sorun muttered out.

He hadn't known she could forcibly teleport people in the city. Or that the nanites had that type of capability. Did they? Did she build some kind of teleportation machine she could use it anywhere she wanted? Wouldn't surprise him; he saw similar tech on Eggman's mech suit. She herself said she was familiar with it. It still shocked him she even had something like that. And even more that she'd used it to force him back to his hospital room.

"... 'Go to your room.' What am I, four?" Sorun quietly scoffed to himself as he looked up from the bed he was sitting on. "I can't believe she- what happened to the door!?"

The door to his hospital room was gone. Simply gone. It just wasn't there anymore. Where once there was a door there was now only a smooth, white wall. Nicole removed the door.

"Oh my god, she did me like Ed's parents when they grounded him and trapped him in the basement by taking the stairs away in that one cartoon," Sorun mumbled out in disbelief. "She really does think I'm four, doesn't she...?"

It'd been... Sorun wanted to say around twenty minutes. Twenty minutes since Nicole effectively grounded him to his hospital room, a concept that still had him reeling. Could have been thirty minutes. There were too many emotions swirling around in Sorun for him to keep track of something like that.

Sheer bewilderment over Nicole having actually gone as far as to trap him in his hospital room out of fear for his health. Frustration over everybody treating him like he was made of glass. Exhaustion from this whole Enerjak situation. Fear over Enerjak himself. Unbridled fury at him having hurt Nicole, even if it was unintentional and momentary. It was all too much. Sorun couldn't think straight.

What made it worse was that he heard the sounds of combat outside. Sorun couldn't see it, of course- the most he got were glances out of a window that wasn't even a window anymore, just a glass pane that didn't open in any way. The thundering of Chaos energy attacks being shot off and other such things. Sorun could have sworn he'd seen flashes of very familiar-looking spear-shaped energy attacks in the distance, and flashes of a red and black form. So Shadow, then. Sally apparently managed to get through to G.U.N. and they'd at least sent Shadow.

It didn't do much to make Sorun feel better. He couldn't stand it. Everybody out there fighting somebody that seemed way out of their league, and here he was stuck in a hospital room pacing around like a maniac because he just couldn't sit still through it all. Too antsy. Too eager to get out there and help. Too worried about what was happening to everybody because the *bloody idiots chose to fight a god* .

"Yamato has the capability to rend man from devil. If Vergil can stab himself with the Yamato and separate his human and demonic halves, creating V and Urizen, then I can for sure separate Enerjak and whoever he's possessing. All I'd need is one clean hit." Sorun ceased his pacing and firmly planted down on the bed, groaning out loud in frustration. *"Agh, but everybody has a fucking point! My*

body's shit, it just can't keep up with a Mobian, let alone a fucking juiced-up super Mobian god or whatever the fuck Enerjak is. Especially right now when I'm so many Emeralds deep I get winded so easy. I wouldn't last long enough. I need... I need something to help me."

He got up off the bed, and immediately turned to the back of the room. Towards where the cabinets were, above the small sink in the counter at the back. Sorun approached it without a moment's hesitation, and then began opening cabinets with the intent to rifle through them.

"Come on, this is a hospital. There's gotta be something, ANYTHING, that can help me out here. A pick-me-up, a booster of some kind, I'd take a fucking Flinstones chewable vitamin at this point if it'd even give me so much as a second longer-"

Sorun's thoughts cut out when he opened a cabinet and saw something. A syringe. A single, innocuous syringe just sitting there, looking so out of place in the otherwise empty cabinet. Sorun blinked at it, and then reached out towards it. He grabbed it, and then pulled it out of the cabinet. He rolled the syringe full of a clear fluid around so he could see the label on the others side, and then started reading it.

"... Oh. Oh, shit. Seriously? They just leave something like this lying around? Pffft, I'll take it. Perfect." The syringe was sent straight to Sorun's pocket. Maybe it wasn't so strange, seeing as he *was* in a hospital, but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. The contents of that syringe were just what he needed.

"Alright. Got what I need. Now..." Sorun approached the unopenable window and made a contemplative hum. *"How do I escape the hospital room? There's no door, and I don't know if even the Bringer Claws are strong enough to punch out a window made with Nicole's nanites. With my luck they'd just regenerate. Maybe I could..."*

His thoughts trailed off, followed by Sorun's expression falling flat. He inhaled, and then looked down at his hand as Yamato appeared in his grip. *"... Right. I can just do that."* He looked up at the window. *"Sorry, Nicole, but I can teleport, too."* He sliced the sword through the air. *"Or at least make portals."*

Wanted to find where in the city all your friends were fighting a god? That was easy: just ignore the *city shaking* and follow the red and green lights in the distance. That's the method Sorun employed, anyways. He'd gone straight towards the source of the fighting after escaping the hospital, only giving the large island floating above the city a cursory glance before facing back to his destination.

"So that's what it looks like. Huh. Guess it's about what I expected. Giant floating island."

He only needed to round a house's corner to see where all the commotion was happening. It was in a small grass clearing, between a bunch of houses and near the library, all of which looked to be in rough shape. The first thing Sorun saw was the crowd of people. Not just all the Freedom Fighters. Not just the Chaotix, sans Knuckles. Not even just Shadow and Rouge, who were also there. No, there were even random New Mobotropolis citizens there, too, all grouped up to one side. And seemingly frozen in place, as they were all surrounded by a green aura and none of them were moving.

And in front of them all was the man of the hour himself. Enerjak. Nothing more to say about that. He was just standing there, talking, seemingly, to the crowd of Mobians he'd evidently frozen. Sorun's patience ended there, and he Tricked a few meters behind Enerjak and the frozen crowd.

"You know it's bad when you gotta rely on the cripple to save the day."

Gone was all the fear, the anxiety, the worry. Not when the source of all today's ire was standing right there in front of Sorun, in all his

golden glory. Not when he was still upset at everybody for the way they were treating him, even if he understood it. Not when he had to see Nicole hurt like that.

He was just genuinely pissed off.

Enerjak had stopped in whatever monologue he'd been in, and turned around. The only part of his face Sorun could see past the gold helmet was his mouth and red dreadlocks, and Sorun saw Enerjak's mouth was open a bit in surprise at seeing him. Even the white lenses of his helmet seemed a bit wider in shock.

Sorun ignored him completely and looked towards the crowd behind him. He made a "tch" sound and looked towards where he saw Sally's frozen body. "Wow, Sally. You let civilians fight the guy but not me. Really feeling your confidence in me here."

He saw her eyes, as well as everyone else's eyes, move around, but that was all that could move. He even heard muffled sounds as they attempted to speak out, but nothing significant made it out of whatever that green energy trapping them was.

"What did you do to them?" Sorun demanded, facing back towards Enerjak.

"They're unharmed, I assure you." Enerjak's voice was completely normal-sounding. And also familiar to the point that Sorun was starting to suspect who it actually was. And it just went to piss him off even more. "They're all merely in stasis. I've quieted them down so we can talk uninterrupted, but they're completely aware of everything happening."

"... Knuckles, take the stupid hat off."

Again, Enerjak started in surprise. Afterwards he lowly chuckled, and obliged Sorun by reaching up and taking the helmet off. He tucked it under his arm afterwards to reveal... just Knuckles' plain face. Same face, same violet eyes, he even had an easy smile on his face.

Expression was off, though. It looked friendly, but there was something there not quite right that Sorun couldn't put his finger on. Might have been the Chaos entity possessing him. It was, but wasn't Knuckles at the same time, despite it being his face. It unsettled Sorun a bit.

"Nothing gets past you, does it, Sorun?" Knuckles - Enerjak - asked. "I'm... glad you're here, actually. So we can talk."

"Wow, this came out of nowhere. Like, literally. There was no buildup to this at all. It just happened." Sorun began to pace back and forth, eye still locked on Knuckles who followed him with his own eyes. "So, Knuckles! You're coming up in the world. Got god-like power, fought everybody and won, Shadow couldn't even scratch you it seems, hi Shadow, long time no see," Sorun interrupted himself by nodding at the nearby, frozen dark hedgehog. "I'd go as far as to congratulate you," Sorun continued, facing back to Enerjak, "if you didn't also seem to go completely insane by attacking everybody around you."

The pleasant smile that was on Enerjak's face started to drop off. "You, too, do not approve of my ascension, it seems," he realized. "Sorun, you have to realize that what I do is for everybody's own good, including you."

"You know, I've been getting that a lot lately. It's starting to really tick me off."

"You're angry."

"Ohhhh no, Enerjak, I'm not angry. Knuckles, if he's still in there somewhere and not a mind puppet at this point, saw what me being angry is back in New Megaopolis with everyone else. Me when I was fighting Eggman? Cool, quiet Sorun? That was absolute anger. That was my peak." He held his spectral index finger in the air as he whirled his body to face the god-like echidna. "We're not quite there yet, but we're gettin' there." The hand fell back to Sorun's side, and he made a large sigh. "I'll give ya a chance to explain yourself,

though, even though I doubt it's gonna be good. But I'm a good person, right? And good people give others chances."

It was Enerjak's turn to sigh. "You misunderstand, Sorun. I *am* Knuckles."

Sorun scoffed in response, but remained quiet otherwise and allowed the echidna to continue.

"You are aware," he began, "that my people, the echidna people, were utterly decimated due to the machinations of Dr. Eggman, are you not?"

Shrugging, Sorun said, "Sure, real tragic. Failing to see the point, though."

"It's just one blot of misery on the bloodstained history that this planet has," Enerjak continued, looking down at the ground and grimacing. Sorun himself paused in surprise when he registered genuine anguish on his face. "My people, almost rendered extinct due to one madman and his sick fascination with technology. Before that my people were divided because half believed fusing their bodies with machinery and becoming abominations was the way to truly elevating the species. Before that the Overlanders used their technology to wipe out swathes of Mobians in the Great War. The effects of technology are still felt from how polluted parts of the planet are! This very city is powered by poison as a result of technology's misgivings!"

"What," Sorun interrupted, "does *any* of this have to do with attacking the town and our friends?"

"Everything, Sorun. Everything." He looked up at Sorun, and his expression turned even sadder. "Even you, dear friend," he mumbled out, making Sorun quirk his eyebrow. "You're only here because we abused technology out of desperation to defeat Eggman. We stole you from a home you can never return to, and stranded you in this world. And you still fought with us, despite all that." His expression

grew warmer. "You have no idea how much I grew to admire you, how deeply I respected you for everything you risked for a cause you had no right to be a part of. I can never express how grateful I am to you for how you put everything on the line to save everybody when Eggman took us all to those life-draining pods of his." The warmness fell away from his face, the helmet creaked as the arm it was under tightened. "Seeing you torn apart like that, to yet another technological monstrosity perpetrated by Eggman, hurt deeply. Don't you see how technology-"

"Don't make this about me." Sorun's voice cut through Enerjak's speech, causing him to quiet down and look at Sorun with questioning eyes. Sorun's own expression remained flat and unamused, the teen having actually felt anger at the god having tried to use his own suffering as a reason for all this. "You don't like technology, I get it. It's... it's this *thing* with echidna. The Knuckles I know never really seemed like he was in the crowd of radicals that was flat-out against it, though, so I'm believing less and less you're a hundred percent Knuckles. It's lookin' more like Enerjak than Knuckles to me." Slowly placing his hands in his pockets with the thumbs hanging out, Sorun leaned his body forwards in Enerjak's direction. "You don't like technology. It's a grave sin or whatever. Okay. We've established that. Now why don't you tell me what you plan on doing about it?"

It was around halfway through listening to Sorun's own words that Enerjak adopted that surprised look again. It began falling to a neutral expression towards the end, and once Sorun finished by asking the question he sighed and nodded towards him. "You are correct. Technology is a sin; its use even moreso. Everything it has touched has created nothing but blights and suffering for those involved." He tilted his head upwards, towards the island floating above them. "Through the efforts of Dr. Finitevus, I have seen the light. The world is far too corrupt. It cannot be saved. The only answer is to cleanse it and begin again. To usher in a new age ruled by benevolent strength, not cold metal." He lowered his head back down to Sorun. "This is what I have decided."

"So you're gonna save the world by destroying the world. You know, they have a term for that. It's called a logical fallacy. Alternatively we could simplify it and call it what it is: you being a moron." Sorun crouched down, loudly sighing as he looked up at the island. "So Dr. Fish Stick up there got it in your head that the world needs a reset because 'technology bad', so you're gonna reshape the world with your neato burrito powers that got you possessed by Enerjak." His head tilted down to Enerjak. "You're literally a walking trope villain right now. You know that, right? Ultron, Light Yagami, Mass Effect Reapers, these names mean nothing to you but I can go on. It never ended well for any of these people, by the way."

"My cause is just," Enerjak argued, violet eyes narrowing.

"Ehhhh, not really." Sorun stood up to his feet. "So now that we've analyzed your motivations and, surprise surprise, they're awful, we get to the part where I say stop it before I stab you in the face."

The threat hadn't registered at all with the echidna. If anything, he just looked more sad. "Sorun, please. Consider your actions," Enerjak pleaded. "It doesn't have to be like this. I can heal you- restore everything you've lost! Please. Just stand aside."

"The whole world for an arm? What an offer," Sorun sarcastically remarked, going as far as to examine his spectral arm. "Lemme ask you this. Technology is a sin, right?" He gestured his arms out to the sides, gesturing to the city around them. "Is all this a sin? This genuinely beautiful city that gave everyone a home?" His arms fell to his side, and he cast a glare towards Enerjak. "More importantly," Sorun said, voice going still and eerily calm, "is Nicole's very existence a sin?"

There was absolute silence between them. Sorun stared at Enerjak expectantly, while Enerjak just silently gazed at Sorun. Even all of the people put in stasis behind them stopped their struggling against the Chaos energy restraining them to silently watch as Sorun let the question hang in the air.

"Well? Is it?" Sorun asked. "Technology is sin. That's what you believe. So is Nicole evil just because she's born from technology? Does her being an AI make her inherently evil? Is she not allowed to exist just because you say so? Are you gonna snuff out a sentient being over belief alone? Hm? *Enerjak* ...?" he all but hissed out.

"..." Enerjak's eyes hardened. "It's for the good of the planet," he settled on.

"Hm, alright." Sorun slowly inhaled, and then exhaled. Despite his overly calm appearance on the outside, the breathing did nothing to quell the wrath coursing through him. "Well, we're at that point," Sorun said, voice still calm and even, his iris constricted. "I couldn't possibly be more angry than I am right now."

A light frown. That was all Enerjak offered Sorun as he grabbed at the gold helmet held under his arm. A light frown and a pitying look. "Why oppose me, Sorun?" he asked, sounding hurt. "Why?"

"I just don't like you. That's all." He took his left hand out of his pocket. "Other than that? You hurt Nicole when you crushed that drone. You shouldn'ta done that." Yamato materialized in his grasp. "You called Nicole's existence a sin. You shouldn'ta said that."

Making a displeased sound, Enerjak donned the helmet over his head. "I'm monumentally disappointed in you, Sorun," he rumbled out.

"Yeah, I do that a lot," Sorun said back as he began drawing Yamato from its sheath. "Get used to disappointment."

The sword was fully drawn and and held to Sorun's side. Sunlight glinted off the silver blade, with the empty scabbard held in his left hand.

"Have you forgotten that I am a god incarnate?" Enerjak questioned him, half in amusement and half in a tired tone. "None before me have even posed a challenge. What could you possibly hope to do?"

"Mm, yeah, you got a point," Sorun admitted with a nod of his head. "You forgot to account for one thing, though."

"And that is?"

"I got the power to stop time from the last Emerald."

"... Wha-"

"Quicksilver."

It was less than when the word was said and more when it was merely *thought* did the power activate. The world around Sorun slowed to a crawl as a wave that inverted the colors of everything it touched expanded from Sorun's position. The colors slowly returned to their normal pigmentation, and at the same time the world came to an absolute stop. Falling leaves paused in midair. The energy roiling around the people in stasis behind Enerjak froze. Enerjak himself remained immobile.

All was completely still. All except for Sorun, who was calmly walking towards Enerjak with his sword in hand.

"Dante's ability from 'DMC3'. Now I can do it too, Shadow." Sorun stopped in front of Enerjak, silently staring down at his body. *"Where's a non-vital area I can stab? Don't wanna accidentally kill Knuckles."* He aimed the sword at Enerjak's stolen body, humming slightly as he aimed it. *"I would assume the locations his organs are in are relatively close to a human's, but... eh, I don't know shit about Mobian anatomy. I'll play it safe and go for the shoulder. Doesn't matter anyway; I just gotta stick it in somewhere."*

Yamato was plunged through Enerjak's left shoulder and pierced through to the other side effortlessly. Blood flew through the air, pausing midair momentarily before it began to slowly fall to the ground as time sped back up to its normal pace. Less than a second later it splashed to the ground.

Enerjak grunted out in both surprise and pain from the blade that, from his perspective, had instantly embedded itself into him. He only managed to stare at the blade in absolute shock for a second before blue energy coated the blade. "What are you- ergh!" Green sparks of electricity arced around his body. The blue and gold clothing began to fade in and out of existence, and as a result Enerjak loudly gasped out. "You... no, no stop it-!"

Sorun tore the blade out of Knuckles' shoulder. Along with the blade and some blood flew out a third thing: a golden, spectral projection of Enerjak that rolled onto the ground behind Sorun. In his former place was Knuckles, who, with his shoulder bleeding profusely, collapsed down to the ground.

Without even paying the fallen echidna a single glance Sorun turned to the golden ghost behind him. He wordlessly began to approach Enerjak's projection, his spectral hand flipping the katana around to hold it in a reversed grip. He stopped right above Enerjak, who was flat on his back and staring straight up at Sorun.

"Warned ya."

No sooner had the words left Sorun's lips did he plunge the sword down right through the ghost's face.

The reaction hadn't exactly been what Sorun had wanted. There was a lot of screaming and thrashing from Enerjak's golden spectral form, which was good. There were even cracks forming along his body. Even better. But Sorun had been hoping for a sword going through the ghost's face to result in instant death, not mere damage.

"Of course he'd be resistant. He's made of Chaos energy," Sorun's mind spat. *"Fine. Whatever. If I can't do it in one, I'll just keep cutting him 'til he dies."*

Enerjak had other plans, though, much to Sorun's annoyance. He watched as the spectral ghost glowed brightly, and then condensed down into a small orb. It flew away from him and Yamato, with Sorun

lazily turning around as he watched the orb race towards Knuckles' body.

The gold orb flew right in without any resistance. Knuckles' eyes snapped wide open as the blue and gold clothes returned to his body. He stood up in an instant, Enerjak panting out heavily as green energy rolled over the wound on his shoulder and healed it in an instant. His helmeted head then looked up at Sorun, his mouth practically in a snarl as he stood up straighter.

"What... what did you do...?" he demanded, still lightly panting. "What did you do to me!?"

"The Yamato can separate anything. So I separated Enerjak from Knuckles," Sorun answered in a simple tone. "I wanted to just kill the Enerjak half right afterwards, but it seems you're a bit resistant to Yamato. You can still be damaged, though... guess I'll just have to do that a bunch 'til you're dust."

"That sword..." Enerjak's helmeted gaze fell from Sorun to the sword in his grasp. "I can see it for what it is. That thing... that wretched, ruinous blade... something like that should not exist."

There was something to Enerjak's voice that gave Sorun pause. Something different from the overconfidence and mightier-than-thou attitude Enerjak had thus far. There was fear now. His tone had gone completely serious, but underneath it was fear. Not an overwhelming amount, but it was there. Fear not directed at Sorun, but specifically at the sword. Yamato.

"The Yamato?" Sorun propped the katana on his shoulder and gave Enerjak a questioning look. "'S nothing more than a magic katana made from a Chaos Emerald. You know that."

"It's more than that..." Enerjak mumbled, taking a step back. His eyes were still on the sword. "Your will, your heart, you shaped it into that monstrosity! Why would you make such a vile thing, Sorun...!? Why would you create that!? Such a demonic, cursed *thing* -!"

Enerjak cried out in pain when, once again, Sorun had stopped time, walked up to him, and this time stabbed him through the stomach before time resumed again. Just like last time, Enerjak was torn from Knuckles when Sorun ripped the blade out. Unlike last time Sorun resorted to cleaving the sword down on Enerjak's ghost, again and again, making him scream more as numerous white cracks formed along his ghostly form. And like last time he went back into Knuckles to manifest his physical form.

Sorun hadn't waited for Enerjak to catch his breath, and walked right up to him with the intent of stabbing him again. When he stabbed down, however, there was a flash of green, and all Sorun managed to stab was nanites replicating dirt. He looked behind him, humming a bit when he realized that Enerjak had teleported to the other side of the clearing.

"You leave critical wounds on my body by doing that," Enerjak said, regaining his composure as he stood up straighter. "You'll kill me at this rate, Sorun. Is that what you want? To kill your friend?"

"First, Knuckles is my friend, not you. Second, you're regenerating the wounds." Sorun pointed his katana at him, at his shoulder and the wound on his stomach that sealed up faster than Sorun could perceive. "It doesn't matter where I cut, it seems.

"I gotta wonder..." Sorun continued, idly twirling the blade around in his spectral hand, "if you can even jump hosts instead of having to fix Knuckles' body over and over. Julie-Su's right over there, but instead of getting a new body you're sticking with Knuckles. And as far as I know, the only other echidna who's ever been Enerjak is that freaky Dimitri guy. After he dosed himself with a helping of Chaos energy. Knuckles told me his own dad did something similar and hit him with a Chaos energy beam when he was an egg. That's why he's special." The sword was flipped up to rest on Sorun's shoulder. "Could it be..." he wondered, "that you can't inhabit just any old echidna body? You need a special one that's been modified like Dimitri and Knuckles? One with an unnaturally strong link to the Chaos Force? If so, you're not gonna let your host body die. You'll

keep fixing him up regardless of the damage I do. Which means I can cut you up as much as I want since Knuckles will be fine in the end."

It'd been a scenario Sorun had been running through his head as he'd walked towards the battlefield everyone was at. He'd seen it in various forms of fiction before. The all-powerful such-and-such needed a special host body to preserve itself so it could exist. A host body that needed to fulfill certain prerequisites. Dimitri telling Sorun Enerjak initially only existed because of what he'd done to himself had him thinking it was something along those lines. That Dimitri and Knuckles were viables hosts that met prerequisites needed for Enerjak to possess them. If so, it was simple: separate the entity from the host and kill it.

That's what he intended to do. To keep separating Enerjak from Knuckles over and over until he finally managed to kill it.

"You're making a mistake," Enerjak growled out to him as green energy gathered around his hands. "I *am* Knuckles!"

"So it's a fusion-type deal where you can't disassociate yourself with the host, same difference. I already proved you're separate beings by separating you." Sorun began walking forwards. "It's actually really sad if you think about-"

Sorun was abruptly cut off mid-sentence as a wave of exhaustion overtook him. He made a frustrated growl as he dropped to a single knee, his grip on the sword and scabbard loosening completely as the weapon fell to the ground. He began panting lightly as he looked back up at Enerjak. The furious snarl he'd had on previously was turning into a smirk.

"You may be able to wield the forces of Chaos such as I, Sorun, but your body is mortal," Enerjak stated. "You have limits, doubly so from your previous injuries. You cannot heal like I can. I can keep this up all day, while you're already on your knees after a couple of minutes."

"Yeah, yeah..." Sorun bit back on his own frustration as he, with some effort, climbed back to his feet. "That's why I stole this epinephrine from the hospital," he said, digging into his pocket for the syringe he'd pocketed from earlier.

Epinephrine. In other words: straight adrenaline. He knew enough medical know-how from his mom to know what it was the moment he'd read the label. Sorun'd been amazed to find a syringe of the stuff just lying there for him to take, and had taken it immediately in preparation for this. With any luck, it'd keep him going long enough to end this. He'd also crash *hard* right after, but as long as he finished before that happened, it'd be fine.

He'd deal with Dr. Quack's nagging later.

"Really, Sorun?" Enerjak asked in that disappointed tone of his, his hands lowered as he watched Sorun twirl the needle between his fingers. "You're resorting to using drugs?"

"Hey, if it works. Hope Cream isn't watching me set a bad example." Without another word, he plunged the needle into his neck and compressed the plunger. He felt nothing from it, of course, not the needle entering him nor the cold fluid flooding into his body, and only chose to take the needle out and toss it over his shoulder once he'd decompressed the plunger completely. "So- whoa, that hits different..."

Sorun was hit with a sensation soon after the spent syringe was tossed away. He felt... energized wasn't the right word. Close, but not quite right. Restless, more like. Like his muscles were ready to just *move* . He wasn't sure about the fact it felt like his heart rate tripled, though. A side effect he'd just have to weather along with everything else that was to come after.

"Haven't felt this good in months," Sorun thought as he made a short hop, katana and scabbard reappearing in his grasp. *"It's gonna suck later when my body crashes from all this."*

A low growl emanated from Enerjak's throat as the green energies swirling around his hands increased in brightness and intensity. Sorun's grip on Yamato tightened, with blue, barely-perceptible wisps of blue energy sliding up and down the blade. Both faced each other, ready to spring forwards at the other at a moment's notice in preparation for the fight to come.

Said fight was interrupted by laser blasts raining down from the sky and peppering Enerjak.

"... Huh?" Confusion stretched across Sorun' features as the blade he held was lowered down to his side. He watched, stupefied, as Enerjak's body was pelted by an endless barrage of lasers that impacted him again and again. He'd even tried to erect an energy shield to protect himself, though this was done to no avail as the shield was shredded apart in less then seconds. *"Who's... oh, I see."*

Looking up in the sky answered Sorun's question of just what was happening. A small fleet of ships flying in the sky bearing Eggman's logo hovered above the city, all of which were firing down on Enerjak. The beams impacting his body made him gradually disappear more and more. And then, Enerjak simply vanished completely.

"... I swear if I just drugged myself with adrenaline for nothing-"

"Whoa-ho-ho! Goodness gracious, that couldn't have played out more perfectly if I tried!"

There was no stopping the loud, aggravated-sounding groan that escaped Sorun, who by now was so sapped of willpower his shoulders were sagging and limp. He turned around and saw a familiar form materialize behind him. Eggman's form. A hologram Sorun would have believed was the man himself standing before Sorun in the flesh if he hadn't seen the image flicker into existence in the first place. And much to Sorun's ire he had the same smug smirk on his face that he had when Sonic stopped Sorun from killing him earlier on.

"... You teleport Enerjak somewhere?" Sorun asked in a bland tone, eye twitching from having to see that smirk on Eggman's face.

"Correct!" Eggman confirmed, grin growing wider. "Sonic was kind enough to warn me beforehand of this Enerjak fellow, so I thought why not take this opportunity to sweep a being of unbridled power off your hands to use of for my own devices, metaphorically and literally speaking? I'd do the same to you, Sorun, but, eh..." He tilted his head downwards towards his katana and pointed at it. " *That* little item makes it a bit hard to contain you. And it wouldn't that sporting of me anyways. So!" Eggman clapped his hands together. "You all get to live to see another day until I say otherwise and I get a veritable infinite source of energy. Win-win."

Sorun sharply inhaled. "I... genuinely hate you with a burning passion. And I'm not that passionate about a lot of things."

"Eh, you're just saying that." Eggman spun his head left and right to gaze at the damages houses and structures all around, making a light whistle while doing so. "Huh. Not gonna lie, place could use some work. I *could* take this opportunity to bomb your brand-new city since it seems all that clashing Enerjak did with everybody temporarily brought down your city's defenses, but... well, like I said, I'm a sporting man. We'll call it good for today. Do me a favor and tell that AI to at least *try* and make the place look presentable by the time I come back to conquer you all for real." He turned around and waved at the large gathering of Mobians behind him, who Sorun noticed weren't frozen in place by green energy anymore. "Good seeing you again, Sonic! Thanks for the heads-up!"

The last thing Sorun heard before the hologram dissipated was Eggman's raucous laughter, which he could have sworn lingered behind for a few seconds even after the hologram disappeared completely. The inhale Sorun had taken earlier was slowly breathed out of him, a process he had to repeat a few times to normalize his own breathing. Once he got it under control he looked over to where the Mobians were, his eyes instantly locking onto the blue form of Sonic.

He didn't even allow the hedgehog a second to get his bearings before Sorun Tricked right in front of the hedgehog, startling him and making him jump back a bit. And then he froze when he saw the intensely irritated look Sorun was giving him.

"Gee, Sonic, he sure was a lot of help. Thanks for that. Thanks for enlisting the help of the guy actively working to destroy us all and enslave the world. The guy I was seconds away from ending. Thanks."

Groaning a bit, Sonic rubbed a hand over his face and stepped closer to the other teen. "Sorun-"

"That was such a brilliant two-hundred IQ move that I can't even comprehend it, Sonic," Sorun scathingly remarked. "You must be five moves ahead of everybody else because I can't even begin to fathom this elaborate move of yours. We're all over here playing checkers while you're playing 4-D chess like some clairvoyant-"

"And you were gonna do what!?" Sonic interrupted in a raised voice. "You were gonna go take out the big bad on your own!? You really saw that workin' out for you!?"

"It probably wasn't gonna, no, but I still made it further than you all which was *literally zero* -"

"Both of you, cut it out!" Sally wedged herself between the two and pushed them away with her hands, sending sharp glares at each. "Sonic, now isn't the time." She turned to Sorun. "Sorun... *adrenaline* ? Really?"

"What?" Sorun gave her a hapless shrug. "I just found it lying around so I thought-"

"You thought it'd be a good idea to go injecting a random drug you found into yourself!?" she all but screamed at him.

Sorun didn't visibly react at all to the scream, instead giving her a flat look. "First of all, I knew what it was. I wouldn't have done it if I thought it was dangerous. I'll pay for it later on when it wears off and I start puking my guts out. That's my choice." He leaned in closer towards Sally, who wasn't fazed in the slightest and continued scowling at him. "Second, are we not gonna talk about how you let this random crowd of people join in on the fight against Enerjak and not me? Me and my all-powerful sword? The sword that actually did something as opposed to the nothing everyone else brought?"

He noticed from the corner of his vision that some of the Mobian citizens were shifting around uncomfortably while looking away from the pair. In fact, everybody was beginning to back off to give the pair some space. Sorun continued to stare right at Sally while some of the aggression in Sally's face disappeared as she glanced towards the crowd.

"I... we all... it was a desperate time, Sorun," she sighed out as she looked back at him.

"I tried telling you," Sorun said to her. "I thought I'd be able to go, 'hey, Sally, I think Yamato can separate Enerjak from Knuckles, maybe we can all plan around that and come up with some super great strategy to save the day.' Instead all this happened." He threw his arms out to the side. "Sally, I get it, I know you guys are trying to look after me, but for god's sake, woman, I'm not... I'm not super sturdy like you guys, but I'm not that fragile, either. I made it this far, didn't I? Granted not in one piece, but still. Come on."

"I know." Sally gave him a small nod and an accepting look. "Sorun, I-"

The pale teen held his hands up to Sally to stop her. "I don't want apologies. I just want to put it behind us so we can focus on more important things. Mainly that." He pointed up at the floating island above them. "And everything else. I'll forgive everybody for everything if we can just do that right now."

Honestly, he really just said it because he couldn't handle another round of apologies, and because there really were bigger and pressing issues. Fortunately Sally seemed to see the logic in everything Sorun said, and gave him an agreeing nod. Sorun just managed to breath out in relief as he saw Sonic's blue form approach them, flanked by Julie-Su.

"So," Sonic began, the two Mobians stopping next to Sally and Sorun, "what do we do now?"

"I don't know, I'm thinking." Sally turned around and began pacing in small steps, simultaneously rubbing her index fingers on the sides of her head. "We're not really in a good position to be doing anything right now-"

Something golden appeared in the corner of Sorun's vision, causing him to shift his attention from Sally to the object. He'd felt an internal shock from the gold color at first and thought it was Enerjak, but then calmed down when he saw it was just a large, golden ring floating in the air behind Sonic and Julie-Su. And then he grew confused as to why there was a floating golden ring behind them. Confusion grew to curiosity, causing Sorun to trick right behind the pair of Mobians so he could eye the ring with a curious eye.

"Huh, this ring..." Sorun thought as he looked to the center, where he saw that the entire hollow of the ring was filled with a bright, golden light. *"It... kind of looks like a... portal...?"*

That was as far as Sorun's thoughts carried him before a red-furred arm with a brown glove shot out of the portal, grabbed Sorun by the scruff of his shirt, and pulled him through the ring-portal.

A/N- You can really feel when I go from doing my own plots to just going through the comic's plots from how faster the pacing gets. You don't realize it reading the thing in comic format but once you actually write it out it just goes. And if the ending feels

abrupt it's because this chapter and the next were supposed to be one, but it was getting a bit long so I split them in two.

Like a lot of things about the echidna the comics did I don't like, which is pretty much everything, they introduce a character like Enerjak with near-omnipotent powers. And the problem with introducing a character with near-omnipotent powers is that you either have to jump through a lot of writing hoops to find a way to get the main characters to beat them while making it look believable, or you just straight-out make them fight the god and win. The problem with that latter thing is that you're gonna mess up the power scaling by basically implying your characters can take out near-omnipotent beings, and that kills the tension. To be honest I would have liked never including Enerjak in the story to begin with, but guess what, he's an important character in the comics, so in he goes.

Comic suffers this problem a lot when you look deeper into comic Sonic's feats and how powerful he really is and realize there should really have never been any reason he couldn't have blitzed, like, ninety percent of the villain cast solo. Guy's stupid broken. I'm not even gonna get into the stupid universe-crushing mammoth guy and mountain-sized buff Tails.

That image of mountain-sized buff Tails is cursed.

Originally I did plan to just have Sorun flat-out fight him to a draw before Eggman teleported him away like in the comics with the justification being that he just happens to have a hyper-specific power set that's a perfect counter to Enerjak, but, again, gotta keep the power scaling consistent. So "Sorun fights Enerjak to a draw" turned into "Sorun gets some cheap shots in with time stop and then Eggman swoops in to teleport Enerjak away before they fight for real and Enerjak massacres Sorun".

Chapter 48

Recursion Error

Episode 48- Okay, doomer

"I'm getting real tired of people pulling me through random-ass portals."

Wasn't much to be said about the fact somebody pulled Sorun through a portal. He'd been pulled through a portal, and wound up on the other side face-down in some grass. Real grass, too, Sorun suspected, and not nanites perfectly imitating grass. But other than the effects of the epinephrine shot he'd injected himself with, he felt fine. Physically at least.

Mentally he was between being tired enough to give up and angry enough to start lashing out at everything in sight. He just felt *done* with it all.

Huffing out, Sorun rolled onto his back and stood up. Surroundings were unfamiliar, mainly from the fact he'd appeared in a grass field surrounded by strange trees that almost looked like palm trees. No people, either. Nobody except for the red echidna standing in front of him giving him about as odd a look as Sorun felt.

"..." Sorun gave the echidna a quick glance. Looked like Knuckles but with blue eyes, and way older. Reasonably aged if the old-looking tribal garb and gray eyebrows said anything, which Sorun had to do a double-take at, because he hadn't known echidna even have eyebrows. At least he thought they didn't whenever he looked at Knuckles and Julie-Su. He shook his head to purge these thoughts and looked at the old-looking echidna with a displeased look. "Thirty seconds, fill it with reasons why you pulled me through a portal."

"You are not Sonic," was the only thing the echidna offered him.

"Gee, really?" Sorun sarcastically exclaimed. "What," he continued with a grunt as he climbed to his feet, "did you see the arm and grab the closest blue thing you saw 'cause you thought it was Sonic?"

A low sound left the echidna's throat as Sorun finally stood up and dusted himself off. Sorun couldn't rightly place what that sound meant. "It was my intention to bring Sonic here to aid with the current situation surrounding Enerjak," he said. "It seems I brought you by mistake."

"Glad you cleared that up." Sorun took a glance at the trees around them. "Where's here, anyways?"

"Angel Island," the echidna answered immediately. "I've brought you to Angel Island."

"Oh. So this is the island, huh?" Explained the palm trees, at least. Didn't help to explain much else. "Okay," he mumbled out, turning back to the echidna, "and who are you?"

"I would ask who you are first."

Sorun's eye narrowed a bit in the echidna's direction. "And *I* would think that the polite thing to do after pulling some poor guy through a portal up to a floating island would be to introduce yourself to the aforementioned poor, confused, and now slightly-annoyed guy. But you don't seem particularly polite."

The old echidna gave Sorun an equally narrowed look with his eyes, which went along with the unpleasant expression he gave Sorun. The Earthling, for his part, simply kept staring back at the echidna while maintaining a blank expression mixed in with his sharp look.

Finally, the echidna gave in and relaxed his shoulders. "My name is Locke," he finally offered.

The name triggered something in Sorun's memory, and he found himself instantly recognizing it. "Knuckles' dad?" he asked, causing him to nod. "Ah. Dunno if you know this but your kid got possessed by a Chaos... thingy."

"Of course I know this!" Locke exclaimed in a frustrated tone. "It's my intent to fix this entire mess before things get too out of hand! I only had the one Warp Ring on me, but instead of getting somebody I trusted to be capable of helping I pulled you through instead." He approached Sorun closely enough that they were inches from each other. Sorun had rose his eyebrow as he gave the Mobian a questioning look. "I have no inclination as to what somebody of your kind was doing in that city, but if you've no way to contact the city below then I insist that you stand aside so I can do so myself."

Sorun's eye narrowed further, with his head tilting just the slightest amount. His hands twitched. "How about instead of wasting time doing that you just ask me to help with whatever you needed Sonic with and I'll do it in his place, Locke?"

"I am not willing to let an Overlander trample about up here while lives are at stake."

There wasn't maliciousness to his voice which made Sorun all the more confused. The lack of any scorn in his voice, however, did not stop Sorun from taking offense with the echidna for saying that.

"Ohhhh, pal..." Sorun turned his back to Locke. He took another exhale and shook his head. "I'm not even a- do you even know who I am?" Sorun asked, turning his head back around to Locke. "I know you and Knuckles were all radio silent for reasons, but do- have you kept with with *anything* that's been happening down on the planet for the last four odd months? Anything at all?" Sorun pressed a hand against his chest. "Everything Eggman did, the Chaos Emeralds, any of that? Any of that ringing a bell?"

To Sorun's disbelief, Locke shook his head. "I've been a little busy preoccupying myself with making sure my people on this island

weren't wiped out amid the warring factions."

"Yeah, and I've been dealing with stuff concerning the whole world, this island included, so I'm sorry but I just... I just really don't fucking care about you or anything that goes on here. All the nonsense bullshit concerning you echidna and this island, I just- I fucking swear, it's not even self-contained here anymore, it's spilling out onto the planet below, and now there's this whole Enerjak thing going on, so guess what, Locke, this is now *my* problem, too." When Locke continued to maintain a harsh glare on Sorun, he sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "Look," he said in a less hostile tone, "this whole thing is because of Dr. Fini-whatever the fuck his name is, right? What exactly did he do to start all this?"

To his credit, and much to Sorun's relief, Locke had taken a calming breath and eased off on the aggressive glaring before he spoke out. "I am... not entirely sure what he did. What I do know was that he somehow coerced Knuckles into using his abilities to absorb the power of the Master Emerald."

"Thing that keeps the island floating?"

Locke nodded. "Yes. Finitevus, he... tampered with the Emerald, somehow. Put a spell of some sorts on it. It corrupted Knuckles, made him more susceptible to Dr. Finitevus' will. Enerjak was the result."

The explanation made Sorun pause. An idea began to form. "He put some kind of curse on the Master Emerald, and that's what turned him into Enerjak?"

"Spell, curse, hex, whatever you wish to call it, yes! Finitevus has been constantly supplying him with his corrupted power-"

"If that hex was removed from the Emerald... separated, let's say... would Knuckles turn back to normal?"

"What?" Locke blinked in confusion, and then shook his head. "Perhaps, most likely, but we've not time to conceive a method for performing such a task."

"Then what's your plan?"

"Simply put..." Locke closed his eyes and tilted his head downwards. A low breath blew past his lips. "This is not the first incident involving Enerjak to arise. Back when it was still intact, a group I was a member of named the Brotherhood constructed a weapon that could end Enerjak and his host, once and for all."

The shock that hit Sorun was enough to straighten his head up as his eye widened in Locke's direction. "You wanna use a super weapon to kill him?" He quietly muttered out. "That's fucked. He's your kid."

"Not... not anymore. He's Enerjak." Locke's eyes opened back up, making Sorun go quiet again. There wasn't mistaking the pain in his face under that resolute and determined look in his eyes. Or any way to miss the way his voice just *slightly* quivered. He must have gone to great lengths to hide it, though, as Sorun wasn't able to hear it when he spoke further. "Whether you agree or not is of no consequence. This is the entire world we're-"

"You know," Sorun interrupted, causing Locke to angrily scowl, "when Knuckles first told me you decided to go and irradiate him as an egg, I got the impression your morals fell on the wayside and you were a really messed-up dude. Seeing you now, though, I think I was wrong." He turned away from Locke, a frustrated, tired look on his face. "Now I just think you're a fucking dumbass," he continued. "Maybe somewhere under there, way, deep down, is a decent guy and a half-baked father that at least wants to try and be a good person. Maybe. Somewhere underneath all that stupidity." He fully turned back around to Locke. "You don't wanna see the world burn, don't blame ya, but I'm not gonna let you off your own kid just to save it. I'd never forgive you, and you'd never forgive yourself." He started walking, not pausing after passing Locke's side as he said,

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this for Knuckles and everybody I care about that care about him. Nobody's dying. 'Cept maybe Doc Finny when I get my hands on him."

Save the world at the expense of a single life? Wasn't that just the story of his life. He already knew what that was like, and there was no way he was going to let that kind of fate fall on someone else. Not if he could stop it. And oh, he could. He had a pointy stick that said he could.

He wasn't letting Knuckles join him in the grave of dumbass martyrs.

"There is no other option-" Locke tried, but was stopped when Sorun quit moving and whirled back around to him.

"No way, echidna tech fucks everybody over from everything I heard, I don't trust it. We're doing this my way." His expression softened a bit, and he held his left hand up. "Listen," he tried in a quieter voice as he manifested Yamato, making Locke's eyes widen. "This is a sword made from a Chaos Emerald I absorbed. It's a thing I can do, don't ask. It has the power to separate anything it cuts." He lowered the sheathed katana to his side. "So what I wanna do," he offered, "is go straight to the Master Emerald and use the Yamato to separate it from the hex put on it. Knuckles goes free, threat averted, maybe I cut the evil doctor echidna man's head off along the way, don't know, we'll see. Just show me where it is and I can fix this."

After finishing his proposal, Sorun looked closely at Locke's expression. It'd gone through a number of shifts, from skepticism to disbelief to thoughtfulness, all while he stared at Sorun's sword. Through it all, though, Sorun could have sworn he saw the faintest glimmer of hope in the old echidna's eyes. Hope that maybe his son didn't have to die, which reaffirmed Sorun's belief that there had to be some goodness in there somewhere.

His belief that his goodness was stifled by stupidity was also proven by the red Mobian's next line. "I'll admit that the amount of Chaos energy I feel radiating from that blade is staggering," he admitted,

"but you'll have to forgive me for not trusting the word of an Overlander I just met. why would you be interested at all in saving Knuckles?"

"... 'Cause we're friends?" Sorun tried in a confused tone. "Why-why would I lie? Christ, man, I'm trying to help you!"

"You have no guarantee the sword-"

"It managed to separate Enerjak from Knuckles!" Sorun shouted at him, causing Locke to freeze right up. "I kept doing it over and over to try and save Knuckles, but the fucking ghost or whatever Enerjak is kept snapping back into his body! Maybe the hex on the Master Emerald is anchoring him to Knuckles, or something else, I don't know, but if it can do that it can separate the Emerald from the hex." He took a step closer to Locke and gave him a pleading look. "Listen, you don't like me, I don't like you, I get it. But I genuinely just want to save your son and everyone else here. I *just* need to know where the Master Emerald is and for you to take me there."

"I..." Confliction appeared on Locke's face as he stared down at his feet. "I don't..."

"For the- fine, we'll try this." With a frustrated grunt, Sorun tore Yamato out of its sheath. Two cuts were made in the air, forming a portal. Sorun stuck his spectral hand in the portal afterwards, looking through it briefly as he searched for what he was looking for. Locke looked on in bewilderment, and somehow the shock on his face grew even greater when Sorun pulled himself out of the portal, another Mobian in the grasp of his spectral arm, which he then set down on the ground while also cutting the portal away.

The new Mobian in question, which Sorun had pulled out from New Mobotropolis, was Julie-Su. Hadn't even been that hard to find her- she'd been in the same place everybody else had been when Sorun went through the Warp Ring as Locke called it, arguing amongst themselves. Sorun had simply plucked Julie-Su out of the crowd and put her here. And now the poor, confused Mobian was looking

around left and right, nearly looking hysterical as she took in her surroundings.

"What- where- this is... the island...?" Julie-Su held her eyes up to Sorun, still looking completely lost. "Sorun?" she mumbled out as she got up to her feet. "What's going on? Why did you pull me up here?"

"Because Knuckles' dad is being an idiot, and I don't see his mom around anywhere, so you're practically the closest family he's got I know besides dad of the year back there since you two are so close," Sorun explained. "Here's the argument: I can solve the Enerjak problem and save everybody including Knuckles. Locke has his own way of getting rid of Enerjak, but Knuckles'll die. So what're we going with?"

Of course no matter what they were doing Sorun's way. He was determined to see it go that route. He also knew that the female echidna in front of him and Knuckles were in a romantic relationship, and that in no way she'd allow Locke to try and end Knuckles. More than that, she probably knew where the Master Emerald was. If Locke wouldn't take him, she would.

But maybe that wouldn't be necessary. Maybe somehow Julie-Su'd be able to convince Locke that Sorun was on the up-and-up and could do this. It'd certainly be nice, if not hopeful. He'd have to see how it went.

"What!?" Julie-Su had turned on Locke in a heartbeat, anger forming across her face. "Of course we're saving Knuckles!" she yelled out, stomping towards Locke. "You can't be serious! You'd destroy your own son-!?"

"The life of one compared to Mobius itself-!"

"If Sorun says he has a way-!"

"A random Overlander-!"

"He isn't an Overlander!" Julie-Su's outburst had given Locke pause, and as he eyed Sorun with an odd look the off-pink echidna in front of him said, "He's... it's a long story, but he's different, okay?" She turned her head around to the pale teen in question. "Sorun? Can you really save Knuckles?"

Sorun nodded. "Master Emerald got tainted. All I gotta do is use Yamato to separate the thing corrupting it and all's good."

That had certainly sparked some hope in Julie-Su's eyes. Understanding seemed to wash over her as she turned back to Knuckles' father. "Locke, please," she begged, "I know Sorun, we all do, we trust him! More than that I've seen what his powers can do! If he says he can do it, he can! We need to try his way!"

Locke, despite all Julie-Su's pleading, wouldn't so much as acknowledge her. He'd gone back to staring down at his feet, and that look of deep confliction in his eyes didn't provide a clear answer. Julie-Su scoffed in response, stepping away from the older echidna while shaking her head in disgust.

"I can't believe you, Locke. Your own son..." Giving him one last look of contempt, the cybernetic echidna turned away from him and towards Sorun. "Follow me, Sorun. I know where the Master Emerald is-"

"Wait." Julie-Su paused, and then turned back to Locke. Sorun looked towards him, too, eyeing him curiously as the older Mobian looked up and into Sorun's eye. "Boy," he said, "is all of this true? Do you truly have that power?"

"What have I been saying this whole time?"

"Hmph." Nodding to himself, Locke began to walk forwards. "I pray for all our sakes your words hold true," he said as he passed Sorun. "Follow me, both of you. I know a shortcut to the Master Emerald. Perhaps along the way you can tell me just who you are, Sorun."

Watching the echidna walk in front of him, Sorun turned towards Julie-Su. They locked eyes for a few moments, after which they nodded to each other, turned back to Locke, and began following closely behind him.

Locke's "shortcut" was to cut through the trees and shrubbery towards the Master Emerald, evidently. On calmer days Sorun wouldn't be that overly objective towards a hike. On days when he was running on a time limit due to the adrenaline running through him and was racing against the clock alongside a malevolent Chaos god and Eggman, he was in a bit more of a rush. Nothing to do about it, Sorun supposed. Without knowing where the Master Emerald was exactly he couldn't make a portal there, and Locke had no more of those strange teleporting rings of his. So on foot it was.

To pass the time he'd told Locke about himself. His reaction had largely been the same as Dimitri's- stark shock and some skepticism. Nothing more to say about that other than how intrigued he seemed over Sorun's abilities and how they manifested. Sorun, in return, had merely shrugged in response and said he just rolled with what the rocks gave him. He seemed equally surprised that Sorun's body was even able to handle that amount of Chaos energy without breaking down, especially since his species truly was unaccustomed to harnessing Chaos energy.

The irony wasn't lost on him.

In return for all this, Sorun had asked for the skinny on Dr. Finitevus. Somehow it wasn't as convoluted a backstory as Sorun thought it'd be. It was even worse.

"So this thing with Knuckles has happened before?" Sorun asked Locke as they trekked through the thin forest, Julie-Su trailing behind them.

"In part. He was no Enerjak, but he was still overcome with Chaos energy," Locke informed him. "The echidna inhabitants of Albion saw

him as a threat, and attempted to... euthanize him, as it were, due to the threat his powers posed."

"Of course they did..." Sorun muttered as he ran a hand over his face. He knew from Knuckles the echidna on Albion were a bit more advanced than the ones here, though he never liked talking about them for some reason. He guess he knew why now. "Finite was there?"

"Finitevus, and yes," Locke confirmed with a nod. "He was... exposed to the Chaos energies Knuckles' body radiated. It morphed him, changed him. Gave him corrupted powers and twisted his mind. I was recently made aware the Albion echidna tried a preventative approach with him the same way they had with Knuckles. He pulled strings in response and had Dr. Robotnik use his fleet to destroy Albion. Those that remain are the few survivors and the echidna Enerjak sent there from the island earlier today."

"Trigger-happy paranoid echidna, evil scientist echidna, evil god echidna, cyborg echidna crazies..." A long groan escaped Sorun. "Your entire species, dude..."

Julie-Su and Knuckles were some of the only good ones that came out of that bunch. They had to be. There was something wrong with them. Sorun refused to believe *so much* could go wrong with a single species of Mobian due to sheer coincidence. Something was wrong with them. Collective stupidity, maybe.

Sorun's silent musing were interrupted when something appeared on his shoulder in a flash of light, and then spoke out in an unfamiliar voice. "Don't you suppose it's a bit uncouth to lump in an entire species with a few bad-"

A frightened scream left Sorun as he grabbed at whatever teleported on his shoulder and threw him away further into the forest.

Both Locke and Julie-Su stopped in their tracks, looking towards Sorun's in mixtures of confusion and puzzlement. Sorun himself was

left staring in the direction he'd thrown whatever that had been, until another flash of white drew his attention to Locke's shoulder. The thing from earlier had teleported to the echidna's shoulder.

... It was a small, red, anthropomorphic ant that was around six inches in height. An ant with a brown hat and vest on. A little park ranger ant who had all four of his arms crossed and was glaring at Sorun.

"You throw everybody you meet for the first time?" the ant grumbled at him.

Growing sheepish, Sorun turned away and rubbed at the back of his neck. "S-sorry, man, you spooked me." He looked back to the ant. "I, um... didn't know Mobians came, y'know... so small. I know bees, like, fifty times your size so I figured... agh, it doesn't matter." He shook his head. "I'm Sorun."

"Archimedes. Pleasure to meet you."

"Weird name for an ant, but alright." Sorun looked to Locke. "Friend of yours?"

"Yes, we're well acquainted." Locke looked down to the ant on his shoulder. "Old friend. How are things?"

"Could be better by what I would say is a substantial margin," the ant informed him in a grim tone. "Finitevus set the Destructix to guard the weapon you're planning on using against your own son. You willn't be acquiring it without a fight."

Locke hummed in acknowledgement. "I see. It's a good thing we aren't going for the weapon, then," he said, making Archimedes tilt his head in surprise. "They're wasting their time guarding something on the other side of the island. Less obstacles for us."

"The who now?" Sorun asked, raising his hand to gain the attention of the two in front of him.

"Mercenaries under Finitevus' auspices," Locke explained. "Last I checked they were being lead by that Scourge rapscallion."

"The evil Sonic guy I heard about?" Sorun muttered under his breath. "Evil guy needs evil henchmen, I guess... well, whatever. If we're not gonna be running into them then why bother worrying?"

"Yes, I... suppose so..." Archimedes cast a questioning look to Sorun, and then focused back on Locke. "May I please ask who...?"

Letting out a single chuckle, Locke turned around and continued advancing through the foliage. "I'll explain everything to you along the way..."

Sorun continued walking behind them, hands tucked in his pocket as he made sure to follow in Locke's path. He glanced behind him towards Julie-Su in order to check on her, and then tilted his head a bit at her in worry. She didn't look too great. All the anxiety over Knuckles, he wagered. She just plainly looked worried sick, especially from the way she kept wringing her hands together like that. He continued to look at her state for some seconds, and then sighed under his breath as he slowed down to walk at her side.

She hadn't even seemed to acknowledge his presence even though he was right besides her now. It was only when Sorun cleared his throat to gain her attention did he see her eyes flick up to him, though even then his being there seemed to do little to help.

"So, uh... I know you're probably not doing alright, but... you gonna make it?" Sorun asked.

Slowly, she nodded. "I'll manage," she said, and inside Sorun felt himself cringe from the slight, broken sound her voice carried. "Thank you, Sorun. For doing this. I know this isn't what Knuckles wants."

"'Course not. He's mind-jacked, that's all. Y'know, 'cause... Enerjak and mind-jack, so..." The poor attempt at a joke didn't even so much

as make the corners of the echida's mouth upturn. "Sorry, stupid joke, I-"

"Not, it's fine," she assured him. "I'm just worried about... about everything, you know? Him, the island, everyone in New Mobotropolis..."

"I know. We're gonna fix it," Sorun promised her. "Nobody's dying." Nobody important, at least. Finitevus' fate remained to be seen. "How mad at me is everybody back in the city?" Sorun suddenly asked in an effort to change the topic. "I know they can't be too thrilled with how active I'm being despite the doctor's orders."

For some reason that's what got a small chuckle out of Julie-Su. "Things got a bit heated, I won't lie. Mostly we were arguing what we were going to do about Knuckles, but you came up a few times. They're all a bit scared over you." She turned to look at Sorun as they continued walking. "I share some of their concerns," she continued, looking at Sorun's eyepatch. "Are you sure you're good to go with this?"

"'Til the adrenaline runs its course, yeah," Sorun answered. "Should carry me through the rest of this. After that I'm sleeping for a week straight."

"Ha-ha. I wouldn't blame you." The worried look returned to her face as she faced back forwards. "Just... I know it's wrong of me to ask you to push yourself so hard for his sake, but... but Knuckles-"

"Means a lot to you, and the Chaotix, and everyone else. He's my friend, too, you know," Sorun said. "Just trust me on this, Julie-Su. I got you all out of New Megaopolis, didn't I?"

"You lost an arm and eye in the process," she pointed out.

"Tch. Details."

They'd finally reached the chamber where the echidna kept the Master Emerald that kept the island aloft in the air. It was less a chamber and more a cave, though. A small rock cavern with an open ceiling, in the center of which lied a small staircase leading up to a pedestal holding a great, green Chaos Emerald that was bigger than Sorun himself.

Knuckles had... well, admittedly he'd probably been very detailed with explaining to Sorun its origins, but he hadn't paid that much attention. Something about a bunch of Chaos Emeralds from back when they were numerous fusing to the one big one that held the island up through some complicated series of events, and that its powers were much greater as a result. How it could be greater when the gems themselves could channel an infinite amount of Chaos energy was a mystery to Sorun, maybe smaller one's had a cap to their maximum output, but it didn't matter. The important thing was the Master Emerald. And the person standing in front of it.

The group of four had chosen to spy on him from behind a gathering of stalagmites near the entrance of the chamber. Sorun in particular took as good a look at Dr. Finitevus as he could, focusing in on his features while thinking to himself.

"Geez, the guy's givin' Infinite a run for his money here..."

He'd never wondered what an albino echidna looked like until he saw the one standing before the Master Emerald. Now he knew, and could have went on with his life without knowing. The guy's fur was pure white, also sporting straight, black lines and perfectly diagonal corners. Bandages in place of gloves and feet. Gold rings on his wrists and ankles, and some more adornments on his torso. A strange four-sided, gold shape on his head with a ripple pattern.

The crème-de-le-crème had to be the long, black cloak he wore with a gold star emblazoned on its back. It even had a frayed end to give it that all-important edge. Sorun couldn't help but quietly scoff at the sight, going as far as the shake his head.

"What a geek," Sorun muttered out as he silently drew Yamato. "'Kay, here's the plan." He glanced back at the two echidna and ant. "Um... I'll go take care of him, so just hang back."

"Alone? With no backup?" Locke incredulously stated. "You can't be serious."

"It's one dude and I can stop time," Sorun stated in a flat whisper. "I mean if it gets hairy then yeah, step in, but otherwise I'm gonna go deal with him. Quicker that way." He gave all three of them a nod. "Wish me luck."

With that, he Tricked to the bottom of the steps and took a deep breath. Dr. Finitevus' back was still to him, as he was facing the Emerald doing... something. Something that involved black arcs of lightning to occasionally shoot out of his hands. Something that gave Sorun slight pause, but in the end caused him to merely note it before looking to the white echidna's body.

"Hey, Finbarr."

The black lightning the echidna's hands emitted ceased. His entire posture had gone rigid as his hands slowly lowered to his side as the echidna registered Sorun's voice.

"Finbarr...?" Finitevus voiced.

"Why the hell do the edgy guys like Shadow, Infinite, and this nutjob always get the best-sounding voices?" It wasn't as rich as Shadow's, or as smooth as Infinite's, but there was still something there to the echidna's tone. Velvety, Sorun supposed. He couldn't help but be a bit jealous.

Finitevus finally turned around to address the intruder standing behind him. He'd already looked confused from the way his name had been mispronounced. His eyes, sclera dyed black and irises a smoldering orange, had opened up even further when he looked down the steps at Sorun. He looked, quite simply, at a loss for words

at what he was staring at. So much so that he'd tilted his head to the side in a curious manner for a bit, and then set it back in a straight orientation as he continued to stare at Sorun.

"A human?" Finitevus asked. "Why is a human of all things here?"

"You're the first person in a while that's gotten it right," Sorun said to him. "It's always Overlander this, Overlander that, nobody that doesn't know me ever gets the distinction, I swear."

"The finer details are often lost on lesser minds." Finitevus' eyes traveled lower. To Sorun's arm right arm. "That's an intriguing arm you're sporting there," he said. "Just what is it, I wonder?"

"Oh, the arm?" Sorun rose up the spectral limb, which still held the unsheathed Yamato. "Tell you what." He looked back to the albino echidna. "If you stop all this Enerjak nonsense I'll tell you."

The offer actually managed to elicit a single chuckle from Finitevus. "That's certainly one way to go about this. I'm afraid I'll have to decline that generous offer."

"Welp, tried it the nice way."

A single Trick found Sorun right besides Finitevus, with his blade held to the echidna's throat. His eyes had widened in surprise once again, while at the same time his hands were lifted in the air.

"Listen to me, you pasty motherfucker," Sorun quietly rasped out. "It's been a long day. I'd say I'm tired, but I'm hopped up on so much epinephrine I couldn't sleep if I tried. All my friends are worried and it's driving me crazy. This whole mess makes me wanna either go into deep-sleep hibernation or bash a rock over my own head in the hope that I'd cause enough brain damage for me to lose the memory of today happening. If you don't remove the hex you put on the Master Emerald and turn Knuckles back to normal you're gonna lose your head."

Finitevus didn't even seem to be paying attention to Sorun, much to the human's confusion. He was looking down at the katana blade held to his throat. A wide grin spread across his face from the sight of the sword, revealing sharpened teeth, and Sorun had to resist shuddering when he made what sounded like a pleased hum.

"This... is a *very* interesting sword..." he said. "I would very much like to know where you acquired such a blade."

"Why does everybody keep talking about the sword- ohp!"

Using speed that caught Sorun off guard Finitevus had snapped his hand down, grabbed the katana by the blade, and flung it and Sorun off of the pedestal holding the Master Emerald. The human spun in the air a few rotations, and then Tricked safely down onto the ground. He looked up in time to see Finitevus slowly descend the stairs towards Sorun.

"A teleporting ability, the ability to create a construct from pure Chaos energy to replace a lost limb, a sword which radiates so much power..." Sinister chuckles rang out from the echidna's throat as he reached the bottom of the stairs. "Not even the Guardians have ever displayed such fidelity with wielding Chaos energy like you do so casually. Echidna with modified bodies to strengthen their link to the Chaos Force such as the current Guardian, Knuckles, don't even compare." He stopped right in front of Sorun, grin still wide as he eyed the human up and down, slowly. Like he was examining him. "You truly are remarkable. Fascinating in every sense of the word, and we've only just met," he said. "Just where have you been all my life?"

"... Uh." Sorun took a step back. "You know, around." Another step. "Can we talk about Enerjak now and how you're gonna turn Knuckles back, please?"

"Him?" The grin grew wider, and somehow even creepier, making Sorun take a third step back. "Don't tell me. The former Guardian, Locke, put you up to this?"

"I mean he's involved, yeah, but I'm mainly just trying to save my friend from destroying the world. And also save the world," Sorun said.

"So that's the reason." Humming, Finitevus looked up towards the exposed ceiling of the cavern and at the midday sky. "Are you aware of the history of my people?"

Sorun's shoulders slumped. "I know it's so convoluted I'd probably go insane trying to understand every minute detail of it."

"You jest, but you're not so far off the mark, as it were." The scientist looked back down at Sorun. "Hundreds of years, generation upon generation of Guardians and fighting between them and the Dark Legion, failure after failure of echidna science to wrought one disaster after another."

"They're fools, yeah, nobody's arguing that," Sorun agreed. "I won't lie, there's only two echidna I actually like. Eh, maybe two and a quarter with Locke. The rest though, oof... I'm probably gonna have ulcers by the end of this just thinking about 'em."

"Then you understand how hopeless of a species they are," Finitevus said. "That's not even getting to the world proper, which has its own set of issues. Overlanders misusing technology for their own gain, Dr. Eggman the most egregious case among them. Mobians stuck between preserving nature and peace and defending themselves, which only serves to divide them further and further. Everything in this world is too far gone." He perked up, grin dropping for a second before he gave Sorun an apologetic smile. "But where are my manners? You seem to already know me, butchering of my name aside, but I've yet to ask the name of this spectacular specimen before me."

"... Sorun."

"Sorun..." Finitevus hummed out. "The name is unfamiliar to me, and that much more enticing." He gestured a hand to Sorun. "You agree

with me, do you not? Surely somebody with powers such as yours sees the world for what it truly is underneath the surface. How hopelessly corrupted it is. Do you not think it prudent to hasten the inevitable and start again?"

"Nah, not at all," Sorun denied, shaking his head at Finitevus. The answer caused the grin to fall away from the echidna's face. "You're a nihilistic, sociopathic doomer who stooped to using Chaos mumbo-jumbo to brainwash a guy into becoming possessed by some weird Chaos entity." He placed the blunt end of Yamato on his shoulders. "World's trash, yeah. That doesn't mean you gotta go ruin it."

"Well, that's rather rude of you." The eerie smile returned to Finitevus' face. "You agree with me in that the world is in a less-than-poor state, but not that it needs to be purged?" A single, sardonic laugh left him. "So you would, what, try and save it?"

"Fix the world of all its problems? I look talented enough to do something like that to you?" Sorun sighed out and shook his head. "Finitevus, I won't lie to you. If there's one problem in the world I do want to fix, it's Eggman and how his head needs to be separated from his body. Past that? I'll leave fixing the world to the people that actually know what they're doing. I just wanna hang out with my friends and play video games with a girl I really like, or even more than that go home to where I come from." He made a "tch" sound and looked away. "I'm not gonna actually *get* any of that, but... it'd be nice," he quietly mumbled out.

"... That's all you want?"

"I'm a man who strives for the simple things in life." He looked back to the puzzled echidna. "Why the face? It not fit your world view?"

"..." Finitevus shook his head. "Meaningless conjecture," he claimed in a low tone. "You've said enough. Onto the business at hand. You wish to undo the changes Knuckles has undergone to become Enerjak, correct?"

"Mmhm," Sorun confirmed with a nod. "I know it's 'cause of the hex you put on the big rock up there." He nodded to the Master Emerald. "Now listen, I heard you were responsible for Albion gettin' sacked, but that they tried to do some less-than-virtuous things to you. You probably did a bunch of other shady stuff I'm not aware of, but I'm not gonna judge on stuff I don't know. I'll let that all slide." He gestured his left arm, holding the sword's scabbard, around the cavern. "As far as this Enerjak thing's gone, nobody's been seriously hurt. Dark Legion got all their cybernetics taken away and a bunch of echidna got shunted to Albion, sure, but nobody's actually died or anything like that. So just this once, I'm gonna give you the chance to undo the hex right now. Do it and I'll turn around and walk right out."

It was much more than Sorun felt like giving him. Generous didn't even begin to describe it. And he really was doing it just because nobody'd died yet. Otherwise he would have skipped this conversation entirely and gone with stopping time to cut the echidna's head off and undo the hex. But Sorun wanted to at least *try* and do it peacefully, if only to avoid any potential fallout from other later on about him killing somebody since they seemed so against the prospect.

"I'm afraid I couldn't undo the hex even if I wanted to, Sorun," Finitevus said. The smile on his face didn't imply he was very sorry. "To put it in terms you would understand, the hex is 'locked' into the Master Emerald. Even I am unable to remove it in this state. And as long as that hex remains in the Master Emerald, Knuckles is bound to my will and shall remain as Enerjak."

"Oh?" Sorun glanced up at the Master Emerald. "That isn't a problem," he stated, causing Finitevus' smile to drop a significant amount. "This sword you're drooling over can separate anything. All I gotta do is use it to separate the Emerald and hex." He looked down to the white echidna. "So move it or lose it."

"You..." The smile was completely gone at this point. In place of it was a deep frown on Finitevus' face. "You bluff."

"Eh, maybe, wanna test it out?" Sorun pointed the tip of Yamato at the Master Emerald. "Just lemme give it a li'l poke and we'll know real quick if-"

A flash of green light interrupted the both of them. It was to the side of both Finitevus and Sorun, the pair of which had snapped their heads in the direction of the light. The light's intensity died down almost as soon as it arrived, and in its place was a figure kneeling down on the ground. Sorun didn't even need to look at them to identify them, as something had rolled away from the figure and stopped against Sorun's feet. When he looked down, he saw a very familiar, golden helmet staring up at him.

"Uh-oh." He looked up to confirm his fears, and then began biting down on his lower lip when he saw it was Enerjak sitting there on his knees. *" That's not... wait, something's up with him."*

From what Sorun observed, Enerjak looked positively exhausted. The green energy roiling around his hands was so dim that it was practically invisible. He was panting heavily, his eyes half-lidded like he was liable to fall asleep at any moment. Even the blue and gold garb he wore was cracked in some places.

"Enerjak!" Finitevus exclaimed in a surprised tone. Even he didn't seem to expect this kind of sight. "What happened to you?"

"My... my power... it was depleted," Enerjak panted out in Knuckles' voice. "Eggman's Egg Grapes... nearly ended me. Fought my way out, devastated his forces... but I'm nearly out of power. I need more to finish my work..."

"He drained himself escaping from Eggman?" Sorun thought. He looked between both echidna, and then glanced up at the Master Emerald. *"... Screw it, if ever there was a time it'd be now."*

Without hesitating for another moment Sorun Tricked back up to the Master Emerald. He'd faintly heard Finitevus gasp out and turn his

head towards him, but by then it was too late as Sorun had rose Yamato up and slammed its edge against the giant, green Emerald.

Tink!

... Only for it to bounce right off.

"... Fuck."

The next instant found a floating, golden ring portal to appear next to Sorun much like before. What Sorun didn't expect was for a white, bandage-wrapped echidna hand to shoot out of the ring-portal, grab Sorun by the wrist, and pull him through the portal.

On the other side of the portal, down near the feet of the Master Emerald's pedestal's steps, Finitevus had thrown Sorun out of the portal he'd made, causing the teen to roll a few meters before snapping up to his feet. The first thing he registered was the sharp-toothed sneer Finitevus was sending his way.

"It appears you were all talk after all," he said. "You didn't so much as disturb the hex."

"Nah... that's not it," Sorun muttered out as he stood up. "Thing about Yamato is its ability to absolutely separate anything runs on Chaos energy. It's from a Chaos Emerald, you see. So when it tries to cut something made of pure Chaos energy like it, they cancel out," he explained. *"Keeps up with the games' lore of the sword. Vergil's Yamato couldn't cut other Devil Arms like Dante's sword, Rebellion. Demonic energy against demonic energy, at least in roughly equal amounts, cancels out each other. Usually for me it isn't a problem since not a lot of things are equal in power to a Chaos Emerald, but it's been a problem a few times. It's the same reason I can't separate the Chaos Emeralds from myself, why Eggman's mech suit was so resistant with that Chaos Emerald he had, why I couldn't instantly kill a Chaos entity like Enerjak... why I couldn't affect the Master Emerald."* Sorun scowled as he tossed the black scabbard away and held the Yamato with both hands. "If I can't separate Emerald from

hex... then I'm just gonna have to jam the sword in there to get to the hex so I can separate hex from Emerald."

Finitevus bolted upright, having seen the logic in Sorun's reasoning. A small snarl played over his pale lips as black electricity began arcing over his hands. "I won't allow you." He pointed his hands to Enerjak. "Regain your strength so you can deal with this meddlesome human. Leave him alive, though." He glanced back at Sorun, snarl morphing into a smirk. "I'd like to get him on a dissection table and spend some time with him."

"Dude." Sorun gave the white-furred echidna a perturbed look, though it quickly turned to shock when he saw the black lightning arc off of Finitevus' hands leap onto Enerjak, who was beginning to slowly regain his green glow. *"Oh shit, he's trying to recharge him. Quicksil-"*

An uncontrollable cough left Sorun, and following that a wave of exhaustion hit him with such intensity that he was forced to his knees. He coughed again, a small amount of blood hitting the ground in front of him. He sighed and wiped the blood away with the back of his hand as he looked up at the pair of echidna. *"Figures. Adrenaline's wearing off, and Quicksilver is my most stamina-intensive power yet... fine, I'll do it this way."*

Following the blue sparks arcing along his body, Sorun's Doppelganger manifested right besides him. Finitevus had snapped his head towards the Doppelganger, half in shock and half in... some twisted intrigue that had him smiling in desire. He'd been so enamored by the Doppelganger's appearance that he'd just barely been able to bring his arms up to guard his body when the spectral Sorun ran up to him and kicked him hard enough to send him tumbling back. While that happened, Sorun cut a portal in the space next to him with Yamato, and then willed his left Bringer Claw to life. What happened next was that he simply grabbed a weakened Enerjak with the spectral claw, tossed him through the portal, and then cut it close with Yamato.

"No!" Finitevus scrambled to his feet as the Doppelganger disappeared, his earlier intrigue replaced by fury as he gazed at the empty spot Enerjak had been in, and then towards a kneeling Sorun. "What have you done!?"

"What? You thought you were the only one that could pull off portal shenanigans?" Sorun asked with a slight chuckle. "I got those, too."

"Where did you send him?"

"Ah, somewhere on Mobius." Eight Summoned Swords, four to each side of Sorun, appeared, with all their tips aimed at a yet again surprised Finitevus. "I may not be able to stand up right now, but I got more than enough power to end you right here and now. So you either-"

Mid-sentence Sorun had fired off the Blistering Swords towards Finitevus, who'd gone as far as to smirk a bit. Whether it was in intrigue at the technique sailing towards him or mild respect towards Sorun having the audacity to pull a cheap move like that was unclear. What was clear was that he had reflexes faster than the average Mobian, as he tossed up a gold ring in front of him which expanded into a portal. A portal that the eight Summoned Swords flew into.

And unfortunately for Sorun, a second ring-shaped portal opened up right next to him, from which the eight Summoned Swords flew out from.

The swords had been too fast and too close for Sorun to think properly. Indeed, in any other scenario he wouldn't have been quick enough to mentally detonate the swords midair so they wouldn't skewer him. In this instance, he wasn't, and nearly died right there from being impaled by eight spectral swords.

Fortunately for Sorun a certain ant who'd been watching the proceedings along with the two echidna at the back of the cavern was fast enough, and had teleported onto Sorun's shoulder in one

moment, and then teleported him away in the next right as the eight swords impaled the spot Sorun had been kneeling in.

The two reappeared a few meters away, Sorun still kneeling down but with Archimedes still on his shoulder. Sorun stared towards the spot impaled with the blue swords, panting heavily, and the looked up to the ant that stood on his shoulder as gratitude washed over him.

"Th-thanks for that, Archimedes," Sorun panted out.

"Think nothing of it." Both the ant and Sorun turned their heads towards the albino echidna. "Now onto more pressing matters..."

Footsteps were heard as both Julie-Su and Locke stepped behind Sorun, both glaring towards Finitevus along with the human and ant. Finitevus himself was caught looking between the four adversaries, looking more displeased by the moment as he continued to glance back and forth between them and the Master Emerald.

"All that research, all that time spent casting... all for naught, it seems." With a bitter sigh, Finitevus held up a golden ring. "I'm wise enough to know to fall back when appropriate. It seems you lot have won this one. Take your precious Guardian back." He tossed the ring behind him, the golden hoop expanding into a wide portal. Finitevus took one step into the portal, but then paused halfway and turned back to look at Sorun. "I'd love to discuss with you at length about who you are and your abilities, Sorun, but time is against us. Rest assured you'll be in my thoughts." With a final wave, and a smile, Finitevus ducked into the golden portal. "Until we meet again."

And that was that. The portal closed behind Finitevus, leaving an empty space. All that was left were the four inside the chamber, the human among them proceeding to double over as he coughed some more. Both Archimedes and Locke looked to Sorun in concern, while Julie-Su had bent down to his level to place a concerned hand on his back.

"Is he okay?" This question came from Locke, who continued to gaze down at the human as he continued coughing while Julie-Su tried to sooth him by rubbing at his back. "That cough..."

"I- hck, ack!- may be... out here against doctor's orders," Sorun mumbled out in a tired voice. "And I might have injected a gratuitous amount of drugs into me just to make it this far..."

"Drugs?" Locke repeated. "What drugs?"

"Epi- khack!- epineph- khck!- I took adrenaline," Sorun gasped out, shaking his head to try and clear his clouding vision. "Usin' these powers, it wears me out. I just took it to give me some more time." His left arm tapped on Julie-Su's shoulder, who nodded at him. She helped him to his feet by keeping one arm on his back and another under his arm, after which he nodded towards the Master Emerald. "Can't say it was the worst idea. I still have to stab that."

As Julie-Su began to assist Sorun in walking towards the altar's steps, Locke, now carrying Archimedes after having teleported to the echidna's shoulder, gave the human's back a curious look. "You intend to... stab the Master Emerald...?"

"Gotta get in deep to get to the hex," he called back in a winded voice. By now he and Julie-Su were halfway up the steps, and while they continued to advance upwards, Sorun turned his head towards Julie-Su. "Hey," he whispered out, "I didn't teleport Knuckles that far. He's back in the spot we both were at when we arrived on the island. When I get this hex out he should turn back to normal."

A relieved smile overtook Julie-Su's features as they both made it to the top of the steps. "Thank you, Sorun," she said as she released the human, stepping back with some concern at seeing the Earthling wobble on his feet. "Are you alright to do this?" she asked.

"Prolly not," he honestly answered as he held up his spectral hand, Yamato appeared in its hold. "It's gotta get done, though."

Giving the sword a single look, and then glancing up to give the Master Emerald the same look, Sorun sighed out of exhaustion and willed his spectral arm to push the Yamato's blade into the Emerald.

There'd been significantly more resistance than Sorun had expected. Enough that he'd almost been worried that even his Bringer Claw wouldn't be strong enough to shove the blade through. Fortunately, it managed to crack through its surface, and Sorun let his power run through the blade as he used the sword embedded in the green gem to feel around.

"I'm feeling... yep, that's something," he thought. Past all the raw Chaos energy he felt in the gem - a fathomless amount of energy, he'd realized when he pierced the Emerald - he felt it. Some dark thing that didn't belong. The hex, he presumed. Yamato's power got right to work, and Sorun felt its separation ability affect it almost immediately. He saw as sparks of black lightning arced over the gem before *something* began to rise out of it from the top. Some formless, foggy, transparent purple thing, like a small cloud of dark energy. Sorun watched as the hex simply floated up and out of the chamber housing the Master Emerald, making a slight hum at the sight of it. *"Huh. Well, that's that."*

"Was... was that it?" Julie-Su asked, voice somewhat in wonder as she watched the hex float off. "Just like that? It's over?"

"It does feel kind of underwhelming, doesn't it?" Sorun asked as he tore Yamato out from the Emerald, watching in some interest as the hole he'd made in the gem was sealed and healed over. "Huh. Well, anyways, looks like all's well that-"

A horrible coughing fit interrupted Sorun. Waves of exhaustion had hit him, and his vision had begun to swim. It was bad enough that the human found himself stumbling around until he'd accidentally slipped and waved his left hand out to try and hold onto something to catch himself.

On the bright side his left hand found something to stabilize himself.

On the downside it was the surface of the Master Emerald.

"... Whoops."

Face suddenly alight in panic, Sorun tried to tear his hand away from the Master Emerald. To his horror, his hand was already affixed to it. Even more than that he saw arcs of green energy began to spark around his hand.

"No no no, not this one, not this one...!"

The green energies began to coalesce closer and closer to Sorun's hand. Try as he might, Sorun's couldn't free himself of the gem, and beyond that he faintly heard voices crying out his name behind him. Sorun couldn't find himself to even hear them as he continued to try and pull his arm away to no avail.

Hissing out in frustration, he looked down to his spectral hand, which still held Yamato. He looked back and forth between the hands two times, and then bit out a frustrated growl as he rose Yamato up.

"Ugh... fuck me."

As it stood, Sorun thought it was safe to assume absorbing the Master Emerald would be a surefire way of killing him right there. More than that, this Emerald was the only thing holding the island up in the air. It was bad enough letting it fall down to ground to destroy both it and surrounding area. It was even worse considering it was hovering right above New Mobotropolis at the moment. Letting the island fall there would mean destruction for the city and the death of everybody within it.

So it was a no-brainer that Sorun used the Yamato to cut through his left forearm and sever his own hand.

Even if his pain nerves hadn't been fried long ago, Sorun was so exhausted he doubted he would have felt his own hand coming off. He saw with some relief before tumbling down the altar's steps that

the severed hand had fallen away from the Emerald and the green energies had recessed back into the Emerald. So that was good.

After that he had tumbled down the steps, leaving a small blood trail behind him from the bleeding stump of his left arm. The last thing Sorun was able to make out was a blurred Mobian face looking down at him before he fell unconscious.

Of all the things on the stupid goddamned list this had been one of the more out-there ones. Enough that Rubrum had to go double-check and triple-check when he first saw it because of how absurd it sounded and just to make sure he hadn't finally dove off the deep end.

It still amazed him he made it this far without going over, so it wouldn't have been that much of a shock.

Looking forwards, it made sense, at least from his perspective. It was only thanks to that perspective everything he'd done the list said to do made sense, and he was sure that to anybody else without this list, it'd probably look like he was doing nonsensical, random actions. And he wouldn't have blamed those people. Because even with that perspective even he sometimes struggled to understand why he was doing what he was doing.

Well, it wasn't his job to understand it. It was his job to follow the list to the letter. And right now he had to follow this particular letter.

- Put the hex Sorun separates from the Master Emerald in a jar and save it for later ()

... He fucking hated his life.

"Yeah, 'cause apparently you can just bottle this shit," Rubrum grumbled to himself. There was an open jar in his left hand and its lid in his right. And nearby a small cluster of trees just outside the chamber the Master Emerald sat in was the hex Finitevus had put on

it that was now separated from the Emerald. Just floating around. And here Rubrum was, feeling like an idiot as he creeped up on the floating purple cloud thing with a jar.

"Highlight of my life right here," he groused as he swiped the jar over the purple cloud. He held the jar up afterwards, tilting his head when he saw the purple and black cloud of energy floating in the jar, and then quickly went to screw the lid on to seal it in. "Well, uh... that's-that's it, I guess, job done." Rubrum looked around at the empty forest around him, and then lifted both his arms up in a half-triumphant, half-confused show of victory. "Er, yeah, woo-hoo."

- Put the hex Sorun separates from the Master Emerald in a jar and save it for later (X)

"- orun, Sorun, lad, wake up!"

One of two things had woken Sorun up. Whether it was from being shaken so much or a voice calling out to him, he wasn't so sure. He wasn't so sure of anything at the moment. His mind felt... muddled, sluggish. Random, incoherent thoughts were the only thing that occupied his mind his his blurred vision slowly came into focus, revealing a red form kneeling above him. He recognized him as Locke due to the aged face, but that was as much as Sorun could think before the incoherent thoughts took over again.

"Sorun?" Locke's mouth had upturned a bit in relief when he was Sorun stir awake, though his eyes were still narrowed a bit in worry as he lightly shook the human again. "Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"Mh..?" Sorun mumbled as he held his left hand to his head. "I don't... wha? Huh?"

Sorun quickly realized he had a left hand, causing him to reel back in shock. His incoherent thoughts snappped right back to normal as he stared at appendage.

The human teen distinctly remembered having severed his left hand in order to stop himself from accidentally absorbing the Master Emerald, so it came as a shock to him to discover that he still had a left hand. He knew it'd happened; nothing showed up on his dark shirt, but he saw some dark stains on his blue pants from where some of the blood had splashed onto him. And yet, there it was. His flesh and blood left hand.

"But... didn't I cut that off?" Sorun looked to Locke with a lost expression. "What gives, I thought... I thought I lost this?"

"Well, you did. Gave all of us quite a scare," Locke informed him with a mild chuckle. He then held up his own right hand, Sorun's eye widening a bit when he saw faint green glows shine around it. "But, when you removed Finitevus' hex it restored my own connection to the Master Emerald, me being a former Guardian. You're lucky I was right there to reattach it with some of my abilities. The arm was still warm and that sword of yours made such a perfectly clean cut that it wasn't even that hard to put it back on."

"O-oh. Really? You did that for me?" Eyebrow risen in surprise, Sorun flexed his fingers. Seemed to work fine. Still couldn't feel anything with it, but the mobility was all there at least. He twisted it around a bit experimentally, and then sighed out before turning back to Locke. "Sorry about doing that," he said. "I can't control it when I absorb Chaos Emeralds. I accidentally touched the Master Emerald, and I didn't want to absorb it and have the island fall on the city, so... yeah, I-I cut it off. Thanks for putting it back on."

Saved him a lot of trouble. He didn't even want to think about how anybody back in New Mobotropolis would have reacted if he came back missing yet another hand.

"Think nothing of it. I owe you enough that the least I could do was give your hand back." Locke turned his head to the spectral arm replacing Sorun's lost right arm. "Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do for long-lost limbs, so..."

"Eh, don't worry about it." A hand was held out to Sorun. The teen grasped it, and afterwards Locke helped him up to his feet. "So Knuckles...?"

"See for yourself," Locke said. He stepped aside, allowing Sorun to have a view of the Master Emerald's altar and its steps. Sorun saw with some surprise that Knuckles was sitting down on the bottom step, with Julie-Su sitting right next to him. He was sitting hunched forwards with a sad expression on his face, but otherwise it was just Knuckles. No egyptian-esque clothes or crazy green energy auras. Just him, his shoes, gloves, and a glum expression.

Casting one last glance at Locke, Sorun nodded to the older echidna and began walking to the two teenage ones. He'd stopped right in front of them, with both looking up towards Sorun. Both had mixtures of surprise and relief written on their faces, along with a bit of worry on Knuckles' part. Sorun simply stared down at Knuckles with a flat expression.

"You're a real piece of work. You know that?" With a sigh, Sorun sat down on the other side of Knuckles. "I'd say I'm sorry for stabbing you a bunch while you were Enerjak," he continued, raising his left hand up, "but this adventure concluded with me having to cut my own hand off, so we'll call it even on that front."

He saw from the corner of his eye Knuckles wince. "I'm... sorry about that," Knuckles apologized. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, your dad worked his magic on me. Literally. I'm fine," he assured him, lowering his hand into his lap. "More importantly, are you okay?"

"That I couldn't tell you," Knuckles muttered out. "I remember everything, you know. It's... it's like it was me speaking, but it wasn't me. I didn't want to do anything that Enerjak did, but..." He shook his head. "I don't know. I wasn't myself."

"Eh, you got brainwashed by a creep scientist guy. A really, *really* creepy scientist guy. Nobody'll hold it against you. City got kinda dinged up, but Nicole can fix it easy," Sorun assured him. "Me running around outside the hospital on the other hand, nah, I'm a dead man when I get back."

His last sentence managed to elicit some humorless laugh out of Knuckles. "I don't think they'll treat you that bad."

"No, they-they will, but we'll get to that," Sorun said. "Look, it was real bad, but it turned out fine. I mean, no one died, right? You, uh... de-cyborged a bunch of the crazy echidna people and did, uh... what'd Enerjak do with all the other echidna again?"

"He sent them all to Albion. I guess they're just gonna live there now," Knuckles answered. "He sent some of the Dark Legion people there, too, but most of them are still up here, dingoes are in the desert... but I don't know, it's probably for the best if you really think about it. They can all just settle on Albion now without having to worry about warring factions attacking them at any moment."

"There, see?" Sorun softly hit Knuckles on the shoulder. "There's a positive thing right there."

"And..." Knuckles continued, a small smirk stretching over his mouth, "that whole 'try to drain Enerjak of his power' massively backfired on Eggman. Those Egg Grapes of his got overloaded and Enerjak ended up fighting him. Most of his forces got completely trashed."

Sorun blinked. His hand slinked back to his side, and he leaned forwards a bit to get a better look at Knuckles' face. "How much damage did Enerjak do to Eggman?" he asked.

"Oh, I'd say a good... ninety, ninety-five percent of New Megaopolis got destroyed," Knuckles answered, making Sorun's jaw drop open. "He wiped out most of his fleet, too. Probably only got one or two ships left."

"Well that's... actually pretty amazing." In that Eggman's total power got cut down to a meager fraction at least. It was actually spectacular when Sorun heard it. He would have taken the fleet alone getting destroyed, but his city, too? Most of his factories and robots getting deep-sixed? "Geez, Knuckles, war's gonna be really easy to win now that the guy barely has any of his stuff left," Sorun breathed out as he sat back on the steps. "I actually don't think this could have ended any better than it did."

He thought back on that statement and immediately considered that maybe it was false and Enerjak could have saved everyone the trouble and killed Eggman at some point while he was wrecking all his forces, but all this alone was more than what Sorun bargained for. It was making his ill-fated plan of blitzing Eggman once he got the last Emerald that much more feasible.

"Huh, we really did manage to turn this whole mad god emergency around, didn't we?"

"Yeah, I guess. Maybe," Knuckles admitted. "I still feel like an idiot getting duped like that by such a shady-looking guy."

"Fooled by literally the evilest-looking echidna I've ever seen? Granted I haven't seen that many but still?" Sorun deadpanned. "Nah, coulda happened to any of us. Don't sweat it."

Knuckles paused, and then looked up to stare ahead at to the end of the cavern. He slowly then spun his head towards Sorun, his face set in a blank expression. Sorun stared back with an equally blank expression, and after that they both cracked into equal grins and stared back ahead at the cavern.

"You're alright, Sorun," Knuckles said. "Thanks for all your help with this."

"It's all good, man," Sorun said back. "I think I'm gonna go back to New Mobotropolis now. You two want a ride?"

"Actually..." Knuckles hedged off, drawing Sorun's attention back to him. He glanced towards Julie-Su, who gave him an assuring smile, causing him to reciprocate it and turn to Sorun. "This whole thing has gotten me thinking that maybe I should be taken my position as Guardian of that big thing up there-" he gestured to the Master Emerald above them, "- more seriously. Plus the threat of Eggman's massively diminished now, so it's not like you guys need every hand on deck down there. So I'm just gonna stay up here. Julie-Su's staying with, thinking the Chaotix'll probably hop back up here too, we'll see. Plus, you know..." He nodded his head at the end of the cavern, where Locke was talking with Archimedes. "Get some, uh... some more time in with dad, you know? Been a while, so..."

"No, yeah, I get. Well I mean not really 'cause... eh, forget it." Sorun clapped his hands onto his knees loudly, startling both echidna next him, and stood up. "You wanna take the Guardian thing more seriously and spend some time with family now that everything's not so dire, I get it. Your other side of the family, mom and step-dad and half-brother'd all be on Albion with everyone else now, right?"

Knuckles nodded. "Yeah, that's right."

"Visit 'em sometime, man." Sorun slid his hands into the pockets of his bloodstained pants. "I'm going to the city. Catch ya around, I guess."

"Sorun, wait. One more thing."

He'd already been halfway to walking away from the pair of echidna before he heard Knuckles call his name out. He's stopped, and then turned around the address the echidna yet again. Sorun felt a small spike of curiosity when he saw Knuckles giving him an unreadable expression.

"Yeah?" Sorun asked.

"It's just... your sword, Yamato..." Knuckles got out in a hesitant voice. "Enerjak, he... you really spooked him with that sword of

yours."

"I remember. He got really freaked out by it." Sorun had chalked up to him just being scared of it since it had the ability to separate him from his host, but looking back, he'd said some things that gave Sorun pause. "Demonic" had been at the forefront of specific words Sorun had taken an interest in. Demonic. The sword's lore origins were demonic in nature, true, but that was just that: the lore. The actual abilities were Chaos-based, even if they emulated Vergil's demonic Yamato from the games. And Enerjak had no way of knowing where Sorun had even pulled the sword from.

So what the hell had he seen to call the blade something like that?

"I remember everything from when I was Enerjak, so... I don't know. He - I - We, I guess, uh... kind of got a good look at it when you, you know... stuck it in us." Knuckles cleared his throat to clear the awkward air that suddenly emerged between them. "... The Chaos energy in that sword is really dark, you know?"

"... Dark?"

"Maybe that isn't the right... heavy, I guess. It's just different. And honestly, man, just being around it gives me chills," Knuckles admitted to him. "You sure that thing is safe? I know it's you and everything, but, well... something just feels really off with it."

"I don't know what to tell you, man. Sword's how it is." Sorun offered Knuckles a shrug. "Don't let it get to you too much. It's probably just some of Enerjak's leftover feelings lingering on ya. They'll prolly go away on their own. Just gotta clear your head. Take some time off to yourself, relax a bit."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Accepting the answer, Knuckles gave Sorun a nod. "I think I'll be doing that. Take care, Sorun."

"Bye, Sorun!" Julie-Su mirrored Knuckles as they both waved Sorun off. He reciprocated the wave, and then turned away towards the exit

to the cavern.

On his way towards the exit he ran into the older echidna and ant that had been conversing with themselves as he talked with Knuckles. The former turned towards Sorun to offer him a small smile, while the latter hopped on the tip of a nearby stalagmite to be at eye-level with the teen.

"'Ello there, Sorun," Archimedes greeted. "Feeling alright? No, er... adverse effects or anything like that?"

Sorun shook his head. "Nah, I'm feelin' fine. Don't think the Master Emerald did anything to me. Probably a good thing."

"A fact I'm sure we're all in agreement on," Locke added in. "We never did properly thank you for everything. Helping to deal with the Enerjak situation, Dr. Finitevus, all that. And for... willing to cut a piece of your body off for the greater good. I know that couldn't have been an easy choice."

"Eh, easier than you'd think," Sorun admitted with a shrug. "It's all good, now, though. So no worries there." He glanced back towards the altar where Knuckles sat, and then back at Locke. "Not so bad for a 'random Overlander', huh?"

Locke grew a bit uncomfortable, while at the same time Archimedes shot the echidna a look. "Right, er... I must apologize for that," he said. "I'd mistaken you for their kind, and any encounter they've had with the island has never resulted in anything good-"

"It's fine, man, I get it," Sorun said with a wave, letting Locke relax a bit. Far be it from him to judge somebody for a justifiable stigma they had, even if he wasn't so pleased with it. He was always surprised enough he could walk around so freely among Mobians without them holding it to him, even if he wasn't an Overlander to begin with. Sorun was happy enough with an apology. "So you're gonna be spending more time with him, then?"

"Hopefully now that he's decided to take his mantle of the Guardian a bit more seriously," Locke confirmed. "I'd be remiss to say I didn't love my own son, but some of his recent decisions haven't sat that well with me. Such as leaving the island for those down below."

"Knuckles was just worried about everybody and Eggman. Can't exactly blame the guy for wanting to help curb a global threat that endangered everyone, his own species included," Sorun said. A low hum left Locke as a response as he looked down at his feet, making Sorun sigh out. "Look, I... don't really got a lot of experience with this sort of thing, so I don't know what to tell ya. Just try talking to the guy, at least."

A dry chuckle left Locke as he looked back up at Sorun. "I suppose I'll have to endeavor to do my best."

"You dot that." Sorun nodded to both of them, and then summoned Yamato. "Well, it's been real, guys. True experience in and out. I gotta go get my head screamed off by my doctor, though. Take care."

"I really am considering hitting you every time you do something stupid."

"Pretty sure they can get you for malpractice if you started doin' that, doc."

A deep sigh was all the Mobian duck in front of Sorun offered. A very unamused sigh at that. He took the stethoscope off of Sorun's bare chest, and as the human lowered his shirt back down he made a small hum as he looked down at the chart in his hand. Finally, he shook his head and looked back up to Sorun.

"Well, somehow despite all your recent *activities* and your abiding of *non-prescribed 'medicine'* -"

"You shouldn't leave needles sitting around," Sorun said with a shrug.

"That's not even a good excuse, but I suppose the fault is mine somewhat. I knew something was off last time I checked inventory, though I don't know how an epinephrine syringe wandered all the way up here from storage... well, it's irrelevant," the doctor finally decided with a shrug. "You made it out of that pretty much completely okay. Well, not *okay* okay, but you're not worse off than you were a few days ago. Actually you seem much better," he admitted with a bit of a surprised tone.

"Might have something to do with what happened on the island," Sorun offered. "Had some, uh... unorthodox procedures, we'll call it."

"..."

"I could say magic, but I don't think you'd like that."

With another sigh, Dr. Quack closed his eye and shook his head. "Yeah, I tend to tune out all that magic mumbo-jumbo and Chaos what-has-its I know some people can do. Not in my scope. What is in my scope is telling you how you're doing on a physiological scale. And as I said, you're doing fine."

"Ah, that's great to hear, Doc," Sorun said as he began to slide off the hospital bed. "So do I check myself out or-?"

"You," Dr. Quack said as he pushed Sorun back on the bed, "stay here because I'm not fully confident about releasing you from our care yet. Though I will consider letting you out of the wheelchair in a few days since you seem to be doing well on that front," he offered.

Sorun sighed as he was sat back on the bed. "Ugh, for the... fine, that's fair."

"Glad to hear it." The duck began stepping away from Sorun and towards the door. "Also, you had a visitor that wanted to come see you."

"Eh, I'm not doing anything else. Send 'em in." Sorun waved his hand to the doctor, who nodded to him as he continued towards the door. He left, closing the room's door behind him as Sorun sat back on the bed, leaning his back against the metal frame as he clasped his mismatched hands behind his head.

"'Getting better' he says. Ha. If only..." Sorun thought to himself as he looked out the window. It was dark outside due to the nighttime, though not that late into the evening. He still saw a lot of lights on in houses outside the window. *"Wonder where that head guy ran off to? Eh, I don't really care I guess... Hope Knuckles'll be doin' well now after that whole thing. If I ever have to deal with that skirt-wearing thing again it'll be too soon."* He heard the door to his room open again, prompting him to remove himself from the metal bed frame and slide down to the end of the bed. *"Alright, who's... ah, boy."*

He'd saw who it was standing at the open doorway, but didn't choose to say anything to them or greet them in any way. Instead he propped his head up onto his hand and looked the other way. There was a deep sigh from a masculine voice on the other end of the room, followed by the sound of footsteps and then Sorun's bed depressing as somebody sat right next to him. A few seconds had passed before the newcomer chose to speak.

"You're a bothersome handful. You do know that, right?"

Lightly snorting in amusement, Sorun finally looked to the side at the black and red body sitting next to him. "You can't talk," Sorun told Shadow. "You punched a god in the face and got knocked flat on your back."

Shadow rolled his eyes and looked ahead at the room. His scowl suggested he didn't seem that amused. "That isn't quite how it went down. And that's not what I meant." His eyes flashed back to Sorun. "I know the details of how you ended up this way. I just... hadn't expected it to be that bad."

"... 'Hey, Shadow, sorry to bug ya but I just called to tell ya Sorun got his arm and eye knocked out of him.' How were you expecting it to look?" Sorun asked him.

"I don't know," he admitted with a shake of his head. "How is it?"

"Eh, it's actually not so bad with this thing," Sorun said as he waved his spectral arm around. "It's actually way better than my normal arm. I'm thinking of cutting my left one off just so I can even them out."

Shadow looked greatly displeased by that statement. "That isn't funny, Sorun."

"So is it a bad time to tell you I *did* cut it off but had it put back on?"

"You..." With an exasperated sigh, Shadow looked forwards along with Sorun. "I should have been there," he said. Hearing that made Sorun a bit surprised, though he continued to stare ahead at the wall along with Shadow. "I realize the others were helpless to aid you. I don't blame them, but you shouldn't have had to do something like that alone."

"Really doubt you could have helped," Sorun said. "Yamato had trouble scratching that thing 'cause of the Chaos Emerald. It was practically invulnerable. Don't blame yourself," he said with a shake of his head. "I had to pull a lot of tricky nonsense just to pull off a win. Ended up using my whole bag of powers. Even then I still made it out an inch away from dying."

"So I heard." Shadow finally chose to glance back at Sorun. "When did you learn to stop time?"

"Emerald."

"I was being rhetorical," Shadow said in a deadpan.

Sorun slowly nodded in understanding. "Ahhh. You know, if you wanna be playful and say stuff like that you have to at least *try* and put some sarcastic edge to your voice. Otherwise people take you for real and it messes the whole thing up."

"Tch. Still trying to give me lessons on wordplay?"

Sorun shrugged. "Who knows? Might be nice, passing something along to someone," he said. "Not like I can teach this stuff to Sonic. He overhams it since subtlety's all but lost on that guy. His sarcasm sucks. Me, my sarcasm's dry to the point I got no hope." He turned to Shadow and poked him in the shoulder. "As for you, it just ain't your style. Not your jive, just doesn't mesh. Which is why you could actually pull it off if you seldom use it. You can use the whole unexpected angle since nobody'd see it coming from such a serious guy like you."

With a scoff, Shadow brushed Sorun's finger off him him and stared back ahead at the wall. "You must be alright if you have the energy to say all this."

"Pfft. I try to help a guy and this is the thanks I get?" Sorun interlaced his fingers behind his head and laid back on the bed. "It's nice to know you care, Shadow. I mean, going out of your way to visit little ol' me like this."

"I regret it more with every passing second. Evidently you're fine enough to the point it was a waste of time coming all the way here since you seem so well-off." Sorun felt the bed lighten as Shadow hopped off of it. He heard him walk halfway through the room, and then paused. "... Things on the other side of the world have quieted down some. We've been getting reports that the infrastructure in New Megaopolis was destroyed."

"Yeah, Enerjak went a bit wild on all of Eggman's stuff. His whole power structure's pretty much crippled now. I told Sally and the rest after I got back, so... yeah. It's lookin' pretty good."

There was a thoughtful hum from Shadow. "If there was ever a time to plan the Doctor's demise, it'd be now. That window is fast approaching."

"We'll get there, Shadow, we'll get there. I wanna wait 'til I get my hands on the last Emerald before we spring anything. Wanna be at max power to give us a good a chance as possible," Sorun said with a wave of his hand. "Just wait for that to happen and then we'll do something. At worst I'll get that last Emerald and use Yamato to teleport us to the New Megaopolis ruins. There'd be so little in our way at this point that if it's the two of us we could probably just beeline straight for him and blast through anything in our way until we got to him. One of us stops time, puts a Chaos Spear or Summoned Sword or whatever through his face, boom, job done."

"Not exactly the most well thought-out plan. Then again, with recent events it has some merits," Shadow admitted. "As it is, since things are a bit less hectic I'll be staying here in the city with Rouge for a bit. If something comes up you'll know where to find me. Until then I'll be around."

"Mm-hm, sure." His head facing the ceiling, Sorun waved the hedgehog out. "You do that. I'll let ya know if anything turns up."

His hand hadn't even hit the bed before he heard the door to his room close as Shadow left. Sorun had thought that was the end of it and had tried closing his eye and falling asleep right there in his awkward position on the bed. That was until he heard a knock on the door what felt like thirty seconds later from his perspective, followed by the door opening, followed by Sorun deeply sighing when he heard somebody softly walk into the room.

"I absolutely refuse to say sorry for a single thing I did today," Sorun said as he sat up on the bed to stare at the person who just walked into the room. His sentence and the way his face hadn't changed expressions caused Nicole to stop halfway to his bed, surprise lacing her features as she watched him.

"... How did you know it was me?" she finally asked after getting over the initial surprise of Sorun identifying her immediately.

"You're the only person I know that knocks on a door and then enters the room seconds later without waiting for anybody to say anything."

Looking abashed, Nicole glanced down towards her feet. "Forgive me. I'm still learning at adhering to social customs."

"Yeah, I know. It's fine." Sorun leaned forwards and clasped his hands together again, this time setting them between his knees. He kept his own eye focused on the floor as he felt the bed compress as Nicole sat down in it- right in the same place Shadow had sat in prior. "So. Today was crazy. But hey, it all ended that well end... ed, yeah, that doesn't work," he muttered with a shake of his head.

"The expression is 'all's well that end's well', is it not?"

Sorun nodded. "Yeah, but I tried putting a spin on it with a new end and it kind of fell apart and didn't work out." Nothing but silence passed after Sorun finished speaking. He got fed up with it fairly quickly and clicked his tongue out of irritation, and then looked up at Nicole. She looked about as uncomfortable as he felt, avoiding eye contact with him while having all but copied the slumped sitting stance Sorun had.

There was a strong urge for him to go and gloat about the fact that he'd been right and that everybody else had been wrong. That even slightly wounded he'd had more right to have been there than anybody else in that fight and that he didn't need to be coddled like some newborn infant that couldn't protect itself. He could be strapped to a wheelchair with no arms and still have more lethality than the average Mobian citizen on account he could summon spectral sword out of thin air. If anything *he'd* been the main factor in solving this entire mess.

Of course he didn't because that would be unnecessarily mean and bordering on cruel, and he didn't really have it in him to pull

something like that on somebody he liked. So Sorun thought that a more tactful approach was necessary. Even if it killed him a bit inside that he couldn't gloat. Because he wanted to. Badly.

"Look, I... I get it, you're all really worried about me," Sorun said. "You don't want me doing all this crazy stuff because I'm in no shape to right now, I get it, it makes sense. I don't blame you at all."

"Then why do you keep doing it?" Nicole asked. "Time and time again we have all continued to try and keep you from endangering yourself further, but at every step-"

"It's not like I want to keep doing this," Sorun interrupted with an annoyed tone as he threw his arms up at the ceiling. "What, you think I actually *like* going up to random evil gods just so I can stab them? I-I-I'm not Sonic, I don't do crazy stuff like that for fun. Believe me, I'd like nothing more than to listen to you guys and sit in a hospital and do absolutely nothing until I got better again. I mean, that's the dream. To just sit around and do nothing." He sighed and sat a bit further back on the bed, enough that he was able to fold his legs in front of him. "But it feels like the world just won't let me take a rest because crazy things keep happening left and right. First a revolution happens and then the whole Enerjak thing happens right after, and I'm just left wondering what crazy, insane thing's gonna happen next. And I'd like to sit it out and let you all handle it, Nicole, but then Enerjak happens and I got this-" he formed Yamato in his hand, "- and-and I just- it- ugh..."

Yamato disappeared, and Sorun flumped right onto his back on the bed. Nicole, looking puzzled at the sight, leaned forwards as Sorun exhaled up at the ceiling with his arms stretched out far enough above him that his hands dangled off the edge of the bed.

"I just wanna sleep until the doctor lets me out of this hospital so I can do stuff," Sorun mumbled out. "I don't want any more crazy stuff happening. I don't want people yelling at me. I just want to do normal stuff for a bit. Why is that so much to ask?"

"..." Nicole's ears flattened halfway as she looked ahead, away from Sorun. "Perhaps we were all a bit overbearing on you," she said.

"No. You weren't," Sorun said, causing her ears to straighten back up as she looked back at him. "I can't really blame you for everything you did."

"Like you wouldn't blame me for putting you in a straight jacket?" she asked, and when Sorun looked up he saw Nicole frowning at him a bit. "That comment was a bit hurtful, Sorun."

"You took my door away."

The frown turned into a pout as she looked away. "The comment having a relatively solid base doesn't make it any less hurtful."

"You didn't even just lock it. You just straight-out took it away."

"I was worried," she snapped as she looked back at him. "And it seems these fears may have been a bit... misplaced," she finally admitted in a softer voice. "You... handled yourself well, it seems. With Enerjak."

"Eh, I'm not gonna lie. I think I just got really lucky," Sorun said to her as he sat back up. "I was really relying on that time-stop surprise of mine one-shotting Enerjak and it didn't, and if I'm being honest with you I don't think I could have taken the guy in a straight fight the more I think about it. I was really heated at the time and thought I could, but looking back Eggman teleporting him away to try and drain his powers only to have it blow up in his face is probably what ended up saving us. Which... would mean Sonic was right in making that truce with him..." Sorun realized as his voice trailed off. *"... Goddammit, he was right."*

How would things have gone if Sonic hadn't stopped Sorun from killing Eggman right then and there? Poorly, most likely. Chances were Enerjak would have won that fight, and Sorun didn't like thinking about how bleak things would have been for the world after.

Him and Finitevus made it sound like they wanted to erase most of the world's population through an armageddon to hard-reset civilization. It would have been the world being brought back to level zero by the gene bombs all over again, only this time with someone like Enerjak there to play (and probably accurately portray) god for the new generation that would rise up from the ashes.

All of that was avoided because Sonic stopped Sorun from killing Eggman.

Hard pill to swallow the more Sorun thought on it.

"Well, at least I was there to separate that hex from the Master Emerald," Sorun finally settled on with a sigh. *"Who knows how things would have played out if I wasn't there, and it all ended well because of it. So how about we try not thinking about that, huh?"*

"Yes, you did seem highly agitated during that fight." Nicole's voice cut through Sorun's thoughts, making Sorun face her once again. "I was observing through the surrounding cameras. I was too busy attempting repairs to the city's defensive systems knocked out from all the fighting between Enerjak and Shadow, so I couldn't intervene directly. I saw what had transpired though." The corners of her mouth lifted up a bit as she glanced away from Sorun. "You... seemed particularly upset at how his aversion to technology related to me."

"Oh, you... heard all that, huh?" It was Sorun's turn to look away from her as he rapidly brushed as much of his dark hair in front of his face as possible to hide himself. "W-well, you know, I... you really freaked me out after the drone thing and-and, well, I..."

"It's okay, Sorun. I understand." A hand placed itself on the teen's shoulder, causing him to freeze in place. His vision was a bit dark from the hair over his one eye, though he was able to make out Nicole reaching her arm over to touch his shoulder as she smiled at him. "It's nice to hear somebody regard me so highly they'd go out of their way to fight a god." The hand squeezed down a bit. Sorun assumed there would have been a bit of pain from the pressure he

felt had he still has access to that bodily function. "It was flattering. Also incredibly foolish of you. But flattering all the same."

He was too flustered at the moment to form any kind of response to Nicole after hearing her words. Fortunately, Nicole had chosen that time to release his shoulder and stand up off the bed.

"I'm happy to have people like you and Sally that regard me so highly. It's made my experience of fitting into real life all the more worthwhile," she said to him. "We can speak more of this later, at a more appropriate time when you're better. For now, I'd like to let you get your rest. It's been a long day for everyone." Her body slowly began disappearing. "Good night, Sorun."

No sooner had she disappeared from the room did Sorun loudly sigh out and flop right back onto the bed. He'd brushed his hair away from his face after to reveal a large blush that had grown on his features.

"Why's it gotta be like this...?"

Chapter 49

A/N- I saw it a couple of times in some reviews, so I'm addressing it right now: no, I'm not planning on doing anything with Anarchy Beryl.

Recursion Error

Episode 49- A deal with a devil

"Thanks for helping me with this, Mighty. I owe ya one."

These words were spoken by Sorun, who at that moment had stepped out of a portal sitting right in the center of his hospital room. From behind him ambled out Mighty from the portal, who was balancing a TV in his hands with a game console and controllers stacked precariously on top of it.

"Aw, it's nothin', Sorun. If anything I owe you for your help with Knuckles during, y'know, that whole thing from a few days back." Mighty set down the electronics and turned back to Sorun just in time to catch him cutting the portal closed. "Though," he continued with a small smirk, "I'm kinda surprised you held out so long in here without getting your hands on this thing with the way you act around it."

Sorun turned around towards the armadillo, his eye twitching in irritation while his mouth was set in a happy grin. "It's been hectic, man, come on. I haven't really had a good opportunity until now."

"Are you sure it's not because you just forgot all this game stuff was in the HQ?" Mighty asked him in a teasing tone.

"You know what, man, you'll never know 'cause you don't have proof of squat." He threw Yamato over his shoulder as the sword

disappeared in a show of blue spark and particles and began to approach Mighty. "I don't really have an end table or something to prop the TV up on so we'll just have to leave it on the ground. Maybe I can have Nicole make, like, some bean bag chairs or something later on. Or an end table."

"Sure, but, uh..." Down on his knees, Mighty looked up to Sorun with a confused expression as he held the TV's power cord in his hand. "Where are we supposed to plug this in?"

Humming in acknowledgement, Sorun took a quick glance around the room. He looked towards the various medical machines stacked near his bed, and then nodded his head towards them. "Eh, just plug it into the outlet over there. It used to power all that stuff, but I pulled 'em out."

Mighty followed Sorun's gaze towards the wall, and then squinted. "Don't... don't you need all that stuff?"

"Nah, not really," Sorun denied with a shake of his head. "I've been getting better. Doc even let me out of the wheelchair, so yeah, that's been great. I can actually walk on my own free of scrutiny." That was probably one of the best things about finally getting somewhat healed of his injuries. Getting out of that infernal chair so he didn't have to feel embarrassed being pushed around in that thing. He'd never get back in a chair for as long as he lived. Which wasn't long. "But yeah, it's been real great. Nicole stopped worrying about me so much so I don't have a camera following my every footstep, so that's been... that's been substantially less weird all around." He got down on his knees on the other side of the TV from Mighty. "How's Knuckles been doing?"

"Ah, he's been doing fine," Mighty answered as he continued to examine the power cable. "Most of the other guys in the Chaotix are up there with him. Thinking maybe tomorrow I'll go join 'em." He gave Sorun that certain look that suggested he wanted to ask him something. "Hey, you think when I do that you could portal me up there?"

"Eh, I dunno," Sorun said. "The island went back to floating around its usual track around the world. I either need exact coordinates or a general idea of where the location I'm making a portal to is. It's easy when I'm going to a static place. Little harder when it's a giant, floating island that keeps moving around." He briefly paused to bend forwards and grab the game console. "I mean I'll try, but you might wanna ask Tails to fly you back in case I can't. Pretty sure I can make it work though."

"Cool, that works. Thanks, Sorun."

"Mm-hm." Sorun made a small hum as he continued to examine the game console. "I just hope I can get this thing to work. I haven't played a video game in forever and being stuck in this hospital room's been torture, so I thought maybe I'd set the old system from the HQ up to try and bring back the simpler times. Was thinking of inviting Nicole here to play this later on. I think she'd like it." His grin widened a bit as he looked up at Mighty. "But hey, if you wanna stay around for a bit to get a few rounds in with me first that'd be cool."

"..."

"Hey Mighty, did your eyes always glow a ghostly green like that?"

A few minutes prior

"Usually I don't intervene so heavily, but I guess this is a special case. No helping it, I suppose."

The location was above the detention center inside of New Mobotropolis. Or just the prison, as Rubrum would put it simply. An admittedly nice-looking prison like everything else in the city, fit in with the aesthetic weirdly enough, but he wasn't here to admire architecture. He had a job to do.

And right now his job was sitting in a cell inside the prison. The prison he was sitting on top of with his legs hanging off of the edge

of the spire that was the detention center building. Rubrum looked down towards the ground entrance to the prison with a small sigh.

"The five bozos locked up down there are some villains the Freedom Fighters had to deal with and locked up a bit before Sorun arrived in this world if I'm remembering this right. Normally how things would have gone is they would have all gotten free by now, but then I happened and screwed up the proper order of things. As a result they wound up stewing in the Knothole jail for months longer than they were supposed to before they got transferred here along with everyone else after Sorun bailed everyone out of New Megaopolis.

"My target... Mogul, right?" Rubrum wondered. *"Hnn... I was told that he made Tails, Mighty, and Mina magic sleeper agents. Apparently he encountered the latter two as children and used his abilities on them back then to mark them with some mind control curse, and then did the same thing to Tails on some adventure. It was all part of this grand plan of his to use them as hostages to coerce Sonic into giving him the gray Chaos Emerald so he could use its power to bust himself and the others out of prison. "*

His hooded head looked to the side, at the duffel bag sitting next to him. He stared at the cyan light bleeding out from the bag's opening, and then looked back down at the ground entrance to the prison.

"Yeah, well, that's not gonna be able to happen now with everything I set in motion. Six of the seven Chaos Emeralds are in Sorun, and I have the last one. Which means that even with his sleeper cell puppets he won't be able to escape. And unfortunately, if the plan is to proceed as intended, he needs to get out of that place. So it looks like I'm gonna have to step in and lend a hand."

It wasn't something Rubrum was very comfortable with, being so direct with his intervention. Pulling strings in the background, subtly shifting things in his favor, playing the whole "mysterious benefactor" role in front of Eggman, admittedly none of it was really his style and he didn't like doing it, but it was necessary. As necessary as him needing to directly deal with this issue. His anxiety was only

magnified given the high chance of somebody as important as a Freedom Fighter seeing him while he was doing this.

He only had once shot to pull all this off, after all. That's where a majority of his stress came from.

"Gonna have to smash any camera in my way so Nicole can't get a recording of me." Rubrum stood up and grabbed the duffel bag containing the Emerald. *"With any luck everyone'll assume Mogul pulled off some magic trick and managed to escape. Wouldn't be the most unbelievable thing. From what I heard he at one point had enough power to crush entire universes with his bare hands before Tails did something to stop him. He has an unusually strong link to the Chaos Force due to his exposure to a Chaos Emerald from way back when. Strong enough that he got god-like powers. It's not unreasonable to think he'd find a way out of there after a while. That'll have to be the story everybody buys."*

He made the motion to step forwards and fall off the top of the prison... but then froze with his one foot hanging in the air.

"Wait. What about the others?" Rubrum suddenly realized. *"Bean and Bark I'm not worried about. The bear doesn't talk and the duck... well, I don't think anybody'll pay attention to anything he says. Naugus, that* fucking motherfucker *, is a bit too feral right now to recall any of this. Nack... nah, I don't see him ever bringing it up with anybody important. And even if he does I won't show off anything too damaging. It'll be fine. All's I gotta worry about is Mogul, but I already know how I'm gonna take care of that. We're all good."*

His mind made up, Rubrum walked off the edge of the spire and dropped down to the ground below.

Finding the way to the holding cells for him had been a piece of cake. Destroying security cameras along the way while also ensuring he wasn't seen by them were equally as trivial, if not a bit challenging from how small and nearly unnoticeable Nicole made the

damn things. Stealth may not have been his specialty, but with his abilities, he didn't need all that much skill in that particular area.

He was a bit surprised on how little of the city's guards were actually inside the structure itself. On the outside guarding the perimeter, entrances, and manning the searchlights, of course. On the inside it was practically a skeleton crew. Rubrum supposed he could see some of the logic; the security cameras set up by Nicole did enough of a job guarding the place, and on a practical level he really did doubt the prisoners themselves had any way of escaping. Not if Mogul had needed to concoct this half-baked "brainwash people into hostages" attempt of his. Desperate move that one, especially if he used cards he'd been holding for likely over a decade if Mina and Mighty said anything.

All that just to bust out of jail.

"I know the guy's immortal and everything, but there's playing the long game and then there's... whatever that was," Rubrum thought as he descended the stairs into the holding area. *"I guess I can't be too judgmental. It woulda worked, after all."*

The holding area quite honestly didn't look like anything Rubrum had ever seen in a prison. It was a corridor, basically. Each side was lined with cells, the doors of which weren't doors at all but clear glass panes. The cells themselves didn't have doors, of course. Not when Nicole could willingly teleport anything in the city she wanted. Doors to prison cells were unnecessary in that case; another reason Rubrum doubted escape from this place was near-impossible.

The corridor ended with another cell, this one slightly larger than the ones to each side of the corridor. He saw who he was looking for in there: a brown-furred mammoth Mobian, massive in size. At least three to four times Rubrum's own size. Casually laying back against the wall of a cell that barely fit him, reading one of the many books stacked to his side.

"The hell? They gave him books?" As he slowly walked down the corridor, he glanced to the side at one of the empty cells. The bed was the standard metal-plank-chained-to-wall prison bed, utilities looked pristine, and the lighting was pleasant, too. Even the temperature in this place felt pleasant to Rubrum's skin. *"For prison cells these rooms aren't actually half-bad. Some Mobians really are too nice for their own good. Or maybe that's just Nicole. Wasn't there a place the kingdom had literally called the Devil's Gulag? Some prison in the middle of the ocean somewhere or something like that?"* Rubrum held a hand to the back of his head as he continued to slowly walk forwards. *"Ahh, I'm not too sure actually..."*

"Hey, what's all this? What's goin' on?" Rubrum looked to his left at a cell he passed when he heard that accent. A purple-furred Mobian. A... something, he couldn't remember. Weasel? Probably, though he didn't look like one in Rubrum's opinion. The brown hat and singular fang sticking out of his mouth was a good enough identifier for the Mobian he knew as Nack. The sharp glare he was giving the passing man not as indicative, but still distinctive enough. "Ah, for the- and who's this clown suppos'd to be, huh?"

Rubrum had wordlessly passed his cell, though he had gone as far as silently show him his middle finger as he passed. Nack had looked incredibly offended by this and banged on the glass pane of his cell in defiance.

"M-monster..." The red-cloaked man stopped, his hand going limp as he turned to his right. In that cell was a relatively short, green duck Mobian. A duck Mobian who was looking straight at Rubrum with quivering eyes. His who body was shuddering out of absolute fright at the sight of Rubrum, to the point that he was sweating intensely as he slowly backed away from the glass pane of his cell. "Bad, very bad, monster, demon, go away, please please please go away..."

The cell right next to him contained a relatively large polar bear Mobian with an off-white, almost tan fur color. He was doing his best to look into the cell next to his, with a look of worry and concern on his face over the shaking duck. Even the purple weasel on the other

side of the corridor seemed off-put by how the smaller Mobian was acting.

"H-hey, Bean, c'mon..." He actually seemed unsettled at the sight, and then reared his head towards Rubrum. "What's the big idea, fella?"

"It's nothing of concern to you," was Rubrum's only reply as he continued onwards. He came to an abrupt stop at another cell, inhaling sharply as he turned to look at the thing inside of it.

The thing that resided inside of the cell was a creature so grotesque Rubrum didn't rightly know if it was even a Mobian. That chimeric abomination. That overly stocky body. A wart-riddled, Mobian bat head whose features were so feral that if Rubrum didn't know any better he'd say it was a lost cause. A cybernetic pincer claw hand that continued to erratically open and close.

Rubrum couldn't control himself he he rushed forwards and slammed his own forearm against the glass pane fast enough that those observing jumped back in surprise, while Mogul, ever casual, just turned a page in his book. Rubrum himself had breathed out so harshly at the sight of the thing it came out as a hiss, and both of his hands began rapidly twitching.

"Mutant, degenerate fuck," Rubrum harshly thought as he glared at the thing past the shadow of his hood. *"If I could I'd wring you apart with my bare hands right now..."*

He wanted to. Deeply. The hatred flowing through him at the moment would have made it so easy. It was the same feeling of intense, hopeless frustration he'd felt when he'd held his sword to Eggman's throat, but hadn't been able to cut his head off. All because of His plan. His actions. These factors were the only things keeping Rubrum from tearing his way into that cell to tear the thing inside apart.

"You'll get yours. You always do." Rubrum pushed off the glass with a scoff and averted his eyes from the thing. He turned towards the end of the corridor at the cell containing the mammoth Mobian, and began to approach it once more.

In another time he would have laughed at the comedy the image a anthropomorphic, tusk-sporting mammoth wearing a white business suit and reading a book in a jail cell provided. At the moment Rubrum just didn't feel like laughing, instead choosing to stop right in front of the cell containing the Mobian. The mammoth's green eyes had only given the red-wearing man a cursory glance before he looked back to the book in his hand, while his trunk hadn't even flinched from his presence. The cheek alone had gotten some amused rise out of Rubrum, if only a little.

"Sorry about that back there. I really don't like that thing," Rubrum greeted as he lowered himself to sit down on the ground while placing the duffel bag he held in his hand right next to him. "Mammoth Mogul. We need to talk."

"Do we now?" Mogul's deep, baritone voice seemed to cut through the walls themselves as he flipped another page. "You will have to forgive me for lacking any recollection of having ever requested to engage in the act of consultation with a deviant garbed in rags-"

"Yeah man, listen, do you think we could keep the verbiage on a lower level here?" Rubrum requested in a tired voice. "I don't know when the AI who runs the city is gonna realize I killed all the cameras on the way here, so we're kinda on a time crunch."

Another page is flipped. "That is none of my concern. Time, you see, is a resource I am in abundance of, whereas it seems you are in short supply. If there is any singular individual in our midst without a leg to stand on in this negotiation, it would be you."

"This fucking guy..." Rubrum had to resist reaching up to rub a hand over his face. He couldn't suppress the small sigh, though. "You got

me there," he admitted to the mammoth. "I think you'll change your tune when you see what I got in the bag, but we'll get there."

"That remains to be seen." The large Mobian glanced up from his book at one of the cells back behind Rubrum. "I am curious, however, in why you would show such animosity towards Naugus."

The name alone made one of Rubrum's hands twitch. "It's not important," he said with a shake of his head. "What is important is this."

He reached forwards and opened the top of the duffel bag. Cyan light shined out from the opening, drawing the attention of every single person in the holding center. Mogul seemed most interested out of them all, going as far as to lower the hand holding his book down halfway to his lap as he stared towards the bag with now wholly interested eyes.

Rubrum's hand started reach forwards while his shadowed face continued to look up at the Mobian. Pale, human fingers rested against the Emerald, and then the whole hand clamped down on it. The Emerald was risen out of the bag and held in front of Rubrum as his hooded head continued to look up at Mogul.

And then the Emerald left his hand as he casually tossed it up in the air.

"You know what this is," Rubrum claimed. He caught the Emerald as it fell back into his hand, only to continue to casually toss it up in the air over and over. "How much do you know about Sorun? The human Freedom Fighter?" he asked. "I know you must have seen him. You all were in those Egg Grapes along with everyone else while he was fighting Eggman."

"That curiosity?" Mogul voiced, his eyes lifting up and down as they followed the Emerald. "A rather anomalous figure that seems to have shown up out of the blue. I'll admit I know little other than what I saw

him display. His control over the energies of Chaos was a peculiar sight to behold, even if I myself found them lacking in great capacity."

"That right?" Rubrum drawled out as he continued to toss the Chaos Emerald up and down.

"I had heard of certain technomancers within the Overlander community who possessed psychic abilities that could control machines, though Overlanders being Overlanders I hear the persecution rates for these individuals were quite high. It was my initial assumption that the boy was somebody unfortunate enough to be born with similar abilities who sought refuge with the Mobians of the kingdom. I find myself questioning these assertions with each passing day with the words I had heard him speak during that battle," Mogul said. "The boy's abilities are a mystery to me. So crude and inflexible, and yet at the same time the power behind them was mildly impressive." His eyes narrowed a bit as he looked to the side. "That sword, on the other hand... its very nature felt erroneous." He looked back to Rubrum. "What purpose does inquiring about the boy serve?"

"Oh, plenty," Rubrum said as he caught the Chaos Emerald. "Sorun... is a human from another zone entirely. One completely inhabited by humans void of any link to the Chaos Force. On his own Sorun isn't special; only thing special 'bout him is how his powers manifested. Otherwise any human from where he comes from can absorb Chaos Emeralds like he can to get powers out of them."

"Truly?" Mogul rumbled out, sounding slightly interested. "I had never thought such a phenomenon could be possible. A being lacking a connection to the Chaos Force... I suppose, given the proper environment to thrive in, such a thing could be possible." A deep hum rumbled out from him. "I find myself questioning why he would be so limited to those simplistic abilities given the nature of Chaos Emeralds."

"Yeah, I'm sure you'd know all about that." Rubrum began tossing the Emerald back and forth between his hands. "Here's the deal. It's

nearly impossible to remove the Emeralds from Sorun, and he's absorbed six of the seven. Which means the one I got right here is the last one." He snapped his hands together and cradled the cyan gem between his fingers as a look of realization came across Mogul's eyes. "You seem to be catching on. Wanna escape this prison? You need more power than what you got right now. Only way to amplify your abilities is with a Chaos Emerald, and I just happen to have the last one in the world." He placed the Emerald down on the ground in front of him. "So let's deal. And try to keep in mind the clock's tickin'."

The mammoth Mobian in the cell in front of Rubrum looked down at the cyan Emerald sitting in front of him. Its intense glow shone off the wall around them, and even from here Rubrum could see its light blue light reflecting off Mogul's eyes. Mogul himself had creased his furred eye ridges in concentration as he contemplated Rubrum's words and offer.

He seemed to reach a conclusion, as he slowly set down the book he'd been holding amongst the pile besides him. "I assume you have terms," he said at last.

"Mm-hm. First things first. That magic mind control thing you have on Mina, Mighty, and Tails? Yeah, I'm gonna need you to dissolve that."

Mogul froze a bit. He kept it cool, Rubrum would admit that much. Not so much as a facial muscle twitched and his eyes remained in the same expression they'd been in. Even his voice remained the same normal tone as he spoke out.

"How could you possibly know about that?" Mogul questioned him.

"I'd rather not say," Rubrum answered. "I know you put some magic Chaos spell thing on them. Remove it."

"And that is what you want in exchange for giving me the Chaos Emerald?"

"No, that's the prerequisite for us beginning negotiations."

Mogul tensed up slightly. "You would ask for more than that? I'm already having to pay a steep price in relinquishing my Fearsome Foursome-"

He was interrupted mid-sentence when Rubrum burst out in laughter. A gasping type of laughter made from disbelief, so intense that Rubrum was forced to hug his sides he'd laughed so hard. It was enough that he fell to his side while he laughed, causing Mogul to eye him in annoyance from his behavior. Even some of the other prisoners from behind them who had been listening in to the conversation gave Rubrum odd looks as he continued to laugh.

Finally, the red-cloaked man's laughter seem to subside. He let out one last wheezing gasp, and then laid his palms flat on the ground in order to push himself up.

"Haaaa... sorry, it's just- you were spitting out all these big collegiate-level words and then you hit me with the 'Fearsome Foursome' and I just- it was too much." Shaking his head, he breathed out while righting himself back into a sitting position. "Alright, where was I? Oh, yeah." His shoulder slumped forwards a bit as Rubrum's voice grew a bit more serious. "Get rid of the mind control you have on them or I walk out with the Chaos Emerald."

A hard, unflinching glare was sent Rubrum's way from the Mobian in front of him. He said nothing at first, instead just maintaining that glare, waiting for Rubrum to flinch. He remained still as a stone, though, causing Mogul to lean his head back a bit in silent acceptance.

"Very well," he agreed. Rubrum cocked his head to the side in interest as both of Mogul's eyes began growing a solid green color, and at the same time a green, four-sided diamond shape appeared on his forehead. He closed his eyes in concentration, after which the diamond shape on his forehead faded.

Meanwhile

"Mighty? Uh... Mighty?"

Sorun wasn't too sure what lead him to poking Mighty's fallen, unconscious form with the scabbard of Yamato. One moment everything had been fine. The other moment Mighty's eyes had started glowing green, and a strange shape had appeared on his forehead. Sorun had been worried something was about to happen before all the green glowing faded, followed by Mighty doubling over onto the floor and falling unconscious.

Hence why Sorun was poking him.

"Mighty, come on." Poke. "Mighty." Poke. "Yeah, he's not waking up," Sorun sighed to himself as he stopped poking the Mobian's body with the scabbard. "What was up with the green stuff?" he wondered as he stroked his chin in thought. "Looked kinda... magic-y. Should probably help him in case something is wrong, but I don't know anything about Chaos magic. I know anybody that does?"

Some seconds passed as Sorun thought. Finally, he reached an answer and snapped his fingers.

"Oh yeah, that g- oh, yeah. *That guy* ," he all but hissed. He briefly contemplated ignoring it altogether in favor of just hoping that Mighty could sleep whatever that was off, but as he gazed at the armadillo's body he felt a bit of worry well up in him. And then his worry gave out and, with a sigh, he stood up to his feet. "You're lucky I like you so much, man," he muttered out as he picked Mighty up with his spectral arm. "C'mon, Mighty. I'll have foxy grandpa check you out."

Detention center

"There. It is done," Mogul stated as he opened his eyes up. "Now what do you want in exchange for the Chaos Emerald?"

"Hm... that's it, huh?" Pale fingers began to idly tap on the surface of the cyan Emerald as Rubrum made a contemplative hum. "Well... you don't really have anything I want if I'm being honest," he said. "So what I want... is the Chaos Emerald."

He finally managed to get some reaction out of Mogul with that request. It wasn't much; just a bit of eye-widening on Mogul's part. And it seemed to be more in confusion than anything else from the way he was staring at Rubrum.

"I beg your pardon?" Mogul asked. "You... want what you are trying to trade me?"

"Yeah, I want it back after you use it to get out of here," Rubrum explained. "I'm not giving it to you for you to keep. It's more of a loan. A minute-long loan. I still need the Emerald for one other thing."

"That's absurd." He didn't sound at all pleased by the offer. In fact, he sounded downright disgruntled. "You would give me the Emerald only for me to have to give it back shortly after? You act as if my liberation from this penitentiary is all you desire."

"Look, man, I'm just trying to scratch stuff off my to-do list. I don't question it. I just do," Rubrum said. "If you don't like the offer, tough. It's all you're getting."

Mogul's eyes narrowed a considerable amount at Rubrum. "And you truly think I would just freely relinquish the last Chaos Emerald simply because you asked?"

"I would think a man of your distinction would have a bit of integrity when it comes to things like this." Rubrum leaned his hooded head to the side and propped it against his fist. "Besides. If you don't give it back, I'll just *take it* ."

The last words of Rubrum's sentence were punctuated by small bolts of red lightning arcing over his body. There'd been something else too- a small presence that had radiated out from his form. It had only

lasted for a brief moment, but that moment had been long enough for the other four prisoners behind Rubrum and the one in front to feel it. It had been something that caused the voices of those that could speak to die in their throat and have them step back away from the glass panes, all the way to the backs of their cells. Mogul, meanwhile, stayed still as a statue.

Highly-evolved animals or not, Mobians still had fight-or-flight instincts hardwired into them all. Instincts that had begun screaming at them for the single moment that presence that radiated from Rubrum's body hit them. Instincts that told them the *thing* sitting so calmly on the floor wasn't just a threat. Not even a force. Just that being near it alone meant the possibility of unavoidable death, and that they needed to get as far away from it as possible.

It was the kind of instinct that overwrote all thought processes with fear, and had the prisoners not been boxed inside of cells that would have ran away. As it was, all they could do was press themselves to the walls of their cells to try and gain as much space between them and Rubrum as possible. The only one who didn't seem so heavily affected was Mogul, who looked down at Rubrum in an unimpressed, if not slightly wary, expression.

That feeling had only lasted for a single second, though, and went away right after. It had still been a shock to the systems of the Mobians around him, though, leaving them all in sweating, panting messes pressed up against their walls as they stared bug-eyed at the man in the red hood. Mogul was the least worst for wear, having been able to maintain his composure for the most part, though even he had large beads of sweat matting the brown fur covering his head as he continued to stare at the being in front of him acting so casual.

"So," Rubrum said in a light tone, acting as if his mere existence hadn't just momentarily set off everyone's instincts that were telling them to run away from him, "what's it gonna be?"

The mammoth got through the instinctual shock he'd received quickly enough. He leaned closer to the glass separating him and

Rubrum, peering deep into the shadows of his hood as a threatening scowl overtook his features. "I am Mammoth Mogul," he boomed out in a low, threatening voice. "My life has run a duration of which your mind could scarcely comprehend, and shall run longer still for an amount you cannot even fathom. I wield powers beyond your understanding and am your intellectual superior. I will not be strong-armed by petty scare tactics produced by second-rate tricks performed by an amateur wielder of Chaos energies such as you-"

"Spare me the drivel and cease your incessant pontification, Mogul."

Mogul stopped talking when he heard that. Out of everything else, *that* had been the one thing to make him the most surprised. The use of advanced grammar. Rubrum, meanwhile, continued to stare up at the mammoth while drumming his fingers along his hooded head.

"Yeah, that's right," Rubrum said, "I can use big, fancy words too."

The Mobian in front of him actually looked offended at that. "And yet you demean yourself to that of a lowly commoner by speaking with such indolent grammar."

With a sigh, Rubrum dropped his head. "Dude, nobody cares you can pull ten-gallon words out of nowhere like you do." With a small groan he stood up to his feet. "I guess I can't be too surprised you'd act like this. I almost expected it." His shadowed face picked up to look at Mogul.

"I really adore that aspect about you Mobians," Rubrum continued as he gradually approached Mogul's glass pane step by small step. "You almost always fall into extremes. The average Mobian is either good to the point they're sickeningly naïve or they're cartoonishly evil. And if it's not one of those they're prone to being impulsive idiots." He stopped centimeters away from the glass pane. "That's why I like living among them so much. They're so easy to read. Predict. Co-existence with Mobians practically requires no effort if you're keen enough, because they all fall into these neat little

archetypes. And if you look past all the faults they're generally pleasant to be around." He looked Mogul up and down. "Well. Most," he added with a scoff. "You're sharp, Mogul. Not just because you're smart but because you have an ungodly amount of experience nobody without immortality like you could ever catch up to. You know what I mean when I speak of Mobians this way. You're a manipulator. I bet you did this kind of thing all the time to other people back in your heyday. You probably don't even need powers to do something like that at this point you're just that smooth."

It was Mogul's turn to scoff. "You speak as if you Overlanders-"

Rubrum's fist snapped out and impacted the glass pane hard enough that spiderweb cracks spread along the impact point. Mogul had started out from the sudden strike and moved back a bit, while Rubrum had to take a deep breath to calm himself.

"Do *not* ... compare me to that subhuman trash," he snarled out. "That garbage species is nothing but a dreg of what humanity used to be before the gene bombs." He removed his hand from the glass and took a single step back. "Did you know that they're actually a devolution of the human species?" Rubrum asked. "The gene bombs the Xorda used, you see. They were meant to render all organic life on this planet to its base components using specific isotopes used in the bombs. They were basically neutron bombs intended to wipe everything out. But those isotopes they used were derived from Chaos energies, and since life here on this planet is unusually close to the Chaos Force compared to most other things in the universe life here re-evolved due to a reaction to the isotopes found in the gene bombs. Humans who survived the gene bombs in their bunkers and underground sanctuaries were still affected by the bombs' effects, though. Their entire genetic pool was damaged. Not to a detrimental amount; they can still reproduce, and in some physical and mental aspects they're actually superior to humans. But damaged is damaged. Their warped evolutionary tree branched so far away from humanity that they ceased being humans and became Overlanders.

"I despise them. Utterly and completely. I can respect the humans of Station Square. Their instincts may have been dulled to a rounded point after years of living so peacefully in that city of theirs under a mountain that no longer exists, but at least they never lost touch of who they were. At least when they were exposed to the world they sought cooperation with the outside species instead of conflict. Because they had an urge to grow. To thrive and learn about everything around them. Because betterment through knowledge is human nature; they display that perfectly! But it just seems to me that Overlanders inherited more of humanity's bad qualities than good. The wars, the blatant schism between Overlander and Mobian territories. You know what I mean.

"Ah, but... maybe I'm overgeneralizing. Not all Mobians are so nice. Some Overlanders tolerate Mobians just fine. But exceptions don't excuse the majority, and the bad I've seen from Overlanders far outweigh the good. I look at them and all I see are things *pretending* to be human. Caricatures of humanity. Homunculi. Ghosts. Mockeries living off the corpse of a beautiful species. If you need an example of them at their worst then you don't need to look any further than Eggman and his twisted little nephew. Though I hear he has a niece named Hope that's rather nice. She'd be an example of an exception. And then there's Mobians like the bandit tribes in Yurashia or the ones in Sandblast I can't find myself standing. Exceptions. The same foolishness from everyone. Over and over."

With a deep breath, Rubrum ceased speaking. His back fell against the nearest wall, after which he breathed out a loud sigh while reaching a hand behind his hood's shadow to rub at his face. Mogul looked on, completely silent with his eyes trained on the red-garbed man, expression a cross between intrigue and quite plainly being disturbed by what he heard. The others in the back were still too scared to speak up.

"... Well, it's all beyond me at the end of the day," Rubrum quietly mumbled out as he pushed off the wall. "Besides, I have bigger things to worry about than animal people and broken humans. I

came here for one reason and one reason only: I've a job to do. And I'll eviscerate anything that stands in my way of accomplishing this mission. Fortunately for everybody in this room you're all too important for me to hurt."

His elbow shot out and impacted the glass pane sealing Mogul's cell. It shattered away, opening up the mammoth's cell and exposing the wide-eyed Mobian within. Rubrum barely paid this any mind as he used his foot to kick the cyan Emerald up and grab it with his hand.

"I apologize for that. Sometimes it all becomes too much and I need to vent," Rubrum stated in a sorry tone. "Now take this Emerald before I shove it in the cavity in your chest, Mogul. We're almost out of time."

Without even waiting for a response, Rubrum causally tossed the Emerald towards Mogul. The mammoth easily caught it in a single hand, his eyes still giving Rubrum that perturbed stare. Even so he still proceeded to pull down the neck of his suit's shirt to reveal a perfectly circular hole in the center of his chest. The Chaos Emerald fit right into the organic slot, and the instant it was fit in Rubrum had felt it. A sensation like an electrical charge seemed to grow and manifest around the mammoth's body as green energies began to swell and gather around him in an aura.

"Ah... how long it's been." He spared Rubrum a cursory glance before looking up at the cells holding the other four inmates. "My fellow prison-mates, I would extricate you from your cells if only to spare you another moment of listening to this madman before us."

Whether the other four had even heard him was unknown. Naugus, in his feral state, was at this point frothing at the mouth at the mere sight of Rubrum. The duck was still looking at him with fearful eyes, while the polar bear and Nack stared with wary eyes tinged in fear. They'd maintained these expressions even after green Chaos energies swirled around them, followed by them all disappearing completely as they were teleported away by Mogul's powers.

"'Madman' is stretching it a bit, don'tcha think?" Rubrum asked as he turned his hooded head back to Mogul. Green energies began to swirl around his own body. "My feelings are actually kind of hurt here. I was just speaking my mind out."

"And I've no time to entertain the philosophy of what amounts to little more than a child angry at the world," Mogul said as his own body began glowing a brighter green. "This is where we part ways, my mysterious malefactor. For both our sakes, I sincerely hope our paths do not cross once more."

"Sure, but before you leave can I have the-

Zap!

Zap!

"- Emerald... back? Wow, really?"

Rubrum no longer found himself standing next to the cells of the New Mobotropolis detention center. In fact, he didn't rightly know where he was. Somewhere snowy definitely, seeing as he could barely see anything in front of him past all the white snow blowing past him. The wind howled unusually loud, too, and even for a frigid environment it was colder than normal.

The top of a frozen mountain, then.

"Did he seriously teleport me all the way here hoping I'd freeze to death? Or did he just put me somewhere as far away as possible?" Rubrum wondered to himself. "Bold, if not stupid. I'll respect the hustle if nothing else."

A few miles outside of New Mobotropolis, just in front of an outcropping of trees leading into a forest, there was a flash of light. At the epicenter of this light was a Mobian mammoth in a business

suit, whom began to lightly brush his white suit off once the light around him dissipated. This action continued until he felt satisfied in the cleanliness of his suit, after which he began stepping forwards. A light breath blew past his ivory tusks as his face began to relax into an easy expression.

He was finally free of it all. That prison, the meddlesome heroes in New Mobotropolis, that insane man in the red hood, all of it. The time had come for a new business venture, away from all that. Something to occupy himself as he bided his time-

"Okay, but seriously, I really need that Chaos Emerald back, Mogul."

His footsteps froze at the voice. *His* voice. The voice of a man he knew for a fact he'd teleported to the top of the highest and coldest mountain he knew of, one that wasn't even on this continent. He slowly turned around towards the source of voice, knowing it was impossible that what he heard was some sort of auditory hallucination, but hoping nonetheless.

No, he was there. The red-hooded man, sitting on a nearby rock. The empty bag from earlier he'd used to carry the Emerald was even in his grasp, which he was now casually swinging around. And though Mogul couldn't see his face, the mocking smirk he was sending his way was palpable in its intensity.

"You know, I really didn't think you were gonna do that," Rubrum said. "I thought you were gonna take the honorable route here, but I guess it doesn't really matter at the end." He slung the bag over his shoulder as his face, shadowed by the hood he wore, continued to look at him. "But you know, I gotta say. That's some serious power I feel coming off of you. All from one Emerald?"

"The powers I wield while in possession of this Chaos Emerald classify me as a god, the likes of which are beyond your mortal mind," Mogul boasted in a voice that was at least three times as confident as he sounded before. "How are you here?"

Rubrum shrugged. "All that power," he continued, "and what do you choose to go do with it? Trivial villain shit that gets nobody anywhere?" He made a breathy sigh. "Ah, I guess I'm not in a position to preach. Well, anyways. 'Bout that Emerald."

"What use could you have of it?" Mogul demanded of him. Green energies instinctively began to gather around his hands as he unconsciously took a step back. "Somebody of your caliber wouldn't have the slightest idea of what to do with all this power. You're undeserving of it."

"Bit presumptuous, don't you think?" Rubrum asked. "C'mon, I just need it for my list. *Please* give it to me?"

"And you'll do what if I refuse? Resort to fisticuffs to wrench the Emerald from my body?" Mogul questioned him. "I'm afraid you lack the proper scope to accurately measure just how vast my power is if that is indeed what you imply. Were not listening to me prior? I am a *god* , child."

His voice was punctuated by an unnatural echo that reverberated around the mammoth's body, as well as his volume being magnified by the Chaos energies within him. Rubrum stared on, unimpressed even if his hidden face couldn't show it. If anything, he relaxed even more out of boredom at the sight of the power-radiating Mobian, making the motion to yawn while doing so.

"I've gone up against a lot of guys calling themselves gods," Rubrum informed him. "None of them really ever lived up to the title."

"I sincerely doubt one who spouts off such puerile bravado such as you has ever matched any individual possessing even a fraction of my power and intellect."

Rubrum shook his head. "Sure, whatever. Listen, Mogul, thing is I can't really hurt you, so tearing that out of your chest is a no-go for me. But I don't need to use violence here. I can just take the hood down and show you my face, after which you'll just give it to me

willingly." The energies around Mogul's hands dimmed as confusion lanced through the mammoth. "But you don't want me to show you my face, Mogul. You don't want to know who I am." Rubrum's voice had gone into a lower warning tone, and he'd leaned forwards on the rock he sat on. "I'll give you the chance to just give me the Chaos Emerald. Because you really don't want to know the truth. Trust me on this."

Seconds passed. Mogul's eyes glared towards Rubrum, and not a word was said from him.

"Mogul?"

The green energies around the mammoth's hands increased their glow in silent defiance.

"Don't do this to yourself."

Rocks, dirt, and small pieces of debris began to shift and float around Mogul's figure as the Chaos energy in him charged further and further.

"Last chance."

His green eyes turned to a solid green as the attack Mogul was readying to unleash on the man in front of him neared completion.

A sigh. "I tried to help you, man."

Rubrum's pale hand slowly reached up and tore down the hood concealing his face.

Mogul's breath hitched in his throat. The earthen debris that had been floating around him instantly fell back to the ground as the Chaos energy in him died down. The green energy in his eyes dimmed, and slowly, his hands lowered back down to his sides. All he could do was stare at the face looking at him from that rock, feeling nothing but complete disbelief at what he saw.

"What...?"

"Pretty wild, huh? Since you've seen my face, I'll go ahead and tell you everything. It all began..."

"So, uh... they-they just had, like, hexes in them this whole time? Just sitting there in them waiting to be turned on?"

As it was, the only person Sorun knew in all of New Mobotropolis that had even inkling into the mystical aspects of the Chaos Force was Tails' uncle, Merlin. Whom Sorun had threatened to kill. And generally disliked.

Honestly, he would have preferred avoiding him entirely, but Mighty's condition worried him, so he decided to put aside all that hatred for the time being to seek out his aid. He had little doubt he'd find help in the old fox; the Mobians that lived in this city weren't ones to turn away from helping others due to grudges, and Merlin didn't seem like an exception to Sorun. So he'd had to swallow his pride and carry Mighty outside of the hospital to search for the wizard.

Only problem was that he hadn't actually known where he lived; Sorun never made it a point to learn where anybody's new houses in the residential district were, really. He'd only found his house to begin with because he'd run into Sonic while looking for it, who at the time had been carrying Tails' unconscious body. Strangely enough the same thing that had happened to Mighty had happened to him, and fortunately, Sonic actually knew where Merlin lived. So he'd lead Sorun there.

Interestingly they'd arrived to find the old fox already had guests. Two yellow mongooses, one Sorun was familiar with and one he wasn't. Strangest of all was that a third victim in the mystery of the green eyes was Mina, the singer. Her boyfriend, Sorun briefly caught his name being Ash, had apparently been taking a walk with her when her eyes had glowed green and she'd collapsed right there in the street. Merlin had just happened to be nearby at the time and

had brought them back to his own home in order to try and aid the girl.

Three patients later and doing whatever magical examination he did, the three worried teens had gotten their answer. Apparently they'd been affected by a hex, one not so unlike the one Finitevus had put on the Master Emerald on Angel Island. Hexes that had been implanted in them long ago that, for whatever reason, had been deactivated without seemingly any rhyme or reason. The deactivation had been what knocked them out to begin with, though Merlin had been quick to assure them they were fine.

Evidently he was right, as Sorun was watching the three previously-unconscious Mobians out and about. Tails was conversing with his uncle, Mina was busy trying to calm down an intensely-worried Ash, and Mighty was... well, he'd gone back to sleep. Sonic and Sorun were standing outside near the house, watching the proceedings with relieved looks on both their faces.

"Yeah," Sonic said in answer to Sorun's previous question. "Merlin took 'em out of them all, so we shouldn't have any more problems. Gotta wonder how those things ended up in them to begin with. Or why this had to happen now."

"Got no clue, man," Sorun honestly answered with a shrug. "It's over with now, though, so I wouldn't think too hardly on it."

"Speakin' my lingo, Sorun, speakin' my lingo."

They both glanced at each other for a brief moment. A playful smirk stretched across Sonic's lips, while Sorun had rolled his eye with a small scoff while turning away. He'd done it just in time to catch the sight of Tails hugging his uncle. He had a sort of sad look on his face for some reason, which drew Sorun's interest. He continued watching as Merlin retired to his small home while Tails began to approach the two that had been watching him.

"Yo, Tails," Sonic greeted as the fox approached them. "What was all that about?"

"Oh, i-it's nothing, Sonic," Tails answered, though his ears had flattened halfway to his head. "My uncle Merlin just said he's moving out of the city."

Sonic looked to Tails in surprise. Sorun, meanwhile, had snapped his head to the direction of the old fox's home as a scowl replaced his features.

"He said he wants to travel around more to help 'discover himself' more and to learn more about the Chaos Force. I don't really know the details," Tails admitted to them. "I'm a bit sad he's leaving, but he said he'll be okay. And my uncle's a pretty smart guy. I'm sure he'll be okay."

A small hum came from Sorun. "Right. Of course he will." He looked back to the two Mobians. "I have something I need to go do. I'll see you two later."

"Huh? Oh, sure. Seeya," Sonic said with a wave. Tails gave him another wave along with a smile, which Sorun had only taken the sight of for a single second before he Tricked away.

A small, satisfied sigh blew out from between Rubrum's lips as he used his left hand to pull the red hood back over his head to conceal his features once more. In his right hand was the cyan Chaos Emerald, which he was casually tossing up and down in the air. "Glad you saw some sense finally," he said as he turned to his left. "Woulda been a chore taking this from you by force. But you're a sensible guy it seems, Mogul."

To his side was the mammoth in question, who was sitting down on the rock Rubrum had occupied prior. His large, flap-like ears were flattened against his head, and his entire body language looked like he was low on energy. His face, though, told a different story. His

eyes had a distant, vacant look to them, and his mouth seemed to be set in a permanent state of shock and disbelief. His demeanor as a whole screamed being withered. Withered to the point he could collapse and die right there.

Slowly, his eyes turned in Rubrum's direction. That vacant, hopeless expression of his only seemed to magnify tenfold when he caught sight of the red-garbed man standing in front of him, so casually tossing that Chaos Emerald up and down. A shuddering breath had left the mammoth as he opened his mouth to speak.

"It's impossible... it can't be true..." His voice was a voice void of all confidence. Broken, like he'd just been told the worst news in his life.

"Afraid it is," Rubrum blithely replied. "That's the whole truth, from beginning to end." He slowly began to walk towards him. "I said you wouldn't like it. Guess I was right, because you look downright suicidal right now. I honestly can't blame ya."

"I could tell them," Mogul threatened, his voice still hollow as Rubrum stopped in front of him to prop a leg up on the rock. "You cannot harm me. There would be nothing stopping me from going to the Freedom Fighters and revealing everything you've said to me."

"Aw, you're not gonna do that." Rubrum leaned forwards and patted Mogul on the shoulder with his free hand. He flinched from the contact. "If you were actually serious about something like that, we wouldn't be having this conversation." He leaned in closer to one of Mogul's flattened ears. "Hey. Mogul," Rubrum whispered out. "I'm gonna let you in on one more thing. I was faking it when I tried warning you away from making me pull my hood off. I was gonna tell you regardless. I just felt like fuckin' with ya."

Mogul shook his head in denial. "You lie."

"Nah, it's on the list. See?" Rubrum dug into his pocket and brought out the list, and then held it out for Mogul to see. His eyes briefly

glanced at the list, followed by him making a small moan as he averted his eyes from it.

- Give Mogul the last Chaos Emerald so he can teleport himself, Nack, Bean, Bark, and Naugus from the New Mobotropolis detention center (X)

- Tell Mogul the truth so he becomes docile (I might fuck around with him just because) (X)

- Get the Chaos Emerald back from a now-docile Mammoth Mogul (X)

"My life's been a living hell for a while now, Mogul, so you can't blame me for trying to milk some enjoyment out of this," Rubrum said as he pocketed the list. "Now I got things to do. And you, my large and not-so-in-charge friend, have a... what is it, a casino to go build and manage? Something about you originally wanting to wait out Sonic until he died of old age because you're convinced the universe gave him plot armor or something stupid, I don't know, I didn't pay attention to every minutia of detail when all this way laid out for me."

He took his leg from the rock and took a few steps back. He took in the sight of the defeated mammoth in front of him, and then spun around and began walking away.

"I know it's rough knowing your immortality doesn't mean anything anymore, but try to enjoy the time you got left," Rubrum called back. "Seriously, try and enjoy it. You still have more time than everybody else, after all."

"Devil." Rubrum stopped walking when he heard that word lowly exclaimed at him. He turned around, and then tilted his head to the side when he saw the harsh look Mogul was sending him. "A demon under the guise of a man. A schemer who acts with so much confidence, but you're trapped just the same as us. You're a fool. A mad fool."

"... Don't I know it." Rubrum turned back around. "Have fun knowing every action you take from now on is meaningless."

With that, he continued walking forwards. He'd bent down briefly just to pick up his duffel bag his feet had crossed, after which he resumed walking forwards. Mogul remained silent at his departure, something Rubrum paid no mind to as he left. It was only when he was far enough away from Mogul did he turn his head back down to the Chaos Emerald in his hand.

"Well, it looks like we're at that point," Rubrum muttered to himself. "All that's left to do with you is give you to Sorun."

He tossed the Emerald up in the air one more time, and then tossed it into the duffel bag. He proceeded to twirl the bag by its handle around his wrist. With the bag spinning around, Rubrum looked up in the sky, towards the broken moon.

"The stage is all set, Sorun. I puppet mastered my way all the way to this point to line it all up for you. You're the leading man here, after all, and we can't start the show without you. So it's time you got your next Emerald."

With New Mobotropolis being a relatively new city, there were no roads that lead to it. Even beforehand when it was simply a blank nanite city there had been no roads, with the place mainly just having been a facility owned by Eggman. As such the city lied in a field, surrounded by trees, near the Great Forest, and with a large stream at the city's back.

As such, anybody traveling to and from the city would have to walk through a field lightly populated by trees just to get there. All in all, not that bad of a hike, as the environment itself was pleasant enough. As such the fox wearing a hooded robe with a knapsack stuffed with personal possessions on his back strolled through the land with relative ease. He'd traveled far enough that the city had

disappeared behind his back, and a light smile was on his face as he continued moving forwards.

That was until three blue swords rained down from the sky and stabbed down into the ground in front of him. The old fox had stumbled back a bit in fright from the swords blocking his path, and then froze entirely when the cold edge of a katana was held to his neck.

"Hey, Merlin." The fox Mobian looked to the side to see a blue, spectral arm holding the katana held to his throat and the pale human attached to the arm. His one eye stared coldly at him. "Leavin' so soon?"

"... Hello, Sorun," Merlin greeted in an uneasy tone. "What brings you out here?"

"What does it look like?"

A loud gulp was heard. "I see." Merlin made a nod small enough his head had barely moved. He took in a deep breath, and then closed his eyes. "I had thought you wanted to wait until after you succeeded in finishing Dr. Eggman off before doing this, if time allowed you."

"Eh, you know, I figured I'm kind of getting close to *dying* here, and seeing as you seem to be leaving to somewhere I changed my mind and decided to just do it now," Sorun explained. "I feel bad for Tails, but... I just really don't like you, Merlin. Or any of the Neo-Walkers. You all kind of fucked my entire life over."

"Is that how you see it?"

"Yeah. It is." The blade's edge pressed deeper into Merlin's neck. "So I'm ending you."

Silence at first. Sorun continued to hatefully stare at the fox with his sword held out, while Merlin seemed... rather startlingly calm, given the circumstances. He simply continued to calmly breath even in the

face of getting his head separated from his body, not looking worried in the least. He seemed so calm, in fact, that Sorun was almost off-put by how he was reacting.

"Fine, then. Do as you will," Merlin said. "I'm powerless to stop you. And I've no regrets."

"You've a lot of cheek to say something like that after what you all did to me," Sorun said. "Your attitude..."

"We foresaw a world devastated by Dr. Eggman. With your intervention our vision went from certain doom to wholly uncertain. We did what was necessary in order to prevent disaster to this world we cherish," Merlin calmly answered. "If I have to give my life so that my family and all people on this planet have a chance at living a peaceful life, then so be it."

"It's way less noble when it's my life you're throwing under the bus here."

His eyes still closed, Merlin said, "You speak as if you do not agree with the decision we made, Sorun. Don't tell me, after everything you've done with the Freedom Fighters, after all this time, you haven't come to the same conclusion-"

"Don't." The blade dug into Merlin's neck hard enough that a bead of blood began to run down the sword's length. The fox's face twisted in mild discomfort. "I grew to like them all, sure. Would I rather see the world saved than completely destroyed by that madman? Of course I would. But none of you had any right to drag me into this by forcing me to remain silent about what the Emeralds have been doing to me using that curse."

"All the curse did was force you to remain silent, Sorun. It never forced your actions. It was you who decided to come back to the Freedom Fighters after you left. You who continued to absorb Emeralds. You shout your grievances at me, and yet this entire time all you've done is furthered your progress to the end via the

Emeralds." The corners of his mouth upturned in just the barest of smiles. Not one that was mocking in any way. It looked genuine. "You already made your mind up long ago, haven't you? The proof is in your actions. You would have just used your sword to separate the curse from yourself so you could tell the Freedom Fighters everything if you had no intention of seeing this through to the end."

"..."

"..."

"... I could have done that?"

The smile dropped off of Merlin's face. His eyes snapped open in surprise, and despite the sword biting through his neck he'd turned his head to directly face Sorun. "Pardon?"

Sorun's own face was set in such a degree of surprise that Merlin found himself stunned. His eye was opened wide, and the human's jaw had dropped open a bit. He seemed to lose all focus on Merlin as he vacantly stared ahead, his focus so lost that his sword arm dropped away from Merlin's neck.

"Oh, man..." The expression on Sorun's face morphed into something else. The face of somebody who just realized something that they knew they should have known all along. A look of self-pity and realization all mixed together in a face that looked like Sorun was disappointed with himself. "I really am an idiot, aren't I?"

"I... sincerely thought you knew. All three of us did," Merlin confessed, looking just as surprised as Sorun as he rubbed at the shallow cut on his neck. "How could you have never considered this?"

"Because you're right? I don't know." With a sigh, Sorun dropped his shoulders and looked up at the night sky. "Back when I ran away and came back, I made up my mind and decided to go through with this whole thing because I genuinely want to give this planet a chance at

living. Because I didn't want a future ruled by Eggman come to pass. To be honest with you, after that the curse... never really came up in my mind all that much. Just whenever I thought of you three."

A gust of wind passed by the now-silent pair. Sorun just continued to stare up at the starry sky, while Merlin watched the human with the now-vacant expression. His hand slowly dropped from his throat, and he gave the human a questioning look.

"Well, now you know," Merlin said. "What will you do now?"

"... Nothing, I guess," Sorun answered in a small voice. "I'll always hate what you people did to me. The principle behind it. Don't think I can forgive ya. But I know why you did it. I remember Aurora hoped that I'd change my mind after a while and see the why of what they did, and while I can't agree with it... I understand," he softly admitted. "I genuinely do want to save them, Merlin. Somehow all those people back there grew on me so much that... that I'd be willing to give my life for 'em. Not like I can just go home and forget about all this anyway, and even if I had the option I doubt I'd take it at this point. So this is the next best option. Lying to them hurts. Knowing how my death'll affect them hurts more. Knowing I'm gonna die, pfft, I'm terrified out of my mind over that, Merlin. But if they all get to live, then... it's worth it. So I'll keep going. Get that last Chaos Emerald so I have the best possible chance at closing the book on all this. I'll get mourned for a bit and everybody will move on with their lives afterwards, but if it means giving them the ability to live a life outside of fighting, then at least me dying means something. I'm not content with it. But it'll have to do."

After he finished talking, Sorun's head slowly dipped downwards. He looked at the katana in his hand, and then glanced at Merlin, who was giving him a sympathetic look. He felt like he should have been mad at that look, but at the moment, he just couldn't muster up the willpower to care. Or even enough to raise his sword back up for that matter.

He couldn't very well kill somebody over something Sorun himself was willingly going along with, could he? He didn't think he'd be able to live with it.

"... Go." The sword dissolved from Sorun's hand as he turned his back to the fox. "Just go. I don't care anymore."

"..." The soft crunching of someone stepping on earth and leaves reached Sorun's ears. He felt a light pressure on his left shoulder, and turned to see Merlin's hand pressing down on it. "Thank you, Sorun," he said. "I know this isn't fair to you. I'm truly sorry for that. But you have my gratitude that you finally saw the right path. I promise your sacrifice won't be in vain."

Sorun shrugged the hand off him. "Never let me catch your face ever again, Merlin."

Saying nothing in response, Merlin simply turned around and began walking back in the same direction he'd been traveling prior. Sorun himself remained rooted to the spot, waiting until the quiet footsteps disappeared. It was only when all was silent did he tilt his head back up at the sky to look at the shattered moon.

"I guess all that's left is to just wait..."

A/N- So I had some wacky stuff originally planned for this chapter. So wacky, in fact, that I took a second look at what I had planned and realize I probably shouldn't go ahead with it for a couple reasons.

So how it was gonna go was it was gonna be this whole thing where Mogul would try to use Sorun as a human battery for power only for it to fail. It was gonna lead to this whole thing where he'd try to mind control Sorun, but then end up in his subconscious and be driven out when he opens a mind door that exposed him to a bunch of ridiculous 21st century internet nonsense, blah blah blah, it was a really dumb idea in hindsight,

and it would have ended with Sorun cutting off an arm and threatening to separate him from his immortality if he didn't get back in the cell.

It's, uh, it's probably pretty obvious why I decided to not go ahead with that. I'll put a bunch of goofy stuff in the story for gags, sure, all the lightheartedness and jokes contrasts well with the dark undertone of the story, but I think blasting the immortal mammoth dude with Sorun's memories of Reddit posts and memes woulda... woulda been taking it a wee bit too far off base. So I did this instead.

Funny to think about, though.

Chapter 50

Recursion Error

Episode 50- Final affairs

"You know... I don't think there's been a single stormy day since we all arrived in New Mobotropolis."

Was the weather on Mobius always perfect as far as Sorun observed? No, of course not. It wasn't always clear skies and sunny days, though they did make up more than a fair amount. There'd been cloudy days. Windy days. Rainy days. But when he and everybody else had started living in New Mobotropolis every single day had been a clear, sunny day.

How long had it been since they came here? Two weeks or thereabouts by Sorun's estimate. He found it hard to believe how much had changed in that amount of time, all that had happened, but maybe all of that was just normal by this world's standards. So he didn't think too hard about it. He just sat there on the park bench he'd happened by, staring up into the midday sun as it hung in the sky.

Since it was one of his last.

The Freedom HQ was still technically a viable command center the Freedom Fighters used, but ever since the kingdom's - now republic - relocation it was a bit more of a trek just to get there. Technically *just close enough to be accessible by foot, but that was by Mobian standards. If one were to measure the distance in human standards it'd be the kind of distance that needed to be traversed by vehicle.*

For Sorun it was possible to get there via the simple use of a portal, but at the moment it seemed it wasn't necessary. He'd been ready to

transfer himself there and even went as far as to summon Yamato before he was stopped by the messenger sent out to speak with him. One of the republic's guards. A - in Sorun's opinion, anyway - overly buff dog Mobian, who'd only found him just to tell him Sally requested his presence. Hence him getting ready to teleport over to the HQ before the guard corrected him and stated his presence was needed at the castle, as that was where she was.

He'd quickly thanked the guard before opening a portal anyways.

It'd taken some directions from some of the castle guards due to how complex the layout was for Sorun, but with their help he eventually found where Sally was. It was in a small little room that looked like a boardroom; even had a long, rounded table. At the head of the table were a bunch of drawn-on maps, and standing in front of the table were two Mobians. He recognized one as Sally. The other one he didn't know. A black and white Mobian. Sorun couldn't rightly guess the species from appearance alone, but the long, bushy had him think of a skunk. So he decided to just go with that.

The unnamed Mobian and Sally exchanged some final words, and then he left her side to make it to the exit. Sorun assumed that he'd come in just as they'd finished up, and they really only crossed paths after they walked past each other going opposite directions. Eyes had met, with Sorun taking some note of the skunk Mobian's blue, sunken eyes. He decided to initiate a greeting.

"Hey."

"Hey."

And that had been it. The Mobian left, softly closing the door behind him, while Sorun made his way to Sally's side. He'd found himself looking back towards the door the black and white Mobian had exited from, and then looked towards Sally.

"That guy seemed a little intense," he'd commented.

The chipmunk had cast a sad look towards the now-closed door. "That was Geoffrey. He's a member of the Secret Service." Her blue eyes drifted over to Sorun. "Hershey was his wife," she informed him in a quiet voice.

"Oh." One of the Mobian casualties from when the gray Chaos Emerald was taken from Castle Acorn in Knothole. Went to explain that look he saw in the Mobian's eyes. "Poor guy," Sorun mumbled out in a bit of a sympathetic tone.

"I know. It's terrible." They spent a few moments in silence, and then Sally softly sighed before speaking again. "I'm glad you could make it. Something big's come up."

"That so?" Leaning to the side with his spectral arm propped on the table, Sorun glanced down at the maps spread out on the table. "Would it have anything to do with all this stuff?" he asked.

She nodded. "Ever since the near-destruction of New Megaopolis, Eggman's security and defenses have been severely lacking. We decided to take advantage of this and have been a lot more proactive in our actions against him. Scouting groups, recon missions, and the like. Intelligence gathering. Geoffrey was part of them," she explained. "We've just gotten word that Eggman's up to something. One of the ships in his Egg Fleet survived Enerjak, and as far as we can tell he's piling up a majority of his surviving mechanical forces on the ship."

"What, is he planning a full-out assault on the city?" Sorun asked. "Not exactly the best plan. Nicole got the defenses back up, and even then it's just one ship. Ship full of robots, maybe, but it ain't exactly numbers we haven't dealt with before."

"I don't know. Maybe he's desperate. Might be a last-ditch attempt at overthrowing us using what little of his forces he has left, might be a play at trying to distract us long enough for him to cook up a new plan. It's almost impossible trying to predict his plays with the way he thinks," Sally muttered out with a shake of her head. "Anyways,

we're doing our best to prepare. The council signed off on us all mobilizing, so all that's left to do is prepare. All the Freedom Fighters are present and accounted for, the Chaotix up on Angel Island agreed to lend a hand, even Team Dark is here, so... all in all, we're in pretty good shape."

"The whole band back together again," Sorun quietly stated. Come to think of it that was every single person present when he first came into this world, back on that day in the Freedom HQ. He couldn't even remember if there was a time they were all in one place together like that after that time. The closest may have been that party, but Shadow hadn't been there. "So why am I here?" Sorun asked Sally. "I assume you're gonna brief everybody on this later?"

The princess nodded. "Yes, I am, but something else came up that might be of interest to you." She leaned forwards a bit and tapped a finger against one of the maps. "This is one of Eggman's off-site storage facilities we keep tabs on. It's a few miles out from New Megaopolis. Recently... we got some interesting readings from there. Readings that match that of a Chaos Emerald." Sorun had stilled just the barest amount, while Sally looked up at him with a grin. "So I was thinking maybe while we all go meet Eggman and his ship head-on to fight off the invading force you could go get that, get your last power, and then just teleport to the ship to link back up with us and join in on the fight." Sally leaned down to the table, resting one arm on it while the other propped its elbow on the table. She rested her head in her hand and gave Sorun a smile. "Pretty good, huh?"

"... So that's how it is, huh?"

It most likely hadn't been what Sally expected Sorun to say based on how the smile dropped off her face in lieu of confusion, nor the way he said it. That blank, almost sad tone. Even stranger was the small smile that adorned his face that completely contrasted with his tone as he leaned on the table right next to Sally, both arms folded under him. A breathy chuckle left him as he dipped his head down.

"When's all this happening?" Sorun quietly asked her.

"Um... tomorrow," she answered.

"Right. Okay." Sorun breathed in deeply, and then slowly exhaled. "Am I going alone?"

"I, um... didn't feel comfortable sending you out alone so soon after the doctor cleared you, no, so I was thinking of sending Shadow along. Just as some backup in case something bad happens. I summoned for him, too, but you got here first." The corners of her mouth lowered a bit when she saw the human continued to have his head bowed down. "Sorun? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm... I'm fine." He exhaled through his nose and lifted his head up so that his singular eye met up with both of Sally's. "You know, I suddenly remember that we shook on a deal day two of me coming here," he suddenly said. "I believe the deal was I would be a Freedom Fighter until we found all the Chaos Emeralds, after which you would make it a top priority to find a way to send me home." He sent her a wry grin. "You kinda broke your promise to me, Sally."

She actually began to look a little distressed when Sorun pointed this out to her. Sally opened her mouth to say something, but the only thing that managed to come out was a sigh as she looked away from him. "Sorun, I... I-I don't..." She began stuttering as she searched for the right words to say to him. "I didn't mean to do something like that," she said as she turned back to him. "I'm sorry, I wouldn't have-"

Sorun had reached a hand out and softly tapped the center of Sally's forehead, making her words die in her throat. "I know. It's okay," he calmly said to her. "I already said I forgive you all, didn't I? I know you never would have made that deal with me if you knew my return home was impossible. It's partly my fault for touching the first Chaos Emerald anyways," he reasoned as he lowered his left hand.

"No, Sorun, don't say that. You couldn't have known," Sally denied, shaking her head.

The reaction elicited a small chuckle from Sorun. "Yeah. Seems like we all did stuff without knowing the consequences. That's life, I guess," he said. "Nobody to blame, so what are you to do?"

"Keep moving forwards, I suppose," Sally answered. "What else is there to do?"

Sorun breathed outward as a small smile grew. "I always admired that about you. The way you just... remain so unshaken no matter what," he said, causing Sally to turn to him in surprise. "So cool. A cool, level head, cool personality, cool everything." Sorun's eye glanced at Sally's torso. "... Maybe not so much a cool fashion sense."

Sally sent him a flat look. "What's wrong with my vest?"

"Nothing, nothing, just... you know, it wouldn't hurt to invest in a shirt or something. Just saying."

"I don't want one."

"Of course you don't," he sighed out. "Back on topic... I don't know, you just seemed to have it all. No powers like me in the beginning, but somehow you got to be up there with the best with all that talent of yours. I would say I was a bit jealous, but if I'm being honest with you I was a bit jealous of everybody back then because of how strong you all were," he admitted, making Sally's expression soften. "But you had kindness above all that. There I was, some random useless guy fresh in this new world, and you go out of your way to try and get him settled. Even when it seemed like he didn't really like anybody around him, which... admittedly at the time I didn't... you still tried to make friends with him just because you were worried over him. And in all that time, over all those missions, you never lost your cool, and it actually helped to keep my own head on straight. And... you really are nice to be around." He turned his head towards her, a smile on his face. "I just wanted to say thank you for being my friend, Sally. You're really great."

"Sorun..." Sally grew bashful as a small, happy smile graced her lips. Happy. But still bashful. "That's very sweet of you to say, but what brought all this up?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? I just felt like being spontaneously nice."

"Well, thank you for the compliments, Sorun. I'm happy to hear you think so highly of me." The smile on her face lowered a bit as her posture deflated slightly. "I just wish we could do more for you. I know you've moved past it all for the most part, but I still feel bad. Part of me still blames myself and the Freedom Fighters for you winding up in this war alongside us. Getting hurt so badly just because you chose to stick with us."

"..." Sorun leaned towards her and clapped his hand on her shoulder, making her jump slightly in surprise. "Try to let go of those feelings by tomorrow, huh? For me?" he asked her, still maintaining a small smile. "No matter what happens, I don't blame any of you, alright?"

Eventually, Sally managed a smile that mirrored Sorun's. "Alright. I'll do my best. Now why don't we wait for Shadow so we can plan this properly?"

"Can do, Sally."

Shadow had arrived at some point after that. Wasn't much to say; it was all business and straight talk at that point as they tried to figure out the best way of going at this, which simply boiled down to the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix flying up to Eggman's ship while it was en route to New Mobotropolis to fight there. Meanwhile Sorun and Shadow would go to the storage facility, where Sorun would absorb the final Chaos Emerald and then use Yamato to transport both him and Shadow to the ship to join the rest in the fight. Simple and efficient.

So that was that, then. He was gonna die tomorrow.

The only solace he took was in the fact there was a high likelihood Eggman would be on that ship. No, it was almost a positive certainty he'd be there. If there's one thing Sorun learned about him, it's that he liked to have a personal presence for these big showdowns. It was all but guaranteed he'd be there. All Sorun had to do, with all his powers and lack of pain, was push his way to Eggman and end him before his body finally gave out and he died. At least, that was the plan.

"Can't believe this is it. Last day today, then tomorrow... tomorrow that's it." He leaned back on the park bench he sat on as he gazed back into the sky. *"I could do what Merlin said, separate that curse from me, but... I don't know. It's already way too late. I'm dying as-is. Nothing anybody can do to change that. Might as well go all in tomorrow to try and finish this for good."*

He would have expected to feel nerve-wracked. To feel nail-biting panic, to be freaking out to the point he was a broken down, nervous wreck, but... oddly, he didn't feel any of that. He didn't know what he felt, what he was *supposed* to feel at this moment. Acceptance? No, there was none of that. He didn't want to die, or leave these people. He didn't want any of that. He only did it because he had to do it, but just because he endeavored to do it didn't mean he was at peace with it.

Just as he told Merlin. He didn't accept it. He just learned to live with it. But even that was beginning to crack apart.

"What's even gonna happen to me when I die? Does it all just go black, just like that? Like going to sleep forever? Endless void for all eternity while I'm in a state I can't even think because I'm nothing? Do I go somewhere? Do I even have a soul that can go somewhere?" These were the questions that kept haunting him the longer he thought about this. Questions he'd once long ago didn't worry about and figured he'd deal with if he was ever near-death or was getting to that age. But here he was, planning on dying tomorrow, and he couldn't help but wonder what it was going to be like.

Gloomy. Forlorn. Frightened. He didn't know if these words applied. He felt these emotions, but at the same time didn't. Like hollow feelings running through him. The only solid emotion he felt was a desire to just continue to sit on this bench all day, and then tomorrow, and then the day after. Or to do something and just stall. Anything to make tomorrow not come.

The irony of somebody like him who could briefly stop time not being able to stop tomorrow from happening elicited an almost muted chuckle bereft of all joy from Sorun.

Slowly, groggily, like he'd just woken up from a deep sleep, he stood up off the bench. *"I guess I'll just walk around. See where my feet take me,"* Sorun decided. *"Don't know if it'll help ease all this existential dread I'm feeling, but... eh. I'd teleport up to Angel Island to see the Chaotix, but I don't wanna make things weird showing up out of nowhere acting all strange, so... I'll just see what happens."*

Blindly wandering through the streets of New Mobotropolis, Sorun didn't know what to expect. A chance encounter with somebody, maybe, or just him biding his time as he waited for the inevitable. He hadn't made up his mind on what he was supposed to do with what little time he had left, and just thinking about that alone had his stomach turn over.

And then life threw a yellow thing clothed in black and red at him.

It happened out of nowhere. He was walking along the streets, probably looking like the most pathetic thing on the planet, when a Mobian he'd come to know and fear just popped up out of *nowhere* and put him in a bone-crushing hug. At least he assumed it was a hug that tight. The pressure felt high and he couldn't breath.

"Oh, you beautiful, beautiful man, you!" Honey released her hold on Sorun and stepped back. The relieved, warm look that had been on her face was wiped off in microseconds, after which she'd placed her hands on her hips and was angrily squinting at him with her golden

eyes. "I spend all this time worrying about you being hurt and I don't even get so much as a hello at the new boutique when you get out of the hospital? What's the big idea, hm?"

Sorun gave her a flat look. "Yeah. I could really tell how worried you were from all the visits. All zero of 'em."

"I wrote you a card. You should be thankful," Honey asserted, turning her head away from Sorun while raising a palm up to his face. "Oh, it's been absolutely dreadful, Sorun. My entire stock got blown to smithereens in Knothole! Nicole was nice enough to make me a new shop, but I had to outsource brand new materials from the marketplace and then I had to remake my entire stock from scratch! I'm practically ready to fall apart here..."

"..." Sorun looked to his lost arm, and then looked back at Honey. "Ah-huh."

"Oh, but I guess it hasn't been that bad. Believe it or not my business has been doing better than ever, having to basically restart aside. I've been getting a ton of requests left and right to the point I'm always busy." She turned back to Sorun with a bright smile on her face. "I even had to set up a PO box since I've been getting requests from outside the city! I, uh... eh-heh, had to mail everybody the new mailing address since, y'know, Knothole, but otherwise it's been great! Can you believe I've even been getting some requests from Station Square!? The people there really seem to like my products!" She'd clasped her hands together and stared up at the sky, with stars practically in her eyes. "It's... all I've ever wanted aside from world-renown fame..."

Sorun found himself being a bit surprised at the exuberant cat. He didn't think he'd ever seen her this happy, but he supposed, at some level, it made sense. Honey was somebody lucky enough to know what they were truly passionate about and made a business out of it. And now her business was blooming at a level she had to work to keep up with... no doubt with his help, he'd thought to himself. He went to great pains going out of his way to advertise for her.

Well, it seemed to pay off. She was happy and in a good place, and Sorun... well, he felt he could at least take some solace in the fact he did a little good for somebody he liked. To some extent. The craziness under that seemingly-harmless exterior made him question himself on this assertion. But she was good people, and he was happy for her.

"Well, good for you," Sorun said to her with a nod. "I gotta go-"

"Nuh-uh-uh!" A low-energy, annoyed groan left Sorun when he felt Honey grab his left wrist. She'd whirled him around so that they were directly facing each other, and that wide smile just refused to drop off her face. "I got it through some pret-ty reliable sources that you had a large part in all this success I'm seeing."

"What exactly kind of sources does a clothes maker have?" Sorun questioned her with a raised eyebrow.

"It's fashionista, get it wrong again and I'll slap you," she threatened in a serious tone. "Also one of my customers that wrote to me said they heard you promote my brand on TV over there."

Sorun blinked, and then looked upwards. "Oh, yeah, I guess I did do that. Wow, I didn't think it'd actually take off." He looked back down at Honey. "Er... you're welcome?"

"Oh, you..." Her face, which had dropped to a blank expression, made a small smile as she looked down at the wrist she held. "You know, Sorun, back in the village where I used to live before coming to Knothole I... I don't know. I always had big dreams, but even with all my skills and my ideas I just never seemed to take off living in such a small place. Knothole was a big change, but it offered so many opportunities that I thought I could finally make something of myself. And then you came along and, well, I'll admit I made that deal of ours more out a whim than anything else, but... but you really did more for me than I could have ever asked for."

Growing a bit uncomfortable from the contact, Sorun made a small scoff and turned his head away. "I just spread the word about your clothes around a bit. That's all," he said. "Even a braindead idiot like me couldn't have screwed it up."

"Yeah, I know," she said, making a tic mark appear on Sorun's forehead, "but you still went way above and beyond to advertise me during all your travels as a Freedom Fighter, and now... heh, it just seems so unreal. I feel like my life is finally going somewhere, and it's all thanks to you."

When she picked her head up so that they were eye-level with each other, Sorun saw the smile on her face. Probably the first *genuine* smile Sorun had ever seen Honey wear. There wasn't an ounce of the teasing or manic nature he usually associated with her whenever Sorun was with Honey. All he saw right now was a single, pure smile full of gratitude that was directed right at Sorun. He was stunned into silence from the sight.

"So yeah. Thank you. Really," Honey said. "And for, you know, saving the whole city from Eggman and the death robot and everything."

"Y-yeah, sure." His spectral arm unconsciously rose up and began scratching the back of his head. "I'm sorry the coat got ruined during the fi-"

"You *should be sorry* !" And there it was. The craziness. The absolute mania that overtook Honey's angered face as she tore her hands from his wrist and began pinching a struggling Sorun's cheek. "I slave away to make you that coat only for you to get it ruined in front of the whole city! How do you think it reflects on my brand when they see the sleeve get torn off so easy or how well the blood stains the fabric!?"

His spectral arm snapped forwards and slowly began to pry the yellow cat's hand away from Sorun's face. "Forgive me," he ground

out in a sarcastic voice, "I should have known the coat wasn't stress-tested to withstand being hit by a *wrecking ball* ...!"

"Hmph!" Honey pulled her hand away, causing Sorun to stumble a bit from the sudden motion. She'd turned halfway away from him after, arms crossed with her nose turned upwards. "I *suppose* I can be magnanimous enough to forgive such a transgression," she said, turning a bit towards him as a grin spread on her face. "I seem to remember a certain human I know that admitted to how much he really appreciates my work in the face of death."

"Tch." He pocketed his hands and glanced away. "Musta been all the blood loss. I was delusional. I don't even remember saying that."

Honey tittered a bit at that, tail playfully swaying behind her as she rolled her eyes. "How silly of me, of course you weren't in a well state of mind. You would have been singing my brand praises otherwise. I know you value it that much." Before Sorun could retort, she held something out to him. "So here. In return for all the gratitude you made me feel. And saving my life. And everybody else's, too. Really you're just a great guy and I wanted to give you this."

Sorun found himself startled by the sudden appearance of a white box being held out to him. Half because he didn't know where Honey had even been hiding the box, and half because he hadn't been expecting a gift. He looked back up at Honey, who was just smiling at him expectantly as she shook the box a bit at him. Hesitantly, he accepted the gift from the cat and proceeded to open it up and look inside.

"... A new coat?" A white one, too, from what he observed. Virtually identical to the blue long coat Honey had gifted him prior before he'd ruined it in the fight against Eggman. He looked up while giving Honey a questioning look. "Why white?"

"Well, I needed something to contrast with the blue arm thing you have. Blue coat would blend too well," she said with a dismissive

wave. "Honestly, I'm gonna have to rethink your whole color scheme now that you have that thing. Do you know how stressful you make my life?"

"Yeah, poor you." He gave her back the empty box after taking the coat out, and then slipped it over his black shirt. It was, of course, a perfect and comfortable fit. As good as slipping on a second skin. "It's okay, I guess," he said to her in a bland voice.

She playfully huffed at him. "Just try not to mess this one up, huh?" she asked him.

Sorun glanced down at the white sleeve covering his right arm. Long enough that only his spectral hand was revealed. "I got something important coming up. So no promises." He looked back up at her. "White doesn't play nice with oil stains, either, so don't expect anything."

In response, Honey lightly hit him on the chest. "You're awful." She turned around fully, looking back to give him one last smile and a wave. "I gotta get back to the shop to fill some of these orders. Stay safe, Sorun."

"Yeah..." Sorun watched the golden cat walk off down the street. He absentmindedly ran his left hand along the right sleeve of his new coat as he watched her disappear around a corner. "You too, Honey..."

He entertained the idea of going around to everybody, individually. Saying his approximation of goodbye to them all, maybe even go pay Virgil a visit. Something to make him feel better as he got closer to the end and to give them all some sort of closure on things. He'd gotten the idea around when he was with Sally, when she'd all but given him a date on his death and he had spontaneously blurted all that stuff out to her. Figured maybe it was the least he could do.

But then Honey happened and all it had done was make him feel worse, not better. So he decided against it. Couldn't take the heartache, too much pressure. That left him sitting up on the ceiling like a creep.

The ceiling in question was in the new air base Nicole constructed inside of New Mobotropolis. Tails finally got that paved runway he wanted for the plane. And a new Freedom Fighter Special made from nanites since the old one got destroyed along with the rest of Knothole. And here it was, stored in an air hangar with everybody running around in preparation for the mission tomorrow. Rotor was sitting in a nearby chair, crutches leaned up against a computer as he read off some string of diagnostics. Tails and Antoine were off to the side discussing something, while Bunnie was hefting up some large, mechanical part with her mechanical arm while she idly chatted with Amy. People who he'd gone on to consider actual friends. Funny to think about seeing as how much he disliked them when he first got here. Tails especially.

Were Sorun made of sterner stuff he might have been able to endeavor to say something to them all before tomorrow happened instead of him watching them as he sat on a support strut on the ceiling, but he wasn't, so he couldn't. Maybe it was for the best anyways. Made things less weird. And besides, he wouldn't even know what to say. So he was content with just sitting up here and watching them work.

He probably stayed up there for a whole hour before he teleported away.

It was with a reserved sigh that Sorun sat down at the stool. The aged, blue hedgehog behind the counter looked a bit surprised to see him sit there, as he'd been in the middle of cleaning a glass. Sorun offered him a slight nod as he slumped forwards on the counter.

"Heya, Chuck," Sorun quietly greeted. "How's the new diner holding up for you?"

Fuck it, why not get a last meal? He doubted he'd be able to stomach breakfast tomorrow, and the sun was getting low to the horizon. And he was *not* eating hospital food as a last meal. Unfortunately, he also didn't know of any decent food places, and he had no money to buy his own, or even supplies or the know-how to prepare anything, so... he was here. In Chuck's Diner. The new one that came with the new city.

"It's been doin' me fine, Sorun," Chuck answered in a light tone as he set the glass down. "What's gotcha so glum, chum?"

"Eh, you know... big mission thing tomorrow. Haven't really been out and about in a while. A bit nervous," he lied. "Wanted some food to take my mind off it all, so... here I am."

"Ah, I getcha," the aged hedgehog said with a nod. "So, what'll ya have?"

It was only at that moment did the fact that Sorun had no money caught up with him. It'd caused his eye to widen slightly, and mentally he'd cursed himself out for having forgotten something so important. "You know on second thought," he decided as he made to leave, "I'm thinking maybe-"

"Nah, nonsense. It's on the house," Chuck offered, causing Sorun to freeze. "Least I can do to help. I know things must not be so easy for you at the moment."

"You've no idea," Sorun sighed out as he sat back down. A feeling of gratitude flooded him as he looked up at the mustached hedgehog. "Thanks. I really need it."

"It's no problem, Sorun, no problem at all," he assured with a hand wave. "What'll ya have?"

"Did you ever start making french fries?" Sorun asked him with a hopeful tone. He hadn't had any good fries since coming to Mobius. They'd been his favorite. He wanted that much at least.

Alas, and much to Sorun's dismay, Chuck shook his head. "'Fraid not, Sorun, sorry. It's not really that popular a request, so, uh... yeah. I could get you a chili dog?"

"I'm not having the last thing I eat be one of those abominable things," Sorun harshly thought. "Just get me a regular hot dog with ketchup," he softly requested. "I don't like that chili stuff."

Chuck had the gall to look almost offended by the claim, but Sorun didn't care. Ketchup was the superior condiment in his opinion: more consistent texture and it didn't override his taste with all the flavors mixed into chili. He absolutely refused to eat chili on anything as a final meal. He'd rather not have his final meal be a fucking hot dog, either, but his options were limited.

A loud, zipping sound followed by a gust of wind ruffling his hair drew Sorun's attention to his left, albeit in a slow and languid manner. He wasn't all that surprise to see Sonic there sitting on the stool next to him, that trademark smirk on his face, green eyes of a nebulous quantity fixed on Chuck.

"Yo, unc," he greeted with a small nod. "Get me the usual?"

Chuck nodded. "You got it, sonny! Comin' right up!"

He left to go prepare the food. Sorun had felt eyes on him the second he'd went away, but he merely sighed as he stared down into the counter. So Sonic had been the one to start the conversation.

"So, Sorun," he greeted in that same, carefree tone, "what brings ya here?"

"I'm sick of jello."

"... Huh?"

"All day. Every day. Since I've been in that hospital. Jello." Wasn't even the good shit he had back on Earth. Jell-O. It was some off-brand Mobian knock-off. And unlike Chao Cola it didn't really compare to the original Sorun was accustomed to. "If I have to eat one more cup of that stuff I don't know what I'll do, Sonic."

"Alright, alright, heh heh, chill," Sonic soothed with a half-amused voice. "Guess I can't blame ya if you've been livin' off that junk this whole time. Blech." He snapped his fingers and pointed at Sorun. "Oh, hey, you got a new coat. Honey?"

"Mh." He forced himself to turn towards Sonic. "What brings you here?"

Sonic nodded his head behind him. Sorun followed the nod, and saw two older blue hedgehog sitting at a table nearby in the diner. One organic, one made of metal. "Me and the 'rents wanted to go out to eat," Sonic said as his mother waved to Sorun, who gave a half-wave of his own. "Wanna come say hi?"

"... I'm good," Sorun replied as he faced back forwards on the counter.

The reaction had caused Sonic to pause. He tilted his head a bit to the side, and then leaned on the counter so he was somewhat closer to Sorun.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked, the barest hint of concern lacing his voice. "You look a bit out of it."

"It's the thing tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah, that." Sonic nodded and straightened up in his stool. "Ehhh, don't sweat it, Sorun. All of us against one measly ship fulla Badniks? It ain't even a question of if we'll win it or not. Eggman'll go crying back to whatever's left of New Megaopolis with his tail tucked

between his legs, an' the rest of us'll come back home to get ready for the next time fathead pulls a fast one," he claimed. "You're worrying over nothing."

"Hn." If only. "I wanted to apologize." While he still had the chance to, at least.

"Huh?" Sonic blinked. "What about?"

Sorun sighed in response, straightening out in his stool so he could look Sonic in the eye. "I was unnecessarily hard on you for a majority of the time I've been here," he began. "It was for various reasons. Frightened of my situation, anger over the circumstances, confusion, hopelessness over it all, I... never really felt that good," he said, causing Sonic to go still. "I kept pushing you away when all you wanted to do was be a friend. I don't know, maybe you saw how bad I was hurting and just wanted to be there for me to make it easier. Practically everybody did. I kept denying it over and over again for stupid personal reasons." He turned his head forwards so he didn't have to look at Sonic. "I'm glad I gave up eventually and just decided to accept it. It's been... easier, since then. If I had any regrets, it's that I didn't do it sooner." His fingers tapped on the counter. "So... yeah. Sorry about that." He shook his head. "I'm no good at this-"

"Nah, no, Sorun, it's okay. I get it." When he glanced back at Sonic, he saw the hedgehog giving him a small smile. "I'll be the biggest of bigger men-"

"Not a thing."

"- Totally is, shut your mouth - and say that I never really got what was going on in your head, still don't, really, but... yeah, you had me a bit frustrated there at times," Sonic admitted with a small laugh. "I mean, I guess I get it. You had stuff you needed to work out on your own, it's understandable. I just wanted to help since you always seemed... not good, you know? Like, all the time." He began to lightly kick his feet absentmindedly. "I was really glad when you started hanging out with Nicole since it was *somebody* you could air

all this stuff out to instead of keeping it bottled up inside, and I saw it was working. It was, like, real tiny changes over time, but you started to become easier and easier to hang around with. You started doing stuff with other people, getting friendlier, the whole wedding thing threw me for a loop-"

"Can we not talk about that?" Sorun interrupted with a small groan.

Sonic made a sheepish laugh. "Heh, yeah, sorry. The point is I'm just glad you're finally, you know, cool with all of us now. So everything before? Water under the bridge, don't even worry about it. You're one of us. Nothin's ever gonna change that."

"... Thanks, Sonic."

"Don't sweat it, man, it's nothing," the hedgehog assured him. "Can I ask exactly what had you hung up for so long that it took you months to get over it?"

Sorun made a small hum. "I'll tell you tomorrow after the mission. How about that?"

"Sounds good to me." Sonic's black nose twitched, causing his head to snap forwards just in time as Chuck put a paper plate in front of each teen.

"Din's up, gents."

"Alright!" Sonic immediately dove for his, grabbing it at a blurred speed and opening his mouth like he intended to eat it in one gulp. He very well may have, too, if he hadn't seen the hot dog in Sorun's hand. The hot dog covered in ketchup. "Sorun. What's that?" Sonic demanded.

The human teen took a bite of the hot dog. It tasted bland. "A hot dog," he said.

"A hot dog? Not a chili dog?" He looked positively disgusted by the sight of it. "You would dare taint the food of the gods with an inferior condiment?"

Sorun rolled his eye as he took another bite. "My deepest apologies for not having your refined flavor pallet, Sonic," he said in a sarcastic voice. "You know, this kind of reminds me of back home," he suddenly said, getting Sonic to calm down. "Me and some friends at a diner after school. Kind of a trash place to be honest with you, but it was close and the food was decent. We always ordered the same things, every time. I'd always just get fries and a soda, David, I don't know why, he just loved this kind of hamburger they sold there, the kind of burger that didn't look like meat and that you instinctively knew you probably shouldn't put in your body, but Dave craved the things, never knew why." He took another bite of the hot dog, now three-fourths of the way through it. "This just reminds me of that. Of those times. Just nice to think of, is all."

"Yeah, I can see that." Sonic had already inhaled his own chili dog. "Must have been nice."

"It was," Sorun agreed. "There was this one waiter that worked there that was really nice. Cool guy, always knew when we were coming and had our orders all memorized and everything so we never had to wait and the food was hot. I think he was an illegal immigrant."

"What makes you say that?"

"'Cause when we came to the diner one day it was closed and there were ICE vans out in front. Never did see that guy again after that." Shame, too. The waiters they got after that guy never really hit the same notes as him.

"ICE vans? You mean like ice cream?"

Sorun laughed. "If only." He finished off his hot dog.

"Well, maybe we can make it a regular thing," Sonic offered, making Sorun turn to him in surprise. "Yeah, after the big mission tomorrow we'll all come here to celebrate. We could even make it a regular thing after missions. It'd be really nice, huh?"

It did actually sound nice to Sorun. Shame it couldn't be made a reality, but... it did sound nice. If not to relive his old memories, then to make new ones with new friends. Maybe then he wouldn't have been stuck as the nostalgic mess he was now, moping about the approaching end.

But that's all it was. A nice thought.

"Maybe. We'll see," Sorun offered, and to his amusement the blue Mobian next to him made a small fist-pump in victory.

"Yeah, alright," he happily hissed out in victory. "It'll be great, Sorun. You'll see."

"I've no doubt, Sonic." He spun around in his stool to directly face the hedgehog. He took a whole ten seconds to look at his face, near the end of which Sonic had grown a bit uncomfortable at the silent staring, causing Sorun to silently chuckle. "It's been an experience, Sonic." He hopped off the stool. "There's somewhere I want to be right now. I'll see you later. Tell your parents I said hi."

"Mm, alright. Bye."

Sorun didn't look back as he left the restaurant.

"Well... that's it, then."

These were Sorun's thoughts as he leaned his arms against the railings lining the hospital's rooftop. He stared out towards the setting sun, the horizon a clashing of yellows and oranges and reds while the sky above grew dark. He made a low sigh at the sight.

He hadn't expected his last day to be so... he didn't know, mundane? Then again technically *tomorrow* was his last day, but he considered this one to be his last free day, so to speak. His last day to enjoy himself.

Well, he didn't enjoy any of it. Never even got close to the precipice of accepting it all. If anything, he only went further away from it.

"I don't know what I expected," Sorun thought as he stared out into the sunset. *"Some kind of, I don't know, happy ending to this. Something I could walk away with, anything, but I didn't get that."* He shook his head. *"Assuming I don't fuck it up tomorrow, at least everybody else gets a happy ending. That's what's most important, I guess. Woulda been nice if I got a happy ending, too, but whatever."*

He couldn't help but wonder if he was even going to get any sleep tonight.

"May I ask why you are on the roof, Sorun?"

Sorun had to grimace to avoid sighing out loud when he heard that voice. She was the one person he wanted to see the most and avoid the most at the exact same time right now. And without any plan on what to do, he rapidly tapped on the railing with his hands a couple of times before he turned around.

Yep. There she was, looking the same as always. Same purple toga dress. Same brown and black fur. The same small and polite smile that shined brighter than any other smile Sorun had ever seen. Same green eyes he couldn't help but get lost in every time he looked at her. Every part of her had that effect on Sorun.

Hard to believe this was the last time he'd ever see Nicole.

"You never stared off into the sunset all dramatic-like before?" Sorun asked her as he leaned back on the roof railing, resting his elbows on top of them. He kept his tone casual and carefree, even if on the inside he felt like crying.

"No, I have not." Nicole had walked to the empty spot on Sorun's right side while giving him a curious look. "Is there a specific purpose this serves?"

"None at all."

"I see..." She leaned her back onto the railing right besides Sorun, though unlike him she'd clasped her hands together right in front of her. "You didn't answer my question," she pointed out.

"Ah, I dunno. I just wanted a quiet place to think," Sorun answered her as he tilted his head up to the sky. "Doc said I'm basically good to go, so after tomorrow it's no more hospital for me."

"You'll have to move the TV and game console out from your room," Nicole reminded him.

"Yeah, I'll put it back in the HQ," he assured her. "Tomorrow. After the mission." Let it never be said he wasn't lazy to the core. If there was one reconciliation he could get from all this, it was one less chore he had to do due to his impending death. It didn't bring any comfort at all, but it was still something.

"Actually," Nicole said, making Sorun tilt his head down towards her, "I've a better place in mind for them. But as you said, that can come later."

He made a small hum, his eye traveling to the side a bit. The long, black hair that Nicole's avatar body had was usually worn loosely and freely. All except for a strand of hair on each side of her head that was fitted through a line of purple and orange beads. He'd risen his spectral hand up just to touch and examine them, with Nicole not reacting at the slightest to the touch.

"You never told me why you put these in your hair," Sorun said as his clawed, blue thumb ran over the beads. "Or why you wear that dress."

"They're simply preferences of mine," she explained. "Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering." He carefully released the strand of hair and rested his elbow back on the railing. "It's a nice look for you."

There was a breeze that passed between them as the two silently looked ahead. Sorun not being able to think of anything to say, and Nicole... well, he didn't know what she was thinking. Whenever he'd glance at her from the corner of his eye, and act he was forced to turn his head a bit to do, he caught her in a look that suggested she was deep in thought. That and looking the slightest bit flustered. He didn't quite know why, but he suspected it was his earlier comment and had begun to feel somewhat regretful over it.

Sorun figured he might as well try diverting the conversation to a different topic.

"Hard to believe how far everything's come," he remarked as he faced back forwards. "From a little underground base to a city to fighting a bunch of killer robots to all this... it's been a pretty wild ride."

"It has been quite eventful, hasn't it?" Nicole agreed. "I myself had some difficulty believing it all when New Mobotropolis was first established, though these feelings have since subsided."

"Well, I mean, yeah. It's been a big change for you, hasn't it?" Sorun asked as he turned his head to Nicole. "You basically got everything you ever wanted, right? Full sentience and sapience, ability to feel emotions like organic beings, you can finally interact with the real world in a body you can keep up for as long as you want, and you made the city for everybody. You finally got your own life."

Nicole kept her head pointed forwards, with her face lowering down slightly. "You're kind to say as much, but I cannot say I have obtained everything I want."

Sorun readjusted himself to a more comfortable position on the railing. "Oh, yeah? What else is there?"

"Well, an end to the war so we could all live safely and peacefully would be optimal," she began. "Though even without that the opportunity to live life among others in of itself has been wonderful. Beyond wonderful, even." She held up one of her black-furred hands and began rubbing the fingers together. "I have you to thank for much of this."

"Pfft. I didn't do anything," Sorun denied with a shake of his head. "You had other people like Sally looking out for you. And you were the one that made that body and the whole city. Really, a majority of this is thanks you to. You should be thanking yourself."

"This is true. But I cannot take all the credit," Nicole said as she clasped her hands back together. "Yes, I was the one to create this body and city. I could not have made it this far without the help of my friends, though. And, beyond that, life would not be worth living if it was not with others, would it not?" The fingers on her hands began to wring together, almost nervously. "I'm grateful for Sally and the rest having been with me through this process, but I'm most grateful to you, Sorun."

Sorun narrowed his eye a bit in confusion. "What did I do?"

"You were always there for me. You spent so much of your time to collect those Power Rings just so I could manifest my holographic body, all to simply do activities together. We shared common interests and played games together, and I will confess playing those games with you has been the most fun I've ever had. You listened to me whenever I spoke, always was in concern over me whenever there was danger, and opened up more to me than anybody else. You also went to great lengths to worry me at times," she added with a small grin, "but I know your heart was in the right place. I do not think life without friends is one worth living, and I was fortunate enough to have those with the Freedom Fighters, but having a friend such as you has helped me realize just how much life has to offer.

"And so... to that end..." The grin fell away as a nervous look overtook Nicole. Her hands unclasped, with the fingers on her left hand flexing once before the hand itself began to move out to her side. "There is one aspect to life I have yet to experience, you see, but... it is not something I can do on my own." Her hand began to inch closer towards Sorun's blue, spectral right hand. "You are always there to help me experience new things in life, so... I would ask your help in this matter if you would be willing..."

Sorun tilted his head downwards, to his right side. He saw the hand that was approaching his own, his eye having widened at the sight. He mentally sighed out, with him just silently watching as the hand came closer and closer.

And then, right before they made contact, he snapped both his hands up and clasped them behind his head as his eye closed.

"You know what I want?" Sorun suddenly asked. "A statue."

Nicole had recoiled her hand back to her front in surprise at the sudden movement. She'd fully turned her head to Sorun afterwards, looking confused at Sorun's words. "A... statue...?" she echoed.

"Yeah, a statue. Not, like, a big one or anything, but I figured, y'know, maybe I could get one after everything I've done," Sorun said, eye opening up at the sky. "I mean you don't have to or anything," he continued as he looked back down to be eye-level with Nicole, "it's totally optional, I just always kind of wanted one of me."

He saw that she continued to look at him with that same, confused look, one that refused to dwindle no matter how much Sorun waited. Finally, he sighed and dropped his hands back down to his sides.

"I'm sorry, I just- it's the mission," Sorun apologized as he pushed off the railings. "It's got my mind all over the place," he continued as he turned to Nicole, "so I'm not really thinking straight. Can't really focus on anything else right now. I just got out of the hospital, you know, so it's my first official mission since the whole Knothole thing, I'm kinda

nervous, it's-it's messing me up a bit," he said, making a nervous chuckle as he rubbed at the back of neck.

Nicole's ears perked up. "Oh! I see the issue." She actually seemed *relieved* for whatever reason as she herself pushed off the roof railing. She was even smiling a bit. "You're not in the right state of mind due to tomorrow's events, I understand." She clasped her hands behind her back as she began walking forwards, having moved past Sorun. "Perhaps I was wrong to have tried and asked this of you with your thoughts already occupied with tomorrow. My apologies, Sorun. It can wait until after you've all finished the mission."

"U-uh, are you sure?" Sorun asked, remaining rooted to the spot as he watched Nicole walk away. "You can- you can still ask me, it's not like I can't take some time to-"

"No, it's alright," Nicole assured him, turning her head back to him briefly to give him a smile. "You have enough to worry about without my request distracting you further. I'll simply ask tomorrow when you're all finished and there is no imminent danger."

Sorun's breath caught in his throat. There would be no time after tomorrow. "Nicole, I *really* think you should ask me right now."

"It isn't that time-sensitive, Sorun. It can wait a day."

He sighed out loud, mentally cursing at himself. "Hey, Nicole?"

The way he'd called out her name was in a softer tone than he usually spoke in. It was enough to get Nicole to stop and turn back around towards him, where she saw Sorun awkwardly rubbing at the side of his head as he looked towards her.

"Do, um... do you think we could have one more game?" When she gave him a questioning look instead of an answer, he spoke again. "Before the mission tomorrow," he clarified. "It helps calm me down. I

just wanted one last game with you before tomorrow so I'm a bit more focused."

That wasn't the whole truth, but otherwise, he wasn't lying. Playing games with her had been his favorite pastime while stuck on this world. The only thing he looked forwards to every day and something he got lost in enjoying. And it was only ever with her. Always. It was always her.

He just wanted a bit more time with her. One more game. Just one before the end.

And then she had to go and shatter his heart when she shook her head. "I'm afraid I've other matters concerning the city I need to attend to," Nicole informed him. She offered him a small smile. "However, I'll be sure to clear up as much time as possible tomorrow so we can play after the mission. We'll have all the time we need to talk then."

"Yeah, that... that works. Sure." Sorun's hand flopped lifelessly back down to his side. He couldn't even manage a fake smile, so all he managed to offer Nicole was a small wave. "Goodbye, Nicole."

"Until next time, Sorun." With one last smile, and a nod, she disappeared on the spot.

The second she'd disappeared Sorun sighed loudly as his back crashed back into the roof railing. He ran his left hand over his face, pulling it up through his dark hair before letting it go limp to his side once again.

"Oof." A sad frown formed on Sorun's face as he looked at the spot Nicole had been standing in before disappearing. *"Sorry, Nicole... that's not something I'm going to be able to do."* He slowly blinked, and then turned his head to look at the city below. *"I wonder what she wanted to ask me? Guess I'll never know now."* Another sigh. *"I never did get to tell her how much I really liked her. Maybe... no. I can't. It'd be too cruel to her. I just don't have time."* He spun his

body around so he could lean forwards on the railing. *"Who the hell are you kidding, Sorun? It's not like she'd ever take a loser like you anyways."*

At this point he probably could have thrown himself off the roof right there with how he was feeling. He wouldn't, of course, not with everything at stake. But there was still something tempting about having the option of throwing himself over right now so he could just end it at this moment so he didn't have to feel all this anymore. The disappointment, the sorrow, the dread. All of it weighing him down.

Maybe it was a good thing he'd die tomorrow. He couldn't handle this anymore.

"Ugh... I just... I just can't anymore. It's too much." He felt his body crumple against the roof railing. No energy in his body, no will to keep standing. All he could manage to do is look up at the sunset, his eye sunken in so far that he looked more tired than humanly possible. *"I just really... really can't do this any longer..."*

The next day

There had been quite a bit of commotion as tomorrow finally became today. The Freedom Fighters were scrambling around that large ship of theirs, chattering and offering words of encouragement as they prepared to take off. The Chaotix had come down from Angel Island to join them just for the occasion. He himself stood off to the side in the hanger, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed as he waited for his partner in this mission.

"Just where is he?" Shadow thought to himself as his crimson eyes glanced around. *"It's not like him to be late like this. He's usually punctual for this sort of thing."*

One of the better traits he could say about Sorun was that he liked to show up on time. He didn't care about being perfect in many areas, though one was his small little quirk about not liking to be late for

things. It was a little eccentricity about the human that Shadow found himself appreciating in him in the time he'd gotten to know him. Among other things.

He could still hear Rouge's teasing voice in his mind, causing him to internally grimace.

"So, did you check up on him?"

"Yes. He seems to be doing well. Your worry was unfounded."

"Ah, yeah, my *worry. Of course,"* she had said. *"I heard from the pilot of the airship you rode to the city that you were pacing around pretty nervously during the whole ride there."*

"Hmph. Maybe the pilot should be focusing less on me and more on driving the ship."

"Aww, don't be like that. I think it's kinda cute you're so worried about your new buddy like that."

"He is not a 'buddy'. He's a comrade. And a competent one at that. At least in some areas..."

He still couldn't shake that urge to roll his eyes at the bat whenever she brought Sorun up with him. He'd be first and foremost in admitting he hadn't liked the human when he first showed up in that base the Freedom Fighters had. He'd outright loathed his presence alone for how little he offered. His attitude hadn't made Shadow think any less of how utterly onerous his existence was.

That had been then, though, and the human had gone great lengths over self-improvement. Absorbed those Emeralds and gained those powers of his. Powers the origin of which Sorun had shared solely with Shadow.

It still surprised him, how much blatant trust Sorun had put in him despite the mutual dislike they shared for each other. Trust born out

of logical necessity more than anything else, which Shadow could silently respect. And from that trust he'd learned a bit more about the human and found out they had thoughts and opinions that lined up with each other, and he grew to respect Sorun a bit more.

And then he'd gone and started going to Shadow for help in controlling his powers. He knew he'd periodically go to that coyote for help with swordsmanship due to his katana, but he almost exclusively went to Shadow for help with his abilities granted by the Chaos Emeralds. Again, a logical choice Shadow could respect, and it was one more thing to put over Sonic since he was coming to him for help and not the other, blue hedgehog.

Regardless of what Shadow felt for Sorun, there was no denying he was incredibly competent with his powers. Probably the most thing he was competent with was using them. That and those games of his.

He'd never play another video game with him again after that humiliating loss he suffered. A worthless pastime.

But they'd practiced, and Shadow had been impressed by the potency of Sorun's abilities. Enough that he'd taken one of his techniques for himself. And... much to his surprise, he'd grown to enjoy those little sessions of theirs. Particularly when Shadow had been showing him how to teleport- by far Sorun's hardest technique to master. Shadow hadn't been able to hold back the smirk at first when the human had been teleporting himself into trees, over and over, having to rely on Shadow to instruct him and on how to visualize where he wanted to appear, how to construct his own mental triggers to seamlessly perform teleports.

It was nice, being relied on, and having someone look up to Shadow for instruction. He didn't know why. The feeling was just... acceptable to him. They'd fought together some against the mad Doctor's Badniks, and Shadow was pleasantly surprised to find they worked well together. Sorun wasn't overly boisterous like the Faker, didn't crack jokes like him or some of the other Freedom Fighters mid-fight

or hesitate. He was focused and endeavored to destroy his opponents as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Partly, Shadow suspected, because Sorun always had some fear of them, no matter how strong he got through his powers. Nonetheless, Shadow liked the way he fought, and liked how efficient they were together.

So, he'd decided to share private things with him. Things he shared with precious little others. Not everything, of course. But enough. To pay back that trust Sorun had given him, and to see what would happen if this trading of trust continued. More and more he'd been surprised by Sorun, the way he thought, his... pragmatism, and the inane way he managed to describe his brand of common sense. Inane, if not a bit amusing.

Sorun wasn't her. Not by a long shot; never would be. More than that, they were complete opposites. Even their looks were different- his blue eyes were a tad darker than hers had been, and much more piercing. But that inane, funny way he spoke in, the reasoning behind those silly words that resonated with Shadow so much, he couldn't help but be reminded of her, even if they were opposites.

From then on Shadow decided that he tolerated Sorun enough that he found him able to stand his presence. He'd wanted him to join G.U.N. after that, to join his team. Mostly because he legitimately thought the Earthling would fit in better with them than the Freedom Fighters, and because he considered him staying with the Mobians here was a waste of his skills and powers. Especially with that cold, pragmatic mind he hid so well behind his inane speech and mannerisms. And he'd figured it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, having somebody like him on the team. Shadow had been a bit dismayed to find Sorun didn't associate with Overlanders at all, something he'd hoped would actually serve to put Sorun at ease. He didn't associate with anything on the planet though due to his nature.

Much like Shadow himself, now that he thought about it.

Well, no matter what happened, Shadow trusted that Sorun would make the right choice. The fact he was actively plotting behind the

backs of his comrades to kill Eggman said enough, something Shadow approved of and another reason he thought he should just leave them to join him and Rouge. Hopefully they'd be able to carry that pact they'd made out today to finally make the planet a safer place and out from under the thumb of the Doctor. It'd be tight timing, messy: they weren't in a position to plan something airtight. He himself wasn't comfortable at all with it. But Sorun was due to get a new power with this last Emerald. Maybe it'd be the edge they needed to pull off a miracle. Failing that, they'd just improvise.

"Hey. Shadow."

The familiar voice caused Shadow to turn to his side. He saw Sorun leaning on the wall next to him, a new, white coat on with his hands tucked into his pockets. He'd glanced up at the eyepatch that was on the human's face, and had to repress the scowl that threatened to form on his face from the sight.

He remember when he'd gotten that call from Rouge, about what had happened in Knothole and what Sorun had done in order to save everybody. He'd been conflicted. On one side, he'd been glad and had somewhat been proud over the fact that Sorun had been able to beat Robotnik at his own game. On the other hand, his mind wouldn't leave the subject of the wounds he'd sustained in the process, and he'd set out to check up on him as soon as possible because of it. As a professional courtesy.

When he'd finally seen the human with his own eyes, he'd wanted to hit him and yell at him for being so careless with himself and getting hurt bad enough he'd lost a limb and an eye. But, at the very least he'd substituted his arm with a Bringer Claw, and he seemed to have adapted to using one eye. In fact, he'd... seemed completely fine, despite the wounds. Speaking in that same, inane way of his. He'd fought a god and actually managed to wound him with his abilities, something Shadow couldn't even do, nor would acknowledge as long as the subject never came up. The worry had vanished in an instant leaving Shadow irritated over the human, and he'd left. Immense relief as well that he was fine. But mostly irritation.

Sorun was fine, so there was no reason to think more on it. Even now he looked fine. A bit tired-looking, perhaps, but that could have been due to any number of factors. But he doubted it affect Sorun in any negative way. He looked calm, and if his greeting said anything his head was in the right place right now. Focused on the task at hand with little room for words.

As it should be. And the same reason working with him was refreshing to Shadow.

"What took you so long?" Shadow questioned, tone annoyed. "You're late."

"Am I?" Sorun quietly mumbled out. "My apologies. Overslept."

"Hmph." Shadow uncrossed his arms and pushed off the wall. "It's no matter. The plan is still a go?"

"Yeah, I got the coordinates for the facility with the Chaos Emerald and the location of the ship. Making portals won't be a problem. We'll go, I'll get the Emerald, then I'll take us to the ship so we can meet up with everyone else."

"And the *other* plan?"

"... We'll see what happens," Sorun said to him in a low tone. "No matter what he's dying today. We're just gonna have to wait for a good time to go for it."

An unsettled hum left Shadow. "Not ideal. We'll have to make do," he decided. "Are we going?"

Wordlessly, Sorun turned his head around. By now the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix had piled into their ship, and its thrusters were beginning to warm up as it prepared to take off. He looked back at Shadow and nodded.

"No reason to delay. I'll get us going." His katana flashed into his hands, which he proceeded to unsheath. "I know she wasn't part of the plan," he said as he slashed the sword downwards in the air, "but how come Rouge isn't coming with us on this?"

As a horizontal slash was made, making a hair-thin, blue cross in the air, Shadow answered him. "She said one of her sources gave her a 'lead' on something concerning our target location, and went to investigate it. G.U.N. provided an escort for her and a ship for faster transportation."

"Generous," Sorun succinctly replied as the cross folded inwards to make a portal.

"We *do* work for them. And they have a vested interest in this operation going smoothly," Shadow explained.

"Sure." Sorun sheathed his sword. "Kinda a little late going to investigate something we're about to walk into, isn't it?"

Waving a hand, Shadow began to walk towards the portal. "That was hours ago. If something was truly amiss, we would know about it by now. She wouldn't be that slow. I imagine all went well and she's to meet us on the Doctor's ship." He took his first step into the portal. "Now come on. Time's wasting."

He heard a sigh from Sorun. "Time. Right..."

And with that, they both ventured into the portal.

Hours ago

She'd be spending a lot of time telling Shadow she'd been right about the bad feeling she'd gotten when they met back up.

The base she was in was an old one, one of Eggman's old bases. Decommissioned by the Freedom Fighters some time ago, but the

computers here were still operational and had a link to the Egg Network. It was always finicky getting the generator in the place up and running, but it was always worth it seeing as some divine oversight made it so the computers' logins weren't password-protected. A simple switch on to access the network, no fuss, no muss, no encryption to work around. Direct access.

Maybe at one point Rouge should have told her superiors she had access to a source this good, but she wasn't one to give up good sources. And the people that worked at G.U.N. may have been good people, but she didn't a hundred-percent trust somebody at some point to not screw something up, somehow alert Robotnik this computer existed, and then do something to pull the plug on it. It was more like she was ninety-eight percent certain, maybe ninety-nine since they were professionals.

That one percent was a bit too big for comfort, though. Besides, she wouldn't be much of a spy if everybody knew where she got her info from.

On the bright side Robotnik wasn't exactly as shrewd as she was when it came to secrecy. Oh, sure, it wasn't like he broadcasted his entire plans on the network for everybody to see, he wasn't a genius for nothing, but it didn't stop him from leaving clues. Listed objectives and progress updates, lines of communication here and there, bits and pieces of information one could use to construe a convincing-enough solid chunk of intel. It wasn't foolproof. It was more often than not she came up with nothing fishing around the network for information. But, just sometimes, she'd find something that made the effort worth it. Like right now for instance.

Something like the mention of "artificially-generated Chaos energy waves" being thrown around over and over. Numbers being listed for the amount of Badniks being loaded into the ship the Freedom Fighters were set to assault. A set of coordinates that just happened to be the exact same location that Shadow planned on raiding with Sorun because they received a reading of a Chaos Emerald there.

Around the exact same time Eggman was preparing to launch his attack.

Didn't take a genius to see where this was going.

"It just *had* to be a trap, didn't it?" Rouge sarcastically remarked as she shut the computer down. "Fake Chaos energy readings to try and split the group up during the attack. Trying to lead some people into a trap, huh? Kinda sad nobody saw it coming, really. Ah, well. Looks like I better go make a trip."

One small detour to shut the generator down later, and the bat Mobian was outside the base. Right in front of her was a shuttle. A small thing, only fit four people, pilots included. But it was fast, which was what she needed right now. Cool on the exterior she may have been, but a small bit of her was concerned about the trap her partner was about to fall into. The more rational side of her managed to remind herself that it wasn't for hours yet, and this shuttle was fast enough to make two trips all the way to New Mobotropolis. Everything was fine. She'd make it with time to spare to warn everyone.

"Alright, pack it in, boys," she called out to the three Overlander soldiers standing guard outside the ship. "We're all done here."

"Ma'am." The three soldiers briefly saluted her and turned around to the small, gray-colored shuttle. She wasn't too far behind them, being the last to fit into the small compartment in the shuttle. The door leading to the interior closed, and the four thrusters on the corners of the small ship fired to life.

He felt a shudder underneath his feet as the G.U.N. ship began to lift up off the ground. Soon after the ship itself rose high up into the air, while the thrusters readjusted positions to push the ship forwards. The man standing on top of the shuttle paid none of this any mind as he fiddled with his hands.

"Poking your nose where it shouldn't belong, Rouge? Well that's just unfortunate for you, ain't it?" Had the roar of the shuttle's thrusters not been drowning it out, there would have been an audible *snap!* as Rubrum finished covering his hands with tight, black gloves. "Can't have you just go and ruin the show, now, can I?"

Chapter 51

Recursion Error

Episode 51- Rubrum

G.U.N. soldiers were trained to be professionals. To have their minds honed to a razor's edge so they could fit themselves into the mindset of being the ideal soldier. Personnel whose minds were utmost focused on duty before all else, and, while on-duty, had a mindset to reflect this.

"Man, what are you talking about? It's blue."

Most of them at any rate.

"You're tellin' me turquoise is blue?" The pilot in the left seat of the shuttle turned his head to his co-pilot sitting on the right side of the cockpit. "You're trippin', man. Trippin'. It's green."

Sighing at the clouds rushing past the shuttle's windshield in front of him, the right pilot turned his head to meet the eyes of the left. "And *you're* colorblind. Turquoise is blue, not green, you're an idiot, case closed."

"Nah-nah-nah-nah, no, no way, it's green. I'm tellin' ya it's green," Left said. "Dude- I- you- I've seen it with my own eyes! It's green!"

"You know if you would have made an argument for it being somewhere in the middle I would have agreed with you, but since you're dead-set on dying on a hill just to be wrong, I'm gonna stand my ground." Right blew past his lips and turned his chair back forwards to the controls. "Just look at the name. Turquoise. It fits right in with blue, like cyan and azure. It's a blue word."

"You're bringing *names* into this now!?" Left exclaimed. "Man, you can't- I took an art class, you can't pull this nonsense on me. I know what colors are. I got a certificate that says I do on my file."

"How many things can you describe that are turquoise?" Right asked. "No, seriously, how many things? I bet the only time you ever even saw the word turquoise was when you were looking at color pallets while figuring out what to color your 'projects' in your art class."

Sighing, Left rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Hey, uh, don't-don't Rouge got turquoise eyes?"

"Oh, don't even try asking, man," Right said with a shake of his head. "She's got rank on us. I don't wanna get written up because we were more focused on arguing about colors than flying the ship."

"Come on, dude, it's not like it's storming or anything. Sky's as clear as it could be. Besides, she's a girl, right? Girls are into this kinda thing I think. It'll take like five seconds-"

"Yeah, she's a girl that can kick you into next week with both her eyes closed and three limbs tied behind her back. Trust me man, you don't wanna bug her with this."

"I mean I was kind of getting a real chill vibe from her, but whatevs, dude."

"Good." With a huff, Right crossed his arms. "... Her eyes are more an aqua anyways."

"Oh don't even START WITH AQUA-!"

A hand burst through the shuttle's windshield and grabbed Left by the face. He didn't have the time to scream out in surprise before the fingers gripping his head squeezed down and crushed his cranium into a pulpy mess.

Right, who was on the other side of the cockpit, did scream at the sight of his co-pilot having his head mashed into mush only for him to then fall lifelessly out of his chair. He then looked towards the window, which was where he saw him. A man completely covered in red clothes crouching outside on the windshield of the shuttle, with his left hand holding onto an outside part of the shuttle while his right hand, covered in a now-bloodied black glove, was sticking in through the hole in the windshield he'd made.

The remaining pilot, so stunned by the gratuitous act of violence, could do nothing but watch in shock as the hand sticking through the windshield lowered itself to the control console. The hand wrapped its fingers around the control stick to the shuttle, and then pulled it up hard enough that the stick was halfway towards being pulled out of the console completely, to the point that it was sparking electricity and some wires were exposed at the bottom of the stick.

Following this, the ship lurched. Its front had turned completely down as the shuttle began to nosedive straight towards the ground. The remaining pilot had finally managed to shake himself from his stupor and moved to act. He'd known that the windshield to the shuttle was reinforced and resistant to damage, despite the fact the stranger in red had seemingly managed to punch through it, and he didn't have confidence in his ability to accurately aim at a target as small and nimble as an arm. So he'd unsheathed his combat knife and ran right towards the arm while stabbing down towards it.

His efforts proved to be for naught, as right before the knife stabbed down into it the red-sleeved arm snapped upwards and snatched the pilot's wrist. It effortlessly twisted the wrist completely around, creating a sickening *snap!* sound and causing the pilot to scream out in pain. The knife was dropped as a result, though it was quickly caught by Rubrum's hand only for it to then throw the knife at the soldier's head. The blade had sunk right into his forehead, causing his eyes to roll to the back of his head and his body to fall lifelessly to the ground.

"Aaaaand we're goin' down..." Rubrum thought to himself. He pulled his arm out from the hole in the windshield, and then looked over his shoulder. He made a small grimace behind the shadow of his hood from the fast-approaching ground. *"Yeah, that's gonna hurt."*

He looked ahead just in time to see the cabin door leading to the cockpit open. He saw a very shocked-looking white bat in the open doorway, staring at both him and the bodies of the soldiers with wide eyes and a gaping mouth.

Rubrum had just enough time to wave at her before the nosediving shuttle slammed him and itself right into the ground.

Turned out getting slammed right into the ground full-speed by a plummeting shuttle hurt worse than Rubrum thought it would.

It'd happened so quickly it'd been a blur, even to him. There'd been a lot of loud sounds. A burst of pain across his everything. A lot of bouncing and being crushed. All ending with him being under something that'd fallen off the shuttle after it crashed into the ground.

With a groan, he kicked off the heap of metal that had been lying on top of him. He slowly sat upwards, sighing out as the throbbing pain along his body dulled and at the feeling of bones and muscles regenerating and righting themselves into their proper positions. He looked up with a sigh, his neck cracking from the movement, and then began to climb to his feet as he observed his surroundings.

The shuttle had crashed down in an otherwise unpopulated part of a forest while heading towards New Mobotropolis. Conveniently enough, it had crash-landed in a wide, natural and clear path between the trees that went in a straight line. Other than that, there was nothing around. Just trees and the hunk of metal he was staring at.

In of itself, the crash had been devastating. It hadn't exploded, but considering it'd crashed full-speed right into the ground it was all but

decommissioned. He saw, with some surprise, another survivor that had been tossed all the way to the direct opposite side of the crash site.

That survivor, the white-furred bat Mobian, had made a small groan as she blearily blinked her eyes open. She slowly sat up as she shook her head, seemingly no worse for wear, and then looked up at the wreckage of the G.U.N. shuttle. It was barely recognizable at this point, being half-buried in the ground, misshapen due the metal buckling so severely from the impact, and was burning. Rubrum saw her gasp out when she saw the single surviving G.U.N. soldier of the group pinned under the burning shuttle wreckage sitting on his legs, who was trying desperately to pull himself out. She'd only turned her teal eyes towards Rubrum himself when he began limping towards the soldier.

"Son of a bitch, that hurt..." Rubrum had groaned. He began winding his right shoulder up, and slowly his limping gait started to transition into a normal walk as his body rapidly healed. He made it halfway to the struggling G.U.N. soldier, and then stopped when he crossed the mangled body of one of the pilots he'd killed earlier. "Surprised you even made it," he scoffed out as he crouched down to the pilot's body. "The bat not so much, Mobians are freakishly tough like that, but you? The hell do they make these ships out of?"

Rouge watched as the man's black-gloved hands rummaged around the dead G.U.N. pilot's belt, only for him to then pull the man's sidearm away. He stood back up while admiring the pistol, and then tilted his hooded head in the direction of the pinned Overlander soldier. Realizing what he intended to do, Rouge shot upwards into a ready crouch, but to her dismay before she could even flap her wings Rubrum had aimed the pistol at the soldier and fired off three rounds into his head, ending him.

"You'll be in my heart for as long as I remember your face, generic soldierman," Rubrum said. He looked down at the pistol in his hand, and then made a small hum. "I'm keeping you for later," he decided

as he stuffed the pistol into the interior of his hooded robe. Satisfied, he then turned around to face Rouge.

The white bat was crouched down about ten meters away from him. She'd visible tensed up when his hood-shadowed face turned towards her, and her breathing had increased by a small amount. She managed to maintain a semi-calm composure, though, her eyes narrowing in his direction as her dark bat wings experimentally flapped. Rubrum had been the one to get the first word in.

"Well, if it isn't Rouge the flying rat," he greeted, though the insult had gotten no visible rise out of the agent. "Snooping around, as per usual. You wouldn't happen to be on your way to warn all your pals about the little trap Eggman set, would you?"

"What would you know about that?" There had been a couple of times Rouge's eyes flicked to the bodies of the dead G.U.N. personnel, though they had been momentary glances. She still seemed completely serious, if not a bit nervous at the sight of the red-dressed man in front of her.

"Oh... about everything," Rubrum admitted.

"And just who are you?" she demanded.

Rubrum shrugged. "My name ain't all that important, Rouge."

The steely gaze she continued to give him didn't falter in the slightest. Her eyes tipped down just enough to eye the red clothes covering his entire body, as well as the black boots and gloves covering his hands and feet, and then she looked back to his face completely concealed by the shadow of his red hood. "Alright. *What* are you?" she tried.

"Equally unimportant," Rubrum said. "You sure you should be fishing for information at a time like this, Rouge? You got a guy that just straight-murdered three of your boys right in front of ya. Now ain't the time to be pulling this spy shit."

Rouge's focused expression was finally broken by a small frown. She slowly began to rise up into a standing position, and then dusted herself off a bit as she continued giving Rubrum a wary stare. "That mean to imply you're gonna try doing me in, too?"

He shook his head, causing surprise to bloom on her face. "Nah. Can't," he said, causing the bat's surprise to turn to confusion. "That said, uh... I don't suppose if I just asked you to chill out here for, I don't know, like a day or something while the big throwdown between Eggman and the Freedom Fighters goes down you'd listen?"

Her answer was immediate. "Not a chance."

"Nobody ever makes it easy for me," Rubrum sighed out. "Look. Rouge. I'll make you an offer. If you just sit here for a day I'll leave you alone. Hell, you don't even have to do that. I just don't want you telling anybody about the trap until the fight's over with." He slowly rose his right arm up and pointed at her. "If you don't do that... I'll tear your wings off."

Dangerous.

It was the one thing both her experience and her instincts were screaming at her as she looked at the person standing in front of her. Not just because he'd somehow crashed a G.U.N. shuttle with his bare hands, or how he'd mercilessly killed three soldiers without batting an eye. Relevant factors of course- ones that made Rouge just that much more wary of him.

His demeanor. That was what was setting her off the most above all else. That casual manner of speech and the way his body language was so relaxed, a stark contrast to how wound up she felt just looking at him. The words he spoke had so much confidence behind them, like what he said was a undeniable fact. No cockiness- genuine confidence. Rouge was experienced enough to tell the difference between ignorant cockiness and confidence, and this man

in red in front of her was practically oozing with self-assured confidence. Which was why she'd retracted her wings just the barest amount when he'd threatened to tear her wings off while also raising her hands into a guarding stance. She legitimately believed him when he said that he was going to tear them off with his bare hands. Believed enough that she'd felt her spine shiver.

"... Just kidding." Her guard wasn't lowered in the slightest, though Rouge did cock her head in confusion when the red-dressed man she didn't know as Rubrum made a small chuckle, and then opened the hand he was using to point at her as he lowered it back to his side. "You're a bit too important to cripple. But I can still break you as much as I want as long as you'll make a full recovery afterwards."

"Just what is he playing at here...?" He didn't seem like somebody who was more chatty than they wanted to be. That'd been another bad sign on top of everything else; there was calculated cleverness under the casual speech that Rouge could see. *"Is he with Eggman? That's the only reason he'd want me to stay quiet on spilling about the trap to the others, but... there's something off with him. Way off. This isn't some random goon he hired. None of the signs are there. He's... I don't know what he is..."*

That was in terms of what his agenda was, or even literally what he was. With his entire body being covered with clothes she couldn't determine his exact species; for all she knew he might not have been a Mobian. An android? Wouldn't be the first time Eggman used something along those lines. All she could determine was it was a male from how the voice sounded and the general shape of the body.

She shook her head. Speculation wasn't going to get her anywhere, and there was no way she was going to listen to the directions of whoever this was. She somewhat doubted he'd just let her fly away, too. He still had that gun from the deceased soldier and she didn't want to risk testing how good his aim was. So it seemed she'd have to fight. Even if there was something in the back of her mind telling her that was an exceedingly bad idea.

The man in red seemed to pick up on her decision from the way his shoulders slumped slightly. "Alright, have it your way." Strangely, he turned towards the wreckage of the shuttle. "Let's at least make it a bit interesting."

Rouge felt nothing but confusion as he walked right in front of the wreckage. She grew even more confused, and worried, when his fist punched right through the damaged steel hull of the ship. His hand seemed to rifle around in the innards of the wreck for a bit, and with a satisfied hum he pulled something out.

"The... the ship's power couplings...?" Rouge thought to herself. In Rubrum's hand was indeed that component of the ship. Two metal cylinders connected together by a short cable. The man spun them around so he held the couplings by one of the cylinders, and then his hooded head looked towards Rouge.

"Hahhhh...!" He shifted into a kung-fu stance startling fast. A... horrendous stance, from what Rouge observed. His footing was completely off and his posture was so wrong she wanted to sigh at the sight of it. It looked less like a professional martial arts stance and more something emulated off a cheap comic. "Ata!" He began to spin the power couplings around himself, like he was using them as a pair of nunchucks. "Wa-wa-wa-wa! Ata! Ha! Hiyah!"

By now Rouge's guard was beginning to drop as she looked at the sight in front of her. There he was, a man who'd killed three men without even flinching, who Rouge had pegged as somebody being incredibly dangerous... shouting out goofy kung-fu noises as he spun the power couplings all around him. It wasn't even that good; she could see from the way he was spinning them he had no actual experience or skill using that type of weapon. They looked like badly-emulated movements, like his stance was. There was no denying he had speed, though. Intense speed and reflexes that compensated for his lack of skill based on the way he was spinning the makeshift nunchucks around so successfully if not skillfully. He was strong, too, if the fact he'd punched through a steel bulkhead with his bare fist said anything.

Just what was he?

"Waaaa...!" He spun the nunchucks around one more time, ending with one end of the power coupling being held under his armpit while the other end was held by his hand. He was still in that ridiculous kung-fu stance. "I've always wanted to try out nunchucks." With his free hand, he gestured towards the bat. "Come on, Rouge! Don't leave me hanging here!"

"Fighting me with a weapon you've never held before?" Her wings flared out to her side. "Big mistake!"

She took off the ground like a bullet, flying right towards the red man's position. She'd spun in the air once to gain momentum, lifting her leg up as she approached and then delivering an expertly-crafted kick right down onto him.

The kick hit nothing but air.

"Y'sure?" Rouge landed on the ground, surprised at the empty space. She then spun to her right at the voice to see her opponent standing next to her, looking down at his nunchucks in contemplation. "I don't know, I mean... rule of cool still applies, right?"

Scowling, the bat Mobian kicked out towards the man again. To her surprise she actually saw him dodge the kick this time. A dodge that seemed so lazily performed but with such terrifying speed she couldn't help but be off-put by it. She tried again and again to kick him, but every single kick whiffed right past the man's hooded head as he *just* dipped out of the way each and every time.

"Oh, yeah, guess I should be doing some stuff, too. Wa-ta!"

He'd struck out with the power couplings too fast for Rouge to dodge. She felt it connect with her side, and immediately pain shot up her body from the hard impact. She grunted from the pain and tried hopping back to create distance between them. To her disbelief,

Rubrum had countered by jumping up in the air after her, and began spinning. Spinning in a way that the end of the nunchuck was held out to the side, like some demented windmill spitting out kung-fu noises.

Rouge was struck again, this time in the face. More pain lanced through her senses, causing her to growl slightly as her wings beat off the ground. She was able to maneuver quickly to the man's backside, though before she could even strike he'd made another exaggerated kung-fu noise and swung the power coupling behind himself. The end of it struck her calf, hard enough that she'd felt the vibrations of the hit right in her bones. The pain was enough to cause her to shout and hop back.

But he wouldn't let her gain distance. He'd dashed right in front of her at frightening speeds, continuing to swing the nunchucks at her. Every single hit was punctuated by one of those ridiculous noises he'd make along with pain exploding on one part of her body. Anger and frustration began to rapidly build up in Rouge the longer this went on. Indignation from being made a fool of from just how casual this person was acting over something so serious. For doing so much damage to *her* of all people and acting like it was nothing.

Nobody made a fool of her like this.

For as fast as he was with the nunchucks, he had absolutely no skill using them. Just raw speed and reflexes. The hits were delivered with the same types of swings, over and over. Even the amount of spins and flourishes he'd do with the power couplings between hits were limited. He may have been swinging them too fast for Rouge to keep up with, but there was a pattern to the hits. A pattern she was learning quickly past all the pain the hits were giving her.

That was why, eventually, she finally managed to land a hit. She'd struck her leg out in a quick jab, right in the middle of the power coupling being swung towards her. Its momentum was shifted as a result of the kick, causing it to spin around and bash the hooded man right in the face. He sputtered and stepped back from the hit, having

left his center wide open. She'd lifted her leg up once more and delivered a straight kick to the male's chest.

The hit was sufficient enough that he was sent skidding back away from Rouge. She hadn't even waited for him to stop, having leapt right into the air after him. It was only when his feet skidded to a stop did Rubrum look up just in time to see Rouge spinning towards him with her leg extended. He grasped both power couplings and held it up with the intent to use the cable to guard him. This did little, as the resulting axe kick from Rouge had completely split the cable.

Rubrum stumbled back a bit as a result, looking down at his split apart nunchucks in what Rouge thought was surprise. She would have allowed herself a small smirk as she leapt back if it wasn't for the fact he began laughing.

"Ha ha! Alright!" He nonchalantly tossed the severed power couplings away and gestured to Rouge again. "You wanna play? Let's play!"

Where there had once been the beginnings of a smirk was now a frustrated frown that was directed at her opponent. He simply just stood there, arms swaying to his side in a carefree manner as he tapped his foot to an unheard tune, like he was waiting for Rouge to hurry up and make a move. It was with a fair bit of anger behind it did she leap up into the air again.

Angry as she may have been, it hadn't managed to cloud her mind or her skill as she wound up another kick midair. The man she was aiming for just continued to stand there, his hooded head looking up at her as she came closer. Even when she fell within striking distance he did not move, and by that point she thought a hit was assured.

But, it wasn't. He'd waited until her muscles began moving her leg to dodge. It made it so her kick came within millimeters of hitting him, but it was still a miss. The tree he'd been standing in front of, however, was not so fortunate. Her kick had been made with enough

skill that there was a thick seem running straight through the entire trunk of the tree the man had been standing in front of. A large creaking sound was heard, with Rubrum having turned his head towards the tree that began falling backwards, while Rouge kept her eyes locked on him.

"Ah... that's the Rouge I know," he said as the tree fell fully down to the ground. He ducked his head to avoid getting struck by another kick. "You and that monster kick of yours."

"We've never met," Rouge said as she defensively hopped back away from him.

"Meh... I guess that's *technically* accurate," he agreed with a shrug.

"Well maybe we oughta get to know each other," Rouge suggested, doing her best to ignore the pain of the previous hits as she offered him a teasing smile. "I'll tell you something about myself if you tell me who you are."

"Ah, but we're already in the middle of doing that." Rubrum held his fists up and began lightly hopping on his feet. "And I gotta say, I'm real disappointed with what I'm finding here."

Rouge frowned. Even in that loose fighting stance he looked too casual for comfort. She decided a straightforward approach was appropriate, and dove right in.

Kick upon kick was unleashed on him. Not a single one of her attacks managed to hit him, each and every one just slightly grazing past him. The most she'd ever been able to do was ruffle the clothes he wore, with him ducking, bobbing, weaving, and overall just dodging every attack she sent him. The same couldn't be said for his performance.

Oh, she'd managed to dodge some of his hits. *Some* , and just barely. A vast majority of them were landing on her, though, and they

hit harder than the makeshift nunchucks had. She wasn't failing to dodge or block those hits for lack of trying, either.

It was strange, though. That style he was using it. In-between taking blows from him Rouge managed to eye just what he was doing, and she couldn't help but be confused by his movements. He was repeating moves. The same ones, over and over, and in the same pattern. That pattern was one of the only reasons she was able to dodge to begin with, because otherwise the hits were coming too quick for her to keep up with.

A left hook, a right uppercut, followed by Rubrum spinning around and performing roundhouse kicks with both legs.

A left hook, a right uppercut, a delay, and then Rubrum using his left leg to perform a flurry of straight kicks, ending with him dodging backwards and then rushing forwards with a straight right punch, all in a single motion.

That was it. Rubrum kept defaulting to those two exact same combos, never deviating from them. He'd mix it up by ending combos prematurely sometimes, feints like that, but otherwise not only would he solely use those attacks, he'd use them in that exact same sequence. It was absolutely baffling to Rouge why he would employ such a style, and even more why he was refusing to expand and use other moves. If it wasn't for his seemingly monstrous strength and speed any competent fighter would have been able to counter and beat him a million times over by now.

She had a sneaking suspicion why he was limiting himself so much, though. The same reason he kept making small chuckles and laughs whenever he dodged her attacks, or on the rare occasion she dodged his. The same reason he was using such basic combos. The same reason he managed to punch through solid steel but a hit on her wasn't going straight through her. For some reason, he was holding back on her. She couldn't tell if he was a legitimately inexperienced hand-to-hand fighter or not, but he was definitely

limiting his power. And an idea began to form in her head because of this observation.

Her wings flapped and sent her flying backwards, creating distance between them. Rouge's feet skid across the ground slightly, while Rubrum had tilted his head to the side as he looked in her direction.

"You... you really know how to flatter a girl," she sarcastically remarked through feigned, heavy breaths, "holding back like that."

"Well, what can I say?" Rubrum asked, not even bothering to deny it. "I'm having a blast hitting you over and over. Besides. You're not worth putting in actual effort."

"That's it, keep giving me what I want..." If it weren't for the need to keep on her act and the pain preventing it, she would have smiled. "I'm gonna make you eat those words!"

Her wings beat down roughly, and the bat was sent rocketing forwards. Her leg was cocked back, her face twisted in an enraged expression in what was seemingly a hot-blooded, reckless charge forwards. Rubrum had actually slumped his shoulders in disappointment a bit at the sight, and cocked back his own left fist in preparation.

"You always start with a left hook with those combos of yours." She knew that it would come at a speed too fast for Rouge to counter. She knew exactly what was coming, though. What kind of punch, its length, its trajectory. And she'd be a poor fighter if she didn't know how to counter a specific type of punch. So when she entered Rubrum's attack range, she'd struck.

The hooded man had struck out straight towards her, having assumed she'd charged him in blind rage. And indeed the look on her face reflected this assumption. That was, right until the movement to punch was made, at which point the expression on her face shifted from an enraged one to a confident smirk. She'd flapped her wings and twisted her body in preparation before the left hook

was even initiated, so that when when the left hook was initiated it'd whiffed right past her. Rouge then wrapped her own arms around the limb in the process of it missing her, and with the assistance of her wings used the vast strength behind the punch's momentum to spin the arm's owner around.

Rouge had intended to flip him onto his back, though his own strength and reflexes proved too great for that. She'd still managed to spin him around and leave him open, though, and struck when the opportunity presented itself. She'd kicked him in the side of the head. A kick even stronger than the one that'd cut down the previous tree in a single strike. A kick with all her strength and skill behind it.

Rubrum's head had snapped to the side under the force of the kick. A kick that'd been so intense Rouge had felt his skull completely shatter under her heel. The man himself gasped out in surprise at actually having been kicked, and more than likely from his skull caving into his brain. More than that, his hood had been jostled just the barest amount. Rouge had quickly retreated from him after delivering the kick, settling down on the ground in front of him with in a low stance as she gazed up to his face.

The hood hadn't been moved back all that much. Not enough that the shadows covering his face receded. She still couldn't tell what he was. What she *could* see were straight locks on long, red hair poking out from the underside of the hood, only being revealed due to her kick.

"..." Rubrum had frozen, seemingly catching on to the fact some of his hair had been exposed from the kick. Slowly, his hand reached up to grasp at the hood. "Well then..." he hissed out, sounding quite upset as he moved the hood back to conceal his whole face. "That kick would have killed me if I couldn't regenerate, Rouge."

"Kinda fighting for my life here," she commented between heavy breaths. "What? Didn't think I'd pull my punches like you?"

"Nah, not at all. You're the kind of person who'd let a whole world burn for a fucking gem. That's primarily the reason why I really don't like you, Rouge."

The white bat made an unbelieving scoff at that. "You really think I'm that bad?"

"Doesn't really matter what I think, does it?" With a light groan, Rubrum flexed his neck back and forth and began to stretch his arms behind his back. "I guess it's time to stop messing around. I've had enough fun with you."

She couldn't help but give him a teasing smirk in response. Her entire body ached, and the longer this went on the less and less confidence she had in winning something like this. But the one hit alone had her feeling good enough to be a bit cheeky. "Aw, really? All it took was a single hit from little old me for you to finally get the lead out?"

"I'll do you a favor and spare your teeth. Wouldn't wanna permanently mess up that pretty little manipulative smile of yours."

And at that point, everything fell apart for Rouge.

The G.U.N. agent apparently didn't have an accurate scale of just how much Rubrum had been holding back against her, because it was after that sentence was said that her entire body began to explode in pain. Blow after blow was struck on her at various points along her body, delivered at such speeds she couldn't even move to get out of the way. It felt like she was being hit in multiple spots at the same time from how fast Rubrum was attacking her with punches and kicks. So fast she could barely see him move, and much, much harder than any other hit she'd ever taken in her entire life.

Bones began creaking uncomfortably from the heavy blows. She felt and even heard some fracture. Her entire body was so inflamed in pain from the beating she was becoming numb to it.

It had ended with Rubrum began kicking her. Kick after kick mixed into spins that was knocking Rouge's entire body back, with Rubrum keeping pace with her with his spins and kicks. He'd become so ferocious in his kicks that he began kicking upwards, with Rouge's body being sent up into the air while the momentum from his own kicks carried Rubrum up with her. The final kick was when he began spinning in front of her while they were midair. His entire body spun at a speed he was nothing but a blurry red wheel to Rouge's darkening vision, before he finally stopped with his leg extended right above her. All that momentum from the spinning was delivered into a single, vicious heel kick that sent Rouge rocketing towards the ground with a pained scream.

Before she'd even hit the ground Rubrum had somehow appeared on the ground, and hit her with such a powerful straight punch that Rouge's trajectory shifted. All she could manage was a weak grunt as she was sent sailing back into the wreckage of the shuttle. Her body had impacted the flat wall of the crashed shuttle so hard the metal dented from the impact. And from that point, she lost the energy and will to keep moving.

"Holding back is such a pain... 'least I got it kick the greedy bitch's face in." With a quiet sigh, Rubrum ran a hand over the hood covering his head. *"That would have been disastrous of she saw my face. Ah, well... managed to save it. No point in worrying."*

He looked ahead, towards the wreckage that he'd sent Rouge to. She was lying flat on her back against a slab that was angled just enough that was was able to lie there without sliding off. Even from here he could see just how sorry of a state her body was in. Battered, beaten, bruises all along her face and body, blood leaking from the corner of her mouth. The heavy breathing and rapidly-blinking eyes suggested she was still conscious. Barely hanging in there, but awake. Good enough as far as Rubrum was concerned.

"You got skill. I'll give you that much." Rubrum had approached the metal slab she was lying on, and then turned around so his back was

leaning on the metal slab right next to her. "More skill than almost anybody else. But skill's all you got. You're no Shadow. No Sonic. No Knuckles. You don't have any real power to put you up there with the best. You're nothing but a filthy thief with more talent and skill than you have any right to possess."

He turned his head down to Rouge. The bat had turned her own head towards him just to look at him. Past all the labored breathing and heavy bruising along her face, she still managed to give him a defiant glare.

"But most importantly... you don't have a concept as to what true strength is. You had its meaning slapped right in your face and you still don't have a damn clue." Rubrum leaned down so he was closer to Rouge, his tone lowering some. "Somebody as selfish as you will never understand. You made that abundantly clear to me with what you tried to do."

"I don't... know what you're talking about..." Rouge grunted out.

"Mm. You wouldn't." Rubrum rose himself back up, still leaning next to the beaten bat's body. "Must feel terrible. Knowing your pal Shadow is about to walk into a trap. A miniature fortress rigged with so many traps and robots he'd be preoccupied there all day along with Sorun. All for a Chaos Emerald that wasn't even there to begin with...

"At least that's what would have happened if I didn't go and put the real Emerald there."

Rouge's heavy breathing was interrupted with a small gasp. Her eyes widened a bit, and her battered features grew more confused. "W-what...?"

"Yeah. I was already there. Disabled all the traps and killed all the robots. Whole place is empty. I put the last Chaos Emerald at the back of the place for Sorun. It's just sitting there and waiting for him to take it."

It was an explanation delivered with no hesitation and so lightly it carried the same weight as somebody talking about the weather. It's what Rubrum said to her, though. And it seemed to cause no end to the confusion Rouge suffered if the lost look she had said anything.

"That... that makes no sense," she mumbled out. "Why? Why would you do that?"

"Oh, 'cause the Chaos Emeralds are slowly killing Sorun." Rouge's breathing stalled completely when she heard that. Her eyes widened as far as they could go, and she began to shake slightly. "Yeah, I wanna say he'll have around... twenty-ish minutes once he absorbs the one I put down for him? Somewhere around there. After that? He's done for. Dead. Finished."

"That's a lie," she ground out. Her voice was pained and full of denial. The livid glare she maintained towards him remained defiant. "He's not the kind of person to hide s-something like th-that... he would have told someone...!"

"Shows what you know. Some spy you are." Rubrum's head turned towards the wreckage. "I don't think the ship's busted up enough so badly that the emergency beacon won't be working. Even if it isn't G.U.N.'ll send search parties after a while. You'll be fine once they get you to an infirmary. But that'll be way after Sorun dies. There's nothing you can do to warn anybody in time in the state you're in."

"Why?" Rubrum turned back to Rouge when he heard her ask that question. He couldn't tell if she was starting to believe him or if she was just getting drowsy from losing consciousness. "Why... why are you d-doing this? Who a-are you?"

"The answer to your question is a fascinating one. Unfortunately, it's not for your oversized-ass ears to hear." He flicked one of Rouge's ears, causing it to flick and for her to grunt out. He then pushed off the metal slab, walking backwards while still facing Rouge, who did her best to keep her eyes on him. Based on the fading look she had she seemed to finally be losing consciousness. "Let's just say it's all

in accordance with His will and leave it at that, huh? Now go ahead and get your beauty sleep. You really need it right now with how your face looks."

If Rouge had any further words for him, she wasn't able to get them out. Her wounds had finally become too much for her, and she'd blacked out right there on the slab. Scoffing at the sight, Rubrum turned right around. He quickly removed his black gloves to reveal the pale, human hands underneath them, and then tossed the pair of gloves on a nearby pile of burning rubble.

"Alright, that's that step finished. It'll get my existence out to G.U.N., and eventually it'll wind towards him. Not enough to completely blow my cover. Just enough to get him thinking and make things smoother later on." Once the hands were free from the gloves, Rubrum dug into the pockets of his cloak and brought out the piece of notebook paper for him to see. *"Let's just do a last-minute double check here..."*

- Genocide the Xorda so the Black Arms can invade Mobius (X)

- Go to Dark Mobius and kill Dark Enerjak (Silver won't be around to take care of it) (X)

- Go to the fake Chaos Emerald signal trap set up during Eggman's desperate assault, disable the trap, and place the real Chaos Emerald there for Sorun (X)

- Body Rouge (X)

- Save Eggman's life ()

- Kill Sorun ()

"Alright, deep-sixed the Enerjak from that beyond fucked up zone, Black Arms should take a long *while to get here* , *after the whole split mess if I timed it right, yep, yeah, mhm, looking good..."* There was no helping the sigh that left Rubrum as he looked at the two next

objectives. *"This hurts my soul just to read. Ugh... why the hell did He have to make things so damn complicated?"*

Chapter 52

Recursion Error

Episode 52- Game Over

Something was weird.

"You know, I expected to find, I don't know... resistance? Some robots guarding the Emerald? *Something ?*" Sorun's single eye glanced around the area as he and Shadow continued walking down a metal corridor, cutting through one large room to the next large room.

It'd be foolish to think that Eggman would just leave a Chaos Emerald sitting around without it being guarded. Both Sorun and Shadow had taken the portal to the storage facility expecting a fight. Sorun himself had walked right out of the portal with his sword in hand, while Shadow had walked out with green energy crackling around his hands.

Except... there was no resistance at all. There were robots, for sure. Dead robots. Everywhere. Badniks that looked like they'd been crushed, stabbed, and cut to pieces. Freshly destroyed, too, as some of them were still smoking and sparking.

The both of them had given each other strange looks before proceeding down further into the facility. The same sight greeted them at every turn, and at every room. Destroyed Badniks. Not a single one was left alive. On one hand it was making the mission a breeze so far, but Sorun couldn't help but feel something was amiss from how strange this all was.

"This is extremely peculiar," Shadow agreed with him, his own eyes scanning any destroyed Badniks they passed. "There is absolutely

no way he'd leave the Chaos Emerald unguarded."

"Maybe he was betting on us being so busy about the attack he didn't think we'd spare people to come get the Chaos Emerald," Sorun reasoned as he stepped over an Egg Pawn that'd been cut in half.

"He's not supposed to know we're retaliating," Shadow reminded him.

"Smart guy like that? He knows we know."

"Hmph. That doesn't explain all the freshly-destroyed Badniks all around us."

"Does it really matter?" Sorun asked him. "As long as the Emerald is still here then it's no skin off our backs."

Shadow turned his head to the human with a scowl on his face. "And if it turns out whoever did this did so to acquire the Emerald for themselves? What then?"

"Then we forget about it and just go to the ship where the fight's taking place," Sorun smoothly answered. "Nothing we can do about it if that's true."

Shadow hummed, but said nothing as he turned back forwards. For as much as Sorun could tell that meant he agreed with him as well as was troubled. Admittedly it mildly unsettled Sorun as well. Partly because nobody but them should have known about Eggman having the Emerald, and partly because he didn't know anybody that could do this. He'd heard some hubbub about there having been some prison breakout back in New Mobotropolis that had some people mildly concerned, but he didn't know if it'd been one of them or not.

Well, as he said, nothing to do about it if the Emerald was actually gone. He'd just go attack Eggman with one less power. It wasn't

optimal, but if everybody else was there, Sorun wasn't as concerned. They'd have to make do.

As they crossed past another room of dead robots, Sorun spoke out to Shadow. "So Rouge is just gonna join us midway through the fight there?"

"I believe so, yes," Shadow answered.

"You believe so," Sorun echoed. "She didn't tell you?"

"She told me she was investigating a lead, and left it at that." He made a low hum as he glanced to the side at an Egg Hammer that looked like it'd been torn to pieces. "She does what she deems appropriate at the time. But she gets good results, so I pay no mind to it."

"Doesn't really sound like a mindset somebody in the military should have," Sorun noted.

"We're agents. It's different," Shadow corrected. "And she's an agent along with me for wholly different reasons than mine."

"Oh, yeah?" Sorun airily replied. "And what'd that be?"

"She had an impressive set of skills in subterfuge, espionage, infiltration, stealth and stellar hand-to-hand, as well as other talents," Shadow said. "They were ideal traits for an agent, and G.U.N. had no access to a Mobian as skilled as her. She took the job because it paid and she's good at what she does."

Sorun rose an eyebrow in surprise. "Pretty impressive," he commented. "What'd she do before coming to G.U.N.?"

"She doesn't speak much of her previous life. All I know is that she stole rare treasures for a living."

"Ah." There was a pause as Sorun thought for a bit. "She's kind of flirty with Knuckles sometimes."

"Hn." All Shadow offered in response was a grunt of acknowledgement as they'd entered a hallway.

"It's just kind of weird," Sorun continued, "since, you know, Knuckles is already in a relationship with Julie-Su. And the guy's kinda clueless about women, so whenever she makes a pass at him it goes right over his head. Saw it a couple times back when you two lived at the HQ."

"I don't think things like that matter for her. She goes for what she wants."

"... That's kind of messed up, isn't it?"

With a small sigh, Shadow shrugged his shoulders. "I work with her because we were paired up due to being Mobians, and because her skills make her a highly valuable partner. I talk with her so we can better communicate on the field and because she's not as naïve as the average Mobian. That's the extent of our relationship. What she chooses to do in her personal life is her business."

"Hn." Sorun mimicked Shadow's earlier hum of acknowledgement. Wasn't his business. He was dying too soon to care. He personally thought Rouge was wasting her time with Knuckles the way she was going, guy was straight enough to cut grass by laying on it in Sorun's opinion, but he had more important things to worry about. Like the Chaos Emerald.

The... Chaos Emerald that was just sitting over at the end of the room they'd just walked into...

They'd just opened a door at the end of the hallway they'd entered previously when they saw it. The door lead to a large, wide, and round room. More robots lied around in heaps. An inordinate amount of Badniks that practically littered the whole ground of the room. And just there, in the center of the room, was a pedestal holding up a Chaos Emerald that glowed a bright cyan color.

Cautiously, both Sorun and Shadow had stepped into the room. Both kept a wary eye out, scanning the walls for any possible traps, or on the robots in case any were just playing dead. But nothing happened. There *were* some turrets sticking out of the wall in some locations, but like they Badniks they, too, were damaged beyond functionality.

The room was genuinely cleared.

"This is just weird," Sorun muttered under his breath as he and Shadow both relaxed at sensing a lack of danger. "We're just gonna get it for free? I'm not complaining, but still."

"Hm..." While Sorun began to approach the Chaos Emerald, Shadow had stopped when he felt his foot impact something. He looked down in interest and bent down to grab an object that lied at his feet. He picked it up to examine it, but to his visible disappointment it was just an ordinary duffel bag.

With a huff, he discarded the bag by dropping it back onto the ground. He then turned towards Sorun, who was standing in front of the Emerald. Just staring at it, with an unreadable expression on his face. It carried on long enough that Shadow decided to speak his name up.

"Sorun?"

"Kind of weird it's another blue one, huh?" Sorun asked. He'd found his own voice to grow quieter at the sight of it, of its bright blue glow. A glow that promised an end for him.

This was it. Once he reached his hand out an absorbed the Emerald... that was it. It'd be over for him soon after. How soon he didn't know exactly, but he didn't imagine he'd make it to see the end of the day. Something inside him just made him feel this.

Oddly, he felt a bit victorious. He never thought he'd even make it this far to get to the final Emerald. He figured a robot would have

taken him out at some point before he got here. And admittedly, he did almost die at various points, but... here he was. Plain old Sorun, who managed to fight all the way to this point, all to give everything up to have one last shot at Dr. Eggman. His heart couldn't help but ache terribly at the thought of what was to come. A great pain that was, oddly enough, mixed with a bit of accomplishment.

"Kind of feels like I just got the last achievement or trophy or whatever in a video game," Sorun thought to himself as he gazed unblinkingly at the Emerald. *"Just... wish it didn't have to hurt so much..."*

"What color?"

"Huh?" Blinking his eye, Sorun turned back to Shadow, who was looking at him expectantly. "What?"

"What color did you expect the last Chaos Emerald to be?" Shadow reiterated.

"Oh. I don't know. Orange, I guess. But this rounds out the colors well enough, too."

A beat passed as the two stared at each other in uncomfortable silence.

"... Well? Aren't you going to absorb it?" Shadow asked.

"... Yeah. Gimme a sec." With a deep breath, Sorun turned back around to the Emerald. The final Chaos Emerald. He slowly exhaled as he brought his flesh and spectral hands up. "C'moooon DT..."

And then, without delaying a moment longer, he placed his hands on the Emerald.

It was the same show as always. Blue sparks of electricity, the Emerald dissolving into pure energy and absorbing through his arm and into his body. He felt nothing at the exchange but a lukewarm

feeling, his hands dropping back to the sides once the Emerald vanished.

He felt the change seconds after.

Shadow saw it from where he stood. The chin-length black hair adorning Sorun's head began to change. It began to grow lighter and lighter from the hair tips all the way to the roots, like dark ash or ink was being washed out of it by some invisible force. In mere seconds Sorun's purely black hair had changed to hair that was as white as pure snow. It was an appearance that otherwise looked out of place on Sorun's youthful face.

"Oh. Oh, wow." Sorun held his right, spectral hand up to his face. The Bringer Claw had disappeared. In its place was different spectral arm. A blue arm that was much more dim and transparent, but was shaped exactly like his flesh and blood arm used to be, and was adorned with swirling, ripple-like patterns. The arm began to brighten in intensity until it glowed a solid blue, and as Sorun watched with a curious eye he saw, *felt* even, something grow from his shoulder all the way to his fingertips over the glowing arm to replace it.

And then, in less than a tenth of a second, it was just there. His normal right arm. It'd regenerated so fast it almost hadn't grown so much as instantly appear. His true, pale right arm. He flexed it, feeling with great satisfaction the pressure of his tendons extending, the feeling of blood rushing through the veins of his new limb.

"Oh, sure, *now* you give me the ultra high-speed regeneration," Sorun grumbled under his breath. He looked to the side towards Shadow, who was giving him a wide-eyed, surprised look. "Pretty neat, huh? It's not Devil Trigger, but I'll take a Devil's Body any day of the week."

"What exactly has happened to you?" Shadow asked, his voice having trailed off as he stared at Sorun's regenerated arm.

"I guess the Emerald gave me Dante and Vergil's freaky human/devil hybrid biology. Or some emulation of it at least. Did it really have to go all-out with the white hair, though?" he mumbled as he flicked away one of the white locks from his face. "Makes... kind of sense, I guess. I mean, that Enerjak guy was regenerating whole limbs and organs from those cyborg echidna he de-borged just by looking at them. Geez, even you can regenerate, can't you?"

Shadow made a slow nod. "Yes. How are you feeling?"

"To be honest? I don't think I've ever felt any better, actually." He wasn't even exaggerating when he said that. The feeling he had throughout his entire body was nothing short of incredible. It was like experiencing the energized, good feeling of waking up from a good nap and having shed off hundreds of pounds of weight at once all rolled into one feeling, perpetually felt through Sorun's body. He just felt so... light. Free. Powerful. It was intoxicating to the point he made a small laugh. "Yeah, this feels amazing," he commented as he reached his new right arm up.

His fingers grasped around the eyepatch covering his right eye and ripped it away. The long, ugly scar running through his empty right socket was revealed, only for blue energy to then run through the scar. Almost instantaneously, the scar thinned, and then disappeared completely to leave Sorun's face unblemished of any scars. And then his right eye opened to reveal a perfectly functioning blue eye.

"Oh, man, I almost forgot what depth perception felt like," Sorun gasped out in wonder, blinking both of his eyes as he looked around the room. "Christ, Shadow, is this what you feel like all the time? Just straight health?"

"I don't... exactly know..." Shadow found himself at a loss for words as he watched Sorun crouch down a few times, and then spring up straight and hop on his feet, laughing lightly all the while. "I take it this is good?"

"Yeah, yeah it's- oh, wait, what the...?" He paused, a look of confusion crossing his face. He opened his mouth and stuck his fingers inside, and then made a strangled sound of surprise as he took his fingers out. "Oh, wow, that one tooth I lost a few years ago when me and the guys tried playing tetherball with a bowling ball grew back."

Shadow heavily blinked, the mystified look on his face refusing to leave. "What...?"

Sorun seemed to ignore him completely, instead choosing to look down towards his midsection. "This is really great. Like, like this just feels really- MAN I'M CUT!"

In the process of examining himself Sorun had reached down and pulled the black shirt under his white coat up to examine his torso. He'd been pleased to find all the scars created when he'd been hit by all that shrapnel in the fight against Eggman had vanished completely. He was beyond pleased to find that where there had once been a flat but fairly unimpressive stomach was now a muscular abdomen with a six-pack.

It wasn't just his abdomen, either, now that he more closely examined his body. It was almost like his entire musculature system was redone completely, or that what had already been there was so improved by whatever the Chaos Emerald had done to his body it may as well have been different. He'd gone from having a below-average build to having what may as well have been a build reserved for the peak of humanity. Still thin, but muscular. Lean.

God *damn* , he looked good.

"I would have given up literally any power to have gotten this one first before anything else," Sorun said to himself as he lowered the shirt. "Why did the best one have to be saved for last? Seriously, look at this!"

The white-haired Earthling walked over to one of the dead Egg Pawns lying on the ground near him. He'd crouched down, and then picked the robot's body up above his head. Effortlessly. With a single hand. He didn't even feel any strain from holding it up the body felt so light to Sorun. He made a small scoff and then lightly tossed it. And evidently that was still too much power, as he ended up accidentally tossing the robot body all the way across the room.

It was a healing ability and strength that was completely foreign to Sorun. Something that felt so out of place but at the same time so right. Even when he punched outwards to experiment with his speed he couldn't help but be surprised. His punch was one with such speed his arm was little more than a blur that slightly distorted the air around it when he punched forwards. He did it over and over, admiring the black speed lines that appeared alongside his punches.

This was the one thing he wanted above all else. It wasn't Devil Trigger, but it was the next best thing. Physical ability on par with a Mobian. Far above, even, if these results said anything.

"I take it you're satisfied?" Sorun quit punching the air and turned towards Shadow. He'd managed to get over his initial surprise, and had approached closer to Sorun. He'd crossed his arms while his crimson eyes had given Sorun an appraising look, and just barely there was a hint of an amused smirk on the corner of his lips.

"Satisfied doesn't come close," Sorun told him. "It's-"

He was interrupted with a cough. Multiple, consecutive coughs that sounded much more severe than they should have been. Or maybe they sounded just right, seeing as every single cough was accentuated by blood being coughed out from Sorun and splattering against the ground. Shadow had been so surprised by the sight he'd stepped back in shock, the smirk dropping right off him as he looked down at the blood. Sorun, at least, had stopped coughing after a bit. His face had fallen into a stony expression as he gazed at the blood on the floor, followed by him sighing.

The good feeling he got from his white-haired body was all but gone. Dropped in an instant by the cruel reminder he wouldn't be able to enjoy this new physique of his for long. He wouldn't be able to enjoy anything for long. That Chaos Emerald was the last one. He didn't have much longer left. All he had left in place of all the joy from earlier was an empty, sad feeling.

"Way to kill the mood. Hm?" He felt something tingle on his throat. It was a strong enough sensation that he lifted his fingers up to feel at his throat, only to recoil them away when he felt something lift up off of it. He watched as a small vapor cloud of purple energy floated up to his face, and then quickly dissipated right in front of him. The tingling in his throat disappeared soon after.

He knew instantly what that cloud had been.

"You choose now of all times to remove it? So, what, I can get the truth out to somebody so they know why I'm about to keel over? 'Cause nobody can stop me at this point?" Sorun bitterly thought to himself. *"Fuck you, Aurora."*

"Sorun?" Hearing his name get called out made Sorun straighten up. He turned towards Shadow, who looked to him in concern. "What's going on?"

"Well... there's an important detail nobody but me ever knew about absorbing these Chaos Emeralds, Shadow." He decided to just come out and say it. For simplicity's sake and for the sake of time, which he was running out of. A large part of him felt scared for doing so. A larger part told the other part it didn't have time to worry. "There's a reason I was so resistant to you back then when you tried forcing that red Chaos Emerald on me." He glanced back to the pedestal the Emerald had sat on, and then looked back at Shadow. "These things are killing me. I'm gonna die pretty soon here."

There'd been little to no emotion in Sorun's voice when he said it. It came out as quiet and low, and slightly cracked, and all he could manage to do was stare impassively at the dark hedgehog standing

in front of him. For his part, Shadow had denial flicker across his face. Not shocked disbelief. Pure denial, like he just didn't believe Sorun's words. He shook his head and looked down, appearing more confused than anything else.

"No. No, that doesn't... that doesn't make any sense." He looked back up at Sorun. Not upset. Just confused. "Chaos energy doesn't work that way. An overabundance of it can't *harm* you, Sorun."

"Humans like me can't handle Chaos energy," Sorun hollowly replied. "No Chaos Force link. Remember?"

Now the understanding was beginning to show. The denial Shadow had was beginning to fade away while realization slowly set in. "No, you're... that isn't true..."

"It happened right after the first one. While I was unconscious." Sorun turned away from the Mobian. "I don't know if you've ever heard of them, but Aurora and Athair are the ones that laid it all out for me. They're these, uh... ghosts, I guess, real close to the Chaos Force. Knuckles knows them, talked to 'em before. Ask him about them when you get a chance. Pulled me in a vision, said each Emerald would take years off my life since my species just didn't evolve to use this Chaos stuff." He turned his head back to Shadow. "I-"

Sorun's words were cut off when a gloved fist hit him square in the center of his face.

The unfortunate aspect of having a regeneration ability now was that his pain receptors weren't fried anymore. He still had an unusually high pain tolerance even among his fellow humans back on Earth, and it seemed that this body made him somewhat further resistant to pain seeing as being punched hard enough to get sent flying across the room and into a wall hadn't resulted him feeling the worst pain imaginable. It still hurt a lot once his back slammed into the wall, resulting in him sliding down into a slumped sitting position.

"Pretty sure he broke my entire face with that punch," Sorun thought with a sigh. By the time he began thinking the bones and muscles in his head had already healed. *"Man, what the f-"*

His thoughts ended when Shadow appeared right in front of him. His hand shot downwards and snatched onto the collar of Sorun's shirt, after which he was hauled upwards so his face was directly in front of Shadow's. He was about to say something, but Sorun's words died on his lips when he saw the state that half-alien hedgehog was in. A strange combination of his mouth being in an angry snarl while his eyes looked like he was in despair.

"Why wouldn't you tell us!?" a distressed Shadow screamed at him. Sorun had found himself so taken back by how distraught he sounded he couldn't help but go limp in his grasp. "You fool... you idiot, why!?" he screamed out again as he roughly shook Sorun.

"I couldn't," Sorun quietly said. "Aurora used her powers to put some... curse thing on me. That purple thing you saw earlier. Every time I tried telling someone my heart stopped."

"That's why...?" A look of realization came over Shadow's face, and he became so shocked he'd inadvertently dropped Sorun back on the ground. "That's why you acted like that... you, you kept pausing-"

"Yeah, you kept making my heart stop with the questions," Sorun groaned as he sat back up. Shadow, meanwhile, had bowed his head while he rubbed a hand over the side of his face.

"Why wouldn't you just remove it with your sword?" Shadow asked him.

At that, Sorun made a hollow chuckle. "You have no idea how much it hurts knowing you figured that out in seconds when it took me three and a half months-"

" *Stupid* !" Shadow lashed out again, this time punching the wall next to Sorun's head hard enough that the metal wall heavily dented.

Sorun, who didn't even flinch from the hit right next to his head, glanced at the fist before turning his eyes to Shadow who was heavily breathing.

"Shadow, by the time I figured out I could it was way too late. I already had six in me." He looked down at the floor. "Besides, Athair and Aurora, they... they have this limited ability to see into the future. They didn't imply it was very exact or clear, but they had a bit of foresight. They said if I didn't collect Emeralds to get as much power as possible to take Eggman out he'd win. Flat out. They envisioned a future where he won if I didn't do anything." Shadow's breathing calmed down slightly as he listened to Sorun. "The future where I went ahead with it wasn't certain, but it was better than certain doom at Eggman's hand." Sorun shook his head. "I-I couldn't do it, Shadow, I... I tried, I tried running away because I didn't want to die, but I just. Couldn't. Do it. I didn't want the planet to turn into some smog-filled wasteland. I didn't want everybody to die, to see a future where all the Freedom Fighters and my friends get captured, have unspeakable things done with them, get executed, I... I couldn't bear the thought, Shadow." He pressed his palm on the floor and slowly picked himself up to his feet. "I don't want to die. I really don't. But I wanted that future to happen even less. So I decided to go through with it. Even if I knew I could have used the Yamato to remove the curse I probably wouldn't have. I was that desperate to ensure that future wouldn't come to pass that I just went along with it even though it's been eating at me every single day since."

He picked his head up to look at Shadow. He had such a pitiful look on his face that all Shadow could do was silently stare at Sorun.

"I... I'm so messed up, Shadow, but I just don't have time to tell you everything," Sorun mumbled out.

"Just take them out," Shadow tried in an uncharacteristically small voice. "You can separate things with your sword, so why-?"

"Tried. Didn't work."

"But-but your regeneration, can't it-?"

"It appears that isn't so." Shaking his head, Sorun began to slowly walk past Shadow. "Even Vergil had a limit to his regenerative abilities, and since the powers are tied to my heart and how I interpret the powers from the games, the limits I know of are imposed on me. Years of constant fighting cumulated in so much damage that his body was falling apart faster than his ultra high-speed regeneration could fix him." He held his hand up to examine it. "I'm not literally flaking apart into pieces, at least, but the end result will still be the same. The regeneration can heal everything, but it can only go so far. My stamina is high - likely much higher than humanly possible - but no matter how absurdly high it is, even with this body there's still a limit. I can't go forever." The white-haired human turned to the black-furred hedgehog. "That is why... we really must be going. I don't have much more time left, you see."

"..." A look of pure confliction settled on Shadow's face, overtop the distraught look. He tried to say something to Sorun multiple times, but looked so lost that he wasn't able to form words. Eventually, he seemed to come to a decision, and then shook his head at Sorun. "No."

Sorun's shoulders slumped as his hand fell. "Shadow..."

"You're not wasting any more energy by fighting." His shoulder roughly brushed past Sorun's shoulder as he quickly stomped away. "You're staying right here until I get you help."

"There's no helping this-"

Shadow whirled around at Sorun. The angry snarl returned to his face. "I'm not letting you die!" he screamed at him. Sorun was frozen to the spot, while Shadow heavily breathed out from having raised his voice. "I don't want to lose you, too," he'd whispered under his breath, almost too quietly for Sorun to hear, before turning back around. "You're not fighting, and that's final. You're going to stay and rest until somebody figures something out-"

"Shadow, I beg of you!" Sorun had shot forwards and gripped Shadow by the wrist, stopping the hedgehog in his tracks. He turned his head back around to yell at Sorun again, but stopped when he saw the pleading look on the human's face. "This is my final request," Sorun continued in a soft voice. "Nothing can be done to save me. And if I'm to die, I want it to at least mean something. I don't want my friends to be hurt, and believe it or not that includes you. So before I die, I want to drag Eggman down to hell with me."

"... If your soul is bound to wind up anywhere, it wouldn't be there." With a resigned look, Shadow pulled his wrist free from Sorun's grasp. "We'll go."

Sorun blinked in surprise. He stared silently at Shadow for some seconds, and then turned away from him at the same time Yamato appeared in his grasp. A blue cross was quickly cut into the air in front of him, following which it folded inwards into a portal.

Once the portal was opened, Sorun sheathed the katana back into the scabbard held in his left hand. He waited a moment, and then turned his head halfway so one of his eyes met Shadow's eyes. "Thank you, Shadow," he said. "I don't think I'll have time to explain to the others, so... do me one last favor and tell them for me, will you?"

"... Tsk. You have a lot of final favors, Sorun." Whether he was being sarcastic or not was unclear to Sorun due to the low, downcast tone Shadow had adopted. Sorun made no outward reaction, and then turned to the portal.

"Sorry for asking so much." He began stepping forwards. "Come on."

Without another word, the two of them silently walked through the portal.

The scene on the other side of the portal may as well have been a war zone from what Sorun saw.

It was a somewhat familiar sight. Like he was standing near the end of a giant, floating aircraft carrier's runway, with clear, blue sky all around. In fact he was fairly certain this was the exact same model of ship as the one he, Sonic, and Tails had acquired the first Chaos Emerald from, all the way back then. Might've even been the same specific ship, really, though there was no knowing how many of the same types of ship Eggman had built before Enerjak destroyed most of them.

The runway was littered in the bodies of Badniks of various types, too. When Sorun looked to his right he saw everybody just to the side of him and Shadow. Both the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix, all huddled up into a singular group and fending off any robots that came their way. Some must have noticed their arrival, as quite a few pairs of eyes had turned over to look at them.

And then Sorun got impaled through the chest when he heard heavy footfalls. He'd managed to turn his head just in time to see the red Egg Pawn that had rammed its lance through him.

"... Fucking ow." He hadn't made any sound in response to the impalement, or to the Badnik still running forwards and carrying Sorun along with his body hanging off the lance held in the robot's hands. He just continued to stare down at the lance carrying him with curious eyes. *"Wow, this hurts, but... oddly enough not as much as I thought it would. This body's weird."*

It still felt like a giant, sharp, metal object pushed in through his chest and out his back, which in of itself was excruciating, but it wasn't an overwhelming type of pain. He found it curious.

He'd made it all the way to right in front of the group of Mobian before he felt another burst of pain on his left shoulder when an Egg Pawn from behind lanced through his shoulder, stopping his momentum. It didn't even stop there when a third and final Egg Pawn ran up from the side and ran its lance all the way through Sorun's right thigh.

All the sounds of fighting that had been going on all around went silent. Everybody, even the surrounding Badniks, had gone completely still as everybody present looked towards the skewered human standing in front of the Freedom Fighters. Sorun himself had turned his head towards the group, his face remaining impassive when he saw everybody staring at him with wide, horrified eyes.

And then he looked ahead and downwards at the lance impaling him and made an annoyed sound. "I just got this coat."

His palm shot outwards and hit the face of the Badnik standing in front of him that'd impaled his chest. Much to the surprise of everybody staring, its face had crumpled in and its body had been sent flying back a good twenty meters before sliding to a stop. The other two Egg Pawns impaling Sorun silently turned their heads towards the Badnik that had been knocked so far back, with another dying when Sorun's hand grabbed its mechanical head and crushed it completely in his grasp.

"I freakin' swear, that crazy cat'd kill me if I wasn't already dying if she saw this," Sorun grumpily thought to himself. He turned around and began to approach the Freedom Fighters, having removed and tossed away the lance in his leg in the process. The final Egg Pawn, the one holding onto the lance stuck into his shoulder, was dragged right behind Sorun as it maintained its hold on its lance. Sorun briefly paused, reached behind him, and then grasped the lance only to pull it out of his shoulder. And then he threw the lance, the Badnik skirting away after losing losing its hold on the lance, and then fell onto its back.

It hadn't been able to get up before Sorun tore the lance out of his chest and threw it with enough force that it buried itself all the way to the hilt in the robot's midsection. Its lights dimmed immediately after.

"Ahhh..." With a satisfied sigh, he ran a hand through his white hair, and then turned around to the Mobians behind him. He found it a positive they didn't look horrified anymore. More bewildered than anything else. He turned his head to the front of the pack, where he

saw Sally standing closer to him than anybody else. She had the same deer-caught-in-headlights look that the rest of the Freedom Fighters and Chaotix had. "We're not too late, are we?" Sorun asked her in a bland tone.

"Um... no, you're a bit earlier than expected, actually..." She said. Sally then quickly cleared her to regain her composure as she looked Sorun in the eyes after forcing herself to look up from the hole in his chest that had sealed itself. "Are you okay? You just, um... got stabbed."

"Yeah, 'cause guess who got a sweet new regeneration power from the last Emerald?" He waved his regenerated right arm at the group, and then pointed at his right eye. "Do you *see* the point?"

There had been the beginnings of smiles that began to spread around to everybody when they saw Sorun's condition. And then he'd made the pun, and all the growing smiles dropped right down to flat looks all around, all directed at Sorun. Flat stares and an awkward silence that made Sorun unconsciously shuffle his feet as he began to regret what he'd said.

"... Ohhh, I get it! Eet iz because he iz having both of ze eyeballs now-!"

Somebody punched Antoine's arm. He shut up with a startled yelp.

"This is why I don't do puns," Sorun groaned to himself as a scowling Shadow walked to his side. "Alright, bottom line, thank you for the concern but I am quite literally better than ever."

"Are you sure there isn't anything *else* worth mentioning?" Shadow asked. Sorun turned to him to see the dark hedgehog's eyes boring into his own. "Something vitally important?"

Sorun shrugged. "Eh, it can wait. No need to distract anybody right now. 'Sides, it ain't all that important."

Shadow blinked, giving Sorun a look like he'd just been slapped across the face. "Not important...?" he'd repeated in a quiet voice. If Sorun's vision wasn't so good right now he would have thought he'd hallucinated seeing Shadow actually look hurt for a second there. But he'd dropped that look immediately, going back to his normal scowl as he turned to the side towards Sally, who was looking back and forth between them with an odd look. "I noticed not everybody's here," he said.

"Well, Rotor's flying around in the Special to draw this ship's attention-" Sally began, though was cut off when Shadow held his hand up.

"No, I mean Rouge," he clarified. "Did she not show up?"

Sally shook her head. "We haven't seen her or heard any word from her."

A look of surprise flashed across Shadow's face. "That isn't right..."

"Maybe she got lost. No helping it now." Sorun nodded his head behind him as he turned around. "We still got all that to deal with."

The runway on the ship was still filled with robots that were all staring at the massive group. Sorun was less focused on them and more on the giant ship behind them all that the runway was attached to. He stared with loathsome eyes at the robots blocking the way as Yamato appeared in his hands.

"Useless pests." Slowly, he began to draw the sword from the scabbard. "Serious question. Eggman on the ship somewhere?" Sorun asked as he turned his head to Sally.

His eyebrows rose a bit when he saw her nod. "As far as we can figure, yes. He taunted all of us through the ship's loudspeaker a bit before you got here."

"Sounds like him." Just when the sword was fully removed, Sorun heard a zipping sound right next to him. He glanced to the side just enough to see Sonic looking at him with a half-exhausted, half-relieved look.

"Man, Sorun, why do you gotta act so scary all the time?" he asked with a loud sigh. "I know you can heal now and everything, but do you really have to go and get stuck like that? Doesn't it hurt?"

"Ehhhhh I pretty much just ignore it," Sorun lightly replied.

Sonic sighed and shook his head. "You really do have a high pain tolerance, huh?" He looked past Sorun and at Sally. "So what are we doing here?"

"I was thinking..."

The rest of what Sally was saying was tuned out by Sorun as he continued to stare ahead. A slight scowl formed on his face at the sight of all the robots. The incredibly weak robots, at least compared to how strong he was now. Robots that only served to stall him and waste more of his time. *"Maybe during all the fighting I can pull time stop and slip past 'em all. Most of the forces are probably out here, so the inside should be relatively clear. Even if it isn't, well... doesn't really matter now, does it?"* His grip tightened around Yamato's handle. *"No matter what, I need to get to him before I run out of time."*

"Alright, so we're just gonna blast our way forwards?" Sonic's voice drew Sorun's attention, causing him to glance towards the hedgehog again as he continued talking to Sally. "Kinda a blunt plan for you, isn't it?"

"Well, we don't really have a lot of choices right now, do we?" she countered as she nodded to the horde of robots all in front of them. "It's all in or bust at this point. Our only option's to push onwards."

"So we're going with charging forwards with reckless abandon?" Sorun asked. "Yeah, sure, I can get behind that."

Without another word, he Tricked right in front of the closest Egg Pawn.

"Alright, let's see if I can actually get this to work..." He knew early on trying to mimic the movements and sword techniques of a video game character was fruitless. Not because he didn't know the moves. He knew them intrinsically from burning every frame of their animations into his memory just to get through those games on all the highest difficulties, to visualize the hitboxes. Sorun knew the movements perfectly. The problem was at the time he wasn't a video game character like Vergil and just didn't have the supernatural hand-eye coordination or dexterity to pull Dark Slayer style off. So he'd had to rely on more conventional, basic swordplay to effectively use the katana he used.

With this body, that logic wasn't so applicable anymore.

It'd... half worked, somewhat, when he tried. The execution was flawless. Sorun had jumped in the air while spinning around with his sword at the same time, hitting the Egg Pawn and lifting it into the air right in front of him while doing so. The issue came in that he was still using a magical katana that cut through everything, and the Egg Pawn wasn't a video game enemy. So when it rose high up in the air along with Sorun, it fell away in two halves as a dropping Sorun watched them fall with a somewhat disappointed look.

"... Why do I even try anymore?" He mentally sighed at himself, and then Tricked in front of a whole group of Badniks. He'd appeared in a low stance, sheathed katana in his left hand with his right hovering over the handle. He grabbed it, pulled the sword out in a single slash, and then pushed it back into the scabbard only to pull it out again. Over and over he'd rapidly pull the blade in and out of the sheath, unleashing countless slashes the robots and rending them to pieces in a blink of an eye. *"This new body really is too great."*

He slashed out one more time with enough force that Sorun's body slid forwards, behind the robots. He spun the sword around in his hand, and at the exact moment he'd slammed the sword back into its scabbard the robots fell apart into pieces. He spun on his feet and dashed forwards in a straight line, rapidly slashing at anything in his way before abruptly stopping and sliding on his feet until his momentum gave out. Again, he spun around and sheathed his sword, causing white sparks to fly out where the bottom of the sword met the scabbard. And again, a handful of robots became undone by his sword.

"Okay yeah, no, they're just way too weak for me now." He looked backwards, past all the robot corpses he'd just made. Both the Chaotix and Freedom Fighters were holding their own against the robots attacking them. And faring fairly well, too, seeing as the Badnik numbers were dropping while the Mobians looked to be just getting started. *"Screw it, they can handle themselves and I'm just wasting my time with the basic fodder. I'm cutting my way to the final boss."*

If things were different, and he wasn't so limited on time, he would have stayed with them. Maybe showed off a bit more in front of some people just to try and milk some praise out of it, maybe even try and wow Antoine with the sword skills he could use now. He doubted anybody even saw him do any of what he just did since they were all so preoccupied fighting. He didn't even have enough time to stop and appreciate just how strong he'd become now to consider killer robots he'd once feared as mere fodder. Annoyances to be cut down without a thought.

He didn't even have enough time to think about how much of a shame it was.

To that end, he'd used Quicksilver to stop time completely. He sprinted past all the frozen robots at speeds he was sure normal human senses would have grown nauseous over, and in a time so short he could scarcely comprehend it Sorun had made it all the way to the front of the ship the runway was connected to, at the back of

the Badnik horde. He barely held back the scoff that formed on his lips before he turned around and cut an entrance into the ship.

He heard a peculiar sound just as the hole was made by the cut. A loud spinning sound mixed in with the sound of countless robots behind Sorun being shredded. He turned around, shocked to see a blue form spinning through dozens and dozens and dozens of robots as it span through the air right towards Sorun. In the span of what Sorun counted to be one or two seconds Sonic alone had cut through what was probably around a hundred Badniks of various types before stopping on his feet right in front of Sorun. He didn't look the least bit worst for wear. He was even smirking at Sorun.

"Hey, man, what's the hurry?" Sonic asked a wide-eyed Sorun in a carefree voice. "Fight's back there."

"Hhh..." Getting over his shock quickly, Sorun nodded his head at the entrance into the ship he cut in. "Everybody out here has things handled. I figured I'd take a shot at the big man while a majority of the robots out here are distracted."

"Yeah, I kind of figured you'd go and pull a move like that," Sonic commented, yet again making some surprise grow in Sorun. He was surprised for a third time when Sonic glanced over his shoulder, shrugged, and looked back at Sorun. "I guess you got a point," he admitted. "No way a bunch of two-bit bots are gonna get the better of all of them, especially when they're together like that." He gave Sorun an even bigger, almost competitive smirk. "You got a whole lot more than just healing and a new hairdo out of that Emerald, huh? I saw those moves back there."

Sorun perked up a bit in silent pride. "Maaaybe," he evasively answered in a coy tone. "Were they a bit too fast for you to make out?"

Sonic rolled his eyes. "You're pretty fast now, but you ain't that fast," he said. "Seriously, though, what's with the hair?"

"It turned white on its own, I don't know, is this really the time?"

"I guess not. I swear, those Emeralds give you the weirdest stuff..." Sonic clicked his tongue and pointed a finger gun at Sorun. "I think it's a neat look for ya, actually. I bet Nicole'll really like it!"

Sorun's entire body flinched. He deeply frowned at the reminder of her, and then turned his head away from Sonic. "Why did you have to go bring her up?" he quietly asked.

"Ahh, no reason. Just teasin'." Sonic stepped forwards a bit so he was at Sorun's side, his green eyes staring at the hole in the ship. "Anyways, if you're heading directly towards Egghead himself I may as well join in. Everybody else has our backs covered. Sound good?"

No, it assuredly did not sound good. Sorun didn't want anybody getting in his way of killing Eggman, and Sonic already proved he was somebody that would actively get in the way of him doing just that. But unfortunately, saying no to something as sensible as Sonic's suggestion without a good reason wouldn't deter him with going ahead with accompanying Sorun anyways. And try as he might, Sorun couldn't think of a good reason to get Sonic to stay behind.

And so, with a sigh, Sorun nodded his head. "Fine. Just don't slow me down."

"Hah! All that new power the Chaos Emerald gave you is going to your head a bit, isn't it?" With a laugh, Sonic began walking towards the hole in the ship. "Well, come on, Sorun! Let's do it to it!"

The words he'd heard elicited an almost pained groan from Sorun. He stared after Sonic's spiky backside, and his face wrinkled in an unpleasant way at the hedgehog's phrase. "I'm almost glad I'm dying just so I never have to hear that again," he quietly muttered under his breath as he began following after Sonic.

There were all sorts of humbling experiences Sorun had experienced in life. Humbling experiences that served educational purposes he begrudgingly accepted. Seeing Mobians in the Freedom Fighters that displayed abilities far above his own, at least months ago, had always made some hopeless pit form in Sorun's stomach at seeing just how generally better or smarter or more powerful everyone around him was and how he was basically nothing compared to them.

Things like being beaten at video games by Nicole was humbling in that it was exciting. She was his only equal there in that area. The only person that could challenge him and make him really enjoy his favorite pastime. The constant back-and-forth between them was exhilerating. But everything he did with her was exciting, so he didn't know if that counted.

Then there was this. Seeing Sonic cut through swarms of Badniks as he and Sorun pushed deeper into the ship. If they bothered to keep track of the numbers, Sonic would be far ahead of Sorun in terms of the sheer number of robots he'd dismantled. Even before that, on the runway on top of the ship when Sonic had blown through a hundred robots in the blink of an eye Sorun had begun wondering.

"I always knew he was powerful. Still though..." He'd known all the way back when he'd watched Sonic cut through anti-air guns probably thirty or fifty times his own size like they were nothing while Sorun watched from the safety of a circling plane. He knew when he fought with him at that factory that Sonic was a lot more powerful than he acted. That little display of Sonic's on that runway, though, with all those Badniks. Even now, as the two made their way through the interior of the ship, with Sorun merely lazily slashing away at the odd robot while Sonic effortlessly blitzed through the rest. Even with his newfound speed it seemed to Sorun like Sonic was just making a light jog to keep up with him and destroy all the robots in their way.

"Just how strong is Sonic really?"

"Kinda feelin' like you're slacking here, Sorun!" Sonic called out as he spun through yet again another robot. He landed on the ground already matching Sorun's pace as they ran through the metal halls. "And here I figured you'd wanna show off your new powers a bit more!"

He did, once. Until Sonic started showing off. And the knowledge of the time limit he was on in the back of his mind was still keeping Sorun down. "I think I showed off enough," he replied in a terse voice.

"Why you gotta be so serious? We're doing great," Sonic boasted. "'Sides, we've cleared out so much of this place I doubt there's much else left."

"You say that now..." Sorun muttered in response. They were coming up on another large door, one of many that had been blocking their path forwards deeper into the ship. Like the previous doors, this one had been swiftly cut through by Sorun's Yamato.

The two of teens had slowed down to a small walk, and then stopped completely when they came to the next room. Massive. Spacious. Circular. The kind of room Sorun had grown accustomed to Eggman using whenever he wanted to throw something big at someone, which made his shoulders slump a bit. The fact there was a giant TV monitor hanging on the other end of the room did nothing to curb his suspicions.

And just like clockwork, the TV flickered to life. It went through some static at first, and then switched to a broadcast of Eggman. Nothing surprising there. Sorun focused less on the man himself and more on seeing as much of the background behind Eggman as much as possible. He was pleased to find that most of the metal interior he saw greatly resembled what he and Sonic had seen as they ran through the ship. He most assuredly was somewhere close.

"Well, if it isn't Sonic and... Sorun?" Hearing his voice drew the white-haired Earthling's attention towards the screen. Eggman, oddly

enough, looked a bit confused as seeing Sorun standing next to Sonic. "What are you... wait, did you- did you dye your hair?" He leaned closer to the monitor and readjusted his blue-tinted spectacles. "I-I'm confused, what's going on here?"

Sorun blinked. He didn't know what to expect out of him, but that kind of reaction hadn't been one he'd ever dream of. Him being clueless as to why Sorun was standing there. What had he expected after having just left the Emerald there for him to grab?

"It's from the last Chaos Emerald," Sorun announced to him in a slow voice. "The one you so graciously left for me in that storage facility."

"... No?" The explanation for some reason only served to make Eggman even more confused. "I'm, uh... I'm pretty sure that was a fake signal I set up. There wasn't a Chaos Emerald there. Just a trap." A beat passed. "How did you get past my trap?"

It was Sorun's turn to look confused. "There was no trap."

"Come again?"

"There was no trap."

His lips thinning, Eggman tapped at the side of the monitor at something. The microphone, Sorun assumed, from the small booming sound that came from the monitor's speaker. "Err, Sorun, I don't think the audio receptors here are picking up the sound right. Finicky things, you know how it is. Could you speak up louder?"

"Eggman, there wasn't a trap," Sorun called up in a slightly louder voice. "There were a bunch of busted-up robots, but no trap. The Chaos Emerald was just sitting there waiting for me. I'd thank you for just giving it to me freely, but... well, I'm starting to think that wasn't your intention."

"But that doesn't make any-!" Eggman cut himself off at the same time his entire body went rigid in realization. "Oh, that interloper..."

He'd venomously hissed out. There'd been so much spite that seemed to be running through him that he'd even went as far as to bang his fist on something nearby.

Sorun blinked again and tilted his head. *"Does he know the Emeralds are... no, that's impossible, and it doesn't explain the dead robots. What does he mean by interloper?"* he thought. Sonic, meanwhile, had placed his hands on his hips and began to impatiently tap his foot on the ground at a rapid pace as he glared up at the TV screen.

"Save it for somebody who cares, Doc," Sonic called up. "Come on, we all know the drill at this point. Show us the big, bad new Badnik you cooked up so we can whoop its butt and move on to you."

"You obstinate... ergh, fine. Have it your way." Eggman extended his finger and reached out to press a button that was outside the viewing of the screen the two teens were watching. "We'll see just how far that attitude of yours will carry you when you get a look at my newest creation!"

A loud whirring sound reached the ears of both Sonic and Sorun. They looked up towards the ceiling, bored expressions plastering both their faces, as a large aperture in the ceiling began to open up. No sooner did it finish opening did something large drop in from the new hole in the ceiling, and then land on the ground in the center of the room with enough force that the ground underneath the teens' feet shook slightly. They both continued to watch with bored, unimpressed faces as the new Badnik in front of them began to slowly stand up.

"It's gonna take a lot more than some quick footwork and a new hairstyle to take this one down, boys." It was a much sleeker robot than most of the other ones of Eggman's make that Sorun had encountered. A thin, bipedal form with sleek, nearly seamless silver plating. A thin torso and limbs, and a head that was actually shaped like a head and featureless save for two round, red sensors for its eyes. Its left hand, both of which sported pointed, metal fingers, was

empty. In the right one, which earned an eye raise form Sorun, was a katana. A gigantic, thick katana whose blade length looked more than twice as long as Sorun's whole body. "I've taken to call this one the Egg Ninja."

"Egg Ninja, huh?" Sorun looked down at the katana held in his right hand, scoffed, and then looked up at the giant Badnik four times his size standing in the center of the room. Both he and Sonic slowly began to walk towards it side by side, with Sorun raising his left hand and slowly wagging his finger left and right at the robot. "You should come to realize that copying my weapon will serve you no good."

"A cheap imitation ain't gonna get ya anywhere, Eggman," Sonic added. "Just give it up now so we can save everyone some time and go home."

"We'll just have to see about that, won't we?" Eggman snarked back at them. "Egg Ninja! Attack them!"

The large Badnik, practically skeletal from how it was constructed, swiveled its head down to look directly at the two teens that stopped right in front of it. For a brief second, red light flared out from its round, red eye-sensors, and soon after it had rose up its huge, broad katana. Sorun rose his eyes up to lazily follow the machine's movements, and right as the katana was risen far above its head, it swung down towards Sorun in particular.

Slow. It was the only word he could use to describe how slowly the edge of the large katana was bearing down on him. Not that the machine itself was slow- in fact, Sorun suspected if he was running on normal human reflexes it would have swung too fast for him to react in time, and he would have had to rely on Sonic to save him. But with this new body and its reflexes, the blade was slow to him. Painfully slow, almost. So much that, when its edge had just reached him, all he had to do was lazily hold up his own katana to block the Egg Ninja's.

A loud *clang!* sound resounded throughout the room from the contact of the blades. Sparks flew out from the contact, the force from the strike had blown some of the teen's hair back, and while Sorun's arm and sword were completely still, he could see and even feel the Badnik's arm and sword shake from the effort of keeping the deadlock between them going. For Sorun, all he felt was a moderate amount of pressure pressing down on Yamato. Sonic stood off to the side, arms crossed and mouth in a smirk as he watched the display.

"Not bad for a new haircut, huh?" Sorun muttered out. Blue energy flowed up the length of Yamato, after which Sorun pushed the blade further. It effortlessly cut through the Egg Ninja's katana with such force that the half of the blade that had been cut away flew high and above Sorun and Sonic, spinning end over end through the air before it fell to the ground. Its tip impaled the ground just behind Sorun and Sonic, who stood unflinching as they glanced at each other.

"Alright, alright, not bad," Sonic complimented. "You got the cool factor down pat, the one-liner was on point, and the sharp bit landing behind us was a nice touch. I'll give it a eight outta ten."

Sorun made a half-amused snort. "Such high standards," he drawled out in response. "You wanna finish it off? I can't be bothered to fight a knock-off."

"Yeah, sure thing." Sonic looked back up at the Egg Ninja, which began to back off away from the two. "What was that thing you said once? Spin to win?"

"You got it." There was a blue flash as one of Sorun's Bringer Claws appeared. It opened its hand up to the ceiling and hovered next to Sonic. "You ever hear of a Fastball Special?"

Sonic looked down at the large, blue hand next to him. His smirk grew into a wide grin. "Nope, but I think I can figure it out." He looked up at Sorun. "We throwin'?"

"We throwin'."

A look of complete understanding was passed between the two of them. Without needed any instruction Sonic jumped up into the air and began spinning. His spinning, spherical blue form fell right into the open palm of the Bringer Claw, which began to rear back in preparation. Blue, ethereal sparks began flying to the sides of the palm as Sonic's spines inadvertently ground into the spectral hand holding his spinning form. Sorun paid this little mind, and instead focused on aiming at the center of the Egg Ninja.

Sorun's Bringer Arm threw Sonic soon after.

Even Sorun's newly-enhanced perception couldn't keep up with Sonic as he flew threw the air. It was less his ball-like form collided with the Badnik and more like a straight, blue line had just instantly appeared in the air and punched right through the silver robot's chest. The line went all the way to the back of the room, to the TV that had once displayed Eggman's shocked face before Sonic had made contact and shattered the monitor completely. His body continued to zoom around, his ball-like form trailing a blue speed line behind him as he passed through the Egg Ninja multiple times, separating limbs, its head, and rendering its torso to smaller and smaller pieces.

It'd all taken place in a fraction of the time it took Sorun to blink.

Once he had blinked the robot was already falling to the floor in pieces, with Sonic standing right there in front of Sorun. He looked as smug as ever, and even a bit excited.

"Whoo! We gotta do that one more often!" A light chuckle left Sonic as he made a small hop, stretching his neck left and right while Sorun stared at him. "What'd you call it? Fastball Special? Yeah, yeah I really like it. It's got a real nice ring to it."

"... Your speed's kind of scary, Sonic," Sorun breathed out as he sheathed Yamato. "I'm probably fast enough to catch bullets out of

the air now and I still can barely follow you when you move like that."

"Ah, well, what can I say?" Sonic asked with a wide grin and a shrug. "Speed's my game, and I'm the best player in it."

"You're the kind of person that dumps all their points into dex, aren't you?" A sudden sound reached Sorun's ears and made his head perk up. Metal footsteps on a metal surface. "Mm?" He turned his head around. "Shadow?"

The unexpected appearance of the black and red hedgehog caused surprise on the part of both Sorun and Sonic. Sorun more at seeing that look he had on his face. He looked disturbed and angry at the same time, though he was trying to hide it from the slight strain Sorun saw on his face. He didn't seem to be doing a good job of it, and somewhere deep down he felt a bit guilty at seeing the expression on Shadow's face.

Sonic didn't seem to pick up on it, though, perhaps mistaking it for Shadow's usual dour mood, and chose to wave at the other Mobian. "Yo! Shads! How's everything going outside?"

Somehow, Shadow managed to add a grimace on top of everything else on his face. "Not poorly, but things could be better," he said. "How's the situation in here?"

"Well, Eggman had this shiny-new death bot all ready and waiting for us," Sorun said, right before softly kicked at one of the pieces of the Egg Ninja that'd rolled to his feet. "Wanna say it lasted, like, a minute. And most of that was just Eggman monologuing." He looked back to Shadow. "Probably not much more resistance in here with everything we cut through to get here and all the robots that're outside."

Sorun looked right into Shadow's eyes when Sonic finished speaking. The unsaid message seemed to be received by him based on the deep sigh he gave. Following that, he turned towards Sonic.

"I think the others could use our assistance outside with the remaining Badniks," he said, and then turned to Sorun. "Could you deal with the Doctor before he escapes?"

"Yeah," Sorun said. "Of course."

Sonic, still acting as his usual self, interlocked his hands behind his quills while looking at Shadow. "The 'Ultimate Lifeform' can't handle a bunch of bots with everyone else helping? Eh, I guess there were a lot of 'em. Wouldn't want anyone to get hurt." He glanced back at Sorun. "Hey, go try and capture him if you want, but if it's lookin' too dicey just fall back." He gave Sorun a pointed look. " *Capture* . Got it?"

"'Course."

Sonic maintained that look he was giving Sorun for a few moments. Long enough that the Earthling began to assume he didn't believe him when he said that. But then he'd simply began grinning a bit and turned around.

"Alright, I'm out. See you in a bit, Sorun!"

He zoomed off in a blue blur right after, back out the way he and Sorun had come in originally. Both Sorun and Shadow stared after him, and once he'd disappeared from their sight they turned towards each other. That angry, disturbed look remained on the half-hedgehog's face, while Sorun's devolved into a sad frown.

"It really looking bad out there?" Sorun asked.

Shadow shook his head. "No. There's still many out there, but everybody's dealing with them handily. But it should be enough of a distraction for the blue hedgehog that you can proceed uninhibited to Robotnik."

"..." Sorun looked off to the side. At an open corridor that likely lead further down into the ship. Towards where Eggman was. "Thanks,

Shadow." He looked back at the Mobian. "Are you coming with?"

"I'll... stay with Sonic and the others," he said. "To try and stall them. Give you time to do what's needed." He made a deep breath. "How are you feeling?"

"... Tired," he admitted to him. "Not by much. It's getting worse the longer I go on. And when I finally go to sleep, I... I don't think I'll wake up." Sorun exhaled through his nose and turned away. "I... I, I never managed to think up any last words. Don't got any final messages or anything like that for anyone. So this is goodbye."

"Sorun." He only made it a few steps before Shadow called out his name, making him stop. "I... I'm sorry this happened to you."

"What are you sorry for? You're the only one that didn't agree to use that portal to drag someone into this world." He began walking forwards again. "At least tell the others I don't blame them. Especially Tails. This might mess him up a bit. And tell Nicole..." He stopped to consider his words, but then shook his head and kept moving on. "N-never mind, don't tell her anything. It's not important."

He felt a hand roughly grab his shoulder and whirl him around before he could get any further. He was met with Shadow's crimson eyes staring directly into his blue orbs. Pained and conflicted, looking like he wanted to shout at Sorun. All he could manage was to deeply sigh and let go of Sorun as he stared at the hedgehog with a lifeless, sad look.

"You shouldn't have to be going through this," Shadow mumbled out. "There's truly nothing I can do to help?"

Sorun's eyes glanced away from Shadow. He made a small sigh, and then placed his right palm on Shadow's shoulder. "It was real knowin' you, Shadow." The hand limply slid off his shoulder, followed by Sorun turning around. "I don't have time to mope about myself anymore. I have a job to do."

He started walking forwards again. Shadow's arm twitched when it threatened to reach out to him one more time, but with a subdued breath he had it stay at his side. He whirled around right after, and the two took off in opposite directions.

"Useless things everywhere."

Slash!

"Where is he?"

Slash!

"Where where where...?"

Sorun hadn't pictured the end of his life being a mad dash through the metal innards of a flying ship as he desperately searched for a mad scientist to kill him with a magic katana from a video game, but here he was, doing just such a thing. He hadn't imagined it'd be while he was so young, either, but he made do.

He hadn't been embellishing that much when he told Shadow he'd been feeling a bit tired. That's really all it had been: a bit of exhaustion. The deeper he went, though, and the longer he spent looking and cutting through any robots in his way, the more that sensation grew.

There wasn't any pain. Just growing exhaustion. Weariness. Weakness. He could even feel his heartbeat begin to slow. Not at an alarming pace. It was more gradual, slowing at such a minute pace he hadn't noticed it until the change was significant, and even then Sorun was too preoccupied cutting through all these Badniks as he searched for Robotnik.

Nothing mattered to him but finding and killing that man before he died. It was his sole focus.

His sword cut through yet another robot. More, dozens and dozens more, stood in his way in the wide, metal corridor Sorun had found himself in. He breathed in and out heavily, dark oil dripping off the edge of his katana as he stared at the crowd of robots with hateful eyes.

"I know Robotnik programmed you all with limited intelligence and fear." Sorun began to quickly walk forwards while brandishing his sword. "So unless you want to die, I suggest YOU GET THE HELL OUT OF MY WAY!"

Some actually had moved aside to allow Sorun to pass. Around half of them. They'd begun shaking, some dropped their weapons, and they moved aside to allow Sorun to run through. Others didn't, and tried to run him through with their own weapons. They were all cut down in what may as well have been an instant.

He didn't stop to look at the Badniks as their pieces hit the floor. He only continued moving forwards.

"Well, maybe we can make it a regular thing. Yeah, after the big mission tomorrow we'll all come here to celebrate. We could even make it a regular thing after missions. It'd be really nice, huh?"

Sonic's words kept getting stuck in Sorun's head as he continued cutting through robots.

What would Sorun have given just to have a quiet day enjoying time at a diner with everybody just like old times? Like at that party they'd all had? Times where he could shut out the world's problems and just enjoy life, if just for a few moments. Mobians were the kind of people that acted like that's what they always wanted to do. Sorun could respect it, strive to live like that, in fact. Maybe that's why he liked them so much.

Mobians were simple. Easy to understand, generally enjoyed living life for the sake of life. Had a tendency for wanting to preserve

nature and life. Sally had once told Sorun Mobians avoided going into an industrial revolution just so they didn't pollute the environment. Didn't stop them from developing highly advanced technology, but Chaos energy in the form of the Power Rings and such made this kind of thing a possibility. For all the trouble it caused Sorun personally, it was actually the cleanest source of energy imaginable. That and all the weird sorts of technology and apparent magic this world had was probably the only reason Mobians made it so far without poisoning the planet on their end.

It was something that resonated with Sorun. The desire to preserve life. Most Mobians he met possessed this quality to some extent. Annoying at times, such as when Sonic stopped Sorun from killing Eggman, but... he still thought it was nice. That they thought all life was a precious thing that needed to be protected so everybody could live in peace. It was a philosophy of theirs developed to a point it wasn't some naïve, innocent idea but a true code they lived by. The Freedom Fighters being formed and the lengths they'd gone to protect as many people as possible and overthrow Eggman to save the world said enough about their tenacity in defending this point. They simply did it because they wanted everybody to be free to live happily, and even if they had to go so far as to fight for it, they'd fight for it. Not naïve. Just determined, hopeful.

Sorun liked that about them, could even understand the logic. He'd be a fool going this far to save them if he didn't.

But there was just something to their pure nature that was so alluring to him. He just couldn't tell why. Traits they all wore on their sleeves that made them so easy to read and be around. Antoine and his loyal and cowardly nature, the latter of which Sorun had seen him drop when it was most important. Sally and her love of all the people that lived in the Republic of Acorn. Sonic and that childish, competitive attitude of his that fitted over his desire to help others purely because he was that good a person. Most Mobians were good like that. They had their ugly sides, too, but who didn't? Sorun'd be more worried if

there weren't flaws. At least with them they were easy to see. Another nice trait he liked about them.

Part of why he just couldn't find it in himself to damn them to a doomed future was just because he liked these people too much. They were just too... good. In every sense of the word. And he liked them. Liked being around them. Liked not having to think so hard just to interact with them, that he could just relax around them and focus more on enjoying life. He simply enjoyed living with Mobians.

He would have liked little more than to just hang out at a diner with all his friends and not have to worry about him dying just so he could save them.

"Getting closer..."

He was down there, cutting through swarms of Badniks just to get to Robotnik. And he'd get there, too, which was the problem. Why he was needed here, Rubrum supposed.

He couldn't let Sorun kill Eggman. As much as he'd love to see Sorun cut him down with his sword, or even do it himself, he just couldn't. Wasn't in His backwards-ass plan Rubrum couldn't comprehend. It was maddening to know the why of why he had to stop Sorun and not know the why of why it had to be like this specifically. But what did he know? He was just the idiot following what the list told him.

It'd be leagues easier if he didn't have to do it without Sorun seeing him, though.

"Ugh, what a pain..." With a sigh, Rubrum looked down from his position, at the large bridge Sorun had just run through cleaving down robots left and right. He rose his right hand up from his side, arcs of red energy and red, ethereal cubes flowing around the appendage. "I guess I'll have to twist reality a bit to make this work."

"Hey. Nicole. I want to ask you something."

The edges of his vision were blacking out. His heartrate was at a rate he didn't want to think about. Exhaustion was making him breath heavily. His whole body was feeling more and more heavy by the minute.

"Hm? Of course, Sorun. What is it?"

He remembered this conversation. They'd had it at the hospital, when she'd found the time to play some games with him after he'd taken the game system from the HQ. It'd been a question he wanted to ask her for no other reason than it had been at the back of his mind, bugging him. And deep down he'd already known the answer. But he couldn't help from asking anyways.

"How... how upset would you be if I died? Just, you know, hypothetically speaking."

She'd paused the game and then slowly set the controller down, and then turned to him while giving him a quizzical look. "Why would you ask such a question?"

"... Morbid curiosity?"

Her ears had flattened a bit, and she'd given him a look that almost seemed disappointed in some way. "I'm not sure what would cause you to think up such a thing." Her ears had straightened out as she looked down in thought. "I would understandably be quite distraught, as I'm sure would be the reaction of everybody that knows you, Sorun. Is that not the appropriate reaction to somebody close to you dying?"

"Is that what we are, Nicole? Close?"

"We are friends, are we not?"

Sorun had been forced to look away from her. "The best," he'd said to her. "You were the only one I felt comfortable with befriending before anybody else. I never did tell you thanks for putting up with me for so long."

"I've never felt burdened by being with you, Sorun." He looked back to her in surprise when he heard that. He'd felt complete shock when he saw the lynx smiling at him. "I thoroughly enjoy spending time with you. You're... quite special to me. Which is why I would be so distraught should you meet a premature end to your life." Without missing a beat, she'd picked the controller back up to return to the game. "But you're well on the way to recovery. There's no need to worry about you dying."

"Yeah," Sorun confirmed as he grasped his own controller. "Of course."

A Judgement Cut sliced a Egg Hammer that had been standing in Sorun's way to pieces. *"Why does it feel like I'm just as worried over hurting you as I am dying, Nicole?"* Sorun wondered to himself as he continued running forwards. *"Why, in these final moments, did it have to be you in my thoughts? Why does just thinking about your name keep pushing me forwards? It's not like I'm doing this just for you. It's for everyone. So why?"*

He'd turned a corner so fast he was forced to drag his hand along the ground just to turn sharply enough without losing much momentum. He'd pushed his fingers into the metal ground hard enough to leave small trenches.

"It's always been you that I think about the most. I don't know why. Because you were the only one that brought some sense of normalcy in this fucked up situation of mine? Because we got along and bonded so quickly? Because you were there for me?" Sorun thought. *"Did I really, truly like you that much? I'm glad I never told you so I didn't make it any worse for you, but... I don't know. I don't know what I'm even supposed to do with those kinds of thoughts."*

More robots in his way. More cutting. More exhaustion and greater weakness in his body.

"What would you say to me if you knew what I was doing to myself, Nicole? Would you call me a fool? Try to stop me, talk me out of it maybe? What could you do?" Black oil stained the walls as Sorun cleaved through yet another group of Badniks. *"Nicole. Nicole, Nicole, Nicole... I just don't know how to deal with any of this."*

He'd had to take a small break somewhere down the line. Inside some large hallway with exposed, open holes in the walls that revealed more of the hollow interior of the ship beyond it. There'd been a small stack of metal crates nearby Sorun that he'd chosen to sat down in. He'd heaved out a large breath once he settled down on the crate, sheathed katana loosely held in his left hand as he held his forehead with his right.

Just a few minutes. He just needed some time to rest before he kept going forwards.

"How big is this fucking place anyways?" Sorun quietly gasped out as he shook his head. "Goddammit, you couldn't have made it easy for me in this last stretch?"

"When's it ever been easy, bro?"

It was a voice that sounded close and distant at the same time. Like it wasn't all the way there. It was familiar, too, though at this point even if he wasn't exhausted Sorun didn't think he would have been surprised to hear it. So what he'd done was simply let his hand fall away from his head as he looked to his left.

There wasn't any reaction at all when he saw a blonde-haired human sitting next to him, smiling wide enough to show teeth as he looked at him.

"What is this, some near-death hallucination shit I'm pulling on myself now?" Sorun muttered to him.

The blonde human shrugged. "What kind of friend would I be if I wasn't there for you right before you died?" he asked. "That said, I don't have a clue what's happening, either. Hallucination's only thing that makes sense to me, so, eh, let's go with it."

"Fuck it, why not?" Sorun made a half-wave and turned his head towards the ground. "Hey, Dave." He was too tired to think about it. And it this point he'd take some familiar company, even if it was in his head. He didn't care anymore. He wanted to talk to somebody, even if they were an illusion.

"Yo," David greeted back. "Sorun, man, nice to see you." He glanced up at the ceiling. "Yeah, nice to see you in this... weird, dank-ass metal hallway. Where the hell's here, anyways?"

"You won't believe it. I got sucked into a world full of furry people and super powers and all other sorts of crazy shit," Sorun said. "All because I made the mistake of wanting to buy some orange juice on a school night. Like one of those freakin' isekai shows. 'Cept I didn't get a Truck-kun. I got a desperate fox kid that pulled me through a magic portal 'cause I was supposed to be the last, grand hope for the planet." A sardonic, mocking laugh left Sorun. "Some savior I am. All I am is somebody who got crushed under all the pressure and has to hallucinate his best friend just to cope with it all now. It's driving me insane, Dave. It all is."

"Heavy."

"Mm," Sorun hummed out in agreement. "I even got some powers of my own now," he continued, lifting up the katana for Dave to see.

He heard a disbelieving scoff from the hallucination. "You ganked Vergil's shit?" Dave said in disbelief. "I knew you really liked him, dude, but come on. You didn't have to go cosplay the guy."

"It's unoriginal as hell, sure, but I'm not gonna fault it considering everything the powers let me do," Sorun said. "Be even cooler if they weren't killing me, but what are you gonna do?"

There was a momentary pause. "Kind a deal breaker, yeah," Dave admitted, voice a bit quieter. "Damn, man... didn't realize that's how you were going out. That super sucks." A quiet moment passed. "So what are you gonna do?"

"Some magic echidna people said some maniacal scientist guy's gonna wreck the world unless I kill him before I die," Sorun explained. "So I'm on my way to go do that, since, well... the people here are alright, you know? Figured if I ever did anything decent with my life it might as well be this. I mean, psh, I'm not good for much all else."

"Aw, come on, man, don't put yourself down like that," Dave admonished in a teasing tone. "... Hell's an echidna?"

"It's like an anteater or something, I don't really know to be honest," Sorun admitted. He made a sigh and lifted his head up, and then leaned it back far enough that his head thunked against the metal wall behind him. He was still able to make out Dave's visage from the corner of his vision. "I think I grew a huge crush on this one girl while I was here."

He saw Dave perk right up when he heard that. Could almost *feel* his large smile turn coy. "Ahhh, that's what's this is about," he said. "Surprised you even think you have a shot for how short you are."

"Fuck off, my height's average here," Sorun bit out. "You'd like her. She plays better than you."

"There it is, of course that's what it took for somebody to finally get your damn attention..." Dave sighed out. "Fuckin' known each other since we were kids and you never batted an eye at a single girl, but the second you find one that can keep up with your game skills suddenly you're all-"

"Man, would you give it a rest!?" Sorun shouted out as he turned his head towards David. "It's more than that, you know? She's, like, nice and considerate and all that stuff..."

"Mm-hm, sure. Didn't you say this was a world full of fur-"

"She's an AI."

"Christ, a virtual girl. It's worse than I thought," David muttered out while palming his face. "How far you've fallen, Sorun. You went the path of Master Chief and fell in love with the computer lady while cutting out the middleman of the weird Freudian mom thing."

Yamato sailed through the air and passed through David's body.

"You know, for a hallucination that's supposed to be comforting me in my final moments, you're doing a shit job," Sorun deadpanned. He sighed, and then turned his head back forwards. "I'm so fuckin' scared, man," he said in a small voice. "It shoulda been you that got sent here. You would have been able to solve this whole mess with half the powers I got. You were better than me at practically everything except games."

"Well, yeah, I had the common fucking sense needed to duck when the bowling ball came for my face. Unlike you."

"I froze up, fuck you, it's a perfectly normal reaction!" Sorun yelled out as he turned back to David. They stared at each other for a few moments, both staring into each others eyes. It was broken off when Dave started to breathily chuckle under his breath, while Sorun made a more broken chuckle.

"So what now?" Dave asked as his own laughter subsided.

Sorun slowly shook his head. "Gotta go die now, I guess," he answered. "I thought I'd be ready for it, but I'm really fucking not. But it's either I just sit here and die or I go out saving the world, so... yeah." He re-summoned Yamato and used it as a crutch to lift

himself up off the crate he was sitting on. "It's a raw-ass hand I've been dealt, Dave. Don't know how to deal, don't know how to process, I'm just-just trucking forwards and hoping for the best at this point."

"Not much else to do in that regard, I guess." Dave admitted. There was some movement Sorun saw, causing him to look up. He was greeted to the sight of David giving him a thumbs-up along with his teeth-baring smile. "But hey, goin' out to save the girl? Sounds like something a true man would do to me."

"It's about more than the girl, you damn dumbass." Despite his bitter tone, a small smile still formed on Sorun's face. "It's all over for me after this, Dave. So I guess it's bye forever."

"Seems so," said Dave with a sigh, sounding a bit more somber. "We had a hell of a time, bro. Good luck savin' the world."

"Yeah." Sorun blinked his eyes. When he opened his eyes back up, he was completely alone. The spot in front of him was vacant. "I'll do my best."

"FOUND YOU, MOTHERFUCKER!"

Of course he'd been all the way at the end of the ship where the engines were. *Of course* Eggman had been as far away in this thing as he could have possibly been. And of course it'd taken Sorun so long to get here that he was barely maintaining consciousness.

Oh, but he'd found his second wind when he'd entered that large room that was more like a cavern. It housed the back end of the building-sized engines that propelled the ship, and the backside of the ship had exposed segments that let Sorun look outside. None of this even registered with him, though, because near the center of the room, floating above halfway to the ceiling was him. Eggman. Sitting in a floating saucer.

Sorun had practically forgotten all about his exhaustion when he saw him. He could have sworn some of the blackness in his perception even faded a bit. In that moment, everything disappeared. The fear and the dread of dying. The sorrow of leaving everybody behind. His anger and rage at the unfairness of it all, the feeling of weakness weighing down his limbs. All of it, in that single instant, was wiped out and replaced by sheer determination when he saw Eggman floating in the center of the room.

Eggman, unfortunately, had also seen Sorun. There'd been a small shuttle parked near the back of the room that he seemed to have been making his way towards before he'd turned around to Sorun. His face had alit with panic and he'd pointed out to Sorun while shouting something. Sorun hadn't even been able to hear it as his Bringer Claws exploded out from his back and took off so fast that he was practically a speeding bullet rocketing towards Eggman.

Some of the winged Badniks had immediately flown in from all directions in an attempt to intercept Sorun and stall him as Eggman made his escape. Cuts from the Yamato and Summoned Swords destroyed and grounded them before they could even touch him. When Eggman saw his robots were doing nothing to slow Sorun down, he'd turned his saucer around and attempted to fly away towards the shuttle.

Sorun had Tricked right onto the lip of the saucer before he even took off.

Breathing heavily, Sorun looked down at Eggman. The panic that he'd had on his face earlier was rapidly transmogrifying into fear. He'd even scrambled back as far away as possible away from Sorun. He'd begun saying some words as sweat heavily beaded down his face, words that were completely lost on Sorun as he couldn't even hear much of anything anymore past a dull ring in his ears.

Whatever words Eggman had been saying cut right off when Sorun rose the sword up.

"Bye, Ivo."

He swung the sword down.

Everything turned red.

It'd been for a split second. In that second, quite simply, Sorun's sight had turned completely red. He wasn't so sure why, and for whatever reason he felt a shift in his body. Like his entire being had been tugged a certain direction even though he hadn't felt himself physically move. He felt his sword stab down into something, so he'd assumed the red had just been Eggman's blood splashing into his face.

But then the red faded. It wasn't blood. Sorun didn't know *what* it was other than it had only appeared for that single second. And when his vision returned, he looked down and saw what he was stabbing into.

It was just the edge of the saucer. He wasn't standing right in front of the Doctor. He was... standing to the side of him, for some reason. He'd somehow completely missed him and cleaved into the saucer instead of Eggman. For some reason he wasn't standing in the same position he'd been in when he'd stabbed down at Eggman.

Sorun blinked in confusion, and looked to the side at Eggman. If the look on his face said anything, he was just as clueless and bewildered as Sorun was at the moment. He tried to pay it no mind and ripped the sword out of the saucer in an attempt to try and slash at Eggman.

Thump.

A strangled gasp left Sorun. A great pain instantly appeared in his chest when he felt one final beat of his heart, followed by a lack of the sensation. His heart wasn't beating any further. It'd stopped completely.

He'd stumbled back from the sensation. Yamato began to rapidly dissolve from Sorun's grasp, and the pain in his chest became so great that he wasn't even able to keep a hold of the sword. When he dropped it, it'd vanished completely before it even hit the saucer beneath his feet. Summoned Swords attempted to materialize themselves next to Sorun, but they'd appeared faded and cracked, and then shattered before he could even fire them off.

"Ngh..." Sorun had uncontrollably stumbled to the edge of the saucer. He maintained his glare towards Eggman, who just stared on in great confusion. The teen's body began to wobble when he began to lose all feeling, and by that point gravity had taken over and he began to tilt over. All Sorun could do was continue looking at Eggman. "D... damn it all..."

And then, he'd fallen over.

"Cutting it kinda close here, aren't I?"

On the ceiling in the room containing the engines, hiding amidst some metal rafters adorning the ceiling, was Rubrum. He watched as Sorun had entered the room, spotting Eggman almost in an instance. He'd shouted towards him, and had alerted Eggman to his presence. Eggman, in response, had sicced what little remaining Badnik forces on Sorun as he attempted to escape.

It was a fruitless attempt from what Rubrum saw. Even in his weakening state Sorun had been too much for those robots. He'd cut down multiple bots in milliseconds. He'd done it without ever taking his eyes off of Eggman his focus on the man had been so great. A kind of manic fervor tempered with so much concentration that Sorun's expression hardly looked human. It was more demented.

But he'd done it. Cut down all the robots in his way and teleported right to Eggman. And had Rubrum done nothing, he would have done it. Used the last few remaining embers fueling his life to cut Eggman's head right off of his shoulders. Sorun'd been that close.

And then, when Rubrum flexed his hand, Sorun's body had briefly glowed red. His position switched, as if he'd been forcibly teleported. Not very far. Just a couple of feet, as well as his orientation having been disrupted by just a slight amount. Enough that'd he'd missed Eggman and swung into the saucer instead.

As far as Sorun was concerned, he'd just think he missed. As simple as that.

The precious moments Sorun had needed to figure out his strike had missed and the moments needed to pull the sword out and ready himself to try and swing at Eggman again proved to be too much. In that moment, he'd ran out of time. His sword faded, and his body began to shut down. A precious few seconds was all he'd had, and would have been all he'd needed if Rubrum hadn't interfered.

Well, interfered he had. And now Rubrum had to watch as Sorun fell off the saucer.

"Sorry, Sorun," Rubrum thought as he watched Sorun's still body fall towards the ground. *"Not yet. Not just yet..."*

He saw the teen's body collapse on the ground. Eggman had stopped his saucer just so he could peer over the edge, and Rubrum saw he had a dumbfounded look on his face as he looked down at Sorun.

"Well, there it is." And then Rubrum went from looking from the rafters above to crouching on the lip of the saucer, right next to Eggman. The Doctor had spluttered out in surprise at his sudden appearance and had fallen on his back. Rubrum paid him no mind, and continued to look down at Sorun.

"R-Rubrum?" Eggman had chosen that moment to speak. The red-clothed man's hood tilted just the smallest amount as he looked back at the round Doctor. At his haggard appearance and his blue spectacles that were slightly fogged from all the perspiration still leaking from his face. "Where on Mobius did you come from?"

"I was around." Rubrum looked back down at Sorun. "Congratulations. You survived. Sorun died."

Rubrum had attempted to sound cynical when he said that, but at the moment he wasn't able to muster the feeling. So his words had come out blank and hollow as he looked down at Sorun's body. He couldn't help but to silently sigh at the sight.

"What?" The sweating on Eggman's face began to subside. His confusion, on the other hand, only grew. And he'd sounded as lost as he looked. "What... what did you do?"

"I just swapped his position a bit so he'd miss you. Otherwise I didn't do anything," Rubrum blankly replied. "I lied when I told you the Chaos Emeralds weren't having a detrimental effect on his body. His body wasn't built to sustain that amount of Chaos energy. That last Emerald I left for him sealed his fate."

He turned away from Sorun's body. He didn't want to see the sight of Sorun's body anymore. Eggman wasn't a much better sight, but Rubrum preferred that over seeing Sorun in that state, so he'd turned around and moved up a bit so he was crouching on the saucer's interior lip, his shadowed face staring straight at Eggman.

"You... lied...?" Eggman repeated. His earlier anxiety began to disappear as he slowly righted himself upwards.

Rubrum shrugged. "I told you I do that a lot."

"You mean to say at any moment I could have just *given* Sorun the Emeralds and he would have croaked on his own?" It took an inordinate amount of willpower for Rubrum not to hang his head when he heard that. The second Eggman had said that any and all traces of his earlier anxiety and panic ceased to exist. He looked completely normal. A bit satisfied, even. And then he began to look a bit questioning as he looked towards Rubrum. "I don't understand. If you were just going to kill him with the last Emerald, then why lie to

me about it? You could have given me a head-up, you know. Or at least have done it quicker so I could finally put him out of my mind."

"For the same reason I do anything. For insane, arbitrary reasons even I don't understand, Eggman," Rubrum answered, bringing no end to the confusion wrinkling Eggman's face. "It's all on His instruction, nothing more, nothing less. Why He structured this all in such a way is something I gave up on figuring out. Not like I can ask Him. Hell, I've never even met Him." He folded his hands over his knees. Rubrum's form slumped forwards, and a long, drawn-out breath left him. "It's always gotta lead back to Him. Because it's all in accordance with His will."

His right fist curled and banged down on the saucer hard enough to dent it. Eggman hadn't flinched from the reaction, though he did keep a wary eye on Rubrum as he continued to just sit there in front of him, unnaturally still and eerily silent.

"... So, it's back the drawing board for you, then?" Rubrum had suddenly asked. His earlier, sullen tone had disappeared, being replaced by a more neutral voice. Eggman had started a bit at the sudden shift in his demeanor, going as far as to cautiously move back a bit to his own end of the saucer.

"I believe that is my business," Eggman answered him. "You've hardly convinced me that we're allies met to be sharing plans back and forth." He leaned back a bit, propping his shoulder up on the saucer. A small confident smirk played across his lips. "How about you?"

Beneath his hood, Rubrum frowned at that smirk on Eggman's face. He was either happy over the fact that Sorun was dead or he was picking up how upset Rubrum felt at the moment and was taking joy from it. He hated both options in equal measure. "I still have things on my list to cross off," he answered. "This is the last time we're gonna see each other for a while." He paused, and took a quick glance around. "Snively not around?"

"No, he's back in New Megaopolis. Or what's left of it, at least," Eggman answered with a shake of his head and a slight frown. "Why? Don't tell me you wanted to pummel him again."

"I just wanted one more punch for the road. Not really gonna have another chance to... eh, never mind. I guess it doesn't really matter." With another sigh, Rubrum stood up to his feet. "We'll meet again right before you hit the big button."

When Eggman blinked his eyes, Rubrum had been gone by the time he opened them back up. All he offered in response was a simple "hmph", after which he grabbed the controls of the saucer and began steering it towards the nearby shuttle.

What had it all been for in the end?

He'd blacked out when he fell off the saucer and hit the ground. When Sorun opened his eyes, it was when he was flat on his back, looking up. He was greeted to the sight of Eggman's shuttle taking off right then and there, with the man himself likely inside of it, probably laughing at Sorun, who could do nothing but watch as the shuttle flew through the open portion of the ship and disappeared out of sight.

So that was that.

He failed.

"Well. This sucks."

Sorun still couldn't feel his heartbeat. His body's regeneration was probably the only thing keeping him alive at this point, but even that was failing. He could feel it. Could feel himself slowly slipping away, his body finally giving out for good. These were his last moments, and he got to spend them as a failure.

"I really am a royal screwup, aren't I?" With his last remaining strength, Sorun rolled onto his stomach, and then began crawling forwards. *"All you had to do was land one shot... and you couldn't even do that..."*

How much depended on his landing that hit? The lives and futures of his friends? The Republic of Acorn? All of Mobius? Everybody? All he had to do was connect with him. To make one single, clean strike against Eggman's neck to finally end it all. That's all he needed to do.

What did he do instead?

He missed. Sorun simply missed.

"I don't even know what happened. Vision went all screwy, I... I must've gotten disoriented..." With continuing grunts of effort he continued crawling forwards, towards a raised section of the wall that was slanted by a great amount. *"How could I have messed up so badly...?"*

The pain was fading away. It was just pure exhaustion now. He couldn't even feel anything anymore. Merely thinking was taking a toll on him. But he pressed forwards, through it all. At the very least he wanted to see something other than cold metal as he died.

"It was all for nothing. Everything I did, all the effort I put into getting these Emeralds, taking this big, final shot... I couldn't do it. I can't... why can't I ever do anything right...?"

This wasn't a feeling Sorun was well familiar with. The sensation of failure couldn't accurately be described by the word "failure" alone. It was such an intense, ineffable feeling assaulting him that, if he wasn't dying and so exhausted at the moment, he probably would have broken down right there. The despair alone might have been enough to kill him.

But he pressed on. Because there was nothing else for him to do but prop his dying body up so he could see the sky one last time.

"Some prophets those Neo-Walkers turned out to be," Sorun had internally scoffed. *"What was it all for? Why was I brought here just for me to die for nothing? Were they wrong? Was I just that terrible at accomplishing one simple task? Why? What was the point? Why did I have to die for nothing? Why...?"*

With great effort, he'd managed to stand up, only to then crash on the raised, slanted section of wall in a leaning position. Panting heavily, Sorun looked out towards the back of the ship, towards the sky. The sun was just beginning to dip down towards the horizon.

"Maybe I was never meant to kill him?" Sorun thought. *"I mean, it... it wasn't for nothing, right? I did things. Significant things. Saved everyone when Knothole was bombed, helped with Enerjak, did all those missions and helped everybody out for all that time... it all has to mean something, right?"* Maybe it was just him being hopeful. Trying to cheer himself up or convince himself that he'd done enough. He didn't know if he believed it. *"I mean... New Megaopolis is practically gone. They all fought him for over a decade working with way less. Eggman's resources are dwindled, and they have the nanite city. They'll... they'll be fine, won't they...?"*

Maybe he was right. Maybe he wasn't. Sorun didn't know. There was nothing he could do about it anymore. He tried his best. It wasn't good enough, but... he'd tried. It was such a small comfort that it didn't even register with Sorun, but as opposed to nothing, it was something.

"I'm sorry, everyone, I... I tried. I really did. I just wasn't good enough."

Sorun's vision continued to rapidly turn black. Even so, he kept his eyes turned up on the sky.

"It's... really beautiful, this world. I never stopped to appreciate it before. I hope they'll be able to save it. Not mess it all up like I did. I... please let everything I did be enough... I don't want them to die..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"... I really would have liked... to have had one last game with you... Nicole..."

With a final, rattling breath, Sorun's body went still.

"Hey! Sorun! Where'd you go!?"

It was minutes later that two new forms entered the large, cavernous engine room through a door at the far end of the room. One was a blue hedgehog, who was casually walking across the room with his hands cupped around his mouth as he looked around. Behind him was a black-colored hedgehog with red stripes whose expression was severely more downcast than the face the Mobian in front of him wore, which was more or less in a lighthearted grin.

"Man, where'd he go? All those cut-up Badniks lead to here," Sonic said as his hands lowered to his side. "Geez, we passed past so many of them it felt like there were more in here than there were out there. You really oversold how bad things were going on outside, Shads."

"I was just being cautious." Shadow's voice had come out quieter and more somber than normal, though it was a change too subtle for Sonic to pick up on. "Perhaps he-"

"Ah, no, there he is."

Shadow's red eyes picked up when he heard Sonic speak out. They instantly locked onto the form of a white-haired human body in a slightly tattered white coat leaning up against a slanted section of the wall. Completely still and not moving. He'd known just why that was the second Shadow had caught sight of the still body. His breathing had become disrupted and he'd felt a shock from the sight alone as his body stiffened up.

Sonic, however, hadn't picked up on why Sorun wasn't moving, and began to make his way over to him. The movement was enough to shake Shadow out of his stupor, and upon seeing the direction Sonic was heading in, he tried stopping him.

"Sonic," he attempted while weakly reaching out to him, "wait-"

"Sorun, buddy! There you are," Sonic called out, his voice jubilant. He stepped right behind Sorun, who was still facing out towards the open end of the ship at the sky that was nearly in sunset, and reached out to shake his shoulder. "What're you doing? Everybody's wondering where you-"

The shaking from Sonic's hand caused Sorun's body to slide off of the slanted section of the wall. It'd lifelessly collapsed on its back right in front of Sonic, who'd reached his hand back and stepped back in surprise at the motion.

"Er, uh... y-you're kinda tired from the new power, huh, Sorun?" Sonic said in a light chuckle. The chuckling began to die off when he looked towards Sorun's face. "Sorun?"

The pale Earthling's face was completely still. Eyes half-opened, unfocused and unmoving like the rest of him. There wasn't even any sign of Sorun breathing.

"S-Sorun?" Seeing immediately that something was wrong, Sonic got down on his knees and began to shake Sorun's shoulder again. "Co-come on, Sorun, what's the matter?" His shaking began to become a bit more frantic. The nervous smile Sonic had adopted

was slowly shifting into an intensely worried expression the longer this went on. "Sorun, seriously, this isn't funny!"

"Sonic..."

A gloved hand gently settled on Sonic's shoulder. He froze at the contact, and then looked up to see Shadow looking at him. He didn't have his usual scowl on. He looked sad, which began to make Sonic's heart sink at the implication.

"He's... he's gone," Shadow said in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

"Gone? What-what do you mean gone?" Sonic looked down at Sorun's body. "He's just- he always gets tired when he gets a new power, doesn't he? He's just sleeping, right?" He looked back up at Shadow. Despite his disbelieving words Sonic's eyes were already beginning to grow damp. "He can't be gone. He isn't- Sorun isn't-"

"Guys? What's going on?"

The question that had cut Sonic off caused both hedgehogs to look towards where'd they just come from. They saw everybody crowding near the doorway, looking towards them all with unsure, questioning looks. Right in front of them was Sally, who'd been the one to voice the question. She'd motion to speak further, but then stopped completely when she looked down at the body lying right in front of Sonic.

"I... I'm unsure how I'm... He..." Shadow, who had tried to explain but wound up tripping over his words in his own grief, made a deep sigh and shook his head in defeat. "I don't know how else to say it. He's gone."

Quiet acceptance grew on Sonic's face at the same time tears began to freely flow from his face and hit the metal floor under him. Sally began to freely cry as well while also taking some steps back and holding her hands to her mouth as she stared at Sorun's body in

grief. Others in the group behind her had started to look towards Sorun's corpse and began to come to the same conclusion. Some began to openly cry while others tried and failed to bite back their tears as they looked away.

"He said they were killing him," Shadow mumbled out, drawing Sonic's attention once more. "The Chaos Emeralds. He said they were causing his body to fail."

"That can't be true," Sonic whispered out in disbelief, shaking his head. "He-he would have told us. He would have told us if they were doing something like that!" he shouted, voice growing hysteric. "That doesn't even- how could they have been hurting him!?"

"I'll tell you what he told me," Shadow said, though his words did little to calm Sonic. "What he told me was that..."

Chapter 53

Recursion Error

Episode 53- Gamers never die

"Well, congratulations, you fucking dimwit. You got us killed."

Black. Black, endless void everywhere around. An entire universe full of nothing. Nothing but a single, lone teen in a tattered white coat sitting down on a nonexistent ground with his knees pulled up to his chest. Behind him was another, identical-looking teen down to the face and clothes that was angrily pacing back and forth behind the one sitting down.

"You know, you've done some stupid shit in our life, but this? Oh boy, I don't even- this is the peak. There's nothing above this. I can't even comprehend how you bungled it this badly and I was there every step of the way." Sorun loudly exhaled and threw his arms in front of him. "Just... *fuck* , man, how!?"

"What was I supposed to do?" the Sorun sitting down on the endless black void asked.

"Oh, oh I don't know, not gotten us killed!?" Sorun screamed out. "'Ah, no, hey, Sorun, buddy, pal. I know we just took you away from your home and loved ones and everything, but hey, listen, things here on Mobius are real bad, so do you mind lending us a hand?' 'Oh, Sorun, by the way, these powers are real neat and all but oh also they're gonna kill you down the line so if you could just get over that for us it'd be *greeeat* , okay?' No-none of this sounds bad to you?" Sorun stopped pacing and looked down on Sorun. "Christ on a crutch, man, why did you go along with it?"

Sorun shuffled in place. "I didn't want my friends to die."

"Your friends. Right," Sorun scoffed. "Let's-let's do a headcount. Tails? Dragged us through that portal and effectively ended our life right then and there. Sonic, that smug prick, always acting like he was better than us, not a single fucking humble bone in his body. Knuckles- fuck him, fuck him and his entire goddamned species, they can fucking burn for all the trouble they caused us. Elias?" Sorun let out a mocking laugh. "Fucking soy boy supreme, doesn't know what the hell he's doing and came to us of all people for advice, fucking amazed you didn't blow that whole history lesson you gave him. Took, what, a single day of rebellion for him to fold and change the whole government? An evening? Sally straight up lead us by the nose the entire time with that promise she made us just so she could have some sword-slinging weirdo in her motley crew of-"

"They were nice to us," Sorun argued. "They never treated us like-"

" *Of course* they were nice, it's practically all they know!" Sorun yelled out. "They're so nice they don't even realize how fucked in the head they all are! Or how bad they screwed us over at the very least," he bitterly added. "Shadow- look, I'll admit, he was cool, I know *you* liked them all but personally he was the only one I could stand to be around."

Sorun sighed and hugged his knees closer to his chest. "They didn't know. They were desperate," he weakly argued. "They never took advantage of us like that. They said we were one of them."

"Oh, grow up, Sorun," Sorun spat out. "They felt sorry for us and made us one of them because they hoped it'd be good enough to make up for everything they did to us. They did it to make themselves feel better."

The Sorun kneeling on the ground began to grow from looking despondent to as angry as the one pacing behind him. "That is simply not true," he denied. "Nicole-"

"And there it is, ladies and GENTLEMEN, the crux of it all!" Sorun shouted up to the nonexistent ceiling. "It wasn't enough to give it all

up for a bunch of aliens that stole our life from us. Oh, no, you took it to the next level." He walked over the sitting Sorun and crouched down right next to him. "You went and simped over the holo-lynx," he lowly stated. "She just had to have all the right qualities, huh? Just had to be attractive to us in every single aspect we could possibly imagine. Fact she looked the way she did went right over our head."

Sorun's eyes fell to the endless black ground as Sorun made another scoff and shot up to his feet.

"But to throw away our life for *her* ?" Sorun continued. "Seriously? For a girl you didn't even have the guts to admit you liked?"

"It wasn't just for her."

"..." Sorun looked off to the side. "Who was it in our final thoughts?" he wondered aloud. "Was it Antoine? 'Oh, Antoine, I'm so sorry we'll never have another sword match where you'll have to hold back against me and still win because even a wimpy fucking fink like you is stronger than me.' How 'bout Amy? 'Ah, Amy, you self-absorbed cunt, thank you so dearly for pulling your head out of the clouds to give me the time of day. You're such a nice person. A veritable pillar of magnanimity!' Nope. No, no, no. It was her. Nicole." Sorun grunted out angrily and began pacing again. "You know what it's like being you? 'Oh, I'm so depressed over dying,' 'this isn't fair, why me,' 'I'm so scared over everything,' 'I just want to play with Nicole for a bit to forget it all,' every single second of every single day we spent on Mobius. The anxiety, the self-doubt, the insecurity, day in, day out. MY LIFE IS FUCKING SUFFERING."

He ran out of steam. With a final breath, Sorun collapsed down onto his backside, breathing in and out heavily in great heaves. The Sorun sitting down didn't so much as look over at him, instead choosing to keeping looking down for a while. When Sorun's breathing returned to normal, Sorun finally spoke out.

"Are you done?" Sorun asked.

"I guess," Sorun breathed out. "I hate this place. There's nothing to do here but realize how miserable my life is. The life we no longer have. The life you threw away like yesterday's garbage. That life." His head rolled to the side to look at Sorun's back. "Why'd you do it?" he questioned. "Why did you throw away our life for them?"

"From the moment we stepped into that grocery store the deck was stacked against us," Sorun coolly answered. "We had no possible way of knowing we'd get pulled through an interdimensional portal to a new world. But that's what happened, so we made the best of what we could with the situation we were in. The Chaos Emeralds changed things."

"Boy, did it," Sorun agreed. "You killed us for a stupid cause."

"It's not as if the options were that glamorous," Sorun argued. "We were cornered the moment we laid our hands on that first Chaos Emerald. The blue one. And just like the grocery store, we had no possible way of knowing it'd be irremovable or that it would give us those poisonous powers. The Mobians were surprised by the development, so it's not as if we could have speculated that outcome. Even people in tune with the Chaos Force were surprised by what we could do. There was absolutely no way of us knowing." He dipped his head lower to the nonexistent floor. "There was simply no way for us to realistically avoid sealing off the way home forever."

"You didn't have to go after the rest of them."

"Those Mobians didn't deserve the fate Robotnik would have given them. It's likely we would have shared the same fate had he won. You know it. I know it. Giving our life up to try and save them was our best option." He made a sigh. "That's the logical explanation, at least. Truly, I... just didn't want to see them suffer. They're dear to me, each and every one. She's the dearest of them all to me." He glanced back at Sorun. "You'd let such a truly beautiful world full of wonderful people die just so we could live a few years longer? For what?"

"It would have been on our terms. And they didn't deserve our help," Sorun answered. "And what good we managed to do." He thrust his arms up. "There he was, all lined up. The biggest and fattest target in history, all dressed in red for us. The phrase 'side of a barn' had never been more applicable, because he practically was the side of a barn! At point-blank range at that! We could have spit on him if you wanted we were so close! And all you had to do was get one eensy-weensy little hit in on the guy. Geez, you didn't even have to aim for his head. Any slash in his general direction would have gone through his body and done fatal damage. That was it. That was all you had to do. We could have done it in our sleep it was so easy. And what did you do?" The arms fell back down. "You dropped the ball. You missed. And because of that, Robotnik's still alive, so all we did was for what? Huh?"

Sorun didn't answer Sorun. Instead, he stood up from his sitting position and began to walk away.

"I don't have to hear this from you," he said. "I'm leaving."

Sorun waved after him, still lying on his back. "Oh yeah, sure, good luck navigating a *literal abyss* , you moron!"

He hated this place.

Ever since he died he'd been here. He didn't know for how long. He tried counting once but kept losing track of the number, if he was counting in seconds or minutes. All he knew was that it was nothing but an endless, black void and he hated it.

How long had he been here? Minutes? Hours? Days? He didn't know. He didn't even know how long he'd been walking. Could have been seconds, could have been years. He didn't know. All he knew was that he despised every aspect about this place.

The loneliness.

The isolation.

He didn't want to be dead anymore.

He wanted to see his friends again.

How long had he been here?

"Fun fact, this place isn't infinite. It runs in a loop." Sorun only continued to stare ahead as Sorun began walking besides him. "Well, either that or you got turned around and began walking in circles since, you know... there's not really any landmarks."

"Where even is here?" Sorun asked. "The afterlife?"

A shrug. "What'd you expect? A desaturated beach?" Sorun asked with a scoff. "How can you adore people that ruined our lives?"

"Will you drop it already?"

"And do what instead? Stare at the vast nothing?" Sorun sarcastically remarked. "It really just took them being nice to win you over? For real?"

"What else was needed?" Sorun asked Sorun. "They realized the grave mistake they made and tried to make up for it. Beyond that, they treated us as an equal when we obviously weren't one. They valued our life just as much as their neighbors and brothers despite the fact we were complete strangers, a different species even. Altruism for the sake of altruism. A genuine love of life." He grew quiet as he looked down. "How could I not grow enamored with them after the way they treated us? With her?"

"Yeah, how could we not love people that kidnapped us and forced us into a guerilla war against our will. Whoo-hoo."

It began to show that Sorun's patience was wearing thin when he stopped and turned towards Sorun with his calm expression slowly turning angered again. "They had. No way. Of knowing."

"And they had no right to ask us to do shit after what they did. Sonic didn't have any right to make that stupid bet with the foot race and trick us," Sorun snapped back with an equally angry expression. "We're dead because of them."

"We're dead because we chose to die."

"Chose? Chose!?" Sorun spread his arms wide and gestured to the emptiness all around him. "We chose this!?" he yelled out. "Ah, yeah, such a super choice! We get damned to an eternity of this insanity while everyone else gets to go on their own merry way-"

Slck!

It'd been an automatic movement on Sorun's part. He'd grown so sick of it. Of this place, of hearing Sorun's mocking of Sorun's choices for every second Sorun was here. Couldn't take it anymore, didn't want to take it, he just wanted it to *end* .

He didn't even know when Yamato flashed into his hands or when he moved forwards to stab Sorun in the midsection. All he knew was that, at some point, he'd done just that. And now Sorun was standing here in front of Sorun, stabbing Sorun through the chest with the katana held in his hands.

Sorun looked down at the blade piercing his chest, more or less nonplussed at the act. "This all you know how to do?" Sorun asked as he looked back up at Sorun. "Kill yourself? I'm not surprised. It's the one thing you haven't fucked up."

Sorun pulled the sword out. There was nobody in front of him anymore. Just empty space. He was there alone. Just him. Sorun. Nobody else.

He suddenly felt something on his right arm. A strange sensation, like something slowly curling around the limb. With his breathing beginning to become more erratic, he looked down at his hand. He immediately saw what he was feeling.

It was the Yamato. There were... vines, bluish-black vines like tentacles spreading out from beneath the white wrapping of the blue hilt and wrapping all around his right arm. There was an eye, too. An eye with a blue iris and slit pupil, right there in the center of the blade, the metal cracking around it. Just a normal eye rapidly looking everywhere, with a small stream of blood dripping out of it like a bloodied tear. The eye finally stopped when it snapped to a position so that it was looking right into Sorun's eye, and he could have sword he heard the high-pitched screaming of his own voice.

With a panicked scream, Sorun threw the sword away. It clattered against the ground that wasn't there, and with heavy breathing, Sorun continued to look at it even as it skidded away. There were no tentacles. No blood, no eye, nothing. It was just a normal katana.

Panting with heavy breath, Sorun collapsed onto his hands and knees. He looked down, but all he saw was blackness. There was nothing but an endless void when he looked up and around. No matter where he looked, there was absolutely nothing in any direction. Nothing but an infinite emptiness.

"I hate it here," Sorun tonelessly droned out. Yamato flashed back into his hands. He held it up and stabbed it down into whatever invisible ground he was leaning on.

Reality itself began to crack all around Sorun. White, glowing cracks that spiderwebbed around from where the sword was stabbing into. Sorun continued to blankly stare at the spot, pouring more power into the blade as he pushed it in further. Blue energy was roaring down the length of the blade as the white cracks intensified.

"I don't want to be here anymore." Segments of reality began to fall around Sorun, like black shards of glass, revealing bright, white light behind it all. "Take me out of here. I want to go back to them."

The entire world around Sorun shattered completely.

Sorun's eyes snapped open.

"... What just happened?" That was the first and foremost thought that came to his head. What came after was the memory of dying, and all the mental baggage that carried. Everything past that just gave him a headache to think about. The details were there, but fuzzy, disjointed. Hard to remember. So he ceased those thoughts and looked up. *"Uh..."*

He didn't know why, but for some reason he was on his back, with his head resting in something oddly soft. He'd wondered what that was until he'd looked up and seen the sky. The sky that wasn't blue, but a giant, glowing canvas of various shades of white and purple. No sun, no moon, not even any stars. Just a lot of white and purple. He also noted there were some green leaves in his peripheral, and when he looked down he saw he was surrounded by trees.

"Well this is just all kinds of weird," he muttered to himself. He finally took note of the soft thing his head was laying on, and felt around with his hand to try and feel it. Oddly enough, his hand rubbed against something damp, and when he held it above his face, much to his confusion, it was wet. "... Why am I wet?"

Sorun looked further up. He was greeted to a pair of solid green eyes looking down at him that were attached to a head completely made of water.

"Whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa!" Startled by the sight, Sorun rolled right off *whatever* wet thing he'd been lying on. He felt soft grass brush against his exposed hands and face as he rolled away, ending when he rolled into a low crouch to look at the thing he'd saw look at him.

He had absolutely no idea what he was looking at. It was some bipedal... thing. A thing made completely from water. In fact, the only things he saw in it that wasn't water were the two solid, oblong objects acting as its eyes and a brain floating in what Sorun assumed to be its head.

For some reason its shape reminded him of an alien of some kind. The two-toed, three-fingered, three tentacled-headed... thing in front of him just didn't resemble anything else for comparison. For the life of him he couldn't figure out why it was completely made of water.

"Um... what's up...?" Sorun awkwardly greeted. The watery thing in front of him, sitting down with its legs crossed, merely had made a gurgling sound while tilting its head at him. "... Yeah, alright." Sorun looked away from it. "Where am I?"

Looking around didn't give him much in the way of answers. It looked like a circular clearing inside of a grove of trees. There was a pond in the middle filled with clear water, a few large rocks surrounding its edge, and... Chao, for whatever reason. Seven in total from what he counted, all just meandering about and minding their own business. A few had cast curious looks over in Sorun's direction, but that had been about it.

"It's a... Chao Garden?" Sorun mumbled to himself. "What the...?"

Something Sorun had never done in his life was skip stones across the water, like they did in the movies. Not surprisingly he was pretty terrible at it when he tried. Like the world hadn't brought him down enough.

"I mean, I try to look at the positives in life," Sorun said as he threw another small stone at the pond, only for it to sink right to the bottom along with his mood. Maybe the shape of the stones was the problem. He was pretty sure only flat ones sufficed, but there were only round ones here. "You know, like when all the downs in life gets me, well, down, I try to remember all the ups." He looked to the side. "Know what I mean?"

The blue water monster thing was sitting right besides Sorun in front of the pond. Some of the Chao he saw were sleeping on it or playing by hanging off its limbs, not that it seemed to mind. Sorun was fairly

sure it was keeping up with the conversation, but, well... it was a water monster. So he wasn't really sure.

The fact it gurgled at him in response to his previous question didn't help him much in discerning a clear answer. Its appearance still made Sorun ambivalent towards whether it was dangerous or not, but at east it seemed friendly. So he decided to voice some of his thoughts at it at some point.

"So, uh... you got a name?" Sorun asked.

It gurgled at him again.

"... Nice to meet you. I'm Sorun."

The water monster tilted its head, and the green objects Sorun assumed were its eyes thinned a great amount for a brief moment. And then it went back to normal.

"Was that, like, a smile? I don't even know." With a sigh, Sorun turned back to the pond. *"What am I even doing?"* he wondered as he tossed another stone in the water. *"I screwed up, got killed without taking Eggman with me. Now I'm here, wherever here is, and he's out there doing his usual thing."*

It still sat with him poorly, utter failure. It was a level of disappointment he'd never had the misfortune to feel before, and as such it was a completely foreign experience. And past all that was the anxiety. How were the others back in New Mobotropolis doing? Were they okay? How were they handling his death? Had he absolutely messed up by not killing Eggman, thereby dooming the world, or had his actions been significant enough to avoid that fate?

With questions like these sitting in him, it was hard to not worry. But he didn't really know how to proceed from here, or even what his current state of being was. Was he a ghost? A spirit? Was this some kind of great beyond? It couldn't have been Mobius from how the sky looked. So where was he?

"Hm?" He felt something that drew his eyes downwards. To his delight, he'd finally managed to find a relatively flat stone. He held it up, and after squinting his eye to aim at the pond, he let the stone loose.

It sunk just as quickly as the rest of the stones.

"I give up," Sorun groaned out as he rose up into a standing position. He brushed his hands over the sides of his tattered white coat, and then turned around.

He'd cried out in surprise and fallen back-first into the pond when he turned to see a pair of bright blue eyes fill his vision.

A splash was heard as Sorun's backside fell into the shallow end of the pond. At the very least the water was lukewarm, but it did little to assuage the annoyance Sorun felt when he heard a gurgle from the water monster that sounded suspiciously like a deep-sounding chortle. Sitting down in the pond with the water up to his waist, Sorun gave the water thing a glare before looking to the left at whoever- oh god it was an echidna.

"No, not another one, please..." Sorun moaned out in a defeated tone. His body had gone completely limp and he'd almost fallen completely into the pool before he'd extended a hand to catch himself.

"Um... sir...?" A soft, feminine voice drew Sorun's attention forwards, at the echidna standing at the edge of the pond in front of Sorun. "Are you okay?"

She certainly looked like a strange echidna, at least compared to the ones Sorun had seen. Her dress was strange. Old and tribal-like, almost. She was a light orange, too, as opposed to the normal red he saw in echidna. Her head flesh-extensions things were adorned with all sorts of makeshift accessories, and her bright eyes looked down at Sorun with a worried expression across her face. Her whole

body was hunched forwards in a way that suggested concern over him.

He would have considered the gesture sweet if it was anybody else, but seeing as she was an echidna, he couldn't help but be a bit wary.

"Considering I'm pretty sure I'm dead, not really," Sorun had sighed out as he stood up. On second glance, he wasn't so sure if he needed to be worried about her. Echidna or not, she did seem genuinely worried over him. So he'd give her a chance. "Thanks for the concern," he added as he stepped out of the pond and sat back down next to the water monster.

The orange echidna gave him a short nod, and then got down on her knees at Sorun's right side, her eyes still trained on his face. Sorun was about to ask why she was staring at him before he felt a strange, crawling sensation. He looked to his left, and then saw something that had made Sorun do a double-take. The three watery tentacles on the monster's head were extending over to Sorun and running themselves over the wet areas on Sorun's body. He watched, and even felt, as the moisture was absorbed from the wet spots, and then put together that the thing was helping to dry him off.

"Oh." Sorun blinked as the tentacles receded back behind the creature's head, and then gave it an appreciative nod. "Thanks... Ccccarrllll...?"

"Chaos."

"Hm?" Sorun made a small hum as he turned back to the echidna. "What about it?"

She gently shook his head. "No, I mean him." Her eyes briefly flicked to the water thing, and then looked back at Sorun. "His name is Chaos."

"Ahh." Weirdly coincidental name given everything, but whatever, he supposed. He almost went as far as to comment on it before he

noticed the orange echidna girl was still staring at him. "Hi...?"

It was hard to place the look on her face. She seemed incredibly inquisitive but confused at the same time. Maybe even a bit fearful from how soft and gentle her face looked. It was enough that Sorun felt oddly calm just looking at her as she looked him up and down, her confusion only increasing the more she looked at him. Finally, she looked right back into his eyes and asked a single question. "What are you?"

"Confused."

She'd blinked at the answer. "N-no, I mean *what* are you?" she repeated. "You... remind me of the residents of that city. Station Square, I believe it was called?" She reached forwards and gently took some of Sorun's hair into her hands to examine it. The unexpected contact had made Sorun flinch a little. "But you look different, and this color is... strange, for one who seems so young."

"... Wait, why is it still white?" Sorun suddenly thought as he looked at his own hair. Indeed, it was still a pure white color. *"I would have thought it'd revert back to black. What's goin' on?"*

The white hair was a sign he still had his powers, if not just Devil's Body. But... that'd couldn't be, could it? He was dead, wasn't he? Was he? He didn't know, not in this state he was in. He didn't know if he was some ghost, or if he'd been transported somewhere, or some third thing he was unaware of. He didn't know anything about what was going on.

He figured he may as well ask.

"I'll tell you if you answer me first," Sorun offered. He paused when he noticed the echidna girl was still examining his hair, and with a small sigh he reached forwards and gently grabbed her wrists. "Hey, come on."

"Oh! My apologies." The girl grew a sheepish look as she pulled her hands back and looked to Sorun's eyes. "I just have never encountered one of your kind that is so strange. Even your height being similar to that of a Mobian's is unusual."

"Of all the things you had to point out, it had to be that...?" Sorun muttered out as he looked to the side, feeling his shattered pride take yet another hit. "Listen," he said as he looked back to the echidna, "I'm, like... super lost. In all aspects of everything. I'll tell you all about me, but first I gotta know what's going on."

She gave him a nod. "Of course. You must be dreadfully confused about your current circumstances. I would be happy to explain everything to you."

"Great, cool." With a sigh, Sorun tiredly rubbed a hand across his face as he looked around. "For starters, uh... where is here, exactly?" he asked. "It looks like a Chao Garden, but, like... spiritual? I don't know how to describe it."

A small, soft giggle left the girl. "You're much closer to the truth than you think." One of the Chao had wandered near the echidna girl. She'd picked it up with a smile and then placed it in her lap, and then began to slowly stroke its head as she continued to address Sorun. "This place is a sanctuary whose sole purpose is to contain the god of destruction, Chaos, as well as the seven Servers. You have met them already."

"..." With a face as calm as stone, Sorun turned back to his left, towards Chaos. The supposed god of destruction gave him a small wave. "'Sup, man," he quietly said before turning back to the echidna. "The Servers?" He glanced down at one of the Chao that was in her lap. "The... seven Chao here?"

She gave him a nod. "Yes, that's correct. For reasons that are not entirely clear to me, these seven Chao are strongly linked to the Chaos Force, so much so that their capacity for power is greater than that of the fabled Chaos Emeralds."

Again donning his stony, neutral expression, Sorun continued to stare down at the Chao, and then glanced around at all the other Chao scattered around. As far as he could tell they all just looked like everyday, ordinary Chao, like the ones he'd seen on Mobius. Nothing special at all was jumping out at him, asides from the fact they were all in this weird place.

"I know Chao are kinda close with the Chaos Force, so... I guess that's believable," he muttered out as he turned back to the orange Mobian. "Wouldn't be the weirdest thing ever."

Her blue eyes brightened up a bit, as if in interest. "Oh! You know some about Chao, then?"

Sorun shrugged. "A little. I took one as a pet, tried to do some research on them so I knew how to take care of him." He blinked in realization. "Oh, man, I hope Cream's feeding Virgil." He'd almost forgotten he'd left him with her. He severely doubted she'd neglect him, though. He already known she was responsible when he met the rabbit girl.

But him suddenly remembering Virgil right then and there made Sorun sag a bit when he realized that his former pet Chao was just one more person he'd never get to see again. His first pet ever. It brought him some comfort knowing he'd left him with somebody actually capable of looking out for him, probably more capable than he himself had been, but he couldn't help but wonder how he'd take his death. Probably as bad as everybody else.

"Virgil?" the echidna girl echoed, followed by her making a small laugh. "That's a rather funny name to give a Chao."

"Yeah, well, he was a rather funny Chao," Sorun said. "He evolved into a... pretty startling form for me." He turned his head to the side. "I don't really know how to describe it. He... evolved to look like something only I should know about. I know for a fact he could only turn into what he did *because* of me, but I still can't really grasp why he ended up looking like that."

"Chao are very mysterious creatures." Another one of the Server Chao flew up onto the echidna's shoulder. She began to lightly scratch under its chin, giving the small creature a loving smile, while the Chao itself nuzzled against one of her dreadlocks. "To form a bond with somebody is to imply that somebody is a person that Chao truly loves and cherishes. The forms they take can often be influenced somewhat by those they form bonds with, as well as serve to strengthen their bond to the Chaos Force. It can be seen as a source of strength for the Chao in that regard."

"Loves and cherishes? You haven't met Virgil," Sorun said with a small scoff and shake of his head. The Mobian girl gave him a curious look as a result, though this was ignored by Sorun as he glanced around the Chao Garden. "You said this place is a sanctuary?"

"Yes. Specifically, this is a separate zone entirely than the one inhabited by Mobius. It resides within the Ancient Onyx. A... special artifact," she added when she saw confusion cross Sorun's features. "I remember it resembling a Chaos Emerald."

Slowly, Sorun nodded in half-understanding. "Dimension in a rock, sure," he muttered under his breath. "Why is this place here? Why are the Chao and Chaos here?"

A sad look crossed over the girl's features. She reached up to pick the Chao off her shoulder and set it down on the ground, and then turned back to Sorun before answering. "In the past, many had tried to take advantage of the Servers in order to abuse their power," she explained to him. Her voice had grown somewhat gloomy halfway through the explanation. "Chaos is a being charged with protecting the seven Servers, though the power he wields can prove to be... catastrophic. It was just recently a valiant group of Mobians had assisted me in securing Chaos and the Servers away from the world when the Servers were threatened and Chaos had run amok."

"It wasn't with the help of somebody named Sonic, was it?" At the girl's eyes widened and an instant nod, Sorun made a hum. "Yeah, I

know him. I think he made an offhand comment about this once, but I don't really remember that well." He pointed at her. "And who are you?"

"My name is Tikal." She introduced herself by slightly bowing her head in Sorun's direction. "I am simply an echidna who chose to look after Chaos and the Servers." She looked past Sorun's shoulder, over at Chaos who had been silently observing the pair throughout the entire conversation. "Chaos is truly a peaceful creature, but he can be overprotective of the Servers and loses control far too easily. I reside here with him and the Servers to keep them company and ensure Chaos remains at peace."

"Really, now?" Sorun glanced to the side at the rest of the Chao Garden. "Don't it get lonely here? Or at least boring?" he asked as he turned back to Tikal. "I mean, are you even alive?"

She shook her head. "Strictly speaking, no. My physical form was sacrificed hundreds of years ago so I could remain with them. But I don't mind," she said, making Sorun's face bloom in surprise. "I'm content with spending time here with them. I've always loved Chao, you see," she added with a small smile as she looked off to the side at some of the Chao. "Life here is peaceful and quiet. That's all any of us that reside here truly desire."

"If you're happy with it, I suppose," Sorun mumbled with a shrug. It was beyond his comprehension how somebody could spend centuries in a place like this and be happily content with it, but everybody had their own tastes, he guessed. There was *some* allure to it, he would admit. Living in utter peace, even if it was a quiet place like this, and with the company of a weird water monster and some Chao. He didn't completely get it, but he could somewhat see what she was getting at.

Wasn't anything he could ever commit to, but more power to her.

Still, it answered some of his questions, like where he was and who they all were, but not how he got here in the first place. Or even what

his current status could be labeled as. He figured he should ask that next, and maybe introduce himself in the process.

"Well, thanks for telling me all that," Sorun thanked, causing Tikal to give him a smile and a nod. "My name is Sorun. I... guess I died."

Tikal's smile lowered drastically at that. "Yes, I was afraid this was so," she admitted. "You did not have a physical form when I found you. You were a spirit, much like I am."

"And where did you find me?" Sorun pressed.

"Simply put, you were just... floating." Tikal's face furrowed a bit in concentration as she attempted to explain. "I'm unsure how to be completely clear about this. You... did not travel to the great beyond, to the Chaos Force that links every and all living beings in the cosmos. When one linked with the Chaos Force dies, that is the destination their soul is bound for. I myself am an exception due to my relationship with the Servers, but this is a uniform rule that every being should follow." She gave Sorun a curious look. "But yet you... you did not go to the Chaos Force. I found your soul wandering, seemingly lost. You radiated so much energy that it would have been hard to miss you, really, despite the vast distances between us. So I'd... sung a prayer, to try and draw you towards me. Your soul followed my song and you ended up here."

"I don't remember any of this," Sorun muttered out with a shake of his head. "I remember dying, then..."

Blackness. Infinite, vast void. Nothingness, endless expanse, isolation, loneliness, insanity-

Sorun roughly shook his head, startling both Tikal and Chaos. "I... remember dying," Sorun finished with a small, shuddering breath. "And then I woke up here."

"Are you alright?" Tikal seemed to take note of the way Sorun's breathing had increased by a bit, and the way his eyes had grown a

bit vacant. She'd reached across between them to grasp at one of Sorun's hands with both of hers, which snapped Sorun out of his funk and caused him to look the echidna in the eyes. "You seem unwell. Is there something I can do to help?"

"N-no, I'm fine. Thank you." Somewhat awkwardly, Sorun untangled his hand from Tikal's and, somewhat abashed, turned away. "I'm fine," he whispered out under his breath.

The look on Tikal's face suggested she didn't believe him all completely. Nevertheless, she still pulled back away from him. "If you're sure. Please tell me if anything comes to mind for me to help."

"Mm." It was kind of her to offer, and Sorun deeply appreciated it, even if he wouldn't say so. Tikal was already quickly approaching his list of echidna he actually liked, which, even with her, was a small list compared to all the ones he detested. She must have been one of the good ones. She had to at least have the patience of a saint if she chose to reside in this place of all places forever, peaceful as it was.

"But still," Tikal continued, breaking Sorun's thoughts, "I can't figure out why it was your soul was lost like that."

"I don't know. Me not having a natural link to the Chaos Force might have something to do with it," Sorun suggested.

"Huh?" Tikal blinked once, then twice, and then gave Sorun an odd look. "No, that's... quite impossible, Sorun," she denied with a shake of her head. "Even though most beings have such a weak link they gain no abilities from it, every single lifeform in the cosmos is intrinsically linked to the Chaos Force. Nothing alive can exist without a link."

"I mean, that's not necessarily true. I know an AI that's quite alive, and I doubt she was made with a link to the Chaos Force, even if she's able to draw and use Chaos energy. Kinda... like me, huh." Sorun blinked his eyes in mild realization. "Anyway," he continued, shaking his head for getting off-topic, "it's completely possible. I'm

not even from this zone- er, Mobius' zone. I'm from a different one entirely where nothing has a link to the Chaos Force since none of that stuff exists there." He made a sigh and looked off to the side. "We just evolved differently, I guess. Different environmental factors creating a species independent of Chaos energy due to a lack of it in our universe or something along those lines, I don't know, I'm not a biologist, but it's the best explanation I can think of. Maybe my home universe was a freak accident when it was created. All I know is that it's unique in that it's not touched by Chaos energy."

"But... you yourself possess Chaos energy," Tikal argued as she looked towards Sorun's chest. "To be quite honest with you, the amount I feel radiating from you is... it's quite staggering, Sorun. Forgive me if this sounds impudent, but I can hardly imagine how somebody who feels as powerful as you could die so young."

"It's not my Chaos energy," Sorun corrected her. "It's from Chaos Emeralds I absorbed. Don't have my own link, so my body made an artificial one by absorbing more and more energy. Each Emerald I absorbed strengthened that artificial link and gave me more powers, but... well, like I said. My species didn't evolve to handle this stuff, Tikal, so it got to a point where I just burned out and died." Tikal's eyes had softened in sorrow while Sorun rose a hand to his face. "I'm not sure why I still seem to have those powers, though," he confessed. "I'm a spirit now, aren't I? This isn't the physical body that absorbed all the Emeralds. So why do I still appear to have the powers...?"

Was it a fluke of some kind? Had the power of the Emeralds transferred with him in this spirit form? Was he still linked to his physical body that still contained the seven Emeralds? What was even the state of his corporeal body? How long had he been away from it?

Too many questions, and he didn't have a single answer to any of them.

"I still find it difficult to believe," Tikal said with a small shake of her head. "To think a whole species could survive without a link to the Chaos Force... how could life not supported by the Chaos Force ever exist?"

"Couldn't tell ya. At this point I'm pretty sure I'm just running on pure spite and vitriol," Sorun said. "Humans are cool like that."

Tikal made a small frown, evidently not approving of Sorun's words. "Don't say such harsh things about yourself. You seem like a truly wonderful person, Sorun."

"Yeah, you haven't known me for long," he breathed out as he looked away from her. He made one final glance around the Chao Garden, sighed, and then turned back to the echidna. "Alright, here's what I'll do. We got a lot of time and nothing better to do with it, so... I'll just go ahead and tell you how I wound up here."

So he ended up telling Tikal and Chaos everything.

No detail had been spared. Every event that had transpired from the moment he was pulled to Mobius to his death, his feelings, his thoughts on it all, everything down to every minutia of detail to the best of his describing ability. It felt like he'd been there for hours explaining it all to them. For all he knew it probably was hours. Might have been a whole day, even.

It felt strange, reliving it all again, going through all those memories. The good times, the bad times, the happiness, the sadness. All of it. All the nostalgia that had hit him, him feeling good when they'd reached points in the story he'd been happy, or him being angry and sad... well, during a majority of the story. From him and the Freedom Fighters to Aurora and Athair and the Emeralds to Eggman and all those fights to everything in between. The bonds he made with everybody, his regrets, lingering desires. He couldn't help but feel a sense of longing throughout the entire thing on top of it all. Almost like he actually missed those times and wanted to return to them.

Well, of course he wanted to return to being alive, but going back to all that? The fighting and the stress that came with him risking his life all time? He'd hated all that, but everybody around him, his friends... he didn't know. Somehow they all made it worth it, if just to be near them all. To be near people he could just relax and be at ease around, be himself without having to worry or think too hard all the time, to just... go with the flow and live. People he'd laughed with, fought with, bled with, liked... really liked in one case.

He realized pretty early on in the story that he wanted to return to them. If only returning to life were so easy...

"And then I screwed it all up and missed," Sorun finished off as he stared towards the pond in the middle of the Chao Garden, knees pulled up to his chest. "He got away, and I was left there to die. Alone. Just me propping my own dying body up on a wall so I could see the sky and sun one last time. I don't know why I did that, I... I guess I just wanted to look at something pretty before I died instead of a metal floor. And the only thing I can remember that kept looping over and over in my head is just... failure, y'know?" He sighed, shook his head, and ran his hand through his white hair. "Had one goal, gave everything up for that goal, but in the end I couldn't accomplish it. I mean, I knew it was a long shot going in, because come on, some random guy like me taking out somebody like Eggman probably wasn't gonna happen even with all my powers, but I still *hoped* , Tikal." He threw his hand up and let it fall to his side. "But I guess hope and powers wasn't enough to cut it, 'cause I messed up, and now I'm dead and left wondering if everything I did was enough to save the future or if I failed so bad everybody's gonna suffer because of it." He looked to the side at Tikal. "What am I supposed to do with that? Tikal?"

When he looked over at the orange echidna sitting next to him, Sorun was greeted to a sight that completely shocked him. She was crying. Not loudly; she was just sitting there, shoulders shaking as she quietly sobbed. Tears kept flowing out of her eyes only to stain the orange fur beneath them.

"H-hey, Tikal, come on..." This was too awkward to watch. He grew uncomfortable enough at seeing someone sad, but seeing somebody cry their eyes out in front of him was proving to be too much. He was already struggling with dealing with his own emotions. He couldn't handle feeling bad for her on top of feeling bad for himself. "Tikal, please don't cry."

"I-I'm sorry, Sorun, I'm just... I'm so..." She sniffed, wiped away some of her tears only for more to flow out, and then she looked up at him with glossy eyes. "I just don't know what to say. To have been taken from your home against your will just to fight in a war-"

"I mean you're making it sound worse than it... well I guess that's kinda what happened, yeah, but-"

"And the nerve of those two echidna!" She exclaimed loudly, making Sorun jump slightly. He thought that she tried to look angry, but she seemed so mild-mannered that, if anything, Tikal just looked even more sad. "To have done such a vile thing and use you like... like an item! For you to have lost your life in that way... you never had a say..." She had to tilt her head down when the tears became too much. "I'm so sorry, Sorun... I'm so, so sorry this happened to you..."

"Why is she taking this worse than I am?" It was a strange sensation, seeing somebody bawling their eyes out over sympathy for *him* of all people. There'd been some tears on his part on his journey, sure, not many, *a few* at most, practically a negligible amount, but they'd been made in silence alone where nobody could see him and only half the time he'd been cutting himself with a magic sword because of it. And then here Tikal was, crying her entire heart out. On his behalf. *"For crying out loud,* I'm *the one that died..."*

It was so bizarre that all Sorun could do was stare in silence. So strange and peculiar. He felt annoyed at her saying sorry over and over. He wanted to correct her and say none of this was her fault, maybe try and comfort her in some way, but the sight before him was so strange he couldn't even think to move.

"U-uh... Tikal, really, it's fine-"

She'd suddenly moved towards him in a burst of speed that... okay, admittedly he could have dodged with ease, but he was so bewildered by what was happening the thought to move hadn't even crossed his mind. But then the orange echidna had wrapped her arms around him in a hug. His thoughts couldn't even form coherent words as he looked down and saw Tikal crying into his chest. She'd probably been in that state for a good thirty seconds before he managed to get words out.

"Oi, oi, oi, c-c'mon, Tikal, this is a bit unnecessary...!" He saw some shadows on the ground shift as something behind him moved, as well as the sound of water quietly sloshing. He looked behind him and saw that Chaos was leaning in closer and closer to Sorun's back with his arms outstretched. He knew immediately what he was going for. "No, wait, man, come on you're wet-"

It was too late. Chaos hadn't listened to Sorun at all. He'd latched onto his back and wrapped his liquid arms around Sorun, trapping him in the middle of two beings hugging him. He could have escaped, he realized, but not without hurting either of them. So with a large sigh he resigned to his fate and just sat there with an uncomfortable look on his face.

"... It's all wet." The moisture from Chaos was beginning to seep into his clothes. Spirit clothes? He didn't even know anymore. The Server Chao that usually meandered about saw what was happening and joined in for the hug, the little creatures either latching onto Tikal, Chaos, or Sorun himself.

They wouldn't stop, either. Tikal kept holding onto him and crying on him. Chaos and the Chao kept hugging him. Sorun just continued to sit there wishing he was anywhere but there at the moment.

The hug actually did feel quite nice. There was something about it... he wasn't quite sure. The feeling of safety and warmness of it,

despite all the dampness. Knowing these beings were sympathetic of him to the point of tears. Seeing them like this, knowing he himself could get overwhelmed by his own emotions and to have nothing bad happen as a result, it... made it so tempting to cry right there along with Tikal. To finally let it all out.

He didn't, because he absolutely refused to cry in front of her. But he came a bit too close to crying for comfort. To the point that most of his time was spent sitting there keeping up that awkward face while fighting back the urge to cry, which in itself made time pass even slower for Sorun as he waited for this strange torment to end.

Finally, Tikal's crying seemed to calm down. Full-on crying had devolved to small hiccups and sniffles, and thankfully the tears had ended. He was still wet everywhere from Tikal's tears to Chaos' moistness, but at least he wasn't getting any wetter on his front side. So when Tikal finally seemed to calm down, Sorun placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Are you okay?" he softly asked her. "You... you can let go now if you want." He managed to make it sound like he didn't want her to let go, but on the inside half of him was begging for her to release him while the other half was hoping she'd keep clinging on for a little bit longer. That part of him didn't want the comfort her hug brought to go away yet.

Conflicting internal emotions aside, she had released him and moved back a bit. The Chao had jumped down from all of them and began to surround the group of three in a circle. Chaos, too, let go of Sorun, and much to the Earthling's thanks the moisture that had leaked from him to Sorun had left along with Chaos. The water monster went to sit down next to Tikal, who herself was drying off the remainder of her tears.

"I-I'm... I'm sorry for that, Sorun," Tikal apologized as she looked back up at him. Her eyes were still wet and a bit red in the corners. "I just feel so terrible for you... nothing like that should ever happen to any person. Is there anything we can do to help you?"

"Can you bring me back to life?" When both she and Chaos had stilled, Sorun made an incredibly small, wry grin. "Just joking," he said. "... Seriously though, can you?"

He couldn't say he was too surprised to see Tikal shake her head, but it didn't make him any less disappointed. "I'm afraid not. I've some moderate abilities, but nothing that could do something like that."

"Eh, don't worry about it, then. You've done plenty," Sorun assured her.

Tikal didn't seem very satisfied by that answer, but she seemed to understand regardless. So, still giving Sorun a sad look, she asked, "What are you going to do now?" She looked down at the grass, and then began to absentmindedly tap at one of her knees. "You could... stay with us here, if you so desired, Sorun. I would never cast a poor soul like you out, and, well... you seem a pleasant fellow." She glanced up at Chaos. "I know that Chaos has already taken a liking to you."

Another gurgle left the water monster as he looked at Sorun. He'd tilted his head and narrowed his solid, green eyes again for a second before righting himself. Another smile, Sorun supposed.

"That's generous of you, Tikal, but... there's something I want to do." With a small sigh, Sorun held his left hand out. "If my hair is still white, if I do in fact still have my powers, then... I should still have this, shouldn't I...?"

He'd barely even had to think of it before it happened. In a small shower of blue particles Yamato appeared in his hand. Same black scabbard with a dark blue ribbon tied around it. Same blue, scaly handle with white wrapping. Same strange dark blue and gold guard.

The Yamato. As far as he was concerned, aside from when it competed with a large amount of Chaos energy that cancelled its abilities out, its power to separate anything truly was absolute.

Anything from physical items to space and time to concepts. The one power out of all the others that had so much potential. Potential that was only possible because his heart specifically shaped a Chaos Emerald, an item with an unlimited capacity for power, into this blade.

Did that still hold true even while he was dead...?

When he looked back up, he saw both Tikal and Chaos were looking down at the blade. Tikal had a cautious look as she warily eyed the blade, and Chaos... Chaos was actually bristling at the sight of it. Sorun could tell from the way his posture was just slightly hunched, like he was getting ready to attack the sword itself.

"Is... that the sword you mentioned, Sorun...?" Tikal nervously asked. "The one from the... what was the term... that game?"

"Y-yeah, the Yamato." Sorun nodded at the pair and lowered the sword onto the ground. *"Them too, huh? Why does the sword always freak people out?"* Sorun wondered. *"It's demonic in nature, but it's also just a facsimile. A perfect replica made from a Chaos Emerald. Not the real sword from the games. But it's so close that I have to wonder if it even matters... or just how much of that demonic nature got translated when my heart made this."*

It's not as if the sword had ever done anything diabolic in the games' stories. It'd been used to sow incredible amounts of chaos, perhaps, but only when it had been wielded by those with that intent. At the end of the day, it was just that. A tool. A weapon. A horrifyingly powerful one, maybe, but still a weapon.

Tentacles escaping from beneath the white wrapping, eye in the blade, blood and screaming-

It was just a sword.

"I never did figure out that 'true potential' bit," Sorun mused. *"But maybe I'm wrong about that. It was more like... Nero fused it with his*

arm and used it as a focus for his powers, and Urizen seemed to be able to fuse it with himself and use it as a focus for his powers, so maybe that's it. It's a focus for amplifying demonic power as well as everything else it can do. But I don't have any demonic power. I'm human. But... it doesn't use demonic power. It uses Chaos energy, even if it emulates demonic energy.

"So why was Enerjak so scared when he saw this?"

"..."

"I'm overthinking this," Sorun decided. *"It's just a sword. A sword with powers. That's all it is."*

"Guys, it's fine. You don't have to freak out over this," Sorun called out in an attempt to put Tikal and Chaos at ease. "It's only a sword. I need to use it for something."

His words did manage to calm them both down. Chaos seemed to be more at ease from his body language, and Tikal had taken a calming breath before nodding at Sorun. "What are you going to do?" the echidna asked him.

Sorun stood up to his feet. "In the lore of the games, this thing could cut portals between dimensions," he explained to her. "I know I can use it to make portals and teleport around, but I gotta wonder..."

"You intend to try and use your sword to make a portal from here to Mobius?" Tikal guessed. When Sorun nodded in confirmation, she made a small hum. "Are you sure that is safe?"

Sorun shrugged.

"That gesture doesn't fill me with confidence, Sorun."

"Yeah, but what's the worst that can happen? I die?" With a scoff, Sorun grasped the handle of the katana with both hands. *"Just focus in on your desire to go to a specific location. That's how I've always*

been getting around," he thought. *"Shouldn't be too hard. It's not like this is a separate universe entirely; it's more like a pocket dimension inside of the dimension Mobius is in. At least that's how Tikal made it sound if this whole place really does exist inside of a physical object somewhere on Mobius. Just need to cut a way out to New Mobotropolis..."*

Would it work? He didn't know. Did he have a plan on what he was going to do if it did work? None whatsoever. But he figured doing something was better than nothing, and while Tikal may have had the mental fortitude needed to spend an eternity here, he didn't.

And besides. He wanted to see the others again. He wanted to see Nicole.

To his surprise making the portal had come easy. He'd simply done the same thing he'd always done when he made a portal somewhere. The cuts quickly and cleanly made, and seconds later a portal was floating there right in front of Sorun.

"... Wow, that was shockingly easy," he mumbled to himself. He looked back at Tikal and Chaos, looked at the portal, and then looked back at the pair. "So, uh... I'm just gonna go ahead and head out," he told them. "Might, uh, might come back later. Might not. Guess we'll see."

"What is it you hope to find on Mobius?" Tikal asked him.

Sorun sighed. "Honestly? I just want to check on my friends and make sure they're okay," he said. "That said I don't even know what's gonna happen to me when I walk through that. But I need to go."

"I understand." Tikal offered him a small smile. "Should you desire to return, we will always be here. I wish you safe travels, Sorun, and hope for the best."

Her, Chaos, and the Chao surrounding them all gave Sorun a wave. He was a bit taken back by the gesture, but soon after he gave them

all a small smile and a two-fingered salute.

"It's been an experience, guys. You're all real great. Seeya around." And with that, he turned back towards the portal. *"Got no clue what's waiting for me on the other side of this, but I can't just stay here. Too many questions, too many worries. I gotta know for certain or I'll never sleep again. If I even need sleep in this state..."*

And so, without any further hesitation, he stepped on through the portal.

"AAAHH- oh, hey, that wasn't so bad at all."

Walking through the Yamato-made portal was... the exact same as always, as it turned out. Little more than a brisk walk through a hole cut through space. As he shut the portal with the katana before dispelling it, Sorun couldn't help but marvel at how easy the experience as a whole had been. Or where he'd ended up.

New Mobotropolis, in the middle of one of the sidewalks. It looked the exact same as he remembered it. Same off-white houses and buildings, same trees and grass everywhere. Daytime, mid-afternoon it looked like if not late morning. Sky was clear and sunny, and Mobians were walking about freely chatting with each other.

"Alright, everything seems good so far," Sorun mumbled, a bit surprised at how peaceful everything looked. "Kinda weird nobody's paying any interest to me, though."

After looking around for a brief bit, Sorun came upon the sight of a Mobian sitting on a nearby bench. Old-looking fellow, an owl if Sorun had to guess. He was reading a newspaper, but otherwise didn't so much as look up when Sorun stepped in front of him.

"Hello, mister? Can we please talk for a second?" Sorun politely asked. The Mobian ignored him completely and turned a page in his

newspaper. "Sir?" He began to frown a bit at being ignored. "Hey, man, come on, I'm trying to talk to you."

Still nothing. Making a dissatisfied hum, Sorun leaned closer to him.

"Dude. Homie. Come on." Even when he began snapping his fingers in the owl's face he didn't look up at him. Didn't even so much as blink in response. This caused Sorun to make a frustrated growl and swipe at him. "For fuck's sake, would you just-!?"

His hand passed right through the owl's face. It been startling enough that Sorun had jumped back in surprise, while the Mobian didn't even seem to notice the hand that had phased harmlessly through his face. After getting over his initial surprise, Sorun carefully stepped back in front of the owl and, slowly, reached his hand back out to poke him in the face.

Nothing. He felt nothing. His hand completely passed through the owl's face, like his own hand was some sort of projection. Sorun tried everything from swiping his hand through his face to poking his eyes, but no matter what he couldn't garner a reaction from the owl, who only continued to read his newspaper. Huffing out a breath, Sorun stepped back from the owl and continued glancing around. Everyone continued to ignore him just like the owl Mobian.

"Right. Still dead," Sorun muttered. "Man, it's the end of 'Dragon's Dogma' all over again. Nobody can see me, but I can still see and hear everything." He rose his hand up to look at it. "I guess spirits like me can't interact with... what would it even be, the physical realm or whatever? World of the living? Ah, I don't know."

Disappointing, but at least he could still walk around and witness things. Wasn't a total loss if that was the case. The fact he couldn't even interact with objects put a hamper on his mood, but there was nothing he could do to help it. Honestly, he was thankful enough he was even able to do this much. He'd all but figured he'd be gone for good after dying.

"Well, I guess I'll have to hold off on haunting Antoine," Sorun sighed as he lowered his hand back to his side. "What to do, what to do... oh, yeah, I guess I should go see how my body's doing. Wonder what they did with my corpse?"

Chapter 54

Recursion Error

Episode 54- The post-life experience

"Well, ain't this just depressing to see."

Any good civilization needed a way of disposing corpses, since just leaving bodies in the streets wasn't very conducive towards promoting public hygiene. Or basic respect and decency. To that end, at the very least you needed a morgue to store the things. As far as Sorun knew there wasn't a morgue in New Mobotropolis, but there was a hospital. And more often than not they had a morgue built-in to store corpses for disposal.

Enter him phasing through and walking through walls to live out his fantasy of being a ghost as he searched around the hospital before he found the morgue in the basement. Little room, had some tables, some shelves and cabinets full of various tools Sorun didn't recognize. The backmost wall in the room had a small row of corpse cabinets, the ones with the small metal beds that slid out of the wall locked behind small, metal square doors. Most of them were closed. Except one, that had its bed extended outwards. It had a body lying on it.

Sorun's body.

He didn't really know what Mobians did with their dead. If there was a custom or something like that they followed, if they preferred burying or cremation. He didn't even think anybody in Knothole or New Mobotropolis had ever died during the duration he'd stayed in all these places since things were usually relatively alright. It somewhat surprised Sorun that they were storing his body in the morgue, but maybe they just didn't know what to do with his body. It

wasn't like he ever told them what his own personal culture decided to do with people's bodies, which was either toss them in a box and throw them in a hole in the ground or just burn them to ash. But they didn't know that. So maybe they just didn't want to be disrespectful to him by disposing of the body improperly until they figured out what to do.

"This is weird." He didn't know what to feel, seeing his own body just there. All things considered it looked shockingly intact. He didn't see any signs of decay whatsoever. If it weren't for the fact it wasn't breathing and he knew for a fact the body, his body, was dead, he'd assume it was just sleeping. "It can't have been that long ago, right? Not if the body's looking like this. Unless... the hair's still white..."

Just like his spiritual form. The hair on the corpse's head was still white. Confirmed his theory that the Chaos Emeralds and their power were still in his corpse, so maybe the reason as a spirit he still possessed those powers was that he was still connected to his body somehow. Maybe. He didn't quite know, but the fact the body's hair was white was telling enough.

"Is the regeneration still keeping the body intact even though it's dead?" Sorun wondered to himself as he examined the body. "How the hell does that make sense? Or has it just really not been that long?"

It was just so unnerving, seeing his own face lying there and dead to the world. At least somebody had done him the favor of closing his eyes.

"... Maybe I can pull a Disney miracle and just, like, crawl back inside." He had heavy doubt it would work, but it wasn't like it would hurt to try. It'd be amazing if it actually did work.

Sorun had tried a variety of positions. Matching his spiritual hand up with his body's hand, his head, he'd even tried laying down in it entirely hoping he'd just merge back into the body or something. But

nothing worked. All Sorun accomplished in doing was harmlessly phasing through his body over and over with no results.

"Yeah, this isn't working," Sorun muttered to himself. He'd taken a few steps away from his body, looking down at it as he thoughtfully stroked at his chin. He clicked his tongue while also humming in thought, and then materialized the Yamato. "Separation of concepts, huh...?" Sorun asked himself as he held the blade up. "Death's a concept, right? I dunno... kind of a stretch..."

Then again, splitting off one's own psyche to create two separate beings from the context of "separating man and devil" was a pretty vague concept, and that had been the entire plot of the fifth DMC game. And his own Yamato didn't necessarily follow all the same rules. Just the ability to separate anything.

The concept of death, though? It seemed out there, even for the Yamato.

"I mean... I guess I don't have anything to lose by trying..." Hesitantly, Sorun flipped the sword over in a reverse grip. "I got the regeneration, so it should all be fine. Plus ghosts can't die, right?" He held the sword out, with its tip pointed right at his chest. "'Least I hope they can't."

And so, he stuck the sword into himself far enough that the tip of the blade pierced through his back.

He staggered back a few steps, choking out a bit in pain from the katana he'd plunged into his own chest. Blue energy ran down the entire length of the silver blade, and at the same time, Sorun's spirit form began to flicker rapidly. He'd gasped out in surprise at the sight, and in less than a second later, both he and the sword disappeared entirely.

For around a minute at first, nothing happened. The entire room was silent, and the dead body on the table remained motionless. Another minute passed, and still nothing happened. The same was true for

the third. At the forth, the corpse's eyes widened, and Sorun took in a deep, wheezing breath as he sat up on the table.

And then with a choked gasp he fell back down on the table. His eyes closed, and his breathing halted. Some seconds later his spirit instantly popped back into existence, lying down flat on his back on the floor with his face blank and staring up at the ceiling. Some seconds passed, after which he sighed and began to stand up.

"Worth a shot," he mumbled out as he stood up to his full height. With disappointment on his face, he turned back to his corpse. "Surprised it even worked for as long as it did," he said to himself, "but I guess dead is dead. Body can't accommodate a soul if it ain't alive; not even Yamato can change that, even if it can circumvent the rules a bit." He made a small sigh as he tilted his head. "Then again, it probably only even worked for a second because my powers are keeping my body intact. The regeneration is running on automatic, healing my body from decomposition and the damage the Emeralds' power is doing to it, fueled by the infinite energy of the Emeralds... but the body's stamina is limited, it can't keep up with all the overuse, so it can't live." Groaning, he rose a hand and rubbed at his forehead. "Shit's confusing," he concluded.

Too active to cease functioning, but too dead to support life or a soul inhabiting it. As best as Sorun could guess the seven Chaos Emeralds inside the body was the only reason the body was in this state. Still powering the body with abilities even though it was dead.

"Weird it's not crumbling to pieces like Vergil was. Maybe it's because the Emeralds are a separate source of power instead of it being my own, like it was with Vergil..." Sorun mused. "Amount of energy was never the problem. Just my stamina and the damage. It was probably a good thing I got Devil's Body last after all, since the constant regeneration might have killed me out of exhaustion way sooner than I planned for... Well, no point dwelling on it, I suppose." he turned away from the body. "Intact and empowered or not, it's still dead, and I'm still a ghost." With a deep sigh, he pocketed his hands and began to walk away from his own corpse.

"Wonder how well the others are holding up?"

He decided he might as well get the worst one out of the way first.

Nicole didn't really have a "home" in the city, per se. Or more accurately, the city itself was her home since she primarily existed in its systems as a digital entity. But Sorun knew she liked to exist in her physical form as long as she wanted to, and a lot of the time she spent time in the server rooms inside the science center. Her own special spot. Her haunt.

... Maye not the best word to use given the circumstances.

"I do not picture this going well at all," Sorun thought to himself as he looked at the front of the science center building. *"Why am I...* why am I even thinking? Not like anybody can hear me," he muttered out as he began walking towards the building. "What am I even hoping to find here? Not like she'll be able to see me, hear me, even know I'm there. I'm just a ghost looking out at everybody. What's the point?"

None, really, and yet he felt himself compelled to keep moving forwards regardless for no other reason than he wanted to see her. At the same time he felt nervous and anxious at the idea of seeing her again, at seeing what possible state she might be in. It made him hesitate when he finally reached the outer wall of the science center. The trepidation of it all, of seeing Nicole again.

But his desire to see her managed to outmatch the fear of it, so he'd managed to step past the wall into the main lobby of the science center. He walked past it all immediately, going to the halls and stairways, looking for one room in particular. He'd only ever been in this building once, during the Enerjak incident, but it was enough to know the general layout. So he didn't need to spend much time finding what he was looking for.

The server room didn't look like much. It was little more than a cold room crammed with servers. At least, he assumed it was kept cold. He couldn't feel the ambient temperature while walking around as a spirit. But he didn't have to search around very far to find who he was looking for.

She was sitting on the ground with her back pressed against a large server box, with her knees pressed so far into her chest that her face was obscured behind her legs. Her arms were folded up over her knees, unmoving and more or less just hanging off of them limply. Sorun saw that the black and brown lynx had a small, black object held in her right hand. A game controller. And he recognized it as the one he always used when playing with her.

"Oh, Nicole... what a mess I've made of it all." Sorun hopped up on top of one of the nearby server boxes as he looked down at her with a sad expression. "It's all my fault, I guess. If I would have just maintained that conviction I had to stay distant with you all, you wouldn't have nearly been as broken up about me dying. But I had to go and cave in to my desires, to reach out to you and others just so I wouldn't feel so terrible all the time... look where it got us." He shook his head and turned away from her. "You worked so hard to finally have a life of your own, and all I wanted to do was make sure you and everybody else got to keep your lives. No, more than that I... just wanted to live. But I couldn't see a path forwards that let me do that. And I don't even know if I even managed to accomplish saving you all.

"I... didn't mean to be this terrible of a person, Nicole... You shouldn't be wasting your life being so upset over a pathetic nobody like me..."

The door to the server room opened. Sorun looked over in its direction, while Nicole hadn't even stirred from her spot. He watched the familiar form of Sally walk into the room, and then softly close the door behind her. She'd taken a second to just stand there, like she was trying to compose herself, before she began walking away from the door. Sorun's head slowly followed the chipmunk as she walked

further into the server room, before she finally stopped right in front of Nicole.

She didn't look all that well herself. An intensely gloomy expression was on Sally's face as she looked down at Nicole. Sorun had a hard time seeing if it was out of worry for her friend or if she was still mourning the death of another friend. He somewhat hoped for the former, but he had no way of knowing how long he'd actually been dead for. He was still going off the assumption it couldn't have been long since his body was still in a morgue, but there was no way of knowing until he heard someone say a number.

"Nicole." Sally's voice had come out as soft and sad at the same time. When the AI didn't even so much as move at Sally's voice, Sally let out a short breath. "Nicole, talk to me," she said, voice growing a bit more assertive. "Nobody's seen you for three days. Is this where you've been the whole time?"

"Three days, huh?" Sorun clicked in tongue. "Not as long as I would have thought."

After she finished speaking, Sally silently watched and waited for Nicole to move, or make a sound, or do anything. But she just continued to motionlessly sit there, with one of her hands still clutching the controller. Sally had softly sighed at the sight. "Nicole, please say something," she pleaded with her. "I'm not leaving until you do."

"... He's gone..."

The words came out quiet and broken, to a point that Sorun had flinched in anguish when he heard just how woeful Nicole sounded. Sally had displayed a similar reaction when she heard her, but it was when Nicole had picked her head up off of her legs so she could look at Sally that Sorun was forced to turn away from the sight.

She'd been crying. Her holographic form was apparently sophisticated enough she could shed actual tears down her face.

There'd been so much sorrow in her green eyes Sorun felt like he'd been slapped by one of his own Bringer Claws just from the sight. He could barely stand to be in the room when she was like this, could barely stand to exist at the moment knowing he was the reason she was like this. Him and his screw-ups and failures. It was all his fault somebody he held so dear was hurting like this.

"I know, Nicole." Sally looked off to the side as she rubbed at one of her arms. "It's... it's been hard on all of us. And I know you two were close." She glanced towards Nicole's hand. "What's that?"

Sorun palmed his face. "Goddammit, Sally, why'd you go and ask about the controller?"

"It was his," Nicole brokenly replied. She held the controller closer to her, cradling it with both hands as she looked down at it. "He refused to use the other one. He said the left stick on this controller often became stuck. It was handicap he used as an extra challenge to make games more fun for him." The barest hint of a smile crossed Nicole's features. "I was never able to consistently defeat him even when he was using this. He adapted to me no matter what methods I used. He... I... I very much enjoyed every second of time we spent with each other..."

The faint glimmer of happiness that had been on Nicole's face was wiped out in an instant. She looked sad enough to start breaking out into tears again, but instead she just continued to stare down at the controller.

"This is all I have left of him," she'd whispered out. "This and my memories."

Ah, right. He never really did have much in the way of possessions, did he? Especially after Knothole was lost. Really all he had was his clothes, and fortunately they'd all had the decency to leave those on him.

With slumped shoulders, Sally walked over to Nicole's position. She slowly slid down into a sitting position next to her, close enough that their shoulders were touching. "You two were really close, huh?" Sally asked her.

"From the moment we met he treated me as a real, living person. Not an AI. I had fun being with him, he... helped show me new aspects of life. Sometimes it felt like he had more respect for me than himself." She glanced off to the side. "I never got to properly thank him. For trusting me so much, for spending so much time with me, for everything he did for me, and for all the words he said to me. I... I'd wanted to ask him..." Her voice trailed off, after which her knees pressed in a bit closer. "It doesn't matter anymore. He's gone. Sorun's gone."

"I know. He was my friend, too," Sally said in a sad voice. "He was a bit strange, but... he was a good person, to join us even though we were the ones responsible for bringing him here. I just... can't stop thinking about what Shadow said, about what the Emeralds were doing to him," she muttered. "The fact he was with us through everything while going through all that, I... I just can't imagine."

"It's awful," Nicole mumbled. "He knew he was dying the entire time. He couldn't even tell us. He continued to kill himself more and more every time he touched an Emerald for our sake, and we never noticed a thing." Her face became more pained at the thought. "I can't understand how I never suspected anything, how I never saw how much pain he must have been in. He trusted me, Sally, confided so much to me that he never told any of you. I thought I was doing so much to help him in return by just being there for him, but... but I was never able to help him..." A few more tears slipped out from Nicole's eyes. "It hurts so much knowing how scared he must have been and knowing I did nothing to help him in all that time, Sally."

"Don't say that, Nicole. I know he enjoyed being with you just as much as you did," Sally said in her best attempt to sooth her friend. "If anything, it's my fault. He just... always looked so unwell, you know? There were so many times I thought he looked sicker and

sicker with every passing day, but he'd always play it off or just say he was tired from missions. I always took his words at face value because I never imagined he'd be lying about something like him dying." Her own eyes began to become glossy at the mere thought. "I was the one that told him about that last Emerald. I practically told him that day was his last day to be alive, and I was so happy about it. And all he did was... w-was try and get me to not feel guilty because of that promise we made that I broke. Even when he was dying he kept trying to help us." She shook her head. "He seemed so off when I told him and I couldn't figure out why until it was too late. If I'd just *known* , I... I would have tried to do something to help him. He didn't deserve this."

The odd thing was that Sorun was upset they weren't talking about all his bad qualities. How he'd lied, how he'd conspired to try and kill Eggman behind their backs. If only they'd criticize him, not make him sound like this tragic hero figure they were mourning over than it could have been something that comforted Sorun and not make him feel nearly as bad as how he felt right now watching this. But unfortunately none of these qualities seemed to even come to their minds. He may as well have been a martyr the way they were talking.

Sorun would have preferred being remembered as nothing but a liar nobody liked if this was how his death was hitting people. He regretted so much not sticking to that uncaring persona of his, of acting to be so unlikeable.

"Look at us. He gave up his life for us, and all we can do is cry over him," Sally said with a sad half-smile. "Can you imagine what he'd say if he saw us right now?"

"I can't even imagine it," Sorun mumbled out as he watched the pair.

Nicole shook her head. "What would you suggest?"

"I'm not so sure myself. I'm not saying not to mourn Sorun, but, well... we have to move on eventually," Sally told her. "Besides, I

don't think Sorun would like it if we spent too much time over him. He was a selfless person like that."

All Sorun could do was tiredly sigh and rub at his eyes.

"I don't want to just *get over* him, Sally." Nicole looked back down at the controller she clutched. "I... I miss him too much..."

Sally cast a sad glance towards her friend. She made a small sigh, reached out to gently squeeze at her shoulder in comfort, and then began to stand up. "I know, Nicole. I... know somewhat about what you're going through." She looked off to the side and began rubbing at her arm again. "I'm not gonna lie to you and say it gets easier, but... I-I'm here, you know, if you need to talk about it. You're not alone."

Nicole didn't say anything. She just continued to look down at the controller with a lost, forlorn expression, with her ears flattened against her head. It only served to make Sally a bit more downcast, after which she began to turn around.

"Just... you know where to find me if you need me," she said as she began moving away. "I'll come back and check on you later, alright?"

"... He wanted one last game with me." Nicole's words caused Sally to stop and turn back towards the lynx. Her focus was still on the controller. "Sorun. He knew he would die the next day, and he wanted to spend the last of his time with me. And I said no." Tears began falling from her face. "I shouldn't have said no. I didn't know. I'd made so many plans for after that mission, I had so much I wanted to say to him, I... I-I thought we had so much more time..."

Sally's arms sagged to her side as she looked towards her friend. "Oh, Nicole..."

"I can't watch this anymore." Sorun hopped off of the server box, walked right through Sally, and made his way towards the nearest wall. "Christ, I... I screwed it all up so badly..."

All he'd wanted to do was save them. He didn't know it would turn out this badly. He didn't know he would have failed. He didn't want any of this...

He decided to drop in on Virgil afterwards to see how his Chao was doing. It'd taken some searching around since he didn't know which house Cream and Vanilla lived in, and there were so many homes in the residential district that Sorun felt it would have taken too much time to individually search every home. He'd almost given up entirely until he'd actually found Cream. She'd been walking alongside with Amy, and they'd both had armloads of bags filled with fruits, bread, and other foodstuffs. Sorun assumed Amy had been helping Cream with groceries, and chose to follow them in the hopes it'd lead to the rabbit's home. To his luck that's exactly where they'd gone to.

Wasn't much to say about the place; it wasn't all too dissimilar to the rest of the surrounding houses. Only thing Sorun could see of note was the garden full of vegetables out in front, and even more along the sides of the house. All comprised of what looked like clay pots filled with what he assumed to be actual soil as opposed to the artificial soil the city sat on top of. Under any other circumstances he would have been amused to see the garden pots were mainly filled with carrots, though there were other vegetables growing out from them that he could see.

Another thing he could see was his Chao sitting behind one of the windows to the house. Even from out here he could see the silver crest that was on top of his head, the cylindrical horns. He saw that Virgil wasn't really looking out towards anything in particular. Just aimlessly staring, really, with a sad frown on his face. Sorun would be the first to admit Virgil wasn't exactly a happy-looking Chao regularly, but even this seemed pretty glum for him.

"Thank you so much for helping me, Mrs. Amy!" Hearing Cream's voice caused Sorun to turn his face towards the pair. The smaller rabbit girl was looking up at the pink hedgehog with a beaming smile on her face. "Mother has been terribly busy around the house, you

see, and I was worried I wouldn't be able to carry all this back by myself."

Amy mirrored Cream's own smile. "It's not a problem, Cream, don't mention it. I'm happy to help."

At first, Cream's smile had brightened up all that much more at hearing Amy's words. But then she'd turned towards her house, and she must have seen Virgil sitting at the window and staring out. It was the only explanation Sorun could think of for why her smile would lower down a bit right there. "Um, Mrs. Amy?" She looked back up at Amy. "When is Mr. Sorun coming to check in on Virgil? It's been an awful long time since I've seen him, and I think poor Virgil is starting to worry about him..."

The smile Amy wore visibly wavered, to a point Sorun flinched just by seeing it. She did her best to keep the smile up, but he'd have to be blind not to see the pain that was in her eyes. Cream, for being either too young or too innocent or both, fortunately had not seen the change in her. "O-oh, uh, Sorun, he's... I don't think he's gonna come around for a... you know, a long while," Amy tried telling her. "He's... busy with... actually, why don't I help you get all this food inside?"

"She doesn't know? I woulda thought my death would have been kind of a big thing after everything I did," Sorun mumbled to himself in confusion. He looked back towards his sad Chao sitting at the window, and then towards a now-confused Cream looking up at Amy. "Oh, did they just not tell Cream?" Sorun realized. "Yeah, guess I can't blame them. Nobody wants to be that guy that has to tell the kid somebody died. She's like, what, six? Somewhere around there?"

He didn't know the exact number, but he knew it was younger than Tails. Sure, he may have been introduced to the concept first-hand at a way younger age than even that, but those were special circumstances and humans held different values than Mobians. Even then back on Earth he didn't know anybody that'd want to willingly explain something like somebody dying to someone as young as

Cream was, so he could see why Mobians would try and steer way clear of the subject. It was practically a natural reaction. Hell, he'd probably be on the same side of the fence as them in that regard.

Whether he actually agreed with it or not was something he couldn't make up his mind about, but again, he couldn't blame 'em.

"Huh?" Cream had blinked up at Amy amidst her confusion. "But doesn't Mr. Sorun want to know how Virgil is doing?"

"I... I'll go ahead and tell him!" The fake smile that was on Amy's face almost brought pain to Sorun as he watched the display. "How's that... *nice* ... Chao been doing living with you and your mom?"

"Oh, he's been absolutely wonderful!" Cream exclaimed as the pair began walking back towards the house. The answer had been one that caused visible surprise to show on both Sorun and Amy. "He's very strong for a Chao! Sometimes he helps my mother tending to the vegetables in the garden." The front door to the house was opened. "Mother cannot stop talking about how much she appreciates..."

The rest of the conversation was lost on Sorun as the two Mobians entered the house, with the door closing behind them. He could have chosen to follow in after them, but he felt he'd heard enough. Between that and the sad-looking Chao sitting at the window, he'd heard more than enough.

"Well... at least he seems to be doing fine. Glad he actually listened to me about not terrorizing the family looking after him," Sorun said to himself. "Amy's taking it all well, too, so there's that. Either that or she's putting up a brave face for Cream. Ugh, I don't know." After running a hand over his face, Sorun turned away from the house and began walking away. "I'm regretting this more and more by the second..."

By now Sorun wasn't even sure where he was supposed to go. In fact, he didn't even know if he should even keep going on at this point knowing he was going to find more of the same: his friends being sad and Sorun being disgusted at himself for letting things devolve into such a state. He didn't know what the point was of doing this.

He was really more of in a daze than anything else by now. A sad, depressed daze.

So to that end, Sorun's feet carried him to the airfield where the aircraft was kept for some reason. If he had to guess, it was because he wanted to see Tails, and if he was anywhere, it was usually near his plane. He was a bit worried about him, about if he blamed himself for what happened with Sorun since he'd been the one to decode those coordinates on the wood tablet and had been the one to drag Sorun to this world kicking and screaming. Now he was dead as a result, and Tails, well... Sorun wouldn't know until he saw him.

When he walked into the air hangar, he immediately was drawn towards the blue biplane sitting in the center of the hangar. Near the top he saw Tails' yellow-orange body, with his front half completely buried in the plane's internals through an open hatch. Burying himself in his work, then, somewhat literally. Could be a good sign or a bad sign, but he was always somewhat of a workaholic when it came to his own projects. Could be he was trying to cope by working his thoughts away, or maybe he was completely over it and this was just business as normal for him. No way to know for sure, and it wasn't as if he could just go up to him and ask.

"Strange fate, is it not, Tails?" Sorun asked as he stepped in front of the plane. "I'm not gonna lie. I hated you at first. I tried not to, I tried seeing things from your perspective, tried putting myself in your shoes, but... it was hard." He took in a deep breath. "I... fantasized about clawing your face clean off. On the one-month anniversary of me being here. Almost did, managed to stop myself just in time since... since you were just a kid trying to save the world and all his friends. Kinda like me, I guess. How could I hate that? I guess

because I was too selfish to see past myself." Sorun paused. "I managed to find forgiveness for you eventually, and I'll admit it may have taken way longer than any decent person should have taken. But I did, somewhere down the line. Now I just hate myself more than anything because of everything I've put everyone through. I'm left wondering why the hell I was even born if this was what I was gonna wind up doing. Be some failure that did more harm than good to everyone." He turned around and leaned on one of the plane's wheels. "Things would be different if I hadn't died. Failing to kill Eggman is one thing, that's a mistake that can be fixed, but having that be my last act, leaving things like this... I just feel like I've permanently ruined something.

"But, you'll survive. You're eleven and you managed to outlast me. Not really saying much seeing how big a loser I am, but you get the idea. I just kind of hope you'll eventually forget about me, because this guilt shit is soul-crushing."

The only thing that answered Sorun was the cranking sound of a wrench tightening screws and bolts inside of the plane. He couldn't help but sigh as a result.

He'd almost walked away right there when Sorun saw a blue object zoom into his vision. He blinked in surprise, and when he opened his eyes he saw Sonic standing across from him. Looking up at the plane where Tails was while tapping his foot on the ground in an impatient manner.

"Yo, Tails!" Sonic called up. "You busy?"

"A little bit, yeah," the fox called back down, still in the plane.

Sonic sighed and shook his head. "Busy with anything *important* ?"

"Plane is important."

"Tails, come on." The hedgehog quickly ran his hand through his quills. "Your parents are starting to get worried. They've barely seen

you for the past few days. Geez, *I'm* starting to get worried. Can we just talk?"

Another sigh, this time from Tails. It came out from inside the plane as the young Mobian finally poked his head up out of the plane's innards. He looked down at Sonic, and with another sigh, he spun his two tails up and hovered up off the plane, only to slowly lower himself back onto the ground. The tails ceased rotating after his feet touched the ground, followed by Tails looking up at Sonic's face.

"What do you want?" he asked. Sorun, still leaning on the plane's wheel off to the side, couldn't help but notice how tired Tails looked. The way his eyes were slightly sunken in and darkened around the rims.

"You've been getting enough sleep, right, Tails?" Sonic asked, a hint of worry to his voice.

"Mm-hm." With a small, noncommittal hum, Tailed turned around to the plane. "I just... you know, can't stop thinking about..." Tails' voice trailed off, and without another word he began to walk towards the back of the plane.

Sonic made a sigh as he watched Tails go off. "Sorun?" he finished for him.

"Yeah." Tails stopped at the tail of the plane, and then looked up as his own two-tailed logo stamped on the side. "It's not my fault he's gone, is it, Sonic?"

"Huh?" Sonic blinked, and then opened his eyes widely. "N-no, no way! Not at all!" Shaking his head and hands in a "no" gesture, Sonic began to approach Tails' back. "Sorun, he... he... it ain't your fault, bud."

"But I'm the one that brought him here, aren't I?" Tails mumbled out while looking up at the logo. "I'm the one who built that machine with Chuck and Rotor's help. I'm the one that figured out the numbers

and opened the portal. And... and I'm the one that pulled him through that portal when he didn't want to come here." He reached up and began to run his hand along the logo. "Now he's gone and it just feels like it's my fault somehow. I mean, he was here because of me, right?"

"Tails..." Sonic stopped right behind the fox and put a hand on his shoulder. "He's not gone 'cause of you."

"... He was always off around Chaos Emeralds, you know?" Tails' voice had gone a little bit higher and at the same time quieter. "L-like when Knuckles brought us to that mountain, a-and he didn't want to touch it. The entire time back he wouldn't stop glaring at it. He and Shadow kept shouting at each other, and that's when he ran away." He made a small hiccup. "He said he didn't want to die, and I- and I told him he wouldn't..."

Sorun saw Sonic flinch back from what Tails told him as his expression grew more sad. He nearly felt the same himself seeing what was happening to Tails. This is what he'd been afraid of happening.

"Yeah. I remember when he got that second Emerald," Sonic said, making Tails freeze. "Knuckles, he... tossed it into Sorun's hands, and Sorun, he... yeah, he kept bashing Knuckles into the wall with his new arms afterwards." He'd attempted to make a small smile at the memory, though it just came out as a grimace. "I laid into him over it afterwards, told him he couldn't just attack people like that, but... I mean, I don't know if I can even blame the guy anymore if they really were taking time off his life like that. Which I guess is why he was kept from ever talking about it..." His hand slipped off of Tails' shoulder.

"I just feel bad," Sonic continued in a noticeably sadder voice, making Tails turn towards him. "It-it just doesn't sit right with me, knowing he was probably asking for help that entire time and none of us ever picked up on it. There were times he was acting weird and I just couldn't figure out why, and I- I should have *known* something

was off with him, but I didn't." His shoulder slumped downwards. "If anything it's my fault he got dragged into our problems," he said. "I'm the one that talked him into being a Freedom Fighter when he really didn't want to be one. I get where you were coming from, Tails, since... I mean it was really bad back then, wasn't it?" he asked, looking to Tails for help, who gave him a slow, sad nod in response. "A-and he did a really good job, too. Saved Antoine that one time, fought with us on all those missions, helped us with his portals, sheesh, he saved us all after Knothole... you know. He... he came back, knowing if he kept using those Emeralds they'd kill him down the line." He looked off to the side, making a sad, broken chuckle. "I just... really respect him for that, you know? But at the same time I wish he hadn't gone through with it. He shouldn't have had to die. I shoulda seen all the signs and kept him from touching any more of those Emeralds. Should have known him saying he was 'tired' all the time was more than just excuses..." Sonic made small, despondent grin. "He really pulled one over all us, huh?"

Tails didn't respond to the question, and neither did Sorun, even if it'd just end up with him talking with himself. They all just continued to stare towards one another with gloomy looks, and with Tails' eyes being just the slightest amount damp.

"I miss him," Tails finally confessed. "He was nice to be around."

"I know, bud. I do too. He kept my room tidy more than I did. Mom always liked that about him." The small joke caused the both of them to chuckle a bit, and even Sorun had cracked somewhat of a small grin in response. It faded away quickly back to the sad expressions. "It feels like Tommy all over again, and everyone else we've lost over time," Sonic said. "And it's... it's just not getting any easier for me. It's hurting more every time."

Tails made a sigh and looked at the ground. "I know what you mean," he agreed, a few tears falling from his eyes and hitting the floor. "Maybe he'll come back?"

Sonic grimaced a bit at that. "T-Tails, come on, you know better than that." Sonic looked off to the side. "Yeah, his... his body's not degrading for some reason, and it's throwing all the doctors for a loop and a half, but... he's dead, Tails." He reached up and began rubbing the side of his head. "We're still trying to figure out what we're even gonna do with his body. He never told any of us what his people do with their dead."

"But Shadow said Sorun talked with Aurora and Athair," Tails argued. "I know Knuckles said he wasn't having any luck with contacting them, but couldn't they help? They brought Knuckles back to life when he died, didn't they?"

Sorun's head snapped to Tails. "What?"

"Yeah, but that was a really specific thing," said Sonic. "And you can't tell me you actually want to ask them for help?" He crossed his arms and made a soured face. "Rubs me the wrong way, what they did to Sorun... it wasn't right..."

"I... I know. I still can't believe Athair would do something like that," Tails agreed as his ears lowered down a bit. They went right back up as he looked back at Sonic. "But Knuckles didn't even have a body to go back to and they helped him come back! Sorun's is still here, so couldn't they bring him back like they did him?"

"Fucking what?"

"Well... maybe, I don't know. I honestly don't have a clue how a lot of this Chaos stuff works," Sonic admitted with a shrug. "And like you said, Knuckles couldn't even contact them anyways even though he's been mediating or whatever he does on that island, so it's not like we can ask..."

The rest of Sonic's words were lost as Sorun stomped away from the plane and out from the hangar. He made it as far as the middle of the airfield's runway before he was forced to stop completely. He took an extremely long inhale, held it for what felt like a full minute, and then

slowly exhaled it in what was probably the most impressive form of self-control he'd ever displayed.

It did absolutely nothing to calm him down.

"Oh, so that's just a thing they can do, huh...?" Sorun's hands clenched at his sides, and they began shaking. "Bring back the dead? That's a thing you can do, huh, Aurora? Didn't think it'd be something important to mention at some point, HUH?"

Bolts of blue electricity began arcing over Sorun's entire form. His anger began to grow at an exponential rate as more and more electricity began to savagely arc around him.

"All this time, you could have done that...? I could have avoided hurting everybody like this if you'd just brought me back...!?"

He was livid. Furious. Enraged. Words alone didn't cover the sheer amount of anger that had began to well up in Sorun as he realized the implications of the conversation between Sonic and Tails he overheard.

Knuckles died once. And the Neo-Walkers brought him back to life. Meanwhile he was dead in part because of them and they'd yet to even lift a finger to help him.

"You damn echidna..." Yamato instantly appeared in Sorun's left hand. "I made her cry... over nothing? I'm dead over nothing!?"

He savagely tore the Yamato out from its sheath so quickly bolts of blue lightning shot out from the sheath. The blade cut right through the air with an angered shout, leaving a thick, blue gash hanging in the space right in front of him. In that small section of space, reality itself cracked apart like glass as a portal was forced open ahead of Sorun.

With a grunt, Sorun slammed the sword back into its scabbard. He took a breath that yet again failed to calm him, and then brushed

some of his long, white hair out from his face. The bolts of electricity arcing around him ceased once he got his breathing under control, and he opened his eyes up at the portal in front of him.

"Alright. Alright alright alright... let's not get ahead of ourselves here. If it's too good to be true..." His hands began shaking against, and his left knuckles whitened from his tight hold on Yamato. "No, fuck that, they *knew* . They knew this entire time, and they let it all happen anyway." He began stomping towards the portal. "Fine, we'll just see what they have to say for themselves. One last thing to do first..."

The second he'd crossed the portal to the other side he'd unsheathed Yamato, swiped it behind him to close it, and then slipped the sword back into its scabbard all in the same motion, his intense anger sharpening his focus and concentration. The sanctuary inside what Tikal had called the Ancient Onyx greeted him once he arrived. Both Tikal and Chaos were right there, sitting next to the pond right in front of him. Both had looked towards him with startled eyes when Sorun had appeared. Or at least as startled as Chaos could look in his case.

The sight of them and the Chao sitting around was probably the only thing that gave Sorun some semblance of mental control at the moment. He was still angry beyond words, but he was thinking straighter now, with more coherent thoughts. Thoughts that began to form questions.

Why? Why hadn't the Neo-Walkers told him they had an ability to bring the dead back to life? Why'd they keep it from him? Was there some piece of context he was missing? Was it not that simple? Did they just not like him? Was it because they didn't think he deserved it since he failed to kill Eggman? Why? Why was he abandoned, especially after everything he'd done? Had they simply *forgotten* ?

Why, why, why...?

"Sorun?" Tikal, seeing the incredibly distressed look on Sorun's face, had immediately risen up to her feet and approached his side. Chaos was not far behind her. "Y-you look awful! What happened?" she asked in clear worry.

"Tikal, I... they..." A loud *clack!* was heard as Sorun gnashed his teeth together, and he shook his head. "I can't do it. I can't stand to see everybody like this. Nicole, she... I'm not doing this. I'm done being dead."

Blue lightning began to arc around Yamato's scabbard and the sword held within. Tikal had cast wary eyes down at it, and slowly she began to look back up at Sorun. "S-Sorun, I... I do not understand..."

"I don't understand either, Tikal. I really don't." Sorun used his thumb to lift the Yamato out from its scabbard by a few inches. "But I'll get my answers yet," he said. He turned to look at her, expression relaxing just the slightest amount. "I just wanted to come and say thanks for helping me out, and to say goodbye."

His hand wrapped around the sword's handle, and slowly he began to pull it out from the sparking scabbard.

"You see, I've decided it's time I visited a couple of echidna I know."

Chapter 55

Recursion Error

Episode 55- +1 life

The only other time Sorun remembered having ever been so intensely focused was actually in recent memory. During that last stretch when he'd gone to go kill Eggman. Nothing, absolutely nothing else, registered in his very being than the goal he'd been staring at. Not the sights of the world around him, not the sounds or smells, nothing. Even his own thoughts had been solely aimed at that one objective: cut his head off.

And now, for a second time, Sorun once again had that focus. It was almost like his body had been on autopilot when he tore the portal open with his sword. He didn't recognize the world that seemed to be made of golden clouds that he stepped into. All he could think about were the two echidna that lived here. The ones that had dragged his consciousness here when he got that first Emerald.

The ones that apparently had the ability to revive the dead.

"Aurora. Athair. What the hell are you two playing at with me...?"

So now all of a sudden people could be brought back to life. It'd been that way Tails had said it, just the way he described Knuckles being revived one time being so... nonchalant. Like it was a common occurrence on Mobius. For all he knew it was, because everything fucking weird happened on that planet. And he knew Knuckles knew them, he told Sorun so himself. Would have also been nice if he'd mentioned they'd revived him at one point, but it was a moot point now.

"Sorun, please, reconsider!"

A pair of arms grasped Sorun's right and halted him. He stopped, and then turned around. He saw Tikal clinging onto his arm, having run through the portal he came from and neglected to close. She had a pleading look in her eyes.

"I just want to talk to them." Sorun pulled his arm from her. "Go home, Tikal. This has nothing to do with you."

"Then why do you feel like this?" She stepped to his side, still looking into his eyes. "I... feel so much anger, so much rage... it reminds me of how Chaos felt, when the Servers were threatened, but... this feels so much worse..."

"I just found out the same people that forced me to go through all these hoops that lead to my death might have the power to bring me back, and they said nothing about it. How am I supposed to be feeling?"

Tikal flinched back at Sorun's cold words. "I... just do not want you to do something you would regret..." she mumbled out.

By just the barest amount, Sorun's expression softened. Tikal was a caring person to be going this far for somebody she barely knew for a day, he'd give her that much. Her just appearing like that managed to calm him down just that much. "Like I said. I just want to talk," he repeated, hoping to put her somewhat at ease. "But... fine. Come along if you want. Portal's right there when you wanna go back."

He walked away before she could get a response in, though he saw her still following him from his peripheral. He didn't much care. She could do what she wanted. He just wanted to find those Neo-Walkers.

It'd taken some time walking through all the golden clouds, enough time he felt like they'd been going in circles and were lost, but eventually he spotted a large clearing of the clouds, an open spot in this place that mimicked a golden sky. He faintly saw a pair standing

off down there in that direction. And as such, he'd Tricked right in front of them.

Sorun had appeared right in front of them, hands in his pockets and a face that would have appeared completely calm if the fury in his eyes didn't give his true emotions away. Right in front of him were the exact two he was expecting to find. The same two echidna from all the way back then. An old male echidna. A younger-looking female echidna. Athair and Aurora. Aurora and Athair. Neo-Walkers.

"Yo. It's been a while," Sorun greeted in a quiet, blank voice. "You sure look surprised to see me."

Surprised they did indeed look, with their eyes so wide it was comical. Aurora even had her mouth gaping open in surprise she seemed so shocked to see Sorun standing there. Like they couldn't believe what they were looking at. It was enough that Aurora had slightly stuttered out a bit before she began speaking.

"This shouldn't be possible," Aurora had whispered out while looking at Sorun.

Sorun made a "tsk" noise. "Those ain't the words I wanna hear."

Athair spoke up next. "How... how did you manage to breach our Virtual Zone?"

"How do you think?" Sorun glanced back and forth between the two of them once. "For beings toting themselves as all-seeing gods... you're not so good at the 'seeing' part, are you?" One of his eyelids began twitching. "I've been having a lot of bad luck with echidna calling themselves gods. You two, Enerjak-" Aurora flinched at the mention of Enerjak's name, "-, it's just all so absurd. And not one of you ever made the impression of being gods to me. Just posers with powers."

Tikal chose that moment to run up to the three, and then stopped at Sorun's side, panting softly while holding her knees. The two Neo-

Walkers shifted their gazes to her while Sorun glanced to the side at her.

"Tikal-"

"You two!" The sudden shout that interrupted Sorun caused him to flinch back from Tikal, mostly from not having expected her to raise her voices like that. The other two echidna, meanwhile, grew a bit nervous as she began to stomp towards them. "What do you two have to say for yourselves!?"

Athair blinked in surprise at the younger echidna, and then squinted and leaned his head in closer to get a better look at her. His eyes then widened in realization when he seemed to recognize her. "You... you're the caretaker of the seven Servers and their protector," Athair said, causing some surprise to show on Aurora's face. "What... why are you here?" He glanced at the side at Sorun. "You're with him?"

"I saved him when I sensed his soul lost between realms," Tikal informed them. She tried to sound calm, but there was a hint of anger to her tone that made all three around her back up a bit. "He told me everything you've done to him."

At that, both the red echidna glanced at each other. Sorun felt his anger spike when they had the audacity to actually look ashamed of themselves, after which they turned back to Tikal.

"Caretaker, please try and understand our position," Aurora attempted. "We foresaw the entire world of Mobius at stake. There was no other... he was unwilling-"

"And that gave you a right to take matters into your own hands!?" she shouted at her. "He told me you'd placed a curse on him that prevented him from speaking of his ailments! You... you *used* him! A living creature with their own will and desires!"

"And what good it managed to do," Sorun drawled out, still standing behind Tikal with his hands tucked in his pockets. "I played your song and dance, got killed off by the Emeralds, and Eggman's still running around free and alive. Hope you're happy with yourselves."

"Yes, we... we know this," Athair informed them, looking down to avoid eye contact with the pair. "We were not able to view those events as they transpired, so we'd assumed the worst in that you failed."

Sorun scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Nice to know you care. And that you really are terrible at watching things from your high perch."

"We were blocked," Aurora cut in, sternly looking at Sorun. "There are many thing that are... blocked, from us surrounding you."

"Blocked?" Sorun repeated, with an air of disbelief to his voice. "By what?"

Both Athair and Aurora glanced at each other. For some reason, for just a second, they'd looked fearful. And then it was wiped away when they looked back at Sorun. "We can't tell you," Athair said in a grim tone.

"Can't tell me- you know what, fine, I don't care." Shaking his head Sorun began to walk towards Aurora. "You used me. Put that curse on me, had your pal Merlin keep tabs on me to make sure I kept dancin' to your tune. I don't even know how many times you made my heart stop with that curse." He stopped right in front of Aurora, barely any more than a nose's length away from her. "You forced me to kill myself for some cause I never signed up for."

Unlike Athair, who stood off to the side in mixtures of nervousness and shame, Aurora stared into Sorun's eyes with a steely, adamant gaze that directly competed with his furious eyes. "I forced you to do nothing," she stated, and the sheer defiance in her voice only made Sorun that much angrier. "At worst, I encouraged you. You had the ability to remove the curse yourself with that sword, and yet you

refused. *You* chose to chase the rest of the Emeralds. *You* chose to uphold the mission of saving the world. You dying was *your choice* . The curse was simply meant to ensure you could never inform the others and jeopardize your path for when you changed your mind."

"Oh, and you were so sure I'd go along with it, huh?"

"Did you not?" Aurora challenged.

She had him there. All the curse did was keep his mouth shut about the fatal side effects of the Emeralds. At the end of the day, he'd been the one to absorb the Emeralds just to amass power for no other reason than he wanted enough power to kill Eggman. They hadn't been the ones that brought him here, nor did they even force that first Emerald on him.

But there was still the principle of the matter there for Sorun. Regardless of intentions, regardless of how it swung in the end, they still did all that with the intent to use him, to have him go on a suicide mission. They still treated him like a sacrificial pawn even if he eventually agreed to it without even regarding his feelings towards the matter. *That* , he couldn't forgive. The principle of it. The total disregard for his life in their eyes.

"You used the excuse of saving the world to end my life. You're manipulative scum."

"And you are the height of supreme arrogance to think your life is equal to billions," Aurora said back in an icy tone. "A foreigner to this world who had no regard but for a handful who reside on Mobius. I have no regrets."

"Tch." Sorun began backing up away from them. "At least tell me if I did enough to save the future or not," he said as he stopped at Tikal's side, who was still silently fuming at the two.

"..." A deep sigh left Aurora. "We don't know."

"What she means to say," Athair quickly added at seeing Sorun grow visibly upset, "is that our foresight into the future has been significantly disrupted." A small sigh left him as the aged echidna clasped his hands behind his back. "You were never supposed to arrive on Mobius, Sorun," he explained. "The future we saw, the visions given to us by our closeness with the Chaos Force, never foresaw you. Your mere appearance in this world had changed the visions. A path of destruction should you do nothing by Robotnik's hands-"

"- And a future of uncertainty should you act," Aurora finished. "But the longer you carried on, the more you ingratiated yourself with the world and changed natural events, the more blurry our sight of the future became." She paused, her expression changing to looked unsettled. "Simply put... your actions have been so significant that it is impossible to tell what the future holds. You changed too much. And that *sword* you carry doesn't help." She looked almost disgusted when she said the word 'sword'. "That... *thing* passively disrupts time and space just by existing. It would be harmless on its own, but it contributed towards the degradation of our ability to see the future. I can't tell you if your actions were able to save the future or not, because we simply cannot tell anymore."

So that was it. He'd made too many waves, did too many things. Their foresight was ruined as a result.

Sorun couldn't help but deeply sighed as he turned away from all three echidna. The Neo-Walkers looked towards his back, while Tikal stared towards him in concern. Sorun, meanwhile, couldn't help but to run his hand over his forehead as he took a shuddering breath. The uncertainty of it all, it killed him. Dying knowing he saved everyone was one thing. Dying knowing he failed everyone was another. But dying and not knowing? It at least had a chance of everything working out, but that hope, that poisonous hope that filled him with nothing but worry and doubt... somehow it gave even more anxiety than knowing he failed. Because he didn't want to hope it'd work out only for the world to die anyway.

But want it or not, the hope was there. Maybe the Freedom Fighters could win after all; they were certainly playing with a stacked deck since New Megaopolis was mostly destroyed. But Eggman was so dangerous, and... and he didn't know. Then again, they'd been dealing with him for a majority of their life, since they were kids. Him and a previous version. They knew how to deal with him. Maybe they could pull a win off and save the world all on their own. The chances were honestly quite high from where he was seeing them.

"... Okay, fine. *Maybe* I did enough to save the world. And I can tell we're never gonna agree on that curse, so let's just drop it so we don't spend forever arguing." He turned towards the Neo-Walkers and Tikal, the latter of which had calmed down some. "Fact is with the way I left things there's actually a pretty good chance the Freedom Fighters will win. Nothing to do there but hope." He slowly breathed out as his eyes narrowed at the two red echidna. "What's done is done. Just tell me if it's true."

"Is what true?" Aurora asked.

"Did you bring Knuckles back to life once after he died?"

He didn't even need an answer from them; their reactions said enough. The wide eyes, their feet shifting uncomfortably, the worried looks and slight grimaces. That was all Sorun needed to see if it was true or not.

"Ha ha..." Sorun couldn't help but laugh. A dry, humorless laugh made with a broken voice as Sorun began to approach them. "Wow. Ain't that something." He stopped right in front of Athair. "You send a guy to die and don't even offer to bring him back afterwards." His hands shot up and gripped the old echidna's shoulders, and before he could do anything he began to shake him. "Why!?" Sorun shouted out in a frantic voice. "Why would you do that to me!? WHY DID YOU MAKE ME GO THROUGH ALL THIS DRAMA IF YOU COULD HAVE JUST BROUGHT ME BACK AFTERWARDS!?"

The calm, cool façade he'd tried to use cracked apart. He couldn't keep it up at that point. He wanted to know. He *needed* to know why they didn't offer to bring him back, why they wouldn't offer it even now. He didn't want to be dead anymore.

His shaking was stopped when an orange-furred pair of arms grasped at Sorun's own arm. When he stopped, Sorun looked to the side at Tikal, who was giving him a pleading, sorrowful look. He sighed and relaxed at the sight of her eyes, and then relented by letting go of Athair's shoulders and stepping back. Tikal let go of him after.

"Sorun, in truth, we can't even understand how it is you're here speaking with us," Athair said, making Sorun look back up. "You have no link to the Chaos Force. You are not even from this world. We'd known right away that you wouldn't have been bound for the afterlife, let alone be here to give us an audience. We didn't know what would happen to your soul once you, well... expired."

"I went somewhere really dark, that's where I went," Sorun snapped at him. "What, I'm not from here and don't have a link, so instead of going where everyone else goes I had to go to that... that void? Is that it!?" Sorun began to grow livid again. "You thought once I died I'd never be around to bug you again so you never even bothered to offer me a chance at revival!?"

"Sorun." Tikal placed a calming hand on the teen's shoulder. He huffed out in anger, but calmed down afterwards. The orange echidna removed her hand, and then faced the other two echidna. "You truly did not know what would become of him once his life ended?" she asked.

Both red echidna shook their heads. "You have to understand that he is a true enigma," Aurora stated in an attempt to explain. "We didn't know what the consequence would be of him not being able to enter the afterlife due to his lack of a natural Chaos Force link. We still struggle to comprehend how his species can even exist. How were

we to know he would end up in... what did you say it was?" She looked back to Sorun. "A void?"

"There was nothing there," Sorun said. "Nothin' but black. Don't even know how long I was there, it... I didn't have an awareness of time there. Coulda been seconds, coulda been years, I-I don't..." He got a headache just thinking about it, and then shook his head. "I won't speak of it. Don't even remember much of it," he said as he looked back up at the echidna, who had all widened their eyes at him. "I cut my way out of that place with the Yamato. Still have my powers, you see. Ended up here with..." He trailed off, and then rose his hands up to his face. "... How did I touch you?"

Athair blinked in confusion. "Pardon?"

"The last time I was here, when I tried touching you, I just kept going through you," Sorun mumbled out. "But just now, I touched you. Shook you."

"You were a mental projection back then," Aurora helpfully supplied. "But now, somewhat like us, you're an intangible being. Though while we're beings ascended due to our closeness with the Chaos Force, you... seem to have so much energy yourself that your non-corporeal form seems to exist in a somewhat similar state as we do."

"So what you're saying is... I can touch you..."

"Yes, it seems so. I would actually be fascinated to learn just how you are still connected with the Chaos Emer-"

"So what you're saying is... I can use violence..."

The world around them seemed to go quiet. Sorun continued to blankly stare at his hands. Tikal stumbled back a bit, a shocked expression growing on her face as she looked towards Sorun. The Neo-Walkers began to grow *extremely* uncomfortable, and began to nervously glance at one another.

"Sorun?" Tikal meekly called out. "W-what do you mean by that? You aren't... please do not say such things..."

The white-haired Earthling was still looking at his hands, silently contemplating his options. The facts of everything that had happened, what he could and couldn't do, what was most likely to work and what wasn't. All these thoughts passed him in a flash, aided by the focus gained by his broiling anger. And eventually, he came to a conclusion.

Instantly, an unsheathed Yamato appeared in his right hand, and after quickly cutting a cross in the air, a portal was made. Next his left Bringer Claw formed, shot out, and grabbed Tikal by the waist. She'd cried out in surprise as she was lifted up.

"Sorun! Please don't do this!" When he looked up at the echidna girl, to his surprise, he saw her giving him a pleading look. Not a look that was scared by being held up like that, but a pleading one. She was even crying. "I-I know you are deeply upset, but violence-!"

"Tikal... you're probably the kindest person I've ever met." Sorun's soft voice cut her off and made her elicit a surprised gasp. "You went up to bat for a guy you just met. You sacrificed your life just to watch over Chaos and those Chao. You're... truly, you're a saint. And I thank you for everything you've done for me. You deserve nothing but the best. But this is my life. And I'll do whatever is necessary to reclaim it." He looked to the side at the portal. "You don't need to see me do that. So I'm sending you back. Tell Chaos I said goodbye."

Ignoring her pleading cries, Sorun threw Tikal through the portal. He then swiped his sword over it to close it immediately after, and then he dispelled the sword completely. Before either Aurora or Athair could get a word in edgewise, he Tricked right behind them, and slowly and gently wrapped his arms over their shoulders as he leaned forwards between them.

"Buddy...! *P al* ..." Both echidna stiffened up at the sound of his voice so close to them. Unusually happy, which fit the small, genuine grin

on his face, but there was an undertone of something sinister to his voice. He looked at Aurora in particular. "Listen, I won't lie. I came in here ready to plead for my life. I would have thrown myself to your feet, crying and begging for you to bring me back. I would have reduced myself to a pathetic mess if it meant even a chance at going back. But if I can just punch you in the face...? Well, that changes the whole game, don't it?"

He let go of them both before they could say anything and began walking forwards. "Here's the deal," he said with his back to them. "I did what you asked to the best of my ability, died, and cut my way outta hell just to get here." He stopped and turned back towards them. The smile was gone. "So you owe me. I want my revive."

"You're demanding we help restore your life?" Athair incredulously stated. A deep frown settled over his face. "And you're threatening to attack us if we don't cooperate?"

"Nah, you both are getting your asses kicked regardless," Sorun corrected him. "What I'm saying is either I smack you two around a bit and you bring me back to life afterwards, or you refuse. In which case, ooh..." He slowly exhaled and shook his head. "It's a fair trade, all things considered. You don't even lose anything from it. Just bring me back."

"It is not that simple," Aurora stated with a shake of her head, causing Sorun to look towards her.

"Enlighten me, then," he responded in an impatient tone. "If Knuckles could do it, then why can't I?"

"There were special circumstances regarding him," she explained. "His unique lineage, the tampering of his body to be more in-tune with the Chaos Force, all of these factors culminated into him becoming the equivalent of a living Chaos Emerald. He'd ascended to our level, was slated to enwrap himself with the Chaos Force to become one with the cosmos... until he gave it up just to return to Mobius," she added in a slightly bitter tone.

"Yeah, well, you see Knuckles possesses something I'm pretty sure a majority of echidna don't possess: common fucking sense," Sorun said in an equally bitter tone, making the two echidna bristle a bit. "And he became a living Chaos Emerald? Good for him. I have *seven of them* in me. If it's an issue of power I don't see how I don't got it."

Athair shook his head. "It's not just about the power. A Mobian who wishes for a second chance at life must be worthy of it."

"What the- wor- what the fuck kind of bullshit, arbitrary criteria are you pulling this from!?" Sorun shouted at him. "'Gotta be worthy', alright, okay, the hell does that mean? The power, 'cause I got that! What, what did me sacrificing my life not constitute as being 'worthy' enough to be brought back? I'm failing to see what the fuck Knuckles did that was so special that he was deemed worthy that I didn't do!"

"It's a process that's never been tested on one who is not a Mobian!" Athair argued. "Or even one such as you that lacks a link to the Chaos Force for that matter!"

"So what!? I have got literally nothing to lose and everything to gain on this!" Sorun argued back. "And, and what, it's a definite rule it don't work on non-Mobians? You tested it?"

Both the Neo-Walkers gave each other unsure looks. It made Sorun groan out loudly at the sight, causing him to shake his head.

"Okay, so no, then." He inhaled deeply, clapped his hands together, and pointed the tips of his fingers at the pair. "I'm losin' my patience. You two owe me for all the grief you've put me through. Just bring me back and you'll never hear from me again. I'll drop everything I have against you two if you just bring me back."

"Perhaps... perhaps he is right." Aurora looked to Athair in surprise when he said that. Sorun himself stopped speaking to silently observe the pair. "He's a young lad who had no business in getting

caught up in all this to begin with. And what he speaks is true... he would indeed be deemed worthy for the second life."

While Athair looked to be considering the argument, Aurora looked the exact opposite. Disagreeing and seemingly completely against the idea. "I don't want him existing on Mobius or anywhere else in the universe with that sword," she said. "You know as well as I do the destructive potential the thing holds just by looking at it! Somebody like him can't be trusted with an object such as that! It's pure evil!" She cast a narrowed, heated look towards Sorun. "And I have to question just how worthy he can really be, seeing as it was his heart that spawned that abomination."

Sorun offered her a flat look. "Lady, it's a sword I copied from a video game."

"Would that even be an issue?" Athair questioned, drawing back the attention of the other two. "The process involves sacrificing one's Chaos-derived abilities in order to return. That is the cost of the worthy attaining their second life. He would lose all of his powers just as Knuckles did, the sword included."

"Well, that's even better!" Sorun exclaimed. "I get rid of the powers that are killing me, you don't have to worry about the Yamato anymore, not that you needed to, but whatever, it's a win-win! There's no reason not to do it if that's the case!"

He hadn't even known losing all his powers would be a part of the deal of this "second life" business. He probably should have figured there'd be some price to pay to have a second chance at life, and as far as they went, it made enough sense. Admittedly he'd been wondering in the back of his mind what he was gonna do to circumvent the powers that were actively killing his real body, but if he'd just completely lose them upon coming back, then it worked out perfectly.

"Kinda figures that the only thing that can remove the Chaos Emeralds is me dying and coming back to life... sheesh..."

"Knuckles regained his base abilities," Aurora hissed at Athair. "There's no guarantee Sorun will not do the same."

"Ah, yeah, 'cause I'd be so heartbroken about losing the powers taking years off my life that I'd scramble at the first opportunity to get them back," Sorun sarcastically remarked. "Aurora, come on," he continued in a serious tone, "I hate these powers. They're cool, sure, but I don't want them if they're costing me my life! Why would I be fighting so hard to go back to being alive just to kill myself with the powers again!?" He shook his head at her. "It doesn't make sense! I don't want powers! I just want to live!"

It was such a good argument that Sorun would have thought it was infallible. They wouldn't lose anything, and he wouldn't be a danger without his abilities. Nobody stood to lose anything while he stood to gain everything. It was beyond reasonable from his perspective.

But then Aurora went and shook her head, and Sorun went completely still as a result.

"I'm sorry, but I can't agree to it," she said. "It poses too great a risk. That sword... that rancid, dark energy it uses... I don't want something like that on Mobius. I'll say it as many times as needed, but you and I both know the destructive potential it holds, and I do not trust him to use it responsibly or to never regain-!"

Sorun Tricked right between them. His right fist swung backwards, and he backhanded Aurora right in the muzzle. Her head was whipped backwards from the contact with the fist, followed by her entire body being launched backwards. She flew back a whole ten meters, and then rolled across the golden, cloud-like floor for another five meters before stopping.

Athair stared over at Aurora's body in shock, and upon hearing the sounds of rapid footsteps, turned his head. He'd done so just in time to see Sorun run up right to him, jump in the air while turning his body, and then kick the bottom of both of his feet right into Athair's face. The dropkick sent him sprawling back in the opposite direction

Aurora had flown in, while Sorun had fallen onto his back from the resulting dropkick only to then slowly pick himself up.

"It's the smackdown of the century." Sorun slowly began to walk towards Aurora while the female echidna picked herself up, straightening out his white sleeves all the while. "You either bring me back or I spend an eternity beating your asses in. I'm content either way."

"Who do you think you are?" Shakily, Aurora looked up to Sorun with defiant eyes. "We-!"

"Don't give a fuck." Sorun Tricked in front of her, rose his foot up, and stomped it down on the back of her head so her face slammed into the cloud-like ground, making Aurora cry out in pain as a response. "I really... really don't care."

He removed his foot, and then crouched down next to Aurora's lying form. He reached forwards to grab a handful of her fleshy dreadlocks, and then pulled her face up so that their eyes were level.

"I get from your perspective I'm just some punk kid that means nothing to you all. I'm probably the most inconsequential thing in the goddamn universe compared to you immortal whatevers who are so close with the universe and the Chaos Force and all that shit. I bet I don't mean a thing to you," Sorun muttered out. "Well, it's not so different from my perspective. All your existence has done is cause me misery. I hear some people down on Mobius talk about you, but you don't do anything but send cursed kids to go do your dirty work while watching from up on high doing fuck all. You realize a good nine-tenths of your whole species is dead down there on Mobius? How the fuck can people see you as gods when you can't even protect your own echidna kind?"

He slammed Auroa's face down on his own knee, making her cry out in pain again. He rose it up so they could look at each other again, and though there was a line of blood trailing out from her nose, Aurora still had that defiant look.

"You're nothin'. Some random bitch and an old dude who fell into some power and don't know what to do with it. That's all we are in the end. Random fucks with more power than we know what to do with. We ain't special. We aren't better than anybody else. Which is why it really pisses me off when people like you adopt this high and mighty attitude, thinking you're better than everyone else."

"We are echidna chosen to uphold the mantle entrusted to us by the Ancient Walkers...!" Green energy began to surround Aurora's hand as her defiant look turned into an angry snarl. "We possess knowledge you could never even hope to fathom or comprehend! What could you possibly know about us!?"

She reached forwards and slammed her hand into Sorun's chest. It was done with enough force that he was forced to release his hold on her, and was sent sliding back across the ground. He stopped after a few meters, and with an annoyed expression looked sown at his chest, seeing a mixture of green and purple bolts of electricity arcing out of the spot on his chest Aurora had touched.

The next second found Yamato forming in his hand, followed by Sorun stabbing it right into his own neck. Aurora flinched back in shock at the sight, while Sorun grimaced a bit in pain from the implement sticking through him. Blue energy flickered along the sword's edge, and the small, sparking spot on his chest proceeded to float off, and then dissipate entirely once it was removed from him.

After that was done, Sorun tore the sword right through his neck. Despite the fact such a wound should have left his neck completely in half, it was completely intact. The wound had began healing once the blade started to move away from the wound. By the time the sword was almost out from his neck the wound was nearly healed. When it did exit, there hadn't been a single sign of his neck having been wounded. There was barely even blood it'd healed so fast.

"Your curse shit's getting real annoying," Sorun stated to Aurora. He'd taken one single step towards her, and then felt something

slam into his back. Sorun stumbled forwards a bit as a result, and then turned around.

Athair was there, heavily panting with his hand extended towards Sorun, with some vestiges of green electricity arcing around his fingers. The sparking began to increase in intensity as he seemed to be preparing another attack, but before he could let it loose, a blue, spectral leg flew in and kicked him in the face. The older-looking echidna was sent tumbling backwards, while a spectral ghost of Sorun looked towards him.

"I'll beat you both at the same time if I really have to," Sorun said, blue electric sparks periodically arcing around his body. "So," he continued as he turned around and kicked Aurora right in the face, sending her flying back, "you feel like bringing me back to life yet?"

The female echidna kept rolling along the ground until she finally came to a stop. A loud groan left her as she managed to rise up to all fours, though she froze when she caught sight of a blue glow just outside of her peripheral vision. She looked up towards it, only to then freeze in confusion.

A ladder. There was a ladder made completely out of Summoned Swords sitting right in front of her. She remained confused until she looked upwards, where she saw Sorun standing right on top of the ladder. And then he leapt off, his body positioned to the side with his right elbow aimed right at Aurora's head.

There was no moving out of the way before Sorun elbow dropped Aurora right on the back of the head after jumping off the ladder made of swords. She made a pained grunt as her face slammed back into the golden floor, and received no respite after Sorun kicked her in the stomach. She was sent flying away once again, though her flight was cut short after she collided with Athair, who had been thrown in the same direction by the Doppelganger.

Both echidna collapsed onto the ground. Athair moaned out in pain and remained immobile, while Aurora attempted to stand up to her

feet. She only got up partway before two spectral hands clamped onto her head and forced her down to the ground. The echidna struggled in the grasp of the Doppelganger, attempting to free herself, but her struggles proved to be in vain as it wouldn't release her. She'd only been at it for a few seconds before she heard rapid footfalls, and looked ahead just in time to see Sorun sprinting in front of her. Using the momentum of his sprint, Sorun had reared his foot back, and just as he passed Aurora he delivered a full-force kick right to her mouth while she was still behind held down by the Doppelganger.

Blood, spit, and a handful of teeth flew out from Aurora's mouth as her head was whipped back from the force of the kick. The Doppelganger disappeared at the same time, though in that same moment a clawed, spectral hand reached out and grabbed at the pained echidna's face as she was gasping for breath. Her eyes had widened, and she'd made a muffled scream into the palm of the hand as she was risen up from the ground by her head. Her feet continually kicked at the air as she clawed at the Bringer Claw holding her up, but no matter how hard she tried it gave no give to its grip. Right besides her was Athair, who was struggling equally as hard at the Bringer Claw holding him up by the face.

The two Bringer Claws moved back a bit, and then raced forwards while still holding the echidna. They slammed their bodies together forcefully enough a small shockwave had been made in addition to the sound of multiple, visceral cracks and pops. Athair's limp form was tossed to the side, while Aurora was roughly thrown onto the ground. Mere moments after she hit the ground the Bringer Claw grabbed her again, this time by the back of her head, rose her up, and then slammed her face into the solid, cloud-like floor. She screamed out in pain and reached back to try and grab at the claw, but all this did was make it lift her back up only to slam her face down again. Before she even moved, it rose her up and slammed her face back down once again. And then again. And then again. Enough times that, eventually, Aurora had gone completely limp in its grasp with her arms hanging downwards as it lifted her up. It still

kept slamming her face into the ground until Sorun decided to will the Bringer Claw to just throw her away.

Watching Aurora's body tumble to a stop a fair distance away from him, Sorun let out a short breath and dispelled the Bringer Claws. He looked to the side just in time to see Athair shakily getting up to his feet. He began stomping towards him, a large blue flash going off in his hands as an object appeared: Summoned Swords position in a way that mimicked a folded-up folding chair. Once he got close enough to Athair, he swung the sword-chair right at his face. The object shattered over him, causing the dazed echidna to drop back to the ground. Sorun stared coldly down at him for some seconds, and then looked over at Aurora and began to walk towards her.

In a nutshell, she was a mess. Even after he stopped a few meters away from her, he could clearly see the damage. Her once illustrious light blue dress was torn and tattered. She was covered in bruises and bent in odd angles all over her body, though as Sorun watched he saw the bruises begin to recede and her bones shift back into place. Even as she looked back at him, her body raised up by her arms pushing against the ground, he saw the damage on her face disappearing and the teeth he'd kicked out slowly regrow.

"So you can regenerate, huh?" Sorun observed. "Well, now I'm really not gonna stop 'til you send me back."

"Why do you even want to go back!?" Aurora screamed at him. It was done in such a raised, shrill voice, and with such anger behind it that not only that voice, but the question itself, gave Sorun pause. "What difference does it make?" Aurora asked him between heavy breaths. "What does it even matter!?"

"What... does it matter?" Sorun softly echoed, so bewildered by the question that he couldn't immediately form a response. "What kind of question is that? It's my life! It matters to me!"

"You'll just die again," Aurora panted out. "You. Your friends. Your family. Every single person and life you've ever touched, and every

life they've touched. That's the curse of mortality, Sorun." With a grunt, she placed a foot on the ground. "Mortals are doomed to die. That is life, pure and simple. What difference does it make whether you die now or die decades from now if we did bring you back?" she asked as she stood up to her full height. "The end result... is the same. There's no point-"

A Bringer Claw shot forwards and punched Aurora right in the center of her face, sending her flying right onto her back.

"You think life is meaningless... just because it's limited...?" Sorun muttered out, eyes coldly locked onto Aurora's form as the Bringer Claw hanging from his shoulder disappeared. "Life has meaning *because* it's limited, you goddamn bastard," he angrily stated as he began stomping forwards. "Of course it ends at some point. Everything does. That's the pain of living life. How are you supposed to appreciate all the joys in life without all the pain, too? That isn't living. That's just existing. A meaningless existence." He stopped right in front of Aurora, who had looked up at him with her eyes. Even now, even after all the beating and the words he'd said, she still looked like she completely disagreed with Sorun. "Has being some immortal god living up in the clouds really made you forgotten all that?" Sorun asked her.

"There's no meaning to anything you speak of," Aurora denied. "I forsook all that when I ascended to this plane of existence. I cast it all aside to gain intrinsic knowledge of the cosmos. Of *everything* ! How could living a life so short it couldn't even be measured be worth more than what I and Athair have become!?"

"And where's all that knowledge gotten you?" Sorun questioned. "Getting kicked around by me?" He gave her a flat look as he glanced around. "Through your own means you got to this grand status. Got titled Neo-Walkers by the Ancient Walkers, whoever the fuck those guys were. But I guess even gods can die if they're not around anymore." He shook his head. "Gettin' off topic. My point is... what's the actual point of being what you are? You know every single secret in the cosmos. Good for you. Evidently you don't know every

single little thing since you can't seem to figure out anything around me, but that doesn't matter. You ascended up to this immortal plane and get to look over everybody else like gods. Sure. But what the hell's the point of that?"

Sorun grabbed Aurora by the shoulders, and then smashed his fist into her face. She didn't even make a sound and continued to glare at him. "The Ancient Walkers did jack shit when the first Robotnik laid waste to Mobian civilization and roboticized all those people. They just sat on their asses and watched as a group of kids had to sacrifice their childhoods to go and save everyone." He roughly threw her body away. "They died and left you to take the reigns, and they were probably happy to leave your dumb asses filling the seats. And what did you all do? Keep watching? Sent me when things got bad 'cause your future vision got fucked with my mere presence? You call yourselves gods that people pray to?"

"You know nothing..." Aurora spat out as she sat up to look at Sorun as he approached her. "Nothing of what we do, what we know, what we exist to do..."

"Yeah, you're right, I don't. Because I've yet to see the results of what you Neo-Walkers existing even accomplishes," Sorun said. "And you know what? At the end of the day I don't care, because evidently it doesn't fucking matter since it doesn't affect anybody on Mobius. Or maybe it does and I just don't know it because my puny mortal brain can't comprehend it. Whatever. It still doesn't matter." He backhanded Aurora and sent her sprawling to the ground. "You really piss me off talkin' like life doesn't matter, Aurora. You don't know what the value of a life is."

Aurora coughed, and then rolled onto her back. "And you do? You know what the value of a life is?"

"It's priceless. Irreplaceable. You can't put a value on a life," Sorun said as he looked down at her. "I never wanted to kill Eggman. I would have done it because he's somebody who doesn't value life at all and snuffs it out or enslaves it just for the fun of it, and because I

genuinely believe he'd never change and is too dangerous to be kept imprisoned, but I didn't want to. Killing him would have been just as wrong as killing anyone else. But I would have done it anyway, if only because I didn't want my friends to suffer anymore. I wanted to do it so nobody else had to. Or would, even." A short sigh left him. "As bad as you are, I'm not gonna kill you or Athair. You're just not worth it, and I really don't know if killing you would invite a whole bunch of catastrophic consequences or not, because I don't know how important you Neo-Walkers actually are. I'm serious about beating you two up until you agree to bring me back, though."

"You'd truly spend an eternity doing this to us? Out of what? Spite?"

Sorun gave the echidna a look that almost seemed disappointed. "Bitch, I *literally* have nothing better to do." He stomped down on Aurora again, causing her to yell out in pain. "Not gonna lie, though. I stopped getting any satisfaction out of it pretty damn fast."

And so he kept beating her and Athair. Again and again, over and over. He ran out of the mental energy needed to be creative with it pretty quickly. It'd devolved to just punching and kicking the both of them, repetitively to a nauseating degree. He stopped bothering to use his powers at some point. He just kept assaulting and beating them, relentlessly, without end.

It became tiring to him so quickly. There'd been so much satisfaction from it at first. The release of all his stress, the vindication for having been dragged through all this grief for nothing, his frustrations released every time he punched one of them in the face. It felt great at the beginning when he was beating them senseless without end. His attacks fueled by the memories of that first meeting, what they'd said and done to him, what they refused to do now. But it faded over time, quickly. Soon enough there wasn't any joy in it. No pleasure. No satisfaction or vindication. All he was doing was beating on these two helpless echidna. Some woman and an old man.

But the knowledge he could go back spurned him on. Knowing he could return to his life, that he could have it all back, that the only

reason he couldn't go back was because they were being so damn *stubborn* . Every time a fist or a foot landed on one of them he'd plead in the back of his mind that they would just give up and bring him back already. He'd gone from being glad he was beating on them to just being apathetic and sad over it, but over time that apathy just began to fester into anger the longer this went on. The longer they held on for no other reason than they wouldn't bring him back.

"Just... give up already...!" His movements began becoming more frantic, more savage as Sorun grew more angry and desperate. Limbs were being clawed at and snapped at opposite angles. Bones were broken and shattered. They'd heal their wounds only for Sorun to inflict them all over again. But no matter how far he went they just wouldn't give in. *"Do you really hate me so much that you're trying to see if your spite can outlast mine? Or are you so worried about the power behind Yamato you'd endure this just to protect the planet from it? I don't want to hurt anyone with it. I don't even want the Yamato itself. I just want to live..."*

He never understood why people were so scared of the Yamato whenever they felt it. Sonic and Knuckles had been off-put by it when they felt it. Shadow had been cautious of it. Enerjak feared it, Finitevus seemed enthralled by it, and the Neo-Walkers seemed to fear it just as much as Enerjak did. Sorun didn't understand why. Just because it felt evil? Just because it had a massive amount of power behind that feeling? Was that truly it? It was just a powerful sword that felt evil? It was just a sword. A sword from a video game. What could they possibly know about it? He knew more about it than anybody else on Mobius!

Maybe that was why, he'd realized as he tossed Aurora's body away for what felt like the millionth time. They just didn't understand the Yamato, why behind all that power it felt so evil. They feared what they didn't understand, so they'd rather quarantine Sorun here as a ghost with them if it meant it wasn't on Mobius. Even if it meant Sorun torturing them like this for the rest of eternity.

He didn't want to regain the Yamato if he lost it. He didn't want to keep beating them like this anymore. He just wanted to go back to being alive.

"Aurora... listen..." Sorun tried, sounding tired himself. "I... I seriously just want to go back to being alive. I don't want the sword. I don't have any desire to reclaim it once I've lost it. It's not worth losing over a decade of my life."

"I can't trust that..." After coughing a few times, Aurora picked herself up into a sitting position and looked towards Sorun. "I won't allow... that thing to exist on Mobius..."

"Why are you so frightened of it? It's just a sword!" Sorun shouted. "What do you think I'm gonna do with it, huh!? What do you people keep seeing in it that makes it so bad!?"

"I don't know what it is!" Aurora screamed at him. "Only that it's wrong and it shouldn't have that much power! That sword is something that has enough power to potentially bring ruin to the world! That much power, with how wrong it feels, held in the hands of somebody like you-!"

"It won't even exist anymore if you bring me back!" Sorun argued back. "Why don't you believe me when I say I'll never try and get the Yamato back!?"

"Why would I trust you to be truthful?" Aurora asked him. She was still grimacing in pain despite her healing body, but she'd managed to get up as far as her knees as she continued looking towards Sorun. "An impulsive... young and foolish human like you... that can't even comprehend the magnitude of power he carries in that sword, who is outright defiant towards anybody he doesn't like and craves power. Do you think I was not watching you during the duration of your life on Mobius after out meeting?" She shook her head, and then proceeded to glower up at Sorun. "You're an impertinent, shameless individual who cares not for how his actions affects others. If there is

one person who should never hold that kind of power... it's you, Sorun."

Anger flared in Sorun at Aurora's remark. His fists clenched, and he began stomping forwards. "You don't know a thing about me, about the Yamato, about *anything* !"

"I know there's a chance you would consider regaining your powers if it was a matter of your friends' safety." Aurora's words made Sorun pause in his steps. "Perhaps somebody would be in danger. Maybe you would seek to regain some of your abilities, including that sword. Maybe you wouldn't. Maybe somebody hoping to exploit your abilities would force them back onto you. Maybe you would accidentally stumble back onto them! Even if you're truthful and truly don't wish to regain your powers if you regained your second life, Sorun, I just can't trust that you would remain true to your word, willingly or not, because there are simply too many variables to account for. I can't trust you with that power. And I can't trust you to never regain it. That is why I will not bring you back."

She was dead serious. Sorun saw it in her eyes. Past all the physical pain, she was willing to let this continue probably forever if it meant there was no possibility of Yamato going back to Mobius. She'd damn herself to an eternity of this hell just because she was that afraid of the Yamato, and saw Sorun in such a low light. Had such a low opinion of him.

He would have said he didn't blame her if he didn't know she and everyone else that saw Yamato were blowing its abilities out of proportion. He knew it better than anyone. He knew it wasn't capable of the things they were claiming it could do. The potential to bring ruin to the world? It couldn't do that. It was just a sword with powers. That was it. He was right. They were wrong. All of them were wrong. And it made him so furious that he was being refused a second life just because everybody but him was wrong.

Sorun started walking back forwards. He didn't care how long it took, how much he had to brutalize her and Athair until he got his way. He

was going back. He-

A pair of arms wrapped tightly around his midsection from behind and stopped him in his tracks. Sorun growled out loud as he looked down, expecting it was Athair who had grabbed him from behind, looked down expecting to see his red-furred arms. But when he saw orange arms instead of red, he stopped completely with a gasp as his eyes opened wide. Not Athair's arms. And if they were orange...

"Sorun... Sorun, please stop..."

It certainly wasn't Athair's voice that sounded like its owner was crying. He didn't sound that young. Or female, for that matter. And he was able to put the pieces together quickly enough to figure out who it was.

"How... I left that first portal open," Sorun realized as he craned his head behind him. It was Tikal, with tears streaming down her face. She looked up at Sorun, sorrow and anguish filling her features with her arms still holding onto him, and all Sorun could do was stutter out her name. "T-Tikal..."

"T-this isn't right, Sorun," she wept at him. "I know how upset you are, I know how unfair this is to you, bu-but please, please just stop... this isn't the right thing to do..."

"Don't listen to her."

Sorun gasped out again, and looked to his left. He saw a mirror version of himself, standing right there besides him and looking him in the eyes. And evidently he was the only one that saw him, as no one else paid him any mind. The other Sorun, meanwhile, just continued to stare into Sorun's eyes.

"She forced that curse on us, treated us like an item, like our life didn't have any value, and now she won't bring us back just because she doesn't like us and the sword?" the other Sorun asked. "What

right does she have to make that kind of choice? To keep our life away from us?"

Sorun didn't have an answer to his mirror image. All he could do was hold a hand to the orange ones pressing against him as he looked down.

"I..." Sorun attempted to say, but words failed to come out of him. He didn't know what to say.

"It's not too late, Sorun, you haven't done any permanent harm." Tikal had pressed her tear-ridden face into his back while also squeezing him harder. "Just please stop, I beg you. We'll find a way to bring you back, I promise. Just please... please stop hurting them..."

"We deserve our life back," the other Sorun said. "I don't care who we have to hurt to get it back. And them? They deserve it more than anyone." He leaned closer to Sorun's ear as he continued to look down. "It's all Aurora's fault. Brutalize her. Eviscerate her. Gouge out her eyes. Tear out her organs. I. Don't. Care. And if you end up killing her? Well, we still have Athair over there..."

"Please, Sorun..."

"Take back our life."

"I..." Sorun began shaking in Tikal's grasp. *"I don't know what I'm supposed to do..."*

"I'll give you your second life."

Sorun felt his own head snap upwards when he heard that voice. Tikal had gasped out behind him, and the other Sorun had vanished right at that instant. Aurora was gaping towards something at his right side, causing Sorun to turn in the same direction.

It was Athair. He looked worse for wear - probably because Sorun suplexed him - and was limping towards the group with his back hunched, though his physical wounds were slowly healing before Sorun's eyes. He stopped right in front of Sorun, looking up at Sorun with an expression he couldn't quite read. He looked... thoughtful, Sorun supposed. That was all he could think of to describe that look. Thoughtful and a bit ashamed. Whether it was at himself, or Sorun, or both, he wasn't quite sure of.

"Athair!" Aurora cried out as she stood to her full height. "You cannot mean to say-!"

"Regardless of what umbrage we hold him in, the boy is right," Athair interrupted while giving Aurora a stern look, freezing her in place. "We used him when we had no right to, and he's done enough to earn his second life. For us Neo-Walkers to deny him that after all this would be... hypocritical of us, would it not?" He grimaced a bit as he turned to the side. "Besides. I'm an old man, immortal or not," he grumbled as he rubbed at his neck. "My neck can't handle being slammed like that."

"Yeah, sorry about hitting you with the Canadian Destroyer..." Sorun quietly apologized. "I'm, uh... I'm real desperate here, y'know?"

No further words were said between the four of them. Tikal had unwrapped her arms from Sorun and stepped to his side while nervously glancing back and forth between the three of them. Athair continued holding his expression, Aurora looked upset, and Sorun was just straight confused at what was happening at the moment.

"You're taking his side in this?" Aurora asked in a low tone as she turned to Athair. "You did the exact same thing when we had this incident with Knuckles. You always-!"

"You did this with Knuckles, too?" Sorun asked in disbelief. "Oh my god, I can't- you're just awful," he mumbled as he began rubbing at his temples. "I'm not even the first person you've done this to. What is wrong with you?"

"I told you that his circumstances were completely different from your own." She turned back to Athair. "You cannot seriously be considering-"

"Aurora, my mind is made up. The decision is final," Athair stated. "You cannot impede me, and we've too many responsibilities to be beaten senseless for the rest of time. Besides that, we've a title to uphold." His eyes glanced to the side at Sorun. "I title I fear we haven't done much justice in the eyes of some." He turned completely to Sorun. "I can't say I approve of the way you think of us and criticize us, and I agree with Aurora when she says you know too little of us to judge, but... many of your arguments are valid as well."

Aurora shook her head and took a step forwards. "The power in his sword-"

"It is a risk we are simply going to have to take," Athair said, interrupting her again. "Maybe you've lose faith in people," he continued as he gave her a stern look from the side of his eyes, "but I've still come to hold onto the belief that you can place faith in others, Aurora." He made a small "hmph" noise, and then turned back to Sorun. "We were watching when you confronted our friend Merlin, Sorun. In truth, if it hadn't been for the fact you spared him... I wouldn't be offering you this."

"... That so?" Sorun responded, voice a bit unsure.

"It is," he confirmed with a nod. "I can't rightly say whether I know what your alignment is, young man. Whether I can call you good or not."

"I can't just be Sorun?"

Athair made another "hmph" sound. "You strike me as someone who marches to the beat of their own drum," he said. "I struggle to see if it's just teenage rebellion or if you live just to spite others at heart, but regardless of all that, your words on life ring true to me. That

along with your actions with Merlin say enough that, while Aurora may not place enough trust to give you the benefit of the doubt, I do. You've earned that much at least."

"Earned. Right." Lightly breathing out, Sorun glanced around at the three echidna and made a sigh. "So, what now?"

The portal Sorun had opened previously pulsed gently in front of them. Sorun casually blinked at the sight of it, and then turned to the side to glance at Tikal. She wasn't even paying the portal much mind, with her focus mainly situated on Sorun. She'd stopped crying, thankfully enough. She even looked a bit happy now if the small smile she had on said anything. He was glad that he got to leave her with a smile on her face.

"So you're going back to be with Chaos and the Chao?" Sorun asked her.

She nodded at him. "Yes. I belong with them."

"... Forever, though?" Sorun mumbled out as he looked to the side. "There's nothing I...?"

Tikal made a small laugh. "You're sweet to offer, but you needn't worry. I said I was content, did I not?"

"Yeah. You did." As long as she and the rest there were happy, he supposed he didn't need to worry too much about them. They seemed fine with their lot in life. It was enough for him to accept. "Thanks for, uh... you know... helping me and stopping me..." Sorun trailed off and rubbed at the back of his neck. "I kinda flew off the handle, admittedly. Just a little."

Maybe more than a little. Maybe forcing Aurora to bite down on a Summoned Sword so he could stomp on her head and break all her teeth had been a bit much. In his defense he'd been justifiably upset at the time and they could rapidly heal the injuries.

The smile on Tikal dropped off a little. "I've always abhorred violence in all its forms, Sorun. I realize not all situations can be resolved peacefully, but I still believe a peaceful solution should be sought out above all others." She glanced behind them, with Sorun following her eyes. The Neo-Walkers were standing a short distance behind them. "I can't say I approve of what you did to them. Nothing they did called for that amount of abuse, Sorun."

The white-haired teen found himself wincing at her soft, scolding tone. "They wouldn't bring me back to life," he weakly said in an attempt to defend himself.

Tikal made a small sigh. "Yes, I know. They shouldn't have done that, either. Or used you. It seems everyone is a bit at fault." They looked back into each other's eyes. "But it's nothing that cannot be fixed, correct?"

"... If they really do bring me back, sure," Sorun reluctantly agreed. "They said it's never been done on a non-Mobian. We don't even know if it'll work."

"I'm sure it will work out fine," Tikal assured him. "Just... promise me one thing, Sorun? Please try and remember what I said about violence. I want you to enjoy your next life, with others. With friends. And I don't want something like... like what you did with them to come between all that." Her eyes briefly flicked to the other two echidna before going back to a wide-eyed Sorun. "So just please try and remember not to turn to violence so easily? For me?"

"... Haah..." A sound between a sigh and a breath left Sorun as he turned away from Tikal while rubbing at the back of his neck. "Even after all this, you just want to make sure I end up happy, huh...?" He glanced back at Tikal. "You're too good for this world, Tikal. We would have been great friends if you were still alive."

"Are we not friends now?"

The question caught Sorun a bit off guard. Tikal had giggled at the expression Sorun made as a result, which made him laugh in turn at both her and the question. He made one last laugh, and then let his hand drop down to his side.

"You got me there," he admitted. "I'll try. Try to... just enjoy my new life. I never really even liked fighting if I'm being honest with you." He paused, took one last look at Tikal's face, and then looked back at the portal. "Bye, Tikal. Thanks for everything. Give the others my regards, would you?"

"I will." She gave him a final nod. "Goodbye, Sorun. I hope you find happiness in your new life."

She left through the portal right after that. Sorun closed the portal right behind her, and as Yamato disappeared from his hands he turned back to the Neo-Walkers. Aurora was still scowling at him, arms crossed, blue dress already repaired. Athair wasn't as expressive as her, more neutral than anything else, but underneath that was still that unreadable expression. Sorun couldn't figure him out. Didn't care to, either, seeing as he'd never see them again after this. At least he hoped so.

He began approaching them while trying to keep a straight face. He stopped right in front of them, and then turned to Aurora. The deep scowl wouldn't leave her face, but after everything, Sorun couldn't find it in himself to be mad at her for making that face. A bit exhausted towards her, maybe. But that was it.

"I'm being completely honest with you when I say I don't want to try and get the powers back," he told her for the last time. "You don't have to worry about the Yamato."

"So you say," she dismissively stated, turning away from Sorun. "... That sword. It's from a game from your world, yes?" she asked, still facing away from Sorun. "Is the reason the sword feels so evil hidden in those games? Why it's like that?"

"..." Sorun lifted up his left hand and let the katana spawn in his grasp. After all this, he supposed they deserved some answer. "The Yamato was a sword forged when a legendary demon of unparalleled power sheared off a third of his own soul to create it. He made a second sword that was the Yamato's complete opposite using the second third of his soul, a claymore named the Rebellion, and one day gifted them both to his twin sons, while the final third was kept to himself in the form of a sword named after himself." The sword disappeared, and when he looked back up, Aurora had turned her head back around to look at him. "That's how it goes in the games, at least," Sorun finished. "The one I have is just a replica. A perfect replica, maybe. But still a replica."

"A sword forged from the soul of a demon..." Aurora mumbled to herself. "Fitting. For how it feels." She paused. "Is that why it feels that way? That... dark aura? Is that sword alive?"

"Hard to say," Sorun honestly answered. "This specific one was made from a Chaos Emerald, not a soul. But it's also an exact recreation, or at least as close as my heart could make, so... I don't know. In the games making weapons from demons' souls was a common thing. But Yamato was only made with a third of a soul. And even then it was the strongest Devil Arm in that entire universe despite only being made from a third of a soul."

"The demon it came from was truly that strong?" Aurora asked. "Why?"

Sorun shrugged. "Who's to say why Sparda was so strong? The story didn't go into much detail," he said. "It's said he found love in the human race and awoke to justice in the wake of the enslavement of humanity perpetrated by all demon kind. He was the only demon to ever do such a thing, and that love awakened a power that made him stronger than the strongest of devils and mad demon kings who gorged themselves on fruit made from human blood all for the sake of power. Strong enough to beat all of hell, the entirety of the demon world, singlehandedly. Or maybe he was just born that tough. Or both. If you want my interpretation, it was both." He rose his hands

up and interlocked them behind his head. "But he did find love, and later, long after liberating the human race and separating the human and demon worlds with the Yamato, found an even deeper love in a human and married her. After that they had the twins I mentioned. One that dressed in blue, and one that dressed in red. Twin half-devils that were fiercely competitive, to the point that, if the swords gifted by their father were alive, were only ever truly alive when they clashed."

A deep hum rumbled from Athair's throat. "Swords coming to life just to fight one another, eh...?"

"It was a deep rivalry," Sorun explained. "Between both the twins and their swords. That was just the way it was. The one who wields Yamato, and the one who wields Rebellion, are destined to fight. There's no getting around it."

"... And you said the twins dressed in blue and red."

"Yes, that's right."

"What color did the twin who used the sword opposite of yours wear?"

"The one who used Rebellion?" Sorun asked. "Red. The Yamato wielder wore blue."

For some reason, his answer caused unsettlement between the two echidna. They both glanced at each other with worried looks, making Sorun look at them oddly as his hands dropped back down to his sides. Eventually, they both focused back on him.

"Something the matter?" Sorun questioned.

Athair shook his head. "It's nothing you should concern yourself with."

"Okay...?" Weird, but he didn't want to stick around much longer to puzzle the two out. "Can I please go back now?"

"Yes, of course." Athair rose his hand up to Sorun's chest, and pressed his palm against the teen's body. It began to grow a soft green. "With Knuckles, he was able to do this under his own power. I suppose we'll have to help you as your own powers are so... rigid, so to speak." He looked up to Sorun's eyes. "Remember that the second life only works once. If you die again, then that's it. There are no third chances."

"Bit contrived, but alright." Sorun glanced down at the hand on his chest. "So this is it, huh?"

"You don't seem too excited," Athair noted, with just the barest hint of amusement to his voice.

"I'm leaving all the excitement for if this works and I do come back to life."

"Having doubts?"

"Some," Sorun admitted. "You said this has never been tried with someone like me before." He saw that his body was beginning to disappear from his limbs up. Their colors would shift to a green color, and then begin to vanish entirely. "If I'm to be truthful, I really don't know if, when I open my eyes, it'll be on that metal bed in the morgue. I hope it is, but... this just seems too easy. To just get a second chance like this." He looked up at the two echidna. "Guess this is goodbye. No hard feelings?"

The unamused looks they gave him said enough. Considering all he'd put them through, he couldn't blame them. He'd be incredibly salty, too, if somebody whooped his ass as bad as he'd done them. He didn't find himself caring at all.

"Yeah, I don't like you either," he said. His torso and head was beginning to vanish. He turned to Aurora. "I don't really have any

final words for you. Just... I don't know, try never doing what you did to me to anyone else ever again?"

She wouldn't even look him in the eyes. Understandable given it all. Sorun didn't think they'd ever get along. Aurora just seem so detached from mortals that he didn't even know if she realized it. To that end, he almost felt sorry for her. Sorry, but held no pity. This was a life she'd chosen, after all. If she was fine with it, then more power to her. He couldn't care less and it didn't matter to him. As long as he never got to see Aurora again he could live with it.

"... A demon using his evil power to protect others." Aurora talked while still facing away from Sorun, though her words drew an eye-raise from him. "I'll admit it's an intriguing concept. I do hope you keep your word and never seek out the Yamato again, Sorun. And if, for some reason, you do, I hope you can follow that demon's example. For all our sakes."

"... Try my best, I guess," Sorun said. "You just gonna leave it at that? No sorry for cursing me, no apology for trying to keep me here? No nothing?"

"Will you apologize for kicking my teeth out?"

"Nope."

"Then you have my answer."

With a sigh and shake of his head, Sorun turned away from Aurora and to Athair. "Thanks for this. You may not believe me when I say this, but... I'm grateful to you for bringing me back."

Athair hummed, but said nothing else. Sorun never could figure him out. He seemed more levelheaded than Aurora. Maybe it was the visible age that just made him wiser. Or the fact he hadn't been a Neo-Walker as long as Aurora. He was able to put together from everything he heard from Tails and Knuckles that they knew him back when he was alive, so there was no way he'd been in this god

gig as long as Aurora had. Maybe that was the sole difference between them. He still knew the value of mortal life, while its meaning had faded from her. Or maybe he just was wiser. Sorun didn't know, but whatever the case, in the end he'd been the one to bring him back. And unlike Aurora he seemed to truly regret what was done to Sorun. So he could afford some small amount of begrudging respect for him.

"What do you plan on doing when you wake up?" Athair had asked, rousing Sorun from his thoughts.

"If this actually does work? Dunno." Sorun's torso had vanished. His head from the neck up began to disappear as well. "I think maybe I'll take Tikal's advice and try to enjoy it..."

And with that, the rest of him disappeared.

A/N- So the whole "second life" thing is actually a thing that happens in the comics, for those of you that never got into those. I think it was #125 or somewhere around there, but the basic gist of it was, in a nutshell, "if you're cool enough you get a second shot at life". And that's all I can say about it because it was only ever brought up in that one comic and they were *super* vague about the whole process. The exact workings of it were never clear other than you get to sacrifice your powers in exchange for a second life.

Is it a bit of a deus ex machina? Most definitely, yeah, but it's canon to the comics, so as far as I'm concerned it's free game to use. Besides, people die and come back to life left and right in that comic. It's a comic. It's just a thing that happens. I mean it's not Dragonball levels of death just not mattering, I don't think anything will ever surpass that, but you get what I mean.

But the plan was always to bring Sorun back. Him dying wasn't the end of the story, and we got a long way to go from here 'cause the story as a whole ain't even close to being done. But

the whole gag curse/Emeralds killing Sorun slowly and all the drama involved with it is done. It's done, gone, played its part. And I know there were a lot of people super frustrated at Sorun and how the story was going regarding his death, but it was all to lead to this point. And... yeah, I probably did drag it out longer than I ought to have, never imagined it'd take this long to get here, but we got here.

Imagine if I really did kill Sorun here and had, like, his friend David or some new human OC take over for the rest of the story. Or another idea I had was him leaving the Yamato behind for Sonic or Shadow to keep for the rest of the story, maybe even have a whole thing where everyone starts fighting over it because it's the last memento of Sorun but also an object of great power. Deep in the initial planning phases of the story I almost did some of these things, but decided to go with the revive route. Even played around with maybe turning him into a Mobian, but that was scrapped way early on, too. Just, uh... yeah I'll be completely honest, I didn't feel comfortable with the idea, and I think it would have taken away more than it would have offered. Then it was the matter of playing around with how to bring him back, I saw one review mentioning Sorun using Yamato to separate himself from death which I'll admit *was* one thing I was considering, but... come on. That'd basically make him unkillable. Can't have that. I still put the small bit of him trying in to establish it doesn't work while also highlighting just how loose Sorun's Yamato's interpretation of separation really is, though, so there's that.

I did plan on dragging out the period Sorun was dead for a while, too, get scenes in with every character he interacted with, even get a few chapters in without him, but it just seemed like it'd be too much since I was just bringing him back to life later anyways, so a lot of that was reduced. Even the chapter where Sorun went around saying goodbye to everyone before the "final mission" was reduced since I was just gonna revive him, so I didn't wanna spend too much time on it.

But anyways, yeah, he's back. More on that next chapter.

Chapter 56

Recursion Error

Episode 56- Respawn

And just like that, Sorun woke up. There wasn't any bright lights, no fanfare, no rush of energy and vitality as he regained his life. He'd simply woken up, right there on the corpse cabinet table. Staring up at the morgue's ceiling.

"... Wait, seriously? That's it?" Blinking his eyes, Sorun sat up on the table. "I just snap back to life just like that? I don't even get, like, a little energy confetti explosion or-" The green Chaos Emerald whizzed by Sorun's head. "Damn!" he screamed out as he ducked down.

He dove right down onto the table and looked out to the morgue. Much to his shock, he saw all seven of the Chaos Emeralds bouncing off the walls, floor, and ceiling of the room. A chaotic rainbow of bouncing objects that, on any other day, Sorun would have found pretty. But then he remembered if one of those just happened to slam into him he'd absorb it by accident and be left with powers killing him again.

And so, he did the first thing that came to mind. He gripped the opening of the corpse cabinet, pulling the table along with himself inside the actual cabinet, and then closed the door behind him, sealing him into darkness. He heard the plinking and thudding sounds of the Emeralds bouncing around from even inside there in that small cramped space. He even heard the occasional metallic *ting!* of one of the Emeralds hitting the small, square door sealing him in the cabinet. Sorun, meanwhile, had breathed out a small sigh of relief at having successfully secured himself safely away from the

flying Emeralds. He decided he would just wait there until the sounds disappeared.

It took some waiting on his part. It felt like whole minutes had passed of the Emeralds bouncing around everywhere in that room, with Sorun just lying on the table and waiting. For a bit he was almost worried the sound wouldn't go away and they would keep bouncing around, but eventually he noticed that the volume and frequency of the thudding sounds were decreasing. Slowly, but it was happening. More and more they were decreasing, until, suddenly, they stopped altogether. He heard the sound of multiple objects rolling along the floor after, and then, nothing. Absolute silence.

Another minute passed of Sorun remaining in that corpse cabinet just to make sure things outside were clear. Afterwards, the door to the cabinet was cracked open, and Sorun peered out. From his vantage point he caught sight of a couple of the glowing Emeralds lying harmlessly on the ground, immobile. He breathed out a sigh of relief, and then opened the door entirely to look out into the entire room. All seven colored Emeralds were sitting motionlessly on the floor.

"Ah, man, that was a close one," Sorun muttered as he pulled the table back out from the corpse cabinet. "I guess they tried to fly out and scatter across the world again like when I first got here. Sonic said that's what happened. Nicole must make these nanite walls sturdy if they ended up trapped in here..." The table was pulled out all the way, after which Sorun swung his body around so he was sitting at its edge, with his feet hanging off. "Well, I... guess I managed to do it..."

There he was. Alive. He did it. He revived. Got his second life. Athair pulled through for him. His premature death at the hands of powers, the sickness associated with it all, the lying, the stress of it all, it... it was all gone. Over.

He couldn't describe how it felt. There was such a mix of emotions going through him that he couldn't put it into words. Ineffable

amounts of relief, happiness, shock and disbelief, uncertainty of what he was supposed to do now. He could have cried, laughed, and fallen unconscious from it all right there with how he was feeling. That's what all his emotions amounted to- a jumbled together mess of confusion. He could still even hardly believe he was sitting here, alive and witnessing this all.

Just to be sure, he held up his arm and felt it with his other hand. He felt a pulse, rushing blood, warm flesh. Felt the air going through his mouth and nose and into his lungs. He felt... alive. Better than he had in months, really. Better, but... also slow, in a way. Sluggish. He realized why when he brushed some hair out from his eyes, and saw it had returned to its natural black color. Devil's Body and all the physical enhancements it gave him was gone.

"What a weird feeling..." His eyes widened. "Wait, hold on." He looked downwards at his own torso, and then reached down to lift his shirt up.

... His abs were gone.

"Dammit, my gains." Feeling disappointed, he lowered the shirt back over his flat stomach, and then tried holding his hand out. He reached for the same feeling he always felt for whenever he wanted to manifest Yamato, but nothing appeared. Not the katana. Not the Summoned Swords or Bringer Claws or his Doppelganger. He couldn't teleport or stop time. Nothing.

All of his powers were truly gone.

"It really did work," he whispered to himself. An uncontrollable smile broke out over his face, and he'd even laughed a bit. "They're... they're really gone. I'm cured. I'm back... I'm alive..."

He spent some time just sitting there, quietly laughing as he held his head in one hand. Drinking it all in, enjoying it all. He was there, alive and well. He didn't have to feel sad about dying anymore, or be sad

about everyone being sad that he was dead. It was over. He did it. He was alive again.

The laughter eventually died out into a happy sigh, followed by Sorun looking back down at the seven Emeralds. He gave them a curious look, and then slid off the table. His black boots hit the ground, and he walked over to the one closest to him. The green one.

"It looks like they all just fell out of me like Athair said they would," he said to himself as he crouched down in front of the Emerald. "Seven gems of unlimited power just... sitting here. I'd be worried if they were anywhere else but New Mobotropolis, but this might as well be the most secure city in the whole world right now." He began to reach for the Emerald. "Guess I should gather them u- ooh!"

He'd come within centimeters of touching the Emerald before he remembered touching them was a *bad* thing to do, after which he reoiled his hand back to himself. He clicked his tongue, and then glanced around the room hoping to find something to help him gather the gems up without needing to touch them. His answer came when he saw a broom leaning against a nearby countertop, and a burlap sack right on top of said countertop.

"Yeah, that'll work."

A couple of minutes later, Sorun had carefully used the broom to sweep all seven of the Chaos Emeralds into the burlap sack, and then tied the top of it closed. He then set it down on the ground in front of the corpse cabinet table, and then hopped back up on the end of it. He placed his hands in his lap, legs freely swinging as he looked down at the sack of Emeralds in front of him with a contemplative look.

"Well now what am I supposed to do?" Sorun asked himself. "I, uh... guess I should go and... tell everyone I'm alive. How the hell am I supposed to go and do that?" Sorun asked himself. "They're

probably gonna freak out, and that's just- ugh, it's gonna be so awkward and I don't know what I'm gonna do. And the Emeralds are all just... kind of here now... huh..."

He found himself focusing back on the bag. The bag that contained the Chaos Emerald. All seven of them.

"... Should... should I just go back home...?"

The sound of a far away door opening and shutting distracted Sorun and made him turn towards the door to the morgue. It was still closed, though he heard a pair of voices nearby, likely in the hallway connecting the morgue to the hospital's basement entrance. This caused Sorun to freeze a bit in panic and, not at all prepared to reveal to anyone he was back to being alive, he did the first thing that felt natural to him: lie back down on the table like he had been while dead to appear he was still dead.

Cowardly, maybe, but he needed all the time he could get to figure out what he was gonna do and to steel his nerves.

"Man, I hope they don't notice my hair turned back to black... or that I'm breathing. Who is it, anyways?" He strained his ears to better listen to the pair of voices that were steadily coming closer. *"Male and female... accents... Southern and... French- oh, it's them."*

He heard the door leading into the morgue open, but couldn't see anything due to having closed his eyes while trying to remain as still as possible. He didn't hear anything, either. Neither voices nor footsteps. It seemed they'd just opened the door to the morgue and just stopped there. And then he heard a deep sigh.

"Ah'll... leave ya with him." That was definitely Bunnie's voice that Sorun had heard. She said that sentence, and then he heard a single, heavy, metal set of footsteps exit the morgue and close the door. From there he assumed Antoine was standing over at the other end of the room, likely staring at what he thought to be Sorun's corpse. He was silent enough that Sorun almost thought he'd been

mistaken before he heard the Mobian take a deep breath and slowly walk in Sorun's direction.

"I guess Antoine's here to say his final goodbyes to me or something... HOLY SHIT I GOTTA PRANK HIM." When was he ever gonna get another chance like this? It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He'd be a fool not to take it.

"Err, uh... uh... hello zere, Sorun." Antoine's voice was close enough that he sounded like he was standing right next to the table Sorun way lying on, almost right over him, even. He sounded unsure and also sad at the same time. "I, um, apologize for having taken so long to do zis. Eet 'as been, how you say, a... I do not know what you would say in ze face of zis," he sadly admitted. "Eet iz unfortunate you are being dead. Y-you left before you evair had ze chance to taste my fine cuisine. H-heh... heh..."

He sounded like he tried laughing. It came out sounding more unenthusiastic and sad than anything even resembling happiness. It was almost enough to make Sorun reconsider pulling a fast one on his grieving friend. Almost.

"Zey are saying ze Chaos Emeralds made you sick and end up like zis. I am not knowing what to zink of zis," Antoine quietly said. "I am not wrong in saying we would nevair 'ave let you go around touching zem eef we knew, but I am supposing eet iz too late to be saying such zings." He paused, and then made a deep breath as he laid a hand on Sorun's shoulder. "You were very special to me, Sorun. Ze others, zey are family to me, always will be. It would being impossible to not see zem as so after so long, but... you were special, and I had held you in ze same place as zem. Zey are always being ze big teases about moi accent, Soneek especially, but you nevair did. And nobody else evair practiced ze swordsmanship with moi." A short, empty laugh left him. "Not once did you evair beat me, and yet I had more fun practicing with you zan evair weeth myself." The hand on Sorun's shoulder began gripping him harder. "You... you were truly ze bestest of friends..."

It was when the tears started falling down on Sorun's face did he decide that maybe playing on Antoine's grief to play a prank on him wouldn't have been the nicest of things to do, as appealing as the opportunity was. But he was smart enough to understand some things just weren't worth it. Even if they were really tempting.

"He just had to break out the tears, didn't he?" Sorun thought with an internal sigh. *"So much for pulling a Joseph Joestar on him. Ah, well..."*

And so, with his decision finalized, Sorun made a groan and lifted his hand up to his face to wipe the tears off of him. Antoine had completely froze as a result.

"Ugh, man, you're really- I was gonna pull this whole zombie bit on you, but if you're just gonna go and cry on me-"

"L'ES UNDEAD!"

Apparently Sorun hadn't even needed to do the bit the begin with; just talking and moving like that had been enough to frighten the poor coyote. He shrieked like a girl and fell completely backwards onto his back he'd been so scared of Sorun's sudden resurrection. Sorun, meanwhile, was laughing. He'd sat upwards and was laughing hard enough that he had to hold a hand to his head just to steady himself. It continued for minutes, Sorun just sitting there on the table laughing while Antoine sat on the ground staring up at Sorun in absolute disbelief, completely stupefied by the mere sight of his living form.

The laughter faded away eventually, thankfully enough. Sorun sighed out the last laugh, and then looked down at Antoine. He was practically frozen there, staring up at him with those wide eyes. It brought enough amusement to Sorun that he was smiling at the sight, though he seemed to lose all energy despite the smile when he realized he'd have to explain himself.

"Guess the cat's out of the bag, now," he mumbled, and then waved down at the Mobian. "Hey, Antoine."

"Sorun...? Antoine sounded one-part in wonder and one-part completely baffled as he stared up at the human, with a myriad of wild, unreadable emotions flashing over his face. "I- I don't- zis is... y-you're... ze opposite of dead...?"

"Apparently I had an extra life," Sorun replied in a low drawl. He made a short sigh and slid off the table. "Lemme tell ya all about it..."

And so, Sorun told him. Everything from his point of death to how he managed to come back. Some parts were appropriately abbreviated for Antoine's sake. When it came to the Neo-Walkers Sorun said he'd just "smacked 'em around a bit 'til they saw some sense" and left it at that, and Antoine took his word for it. The concept of that void he'd ended up in was left out entirely. Otherwise he'd laid it all out for the coyote. The events for the most part, his feelings on it all, everything.

That lead them here. Both of them sitting side-by-side on the ground and leaning their backs against a nearby table. Sorun was just getting to the end of speaking while Antoine just watched him.

"And... and I don't know, Antoine, I..." Sorun exhaled through his nose, lifted his hand up, and let it drop back on his leg. "Say something."

"What am I to say?"

"Something, anything, man I don't know!" Sorun turned his head to Antoine. "You're just sitting there looking at me, I don't know what to do with that, I..." His fingers started to run through his hair as he looked down. "Just say something."

"... So... your kind really do turn into ze ghostie types when you die...?"

Sorun scoffed out a short laugh. "I missed you, Antoine. I really did," he said. "Nah, that was... Chaos energy shenanigans or something, I dunno." He shook his head. "I'm less worried about the why of things and more about what's gonna happen next. Ugh, man... what am I supposed to say to them all, Antoine? I'm at a loss at what I'm supposed to do."

"I am not understanding..."

Sorun breathed out and shook his head again. "'Hey, guys, I found a way to come back to life.' Am I seriously just supposed to lead with that?"

"What else are you to do?"

"Got me there." Wasn't really any other way to go about it, really. He was more nervous about the reactions more than anything else. He almost told Antoine as much, but when he turned around to do so he saw Antoine giving him that unreadable look again. His ears were down a bit, too. If Sorun didn't know any better he'd say he looked sad. Or maybe Sorun didn't know any better and he actually was sad. He decided to ask. "What's with the face?"

Antoine seemed to flinch back a bit, almost like he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't have. He shrunk back a bit away from Sorun, and then looked down a bit. "So... you were died..."

"Dying. And yes, I was." Sorun relaxed against the table he was leaning against as he gave Antoine an apathetic look. "I know it looks bad. You guys pull some random guy away from his home to help with your problems and he ends up slowly dying as a result." Antoine flinched again, and his ears lowered a bit more as he began to look guilty. Worried, even. "Look, I'll be real, I wasn't exactly thrilled about the whole thing, but it's not like I blame you guys or anything like that. Was my choice to go around collecting the Emeralds. If I really wanted to I could have just abandoned you guys altogether and not have bothered."

Antoine's ears rose up a bit. The worried look and uneasiness began to fade, though he still looked a bit uncomfortable. "I... I am not knowing what to say," he admitted. "Why didn't you?"

"Come on, man, do I really look that shallow to you?" He made a small laugh and looked ahead, though he still noted that Antoine was looking at him from the corner of his eyes. At that, he felt the small smile he had on drop. "Because I wanted to, alright? Because I didn't want to see Eggman win."

"Because of zat prophecy, non?"

"A prophecy that's becoming less credible by the second," Sorun demurred. "I talked to the Neo-Walkers while I was dead. They don't got a clue on what's gonna happen since me walking around doing stuff messed up their foresight so bad it just doesn't work anymore. So I dunno what's going on. But they did straight-up tell me it would have went bad if I did nothing, so..." He trailed off, and when he saw Antoine still looking at him, he shook his head and looked away. "I like you all too much to see that happen. What do you want me to say? It doesn't go any deeper than that."

"... Nothing, I am supposing."

"Suppose," Sorun quietly corrected.

"Oui, merci." A few silent moments passed before Antoine spoke up again. "You... truly did zis wanting to sacrifice your life for ours..."

"Hey, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Sorun said, shaking his head in denial as he looked back at Antoine. "I... I didn't... there wasn't a better opt- stop looking at me like that!" When he saw the grin slowly growing on Antoine's face, he faced forwards and crossed his arms in a huff. "Ugh, so what if I did?"

Sorun's answer came when Antoine reached to the side and wrapped Sorun's head in a one-armed headlock. The black-haired human quickly found himself missing his enhanced strength, as,

despite his frantic flailing, he was unable to free himself from the Mobian's grip. Antoine, meanwhile, was laughing lightly while using his other hand to gently ruffle the top of his head.

"Ahh, look at you, Sorun, being ze modest type you are-"

"Get off, get off!"

"- I 'ave always been knowing you to be ze shy type, but I did not zink you would be zis scare-ed of showing a heroic side-"

"I regret it all!" Even after Antoine finally released him, still laughing all the while, Sorun maintained his flustered look as he averted his face from Antoine. "Shoulda left you all out to dry, can't believe I gave my life just for this..." The look fell off his face as his shoulders went slack, and when he looked to Antoine again, he saw him still smiling at him. "... I ain't a hero, Antoine. I just didn't want anyone to die. That's all. Fact I died in the process was just a... I dunno, a side effect or somethin'. Stop looking so far into it."

He didn't know why something like the title of "hero" just made Sorun so grossly uncomfortable he wanted to avoid anybody calling him one in any way possible. It just was. He felt like he didn't deserve it, and the word alone made his skin crawl for some reason. He didn't like the attention or implications behind it, none of it.

"Non, Sorun, I am afraid zat nobody will see it ze way you do," Antoine said, making Sorun loudly sigh and hang his head. "Mon ami, you will be having to hang away zat shy side of yours. I am not zinking it would do well to look so fluster-ed in front of ze others."

Sorun ran a hand over his ragged face. "Woulda stayed dead if I knew I was just gonna come back to this," he jokingly stated, though he saw Antoine shift nervously next to him.

"Eh, Sorun, do not... do not say such things, s'il vous plait. I am glad you are back." Antoine's face made an uncomfortable twitch. "I am... not so glad you had to suffer through months of dying..."

"... Eh, it's fine." Wasn't really, but Sorun was desperate to put Antoine at ease. "Who hasn't suffered continually for months on end? It's over now, though. Feel better than I have in a long time."

"Oui, I... would know some about zat."

"The, uh... the half a year thing you mentioned once? During the whole train thing?"

Antoine nodded. "Did anyone evair tell you of Moebius?"

"The weird evil mirror version of this world, yeah," Sorun answered with a nod. "What about it?"

"I had been... abducted iz ze word, oui?" In addition to widening his eyes, Sorun nodded at him. "Ze other Antoine had abducted moi and 'ad swapp-ed our places. I was forced to pretend to be him for six months while he replaced me here. Eet had nearly destroyed my life and relationships weeth ze others, but, eventually, all was set right. Not without... some costs, we shall say, but otherwise all had ended well zat... ended well, I do not know ze expression," he said with a shake of his head. "I am not claiming to know exactly what you had been going through zese last few months, but, well... I *suppose* -" When Sorun nodded at the correct pronunciation, Antoine smiled a bit, "- I may know a detail or two. Eef you need one to talk weeth."

He hadn't known how severe that whole "half a year" thing had been for Antoine, never having known the details. He knew he felt angry at hearing it, and he would have been enraged knowing some evil doppelganger tried stealing Antoine's life if the man himself wasn't alright and here telling Sorun about it. Past all that he felt... some good feeling. Thankfulness, perhaps, that he was willing to just be there and listen to him. It made him calm down, and a bit happy, even. But on the other hand he didn't want to bother Antoine with the extra baggage, so he shook his head.

"N-nah, man, but... thanks. Y'know, for the... the offer an' all that, you know, j... just thanks- hey, I should get going," he suddenly said in a

raised voice, causing Antoine to jump back a bit at his sudden rise in volume. "As much as I'd like to stay in this morgue forever to avoid seeing the others and the awkward mess that's gonna follow, I, uh... prolly shouldn't do that."

After a few seconds of looking at Sorun with a strange look, Antoine got Sorun's meaning and nodded his head. "Ahh, oui, right..." he said as he calmed down some. "What were you zinking on doing?"

"I don't know, man." Sorun looked off to the side and gestured towards the nearby, filled sack. "All the Chaos Emeralds fell out of me because of the whole revive thing, so I gathered them all up in that sack over there."

"Do you plan on doing zomething with zem?" Antoine asked.

"... Not sure yet. Still thinking." Sorun stood up to his feet, groaning a bit from the sensation of his legs having fallen asleep from sitting so long. "For now, I'm going to the park."

"Ze park?" Antoine repeated in a questioning tone. His head followed Sorun as the human went to the burlap sack and picked it up. "Why ze park?"

Slinging the bag over his shoulder, Sorun turned back to the coyote. "Need some fresh air, gotta clear my head. Maybe wait until somebody I know wanders by and just sees me sitting there, because I got no clue how else I'm supposed to reveal myself. Too nervous to just do something like go to Sonic's house and knock on his door. Or the castle. Or the... server rooms in the science center..."

He just realized he was gonna have to deal with Nicole. And he also realized he didn't have the slightest idea how to go about doing that. In fact, he was scared of just seeing her again.

"Eh, I'll think of something.

"...

"... Fuck, who am I kidding?" Shaking his head, Sorun waved at Antoine with his free hand and began moving away. "Do me a favor and keep my resurrection on the down-low for a bit. Still trying to wrap my head around all this."

"I am not zo sure zis iz ze best way of going about zis, but alright," Antoine agreed. "What am I to tell my wife who iz waiting for me?"

Sorun sighed and flipped his hand up. "I mean, I'm not asking you to lie for me, so go ahead and tell Bunnie, I guess." He began walking towards the door to the morgue. "Eh, to be honest with you there's no way people in the hospital aren't gonna see me, so I doubt I'll even make it to the park. But it's all I got." He stopped at the door, and right before he opened it he turned his head back to Antoine. "Thanks, Antoine. F-for being here."

"I am happy to be zere for you, Sorun." Antoine offered him one last smile. "Welcome back."

"... Yeah. Good to be back."

Shockingly enough he actually had made it to the park without being accosted by anyone. He'd gotten some stares from random Mobian citizens, who all probably thought he was dead only to see him walking around. He new Dr. Quack had seem him when he passed through the lobby and distinctly heard a clipboard being dropped on the floor. Hell, even Bunnie had seen him.

The first thing Sorun had done when he walked through the hospital doors was take his first breath of fresh air since coming back to life. He exhaled, and then looked to his left. He made absolutely no reaction when he saw Bunnie leaning against the hospital wall next to the door. Staring at him like he was a ghost with her jaw dropped open.

"... 'Sup." That's all Sorun gave her before turning back forwards and walking to the park. She hadn't called or even chased after him; probably too shocked to do anything except stare after him. He'd trust Antoine to fill her in on the details. He just didn't want to deal with it.

For sure the rumors - the very, very true rumors - that he was alive and just walking around would circulate like wildfire. Wasn't even a question that somebody would find and confront him within the hour, which would lead to him explaining everything to everyone down the line. Probably Nicole, seeing as all she had to do was glance at the security system, see Sorun, and teleport to his location. Oddly that hadn't happened yet. So either she hadn't gotten wind of him yet, which wasn't likely, or, like Bunnie, she was so shocked she didn't know what to do, which was... marginally more likely.

He didn't care either way since he managed to make it to a bench in the park. So he set the bag full of Emeralds down, sat his ass down on that bench, and decided to just take it all in. Clear midday skies, the pleasant, rustling sound of leaves and the quiet sound of the city behind him, the clean smell, wind on his face, the sun warming him. The fact he was alive and moving around again. The dread at having to talk to everyone over it.

But then his attention kept getting drawn down to the bag at his feet. The burlap sack with all seven Emeralds. The things that'd kill him if he touched them all. And also the things that were responsible for the portal that brought him here to begin with. And, with all seven of them gathered like this... potentially his ticket back home to Earth.

"I can go home with these," Sorun thought. *"But if I do... it's one-way. The Emeralds scatter after use, and there's no way we could set up any form of communications over that distance. If they make a portal back home and I go through, that's that. They'd never have a reason to hunt around for all the Emeralds again and open the portal back up, and even if for some reason they did I'd have no way of knowing*

about it so I could be there when they did. So there'd be no going back.

"But... I'd get to see mom again. And Dave, and the rest of my friends. Hell, I could get my life back. I was really only gone for... what'd it be, almost five months now? I'm not dying anymore, so that's almost nothing. I can get it all back. My life, friends and family. And having my games back would be nice, too.

"What about the ones here, though? Some of the people here are practically family to me, too."

"You're seriously gonna choose them over our real family? Don't tell me you actually wanna stay here."

"No, it's not that, it's..."

"They don't need us anymore. Eggman's at the end of his rope and we're powerless now. They can handle everything on their own. They're good. I know it's gonna be hard to leave them forever and everything, but we got a life to get back to. You're not gonna stop being friends just 'cause we leave and never see them again. There's a slew of movies and games and anime I can pull from our memories with the same message of them 'remaining in our heart' and all that tripe."

"..."

"It's Nicole, isn't it?"

"She-"

"You are not *fucking stranding us in this world over a girl."*

Sorun sighed, and then looked to his side, where he saw himself sitting next to him. *"Yeah, I know,"* Sorun thought at Sorun. *"I'm just... I'm really gonna miss her. I've never liked anybody like I like her."*

"Heartbreaking, I know," the other Sorun said, "but dude, come on. If there was ever a reason to stay here... this ain't it. There's nothing for us here. Some friends, that's about it. We don't belong here, don't have a place here. Back home on Earth we do. Our own place in life, our own people, friends, family. In a world that doesn't constantly try to mindfuck us every single second with its twenty-four seven spew of insanity. We can't just abandon all that. Abandon *them* ."

"I know. You're right." As much as he'd like to stay, which, in all honesty, he didn't... he couldn't stay. He'd left too much behind when he was dragged through that portal. More than that, he just wanted to go home. It was his goal since the second he came onto Mobius. A goal once seemingly unattainable now sitting right there at his feet.

His mind was made up.

He was going home.

"Ugh... Not saying you gotta go immediately or anything," Sorun said to Sorun. "Take your time, say your goodbyes or whatever. But we really should be getting back to Earth right after."

"Sounds good." Sorun blinked, and he was left alone sitting on the bench. *"Eh, it's not like Nicole likes me in that way anyway. It'd probably be really stupid to stay here for a girl not even interested in me."* He sighed, leaned back on the bench, and kicked his feet out as he looked up at the sky. *"It really is a nice day out."*

He could spend all day here just sitting at this bench and looking out at the park and sky. He'd give one thing to Mobius, if nothing else. It really was a beautiful place. Too crazy for him to keep living here, but beautiful all the same.

"S-Sorun...?"

Ah, there it was.

There was absolutely no bracing for what was about to happen, so after quietly sucking in some air through his teeth Sorun just decided to turn his upper body around to address the person he heard speak from behind the bench. He'd already known who it was from the voice alone. Seeing Nicole with his own eyes was a different matter entirely. She had that same look Bunnie had when she saw him walk right out the hospital completely fine: that stunned, bewildered beyond words look. There was something else though that he couldn't quite pin down in that expression, something he couldn't describe. It made something in his chest wrench, though, seeing her face look like that.

As for Sorun himself, he just sat there looking at her with a completely straight face. He didn't have a plan on what to say to her, not even the faintest idea, like almost always. He decided to just try and act normally.

"So the secret I wouldn't tell you about was that I was dying." He rose both his hands up, palms facing forwards, and gently shook them. "Surprise...~"

He didn't know if normal, human reflexes would have been sufficient in catching Nicole when she jumped right at him. It was just too fast for his eyes to keep up with. He was able to perceive her leaping forwards, phasing through the bench and tackling him to the ground, but he hadn't had enough time to even think about moving. By the time Sorun's thoughts did catch up with him he was already on his back, with his arms pinned to the sides of his body due to the fact Nicole was lying right on top of him with her arms wrapped around his torso.

"..." Sorun tried moving around a bit. Nicole's grasp was too tight for him to budge. He sighed and let his head fall back against the grass. "Can't help but notice I never got that statue," he said. "I know I said it was optional, but c'mon, I died."

He didn't get a response.

"Nicole?" Sorun picked his head up. "I'm just kidding around, I don't actually care about a..."

Sorun trailed off when he saw what she was actually doing. She was crying. She was burying her face into his chest and softly crying, while at the same time he felt her whole body shuddering on top of his. Any words he planned on saying died off right there. He just plainly couldn't speak while he saw her in that state.

So, instead of saying anything he just silently laid his head back on the grass with the intent of waiting her out. He had all the time in the world now, after all. He could spend a few minutes waiting for her to calm down. And despite the circumstances, he liked the way she was holding him too much to complain.

There wasn't a point where Sorun counted the time Nicole had pinned him to the ground. Minutes, he'd estimated, a lot of minutes. She'd finally calmed down enough to speak after she found it in herself to lift her face up off his chest.

Then she started grabbing at his face...

"N-Nicole-"

"It's really you?" There'd been absolutely no willpower on Sorun's part when Nicole, still lying on top of him, grabbed both sides of his face and began moving it left and right as she examined it. "You... y-you're... I don't understand, this shouldn't be..." She looked down at Sorun's body, and then looked back at Sorun's face. "You're truly back? Sorun?"

"Of course it's me," he said, not bothering to ask her to let go of his face. She still held on as a result. "It's me, not some clone or android double or something wacky. I came back to life. Morgue's empty if you really wanna check."

"No, I believe you. I saw you walk out of the hospital on the security cameras..."

"Had me pinged since then, huh?" *Sorun thought. "So I guess you want me to explain how I'm walking and breathing, huh?"*

"That would certainly be ideal, yes..."

And so he'd given her the same spiel he gave Antoine, once gain toning down what he'd done to the Neo-Walkers and omitting the void entirely. Somewhat to his disappointment she'd gotten off of him, leading to them sitting next to each other on the park bench as he explained everything.

Throughout the entire explanation Nicole had kept one of her hands on his. Not to grab it or anything. She was just letting it lay there on top of his as he talked, like she needed some physical reassurance that Sorun was there alive and talking with her. She wouldn't stop looking at him, either. Wouldn't so much as turn her head away from him. She just kept staring at him.

But he'd finished, again, from the point he'd died to now, *again* . And now all that he saw that was left to do was apologize.

"And so, now that you know everything... I wanted to say I was sorry."

"You're... sorry?" Nicole repeated. "Sorun, I don't understand. What could you possibly be sorry over?"

Sorun made a small hum, and then turned away from Nicole. He couldn't help still being aware of the hand overtop his. "Told you while I was dead I was kinda just... floating around as a ghost for a bit. During that time I decided to go see how people were doing, so... after I visited my body in the morgue, I went to the science center to see if you were there." He saw Nicole go a bit still from the corner of his eyes, and her fingers lightly gripped around his own. "Saw you in

a bad way, talking with Sally, holding that controller like it was my last surviving memento-"

"It *was* your last memento."

"Okay, regardless," Sorun continued with a half-bemused smile, "I never wanted you to end up like that. I shouldn't have... the whole reason I tried avoiding you that one time was because I wanted to avoid that happening."

He stopped talking and then looked back at Nicole. She was giving him... well, frankly, a lot of looks. Lots of confusion mixed in with the earlier bewilderment, and some relief was showing as well. Relief he was alive, he supposed. But it was buried under all the confusion.

"It was this whole big plan I had," Sorun said as he looked back forwards, going as far as to sweep his hand out in front of him. "If I just pretended to be some unlikeable, unapproachable jerk nobody likes, then no one will care when I finally die so I don't leave people hurt."

"Sorun..."

"But you all just had to be too likeable for me to pull it off. I really tried, but I just couldn't go through with it." He glanced at Nicole. "You especially. I... could never even merely act that way around you, so I tried to just avoid you, but not even that worked. I never thought I'd grow to like you all so much, but I did. I never expected to grow so close to you specifically, but I did. So this ended up happening." He looked back ahead and briefly tossed an arm up. "I died, evidently for nothing, and left all this heartache behind. Heartache that could have all been avoided if I didn't cave into my desires and just toughed it out to the end, but I couldn't even do that. Couldn't go on without your support. Everybody would have been fine if I managed it: you never would have cried, and I wouldn't have turned into the most deplorable human in existence just because I was some weak-willed-"

A brown and black-furred pair of arms found themselves going back around Sorun's torso. He found himself being pulled into another hug by Nicole, close enough that their heads were forced to rest on each others' shoulders. It was a move that deeply startled Sorun, who himself couldn't find the words to say as a result of the hug.

"Stop it. Don't say such things about yourself," Nicole whispered out. "You shouldn't have to apologize for being friendly. You shouldn't have to apologize for *anything* . You died. You continued being a Freedom Fighter knowing you would die. You're not at fault for anything."

"I..." The words stunned Sorun. Enough that he'd went limp in Nicole's grasp while staring blankly ahead over her shoulder. "I still... you're not mad at me...?"

"Of course I'm not mad." Nicole pulled away from Sorun, though she kept her hands on his shoulders as she looked him in his eyes. "I'm vexed beyond words that you were forced to endure such an ordeal, and frustrated that you were barred from the possibility of even consulting anybody on the matter. But I'd never want you to lie to yourself like you wanted to do just to try and spare everyone's feelings."

"But-"

"Sorun, no." Nicole silenced him by placing one of her hands on his cheek. He froze up at the contact, at the soft sensation of her hand on his face, and he found himself relaxing into it. "I wouldn't have traded the time we spent and all the memories we created together for anything. What I experienced when you died was... quite frankly, it was the worst sensation I'd ever experienced in my entire existence, Sorun," she admitted to him with a sad look. "I told you, back when you almost died fighting to bring everyone to this city, that I never wanted to experience something like that again, but when I thought I'd truly lost you, I... words alone cannot describe it. I lack the descriptive capacity to do so. I felt like I'd been shut down but was still active at the same time. Like a part of me was lost." She

looked a bit to the side. "You really do have a habit of teaching me new aspects of life. Even the bad ones, it seems. But I digress." She looked back at him, and began smiling again. "Despite how terrible that experience felt, I truly would rather have suffered through that and have been left with those memories of us than to never have had them to begin with. I recently learned through Sally that this is a sentiment others agree with. Logically it makes no sense, I realize this. Even I struggle to properly rationalize this to myself. But after having experienced it firsthand I think I finally understand why this is so, even if I can't rightly explain it in words. Just... feelings." She repositioned both of her arms so they were both over Sorun's shoulders in another hug. He was too flustered and focused on Nicole to make a single move. "It doesn't matter, anyways. You came back. You don't have to feel any amount of guilt, Sorun, because you came back. And I don't blame you a single bit for anything that happened. If anything, I... truly believe you're one of the strongest individuals I've ever met, to have gone through what you have and ended up where you are now. I sincerely mean that, Sorun."

"C-c'mon... you're just saying that..." Sorun couldn't help the abashed smile that came to his face. One of his hands reached up to softly caress one of Nicole's wrists, but that was as far as he'd gotten in terms of actual movement. "I thought Sally was the mentally strongest person you've ever known."

"You give her competition," Nicole claimed, still smiling at Sorun. "I can't express how happy I am that you're alive."

"I'm... happy I'm back, too. And that you're okay." There she went again. In just a few short words Nicole made every single doubt and uncertainty in Sorun's mind fade away, just like that. One conversation with her and all he felt was calm and peace. Like everything would be okay. She always had that effect on him, no matter what. Suddenly having died and come back to life just seemed like a fleeting memory despite how recent it had been. She was right in that respect; it didn't matter anymore. He was back. With her. "Thank you, Nicole. For everything."

They sat there for what felt like minutes. Just the two of them. Nicole kept her arms draped over Sorun's neck, and he continued to stroke at her wrist with his fingers. He couldn't look away from her eyes which were staring into his own, and between that and the smiles they were giving each other, he felt... he didn't quite know. It was indescribable, the feeling. But it felt right. More than right. For some reason he felt like they could have remained this way for days. He wouldn't have minded one bit.

"Nicole, I... I have something I need to tell you," Sorun said in a soft voice.

Her warm smile grew even wider. "As do I," she said in an equally soft voice. "I wanted to ask you on the rooftop, if you'll remember correctly. Before that day."

"Right, I remember. Do you...?"

Nicole gently shook her head. "You can go first."

"I gotta go home."

The mood shattered like glass. Nicole had gone completely rigid, and Sorun had felt it seeing as her arms were still over his neck. She made a peculiar expression, too- her smile broke, confusion mixing in and freezing it in a strange, shocked smile. She'd blinked heavily a few times, that expression still frozen on her face.

"W-what?"

"Yeeeaah, look, here's the thing." Sorun untangled himself from Nicole's arms, blissfully unaware of the disappointment filling Nicole's eyes despite the frozen, shocked smile on her face. He didn't perceive it at all as he reached down and picked up the burlap sack near his feet. "The condition for getting my second life was that I lose my powers, so as a result all of the Chaos Emeralds were separated from me. So since I just have all of them now I can use

them to go back to my zone using the portal machine Tails used to bring me here."

"Your... zone?" Nicole repeated in a quiet voice. "As in... Earth...?"

"Mh-hm, yeah," Sorun blithely confirmed with a nod. "I'm worried about my mom and friends and everything, so I kinda need to go back. I mean, I always thought I'd just be stranded here forever, but since the Emeralds are all just here now I can finally go back to my old home and life." He turned his head to Nicole and gave her a smile. "Isn't it great?"

She didn't respond at first, making Sorun's smile drop a bit. The strange, frozen smile had fallen off of her face completely, and she was left staring at Sorun and the bag he was holding with an odd look he couldn't quite place. It caused some confusion on his part, seeing that expression Nicole wore, but then she seemed to notice Sorun's staring at her and changed her face back into a smiling one. A noticeably forced smile, Sorun had seen. One that didn't hide the disappointment he saw in her eyes, and the way her shoulders had slumped.

He had no idea why she looked like that.

"Yes, of course... your family. Of course you would be concerned for the life and everybody you left behind when you were forced onto Mobius. I understand completely." Nicole stood up off the bench, still giving Sorun that same, fake look as his eyes followed her. "You'll be departing soon, then?"

"I, uh... was gonna say goodbye to everyone first, but yeah. Thinking of going tomorrow," Sorun slowly said. "You okay?"

"I'm functioning at full capacity, yes," Nicole said with a nod.

"Alright...? What, um, what-what was that thing you were gonna ask me?"

"Hm?" Nicole's ears lowered a bit, and she'd turned away too quick for Sorun to see the smile leave her face. "It was nothing. Just a silly notion of mine," she said. "Shall I go gather all the others for you?"

Slowly, Sorun nodded. "That'd be nice, yeah. Are you ok-?"

"I'll go do that, then." She turned back to Sorun and gave him a small, very small and very forced, smile. "Goodbye, Sorun. I wish you safe travels home and hope you'll be happy there."

Nicole's body vanished right after she finished speaking. Sorun was left sitting on the park bench, bag in hand and a perplexed look on his face as he stared at the spot she'd vanished from. He continued doing this for a few seconds, and then loudly exhaled as he sat back against the bench.

"What was up with that look on her face? Eh, whatever. I'm sure it's fine. Would have liked to know what she wanted to ask me, though," Sorun thought to himself. *"Guess all that's left is to say my goodbyes and then head back home. 'Least I ain't gotta pack anything."*

A/N- Alright, here's what you do. You picture Nicole's face during the entire exchange between her and Sorun. Sorun says he's going home, and you picture her face snapping from that to her reaction face. Then the GTA thing happens where the colors go grayscale and WASTED appears in big, bold, red lettering as the camera angle tilts and the sound effect plays while still focusing in on her reaction face.

Anyway, yeah, happy late Valentine's Day.

Chapter 57

A/N- Wow, so the reception for last chapter was downright staggering. Really had the same energy as the "I love Emilia" scene from RE: Zero. From all the reactions and reviews, it was great to read. There was also this one person that put a link in a review that I couldn't figure out to open despite my best efforts, so, uh... yeah, don't know what was behind that, but thanks to everybody all the same for the feedback. It was entertaining reading about all the guesses people have for what's gonna happen, too. Not gonna say if anyone was close or not, but you'll all get to read for yourselves what happens later.

So the roadmap for the next few chapters is just a few short ones, and then we get to the portal chapter. Specifically it'll be chapter 61 if I'm counting it right that the portal happens, which is probably the most I'm ever gonna spoil on what's gonna happen in the story in the future in an A/N, so look forward to it.

Recursion Error

Episode 57- Goodbye, Freedom Fighters

Nicole had been true to her word and had gathered everyone. So here they all were- every member of the Freedom Fighters. Gathered in some large room inside of Castle Acorn. And Elias, for some reason, probably because he lived here. Sorun was sitting backwards on a chair, his hands folded over the top of the back of the chair as he looked towards the other end of the room. A long table was what separated him from everyone else, who were all standing around in a group.

The reactions he'd seen when he'd strolled into the room and wordlessly sat down in the seat were mixed, both in everybody's

reactions in relation to each other and the reactions themselves. The standard stuff: shock. Disbelief. Surprise. Joy. Worry. A hodgepodge of emotions that couldn't rightly be described from how chaotic the mood felt despite how silent it was. The rundown he'd given them all was the same one he gave to Antoine and Nicole. Now he was merely left sitting here to gauge their reactions.

If there was one whose reaction Sorun was looking for in particular, it was Tails. He was pretty sure the fox Mobian had caught Sorun looking towards him, too, from the way he'd jumped up slightly when Sorun looked at him. He looked the most worried out of everybody there, to the point he could have been sweating. For all Sorun knew he probably *was* sweating and the fur just covered it. Sorun's eyes remained on the young Mobian for a few moments, and then he faced back forwards at everyone else.

"Well don't all speak at once," Sorun drawled out, making everyone freeze in place. "Go on. Say somethin'."

Nervous glances were passed between everyone. Eventually, all gazes turned towards Sally. She'd of course noticed all the looks, and made a small, defeated sigh and then moved to the head of the table opposite of Sorun. She looked towards the human, looking unsure of how to proceed. He didn't think he could blame her considering it all.

"Well, Sorun, I... I think I speak for everyone here when I say we're overjoyed that you're among the living once again." Her voice was well-collected, all things considered. Even so there was no hiding that nervous waver behind it. "So, uh... I don't... I don't really know what you want me to say..."

Sorun remained silent. He kept staring at Sally, expecting her to continue. But she'd actually shrunk back from his gaze and didn't say anything else. Sorun's stony face, meanwhile, hadn't even twitched.

"Awright, enough o' this." Oddly enough it was Bunnie of all people who got fed up with the quiet looks. She'd stomped her robotic feet

to the midpoint of the table and then slammed her robotic limb on the table's surface, using it to lean against the furniture as her green eyes gazed into Sorun's blue. "Now Sorun, Sugah, ah'm glad - *beyond* glad - yer alright and kickin' again, but ya got us all in this stuffy room an' all yer doin' is starin', so if ya got somethin' tah say then say it an' stop makin' everyone so gosh-darn nervous-like."

"... Forgive me if I seemed hostile in any way, Bunnie. I'm just nervous, too, you see," Sorun explained. "I hold absolutely no ill will towards any of you. I wish to make that clear right now." He glanced to the side. "In fact, I... probably should have done so earlier..."

His statement caused surprise to bloom on the faces of everybody in the entire room. Their stances had grown a bit easier and relaxed, and Sally chose that moment to speak again. "If that's true, then why are you sitting in that chair so threateningly?"

Sorun shrugged. "I dunno. Never had an opportunity to do this before. Wanted to try it. Now seemed like a good opportunity."

"Ugh, for the- Sorun..." Sally palmed her own face in exasperation at the answer. Some grins were cracked all around by the others, too, which Sorun supposed was a good sign. "I really don't think that's an appropriate thing to do given the situation."

"I think after everything that's happened I've earned the right to mess around with you all a little," Sorun countered. "But seriously, no hard feelings."

"That's quite a thing to say seeing as you died," Sonic commented. He was at the other end of the table along with everyone else, leaning back in a chair of his own with his feet propped on the table. "Props to you, though, man."

Sorun looked over at the blue hedgehog. "You don't seem very surprised about all this, Sonic," he noted. He was probably the most normal-looking one of the bunch given his demeanor. There were

still hints of the earlier nervousness in his face, for sure, but he seemed nonchalant otherwise.

"Well, I mean... everyone thought I was dead during the whole space thing, then I came back," Sonic began, "then a long while ago Sally took this really nasty fall and we all thought she was dead, but she wasn't, so I had to use a Power Ring to fix that, Knuckles died and came back-"

"I'm glad people dying and coming back to life is so common here that you're able to just take it all in stride," Sorun said. "Can't say I share the same ability, but you know. Good on ya."

And with those words, the nervous glances everyone was sharing among one another before returned. Sally, once again, took it upon herself to speak for the rest of them, and began approaching the spot Bunnie had been standing in while the cyborg herself went to go stand back with the rest.

"I'm still not so sure what to say," Sally began. She stopped right in front of Sorun, and then locked eyes with him. Her expression was just as unsure as her words, and she'd looked down towards her blue boots before she continued speaking. "I feel somewhat at fault for what happened. Well all do, actually. You were only ever put into this position because we dragged you into our problems. We kept encouraging you to gather the Chaos Emeralds when in the end they... well, I'm sure you get it."

And that was the crux of the issue. They all felt at fault for what happened to him. Because they were the ones to vote to use the portal and drag him through. They were the ones that let him be a Freedom Fighter when he in all honesty shouldn't have become one. They were the ones that helped him gather a bunch of magic gems that killed him, and he had to suffer through his entire time here knowing all that while they spent it thinking everything was fine. He'd be shocked if they *weren't* nervous given all this information.

Well, Sorun wasn't having it. He already made up his mind in this matter on how he felt towards the whole situation.

"Sally, save it. Already said I don't hold anything against ya." Sorun sat up a bit straighter in his chair and leaned back a bit while keeping a grip on the back of the chair. Sally, meanwhile, had looked back up at his face as surprise crossed her features. "Ya couldn't have known. Nobody coulda. And I didn't have to go after all those Emeralds. I could have just run away and avoided it all if I wanted. I *did* run away," Sorun said, making Sally and a few of the others in the back flinch a bit. "But, well... figured I was never goin' home anyway, so I might as well try and save everyone since the alternative wasn't so appealing. So I came back even if it meant me dying down the line. I knew that going in and still made the choice. It's all your fault for being so likeable, every single one of you." Some smiles broke out at that. "Wasn't a picnic for me, knowing I was dying for months on, but... I dunno. You guys made it easier, somehow. So, er... yeah. Thanks. For being there for me, all of you."

"I still feel a bit responsible for it," Sally admitted, though she was smiling a bit after Sorun had said his piece. Everyone was, really, perhaps at knowing he wasn't so upset over everything that'd happened after all. In truth he wasn't, not anymore at any rate. Seeing as he was back being alive and not dying anymore. He just plainly didn't have the energy to stay upset. "You're a Freedom Fighter, and I was in charge of you. So even if your condition was kept secret from everyone, I should have noticed something and taken some measure to save you. To stop any of this from happening to begin with." Her eyes softened into an apologetic look. "I'm truly sorry for having let you endure this entire experience on your own, Sorun. For us having to rely on a comrade and friend and the expense of his life. I'm happy you forgive us, but if there's anything we can do to even remotely make it up to you, all you have to do is ask us."

These people were the only people Sorun knew that would go to such lengths to be so apologetic even after he flat-out said he

forgave them for everything and tried assuring them it wasn't their fault. For the most part, at least. Part of their charm he'd fallen for, Sorun had mused. They just had to be that nice. It was endearing, in a way that warmed Sorun's heart enough that he had to fight to keep his face straight.

"Well, since you're offering..." Sorun bent down slightly and grabbed at the burlap sack that was at his feet. He lifted it up, and then plopped it right on the table in front of him. "I'll take an express ticket to Earth, one-way."

Sally blinked, and then looked to the side at the bag. Understanding crossed her features when she saw it, after which she turned back to Sorun. "Ah, I see. The Chaos Emeralds. Nicole mentioned they came out of you."

"Mhm." Sorun leaned back forwards on his chair. "Look, Sally, everyone. You're all really great, to the point I'd say you all are the only reason I was able to tolerate this whole ordeal. I mean, I gave my life for you all." He gestured to the bag. "But listen, I got my own life in my own world. People to go back to, a culture I can actually function properly in. I wanna go back to that." He looked back to Sally. "So if you really want to make it up to me, Sally, then I want you to fulfill that promise you made me. It's not broken anymore. I became a Freedom Fighter and helped you all with Eggman, helped you push him back to a destroyed city. So in return you have to send me back to Earth using the Emeralds."

"A way back home, huh?" Humming, Sally walked closer to Sorun, over to where the bag was. She reached towards it and began fiddling with the top of the bag, until eventually she managed to undo the knot holding it closed. She opened the bag up and was then forced to squint a bit when a bright array of colorful lights hit her in the face. "Well, Sorun... I'm not alone in saying that I'd grow to miss you if you left. You've really become a part of the gang over the months with everything you've done and sacrificed." She closed the bag back up and faced Sorun with a smile. "But I understand you wanting to return home, and it'd be selfish of us to ask you to stay.

So if that's what you really want, then we'd be happy to help you. You don't have to worry about a thing."

And there it was. She'd given him her word. Not that he didn't expect her too, nor did Sorun expect Sally to go back on her word. In the time he'd gotten to know her Sorun had learned that Sally had so much integrity her word was practically worth gold, formerly broken promise to him notwithstanding. Quality of her being a princess. But it was done: he was going home now.

It didn't feel quite as exciting as Sorun thought it would feel. Maybe that was just the mental exhaustion in him talking. Or the finality of it all was beginning to wear on him. He was still happy to be going back after all his time, but he just couldn't find it in himself to be overly enthusiastic at it. Quiet acceptance and a feeling of content was all he could muster.

"Well, alright." With that done, Sorun finally stood up off the chair. There was at least one single thing he wanted to get out of the way before he walked out of this room, so he'd turned to the front of the room. He began walking forwards, quickly passing Sally who turned to stare after him, along with everybody else as he approached the group of Mobians.

Soon, he reached the person he wanted to speak to. He had to get down on his knee just so he and Tails could be eye level with each other, but he'd done so nevertheless for the fox's sake. Tails himself seemed to have a hard time looking Sorun in the eye, going as far as to shy away slightly and turn his head just so they didn't have to look directly at each other. It was an action that made Sorun feel some guilt, and as a result he sighed a bit before speaking.

"So, Tails. You doing alright?"

Tails had once again jumped up a bit when he heard Sorun's voice. He finally turned his head fully to Sorun, looking like he expected to see Sorun with a scornful look, though all he saw was the human looking at him with an inquisitive look. Even so Tails still looked down

at his red shoes. "I guess," Tails mumbled out. "I... I'm sorry, Sorun. For everything."

"How many times I gotta go an' say I forgive you 'fore you finally get it through that big brain of yours?" Against his better judgement, he'd risen his hand up and placed his palm on top of Tails' head just like he'd done in the past. "It's over, it's done with. I'm alright. Quit stressin' over it."

"But you wouldn't have ever had to go through all of this if I'd never made that portal!" Tails argued. His voice sounded a few octaves higher than normal, and he sounded genuinely distressed, making Sorun retract his hand a bit in surprise. "I just... I feel like it's my fault. You got poisoned by the Chaos Emeralds and died just because I'm the one that brought you here..."

"Aw, come on, Tails, that's..." He almost said that wasn't true, but he didn't want to outright lie to the kid's face. Or draw any angry glares at him from the others. "Look, it's all fine now. I undied- undeathed- undid my death- undea- I came back to life," Sorun stuttered out, though he felt a bit glad in making Tails smile a bit from his small speaking blunder. "At the end of the day all I lost was a few months away from my life." And a heap of mental trauma, but he didn't want to bring that up. "And, well... it wasn't all bad. I genuinely enjoyed spending time with you all. You know, once I warmed up to you all. First few weeks there were kinda rocky."

"Heh heh, yeah..." Tails' face brightened up a bit, though his ears had only gone halfway to being straight. "Do you really have to go, though? You can't stay?"

Sighing, Sorun rose up to his feet. "Wouldn't be fair to my mom if I stayed. From her perspective I just disappeared without a trace," Sorun said. "'Sides. I gotta go make sure my friend David didn't do something stupid. Dude's hopeless without me."

"Yeah. I understand." Tails gave Sorun a full smile, and a nod, and then turned around towards everybody else to address a specific

Mobian in the crowd. "Hey, Rotor, could you help me unpack all the equipment for the portal machine? We can set it up just like last time to send Sorun back."

The purple walrus gave him a reciprocating nod. "Yeah, sure thing. If I remember right we packed all the parts away, but we should be able to get it all set up by tomorrow."

"You packed the portal machine away?" Sorun asked.

Rotor shrugged. "Well, we thought you were gonna stay here and it was taking up a lot of space in the lab, so..."

"Fair point," Sorun conceded. "We really gotta go all the way back to the HQ, though?"

"For the parts, yeah, but if you really want to we could probably just fly the parts back here to the city to rebuild it." Rotor turned to the side at an empty spot in the crowd. "Hey, Nicole? There a spot anywhere we could set it up?"

In response to Rotor's inquiry, Nicole's form appeared in the empty spot he'd been speaking into. She seemed... better, Sorun had thought. That extremely strange expression she'd wore right before disappearing on Sorun from earlier was gone and had settled into a more neutral look.

She kept glancing at Sorun, though. Minute twitches of her eyes that Sorun wouldn't have caught otherwise if he wasn't looking at her. And every time her eyes landed on him, for just that split second, her expression would change just the barest amount. What it would change into Sorun couldn't tell, because it disappeared almost faster than it took to form. And when she'd gone to address Rotor, her face had gone back to neutral and she stopped doing it entirely.

"I believe that can be arranged," she calmly answered the walrus. "There's an empty space in the science center that should be more than adequate in terms of space."

Rotor nodded. "Alright, cool. Me and Tails will fly out, pick up the parts, fly back and set everything up."

"Great," Sorun said. "So, uh... yeah, that's it," he continued while clapping his hands together. "This's my last day here. After that I'm going home."

"Ah reckon that's the right call," Bunnie said from off to the side. "We'll miss ya somethin' fierce, Sorun, but, well... family's important. And not all of us've got folk to go back to." Her organic hand slipped to the side and intertwined its fingers with Antoine's, who stood next to her. "Ya gotta do what ya gotta do. It's been real nice knowin' ya, Sorun," Bunnie finished with a smile.

Antoine mirrored the smile of his wife and and looked towards Sorun. "Oui, we will very much be missing you."

Sorun saw from the corner of his eye that Nicole had glanced towards the hand-holding couple. Her expression changed for a split second once again, and this time he was all but certain it was a sad expression. And like before she'd returned her face to looking normal. He hummed a bit at the sight, and then turned back to the rest.

"Thanks, guys. Means a lot. But I really do have to get back." He glanced over to the other side, where Elias was standing. "In a country where I'm actually considered a legal citizen."

Elias made a nervous chuckle, and then turned his head a bit. "Believe it or not I was drafting some documentation for you before... well, you know."

Sorun's eyes widened a bit in surprise. He hadn't actually known that, nor even cared enough to make a note of it. Well, it was very considerate of Elias, even if it was a bit useless now. He still gave Elias a *small* appreciative smile though for his efforts, the king seeing it and nodding back in turn.

"Awww, do you really have to be going away so soon?" Sorun turned towards the new voice, and saw Amy standing near him. The pink hedgehog had a small pout on her face. "We're not gonna have enough time to plan a going away party or anything for you!"

"Eh, one party was enough, I think," Sorun said, holding his hand up and giving her a bit of a shy grin. "I honestly don't think I have the energy for a party at any rate. But thanks anyway for the thought, Amy."

"Yeah, you're welcome." The pout faded away from Amy's face and was replaced by a small smile. "Bye, Sorun. It was really nice having a weapon buddy."

"Can't really call me a weapon buddy anymore," Sorun reminded her. "Don't have the sword anymore, remember?"

Amy shook her head, surprising Sorun a bit. "Nope! Weapon buddies for life, sword or no sword."

"Don't argue with her over it, Sorun. It's a losing battle," Sonic called out, the blue hedgehog still reclining in his chair. "Just accept it and move on with your life."

Sorun rose an eyebrow at the reclining Mobian. "I'm sure you'd know all about that, huh, Sonic?"

"What was that thing you said that one time? 'I have no recollection'?" Sonic tilted his head towards Sorun and flashed him a grin. "I have no-"

"That's not grammatically applicable given the current context; you saying 'I have no recollection' is you essentially saying you have no memory of Amy chasing you around, which I know is false," Sorun corrected. Sonic's grin fell away, Amy began pouting again, and everyone else began grinning towards the trio. "It'd be more appropriate if you said 'I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking

about' or something along those lines. I told you that if you want to battle somebody with wits you need to learn how to speak correctly."

"..." Rolling his eyes and shaking his head, Sonic relaxed his head so that he faced the ceiling and reclined even further in his chair. "I don't even have a comeback for that one," he mumbled. "Just had to get the last word in, huh?"

"You know me."

"Yeah, now I do. I'm almost glad you're takin' your fancy speak back to Earth-"

Sonic was interrupted when the doors to leading the room everybody was in burst wide open. Everyone had jumped up a bit in shock, and Sonic had fallen out of the chair he'd been reclining in due to the loud *bang!* of the doors opening. Sorun had turned his head towards the now-open doors to see who it was that had just opened them, and then felt all the blood drain out from his face when he recognized the Mobian standing in the doorway.

She was standing right at the entrance to the doors, legs spread wide and arms held to the sides to hold the doors open. She was panting, heavily, like she'd sprinted all the way here, and her golden eyes were locked right onto Sorun. The human himself had gone as far as to take a step back from the sight of the manic-looking yellow cat looking straight at him, looking almost frightful.

Before Sorun could react in the slightest, Honey ran headlong into the room barreling right towards him. She hadn't even let the table stand in her way, and had jumped right on top of it just to sprint across it without losing momentum. When the cat Mobian reached the end of the table, she'd jumped yet again to dismount the table, landed on the floor still at running speeds, and then barreled straight at Sorun...

... Only to then run a short distance past him and completely stop. At the same time, Sorun found himself feeling just the slightest bit

lighter right when Honey had passed him. He looked down, and realized that his white coat was missing, leaving his tattered black shirt. He blinked, and then looked behind himself to see Honey just standing there. Holding his nearly-destroyed white coat in her hands, looking at it mournfully. He could have sworn he saw tears threaten to form in her eyes.

"You didn't even have it for a week," Honey mumbled in a voice so quiet Sorun barely heard her. "I poured my heart and soul into this coat, and look at what you've done to her..."

Sorun slumped his shoulders. "It's nice to see you too, Honey. Dunno if you know this but I died. Came back, by the way. Thanks for worrying."

She waved a hand in Sorun's direction. "Ah-huh, that's nice, Sorun, but could you please explain to me-" she turned towards Sorun so fast with such a distraught look Sorun stumbled back in shock at the speed, "- why the beautiful coat I gifted you out of the kindness of my heart is nearly FALLING TO *PIECES* !?"

Everyone in the room had gone still, looking towards the cat like she'd lost her mind. All except Sorun, who just stared towards her with a flat look, like he wasn't at all surprised at her reaction. That seemed to make everybody watching the two grow even more confused.

"... I died," Sorun blandly stated.

"Excuses!" She threw the tattered thing at Sorun, who fumbled to catch it. "It's always excuses with you! 'Oh, I'm fighting giant killer robots who keep trying to stab me and set me on fire, ooh, I'm more busy trying to stay alive than make sure the best clothes in the world that are better than what I deserve don't get scuffed up', it's always the same thing! Do you take joy in torturing me so!? Some sick, sadistic pleasure!? Is that it!?"

"Woman, I-!"

The pair's voices became indiscernible as the both of them began drowning each other out in a shouting match. The Freedom Fighters gathered around looked at each other with confused, bewildered looks, with none of them sure how to proceed. Sorun and Honey didn't even seem to notice them all staring at the two as they continued shouting at each other.

"... I always thought Sorun was kidding around when he said the clothes lady he got his stuff from was nuts," Sonic mumbled out to Sally after finally having picked himself up off the ground. He stepped to her side and found his eyes completely transfixed at the exchange between the two.

"Yeah, I know," Sally quietly agreed, her own eyes uncontrollably affixed to the pair. "I kind of feel bad since I was the one that introduced them."

"Should we, uh... should we do somethin'?"

Sally shook her head. "I'm not sure it's a good idea to get in between that, Sonic."

"You just don't have any respect for me!" Honey screamed out. "None! None whatsoever! I slave over a sewing machine for you and for what!? For this!?"

"I got *stabbed* through the *chest* ! What more do you want from me!?" Sorun yelled.

"Oh, boo-hoo, you're fine now, aren't you!?" she snapped. "I don't even see a scar through the hole in your shirt! Yet another quality product you've ruined I might add!" Her eyes shot downwards, where she then saw the hole in Sorun's blue pants where he'd been stabbed through the thigh by a lance. "The pants, too!? What, did you get stabbed through the leg!?"

"YES!"

"IS THE CONCEPT OF DODGING TOO MUCH FOR YOU TO COMPREHEND!?"

"E-excuse me..."

Somehow, beyond all reason, that small voice had been enough to get through to the two and get them to stop shouting. Their eyes immediately traveled to the side and downwards towards the source of the voice, along with everybody else in the room who hadn't even noticed the new person enter due to being too distracted by Sorun and Honey's shouting. The newcomer everybody was looking towards was Cream, who was standing right next to the pair and looking up at them with sad eyes. Her pet Chao with the bowtie was floating on her right side, while Virgil was floating on her left.

Sorun was the first one to react. "O-oh, Cream, hi there," he softly greeted, nervously smiling at her while his eyes darted to Honey. "Hey, you know the rules. No shouting in front of kids."

"Of course, of course," Honey immediately agreed with a nod.

The rate at which the two had synced up and quickly agreed with each other right then and there after all the shouting was an act that went on to mystify every single Freedom Fighter who bore witness to this entire exchange.

Nervously smiling, and completely ignoring the wide-eyed looks everybody was giving him and Honey, Sorun turned and looked down at the small rabbit. "Was there something you needed, Cream? How come you're all the way out here at the castle?"

"W-well, it's kind of a long story..." she said in a shy tone. "My mother and I were at Ms. Honey's store because my mother wanted some new clothes for me." She looked towards Honey, who, for some reason, froze up a bit. "Ms. Honey seemed really sad, and when I asked why, she just said she missed you, Mr. Sorun! And I remembered earlier when Ms. Amy was at our house having tea with us that the nice computer lady appeared and said everybody was

gathering here, and she mentioned your name, too! Ms. Amy seemed really surprised and left before she could even finish her tea, and later I told Ms. Honey what happened and she ran all the way here, so I flew after her because I was worried!"

Sorun blinked at the long-winded explanation, and then he tilted his head curiously at the little girl. "You... flew here?"

"Mhm! With my ears!"

"I'm ignoring that." Pushing Cream's statement completely out of his mind, Sorun turned towards Honey. He saw that her eyes had darted away from his, and the instant he saw this, he found a small smirk playing across his lips. "Aw, Honey... don't tell me. You were actually sad I was gone?"

"W-well... ugh, of course I was!" she replied in an indignant tone. The yellow cat crossed her arms while keeping her whole head turned away from Sorun. "You were gone! How was I supposed to feel!?"

"Mah, mah, Honey, there's no need to be upset. I get it." Chuckling, Sorun held up the tattered white coat to her even though she still refused to look his way. "It's aaaall clear now. You didn't wanna look all emotional in front of me so you pretended to be more upset at the coat to hide it. It's understandable you'd be too shy to show that side of you. Almost sounds like something I would do, actually."

It'd all been said in a teasing tone, which seemed to visually irritate Honey based on how she began to growl under he breath. Before Sorun could say anything else her hand shot out, and she snatched the coat out from Sorun's hand, and then turned her back to him fully.

"Tch. Who do you think I am? I have an image it maintain." She turned her head to Sorun, angrily glaring at him. An angry glare that by now was much more subdued. And if one looked hard enough there may have been a smile there somewhere. "And I *am* upset about the coat. I really did put a lot of effort into this one."

"Yeah, I know..." Sorun began rubbing the back of his head while making a slight chuckle. "Sorry about that, Honey. I tried my best not to ruin your gift to me so soon after getting it."

"... You're impossible to stay mad at, y'know?" Sighing, Honey tossed the coat over her shoulder and then turned fully to Sorun. "I *suppose* I could overlook it this time and file this instance under extenuating circumstances. Just this once. Given your...-" she glanced at Cream, and then looked back at Sorun, "- trip? Trip. It's a shoddy excuse, but I'll take it."

Sorun's response was to make a light chuckle at Honey, while also giving her a small smile. She'd blinked in surprise at the action, but then she gave him almost the exact same chuckle and smile at seeing Sorun's reaction. By now everybody watching had calmed down as well and began smiling again. Nicole, too, thankfully enough. It was something that caused a nice feeling to well in Sorun, though it was interrupted when he felt a soft tug on the leg of his pants. He looked down to see Cream was trying to get his attention.

"Mr. Sorun? Did you go somewhere?" she asked him. "You never came back to check on Mr. Virgil, and everybody seemed really worried and sad for you."

"Ahh, right, that." Sorun got down on one knee and addressed the Mobian child with a calm smile. "Yeah, I had to go somewhere alone for a bit. I'm back now, though."

Cream's ears straightened up in understanding. "Oh! Where did you have to go?"

"Super special Freedom Fighter mission, top secret, can't tell you a single thing. Sorry." The explanation caused a small whine to come out of Cream, as well as her large rabbit ears to lower somewhat. Sorun once again chuckled a bit at the sight, and then looked over to the side. He caught Virgil looking at him with the same scowl he usually wore. "Glad to see you're happy to see me."

"Chao."

"Don't try and say you weren't worried. I know for a fact you were sadly staring out a window, all forlorn-like. You missed me."

The accusation seemed to shake the Chao a bit. He did a double-take on Sorun, growled out a bit, showing his sharpened teeth, and then turned his head away from Sorun while grumbling out, "C-chao-chao..."

"You're allergic to feelings, I get it. Missed you, too, buddy." A sudden thought came to Sorun, which made him pause as he continued staring out at the Chao. With him returning to Earth, Virgil would essentially be losing out on an owner. He couldn't just go and take him back with him. A strange, mystical creature wouldn't last two days on Earth before something bad happened to him. At least that's what Sorun's paranoid mind told him. *"Maybe I could... nah."*

Internally, Sorun shook his head. He didn't want to put his Chao at risk by bringing him back, or separate him from his homeworld. He'd have to stay on Mobius. Which meant that he would need a new owner. He figured asking Cream wouldn't be too terrible of an idea considering she seemed to already have a handle on caring for Virgil. And he honestly doubted anybody else was up for it.

"That all said, Cream..." Sorun began, turning back towards the child rabbit, "I need to go on another trip. Unfortunately, this one's going to be a permanent trip."

"Permanent?" Cream repeated, growing a bit sad as a result. "You're leaving again?"

"'Fraid so. I gotta go home to my family, you see. And my home's so far away that I won't even be able to ever visit. So can you do my a favor and keep Virgil for me?"

The question seemed to surprise Cream a bit, who'd widened her eyes at Sorun at hearing the question. Virgil had reacted, too, though

while he was surprised as well, he also didn't seem too happy about what Sorun just asked.

"Chao-chao!" The black and blue Chao floated right in front of Sorun, shaking his head in denial while angrily gesturing to Sorun with his arms. "Chao!"

Sorun sighed at the sight. "Virgil, there's no Chao back where I'm from," he said. "I don't know what would happen to you if you came back with me. Things, uh... things don't work back there like they do here." The explanation caused Virgil to pause a bit, and while the anger began to rapidly fade from his features, he'd still lowered his head down to the floor while the rest of him seemed to go slack, save for his V-shaped wings that kept him aloft. Breathing heavily through his nose, Sorun reached forwards and gently poked the Chao's head hard enough to pick his head back up. "I'd take you with me if I could. But I can't. Besides, it'd be a bit too cruel of me to take you away from your home." He removed his finger, and Virgil found it in himself to keep his head lifted up at Sorun. "Keep an eye on things here for me, okay? I won't be able to do it anymore."

"... Chao." Reluctantly, Virgil gave him a nod as a look of understanding crossed his eyes. Sorun nodded back at him, smiling once again, and then turned back to Cream. To his relief, she was smiling back at him.

"Don't worry, Mr. Sorun! I'll take good care of him!" she promised. "I, um... I hope your next trip goes well! I'll miss you!"

"It'll go fine, Cream, don't worry," Sorun said to her. "Now, uh... maybe you should go back to your mom? You kind of made it sound like you kinda just abandoned her at-"

"Oh dear! Mother!" She seemed to reach the same vein of thought as Sorun did from the way realization flashed over her eyes, along with her features morphing into a worried look. "She must be worried sick over me! Sorry, everybody, but I need to go back now!" Much to

Sorun's confusion, Cream's ears began to... flap. They were moving up and down like a pair of wings. "Goodbye, everyone!"

After that, with Sorun staring blankly and with a straight face, Cream's body began to lift up all the ground. Her ears, acting like wings, carried her all the way out through the doors she and Honey had come in from, with her own pet Chao Cheese following after her. Virgil followed as well, but then had stopped at the open doorway to the room. He glanced back at Sorun, looking straight into his eyes, and gave him a nod. Sorun nodded back, after which the Chao turned around and followed after the other two.

"... Just to be clear we all saw that, right?" Sorun suddenly spoke up after the three finally left. He got back into a standing position, and then looked to the side at Bunnie, who was looking out towards where Cream had flown off to. "Bunnie, are rabbit Mobians supposed to do that?"

"... Ah know ah can't..." she mumbled in answer, seemingly looking just as surprised as Sorun at seeing the rabbit girl flying away with her ears. "Well... huh. Ain't that a thing?" Chuckling a bit under her breath, she shook her head and, with a small smile, looked towards Sorun. "Guess ya ain't leaving without one more surprise, huh?"

"Evidently," Sorun dryly responded with a grin of his own. "So now that the goodbyes are out of the way, what do you all want to do now?"

The next hours were spent with everyone just talking. Sitting there in that room, hanging out like any normal group of friends would. It was nice, Sorun had felt. That he was leaving things in such a state like this. Where everybody was happy and okay. And he was glad to get this much in with everyone before he'd finally be leaving. He was glad to have stayed and spent this time with everyone. Enough that he'd eventually left the room smiling.

For the first time in what felt like forever, he didn't feel too shy about other people seeing him smile.

Chapter 58

Recursion Error

Episode 58- Goodbye, Chaotix

"You know, Knuckles, it would have been really great if you, I don't know... mentioned you died at one point and the Neo-Walkers helped bring you back. Woulda been real helpful helping me cope with the whole dying thing."

Thanks to Nicole, the news that Sorun was up and about had reached Team Chaotix up on Angel Island. He'd made friends in them, too, so naturally they'd wanted to see him with their own eyes, and Sorun wanted to say goodbye to them before he left for Earth.

Unfortunately, Sorun didn't want to go outside of New Mobotropolis. Frankly speaking, he didn't want to leave the safety of the city by stepping outside of its borders, especially now that he was powerless once more. Likewise, the Chaotix weren't too keen on leaving the island, even if it was to visit a recently revived friend. The answer to this dilemma came in Sorun using a communication system that had been set up some time ago so the people down here could keep in contact with those up there on the island.

So that lead to this point, with Sorun sitting in a room in the science center staring up at a big monitor displaying Knuckles' face. The entire team up there had already been briefed by what happened with Sorun and his revival by, once again, Nicole, and Knuckles, seeing how he'd gone through the same process Sorun had for coming back to life, had understood immediately and hadn't questioned it at all. So the call was less an interrogation and more a friendly chat.

Or at least it was until Sorun brought up Knuckles never mentioning his own death and revival.

"H-hah, yeah, about that..." The echidna made a nervous cough and looked to the side of the camera that was transmitting his image. "Well, it never really came up, so..."

Sorun had risen an eyebrow at seeing the echidna's expression. Under the relieved smile there were hints of tension and nervousness. The same look the Freedom Fighters had when he confronted them all post-revival. He understood it well- Knuckles probably had some small amount of guilt in him, too, with what happened to Sorun since he and the rest of the Chaotix helped in the decision to bring him here. Perhaps he felt even more at guilt for never bringing up his revival. It was a sight that made Sorun sigh.

"Knuckles, would you relax?" Sorun requested in an annoyed tone as he waved a hand. "I'm not mad at you or anyone else. I'm not upset anymore." He blew past his lips and sat backwards in the rolling chair he was sitting in. "It's over and done with and I get to go home now. All in the past, yeah? 'Sides, not like I even blame anyone for what happened."

Knuckles had started a bit at Sorun's words, and for a brief moment the mask he wore dropped and his nervousness was very apparent. But then he'd sighed, relaxed his shoulders, and he took on a more easy expression as the red Mobian faced the camera once more.

"Yeah. Sorry about that, Sorun," he apologized. "We all felt bad hearing what was really going on with you, but I'm glad to see you're alright now. But you're really going back to your own zone?"

Sorun nodded. "Mhm. Got all the Emeralds, and Rotor and Tails already flew out to get the parts for the portal machine. They're gonna set it up here for me."

"Huh. Well, good for you. Glad you finally get to go home," Knuckles congratulated with a sincere tone. "Julie-Su wanted to come say hi,

too, but she got wrapped up in an errand with Saffron and Ray. They all wanted to see you again, actually, but they're not gonna be back for a while."

"Just give them my regards, please," Sorun said. "I don't really wanna stay on too long. I'm leavin' tomorrow and I got some last things I wanted to do."

"I getcha." Knuckles nodded at him and flashed a grin. "Well, don't let me keep ya-"

The rest of Knuckles' sentence was lost when a small, black and yellow form shot in from out of the camera's view and right into the back of the echidna's head. Sorun had widened his eyes in surprise at seeing the act being displayed on the monitor, while Knuckles, interestingly enough, looked more annoyed than anything.

"Is that Sorun!? Is it!? Is it!?" The human watching the screen let out a laugh when he recognized the voice and saw who it was clinging to Knuckles' back while staring towards the camera. Knuckles wasn't nearly amused, and began waving his arms up in an attempt to try and swat the newcomer off of him.

"Charmy, get off!" Knuckles had barked out. The bee, in response, had buzzed his wings and flown off from Knuckles with a small pout on his face, while the echidna himself rubbed the back of his head while turning back to the camera. "I gotta go, Sorun. Happy to hear you're doin' well. Uh... goodbye, I guess. Hope it all goes well for you."

He gave Sorun one final smile through the camera, and then wandered off-screen. All that was left was Charmy, who was floating right in front of the camera while giving it a quizzical look. And then he seemed to recognize the figure in the screen on his end as Sorun, and he immediately flew so close to the camera that he almost rammed into it. He very well might have, seeing as the screen briefly shook as Charmy took hold of the camera.

"Sorun!" The amount of happiness exuding from Charmy's face was downright explosive from how he looked, as well as infectious due to the fact Sorun had felt himself crack a wry grin at seeing the bee's reaction. It was enough that Charmy's eyes had gone slightly glossy from seeing him. "You're not dead anymore! We heard you came back and we were all really happy 'cause you died and we found out why from Shadow and-!"

"Charmy, Charmy, give him some room!" A green, scaled arm came into the screen and pushed the bee away from the camera. A crocodile Mobian's face then appeared within view, scowling at Charmy. "Geez, he's all the way on the other side of the planet and you're somehow smothering him!" The scowl left, and in a split second the crocodile with a gold chain around his neck turned towards the camera and gave Sorun a wide, tooth-filled smile. "Sorun! Heard you were back in the land of the livin'! How's life?"

"Life's, uh... life, I guess," Sorun answered, still smiling a bit as he shrugged. "Vector. It's nice to see you."

"Same, same. Ain't just me here to see ya, though." Vector stepped to the side, letting two more Mobians into the view of the camera. A purple chameleon with a yellow horn and an armadillo with a smooth, red shell that Sorun instantly recognized.

"Mighty, Espio." Sorun's smile grew a bit wider when he saw the two walk into view. "It's great to see you both."

Both of the Mobians smiled in turn when they saw Sorun on their own screen, though theirs were much wider than his own. Mighty was the first on to speak, saying, "Sorun! It's great to see ya!"

Espio, in turn, nodded at him. "Indeed. I'm relieved to see you're no longer deceased."

"Yeah, tell me about it. So how are things..."

It was a breath of fresh air to just idly chat with friends like this. No crises, no nerve-wracking topics, nothing even remotely negative. They'd just talked. Sorun about his revival, plans for going home, and how he was generally doing really well now. The reception he'd received in turn from the others had been warm, though Charmy had been a bit disappointed Sorun was leaving so soon since it meant they couldn't celebrate Sorun's return to both life and his home.

But, otherwise, it was a relaxed conversation. They'd talked about how things up on the island were going, which was to say, pretty slow and uneventful. Knuckles was still dealing a bit with everything that had happened with the echidna people, but otherwise, things had been quiet up there. It was good for Sorun to hear. He felt like things going "slow but peaceful" is what he'd been fighting for this entire time. It helped to reassure him that he was making the right choice in going back. Things on Mobius were alright now. Nobody had to worry about anything anymore.

He was glad. It was the least these people deserved. And it meant he could go back without feeling any guilt.

"... But, yeah, that's pretty much the long and short of it." This had marked the end of a small story Mighty had just finished telling Sorun of how the Chaotix had lost track of Charmy one day and had spent an entire afternoon looking around for him. Apparently he'd just been taking a nap behind the Master Emerald's altar, which had gone on to upset Knuckles some amount. Charmy himself had on a sheepish look the entire story, while Sorun kept smiling and laughing softly through the whole thing. It was such a mundane, boring story, but it was for that reason alone Sorun found so much joy in it. In such a mundane, harmless thing. So much better than everything else he'd been dealing with all these months. "So you're goin' tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," Sorun confirmed with a nod. "I don't imagine you all will be coming to say goodbye."

Mighty, Vector, and Charmy both glanced towards each other, while Espio looked off to the side. "The island's really far away from New

Mobotropolis..." Mighty began, appearing to grow a bit uncomfortable.

"Yeah, that'd be kinda a long trip for us to take just to see you off," Vector finished off. "Sorry we won't be able to make it, Sorun. But hey, at least we got this."

Sorun waved their concerns away with a sweep of his hand. "Don't sweat it, guys. I get it," he said, making the four of them looked relieved. "I wouldn't expect you guys to drop everything just for my sake. It's fine. Saying goodbye through this is more than enough."

"Aw, well, I'm sure gonna miss you!" Charmy beamed out. "I'll go ahead and tell Saffron you said goodbye for her!"

"I'll do the same for Ray," Mighty volunteered. "Sorry they couldn't be here to say goodbye with us. They got caught up with something."

"It's fine, it's fine," Sorun assured them. "I'm just glad I got to see you all one last time."

"Same here, pal. Same here." Vector gestured a peace sign at the camera as Mighty stepped next to him while Charmy floated by his other side. "Welp, Sorun, it's been real nice knowin' ya! Don't let the portal hit ya on the way out when you finally hit the trail for home, y'hear?"

Sorun nodded. "I hear you, Vector, I hear you. Stay well, all of you."

With some final nods and smiles, the three finally left the view of the camera as they walked off to tend to their own devices. All that was left was Espio, who was still standing in view of the camera. His arms were crossed and he had his usual stoic expression and stance, though even he couldn't avoid grinning just the slightest bit given current events.

"I wanted to wish you safe travels as well, Sorun," Espio said to him. "I'm pleased to hear the way to your home has been opened to you,

and that you've decided to take it. We'll make sure to look after things here on our end, so please try and not worry too much over us."

Sorun chuckled a bit, while the Mobian ninja's own grin grew just the slightest bit. "I'll try not to," he assured him. "They aren't too loud for you, are they? The others? I know you like your quiet time for you meditation and stuff."

Espio shrugged. "Even they are not loud enough to interrupt my meditation exercises. Even so, there's enough quiet spots on the island for me to hide myself away in," he added in with a slightly bigger grin. "I understand that you lost your abilities?"

"Yeah. Same thing happened with Knuckles if I heard it right," Sorun said. "I'm not too broken up about it. Not having years taken off my life is nice, and I get to go back home now. So it all worked out."

"That it has," Espio agreed with a nod. "I can't say I'll be missing that katana of yours."

Sorun rolled his eyes in an amused manner. Espio still had a dislike for katanas, the same as always. "You never change, Espio," he said. "Vector still tease you about not liking katanas?"

"He usually doesn't, but there were many times when you and that sword came up in conversation that he'd mention it and everybody would jump on the same bandwagon," Espio grumbled out. "It's my fault for starting it in the first place. He didn't even know what a katana was until I told him when he asked about ninja tools and weapons this one time."

The sentence caused Sorun's eyes to widen and, following him snapping his fingers, he pointed towards the screen. "Ha, so you admit it! Ninjas *do* use katanas!"

Caught by his own words, Espio became startled enough that his arms uncrossed and surprise flashed over his features. He

composed himself a second later, and then a mixture of amusement and annoyance crossed his face as his grin returned. "I'll admit that they *may* not be entirely exclusive to samurai. But you'll never find this ninja using one."

"What about me?" Sorun asked. "Am I samurai material?"

At that, Espio made a single, low, controlled laugh. "Not in the slightest. You're way too undisciplined," he said, making Sorun slump back in defeat. "You're quite good with a sword, though. And your stealth skills are... passable, to an extent. If somewhat unorthodox."

The human perked up a bit in pride at hearing the compliments. "You're really not letting that box go, huh?" Sorun blinked, and then tilted his head as a thought suddenly came to him. "Hey, how do you know what a katana is?"

The grin fell off from Espio's face. He stilled a bit, and then asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well... it just came to me. None of the Freedom Fighters here knew what a katana was when they first saw the Yamato. Not even Shadow. And according to you Vector and the rest just knew because you told them," Sorun explained. "I kind of just assumed katanas were something only found in the eastern continent, so that's why nobody here knows about them, but... I thought you were raised in the chameleon community up on Angel Island." He made a shrug. "It's just a bit weird."

"Some of the founders of that community hailed from Yurashia," Espio smoothly answered, making a shrug of his own. "They brought some of the culture from there and passed it down over the generations. It's where my ninja techniques and weapons originated from."

"Ah, alright. That makes sense." Sorun blinked again. "Didn't Angel Island originate from Downunda, though? How'd chameleons from

Yurashia wind up there to begin with?"

Espio shook his head. "I'm unsure, Sorun. This was all well, *well* before my time, and I never delved too deep into our history before I began tagging along with Knuckles and the rest."

With that, Sorun shrugged in acceptance. Weirder things had happened on Mobius. *Much* weirder things. He didn't see the point in looking any further into it. He didn't even want to, really, since he had way more important things to focus on. Like home. And, well... generally speaking, everything else. Upon thinking about it further, Sorun realized he didn't actually care all that much about this entire topic.

Espio didn't like katanas. That's as far as he needed to think about it.

"Well, Espio, I don't wanna take up anymore of your time," Sorun said. "This is goodbye. Keep Charmy out of trouble for me, would you?"

"I'll endeavor to do my best." Espio gave Sorun one final smile, and then, in an act that made Sorun smirk in amusement, flattened his arms to his side and bowed at the camera. "Farewell, Sorun. I greatly enjoyed our time together. Thank you for everything you've done for us."

"It's been an experience, Espio. Peace."

And with that, Sorun hit a button on the side of the console he was sitting in front of, right below the monitor he was staring at. The screen went black upon the communications being cut, followed by Sorun getting out of the chair and stretching his arms and legs a bit after having sat down so long.

That had been nice. The Chaotix were doing well like everybody else was. Sorun was glad for it, and was happy that he got to say goodbye to most of them. He found that he'd be missing them just as much as everyone else.

"Ah, well. They'll all be fine." Sorun turned around away from the monitor. *"I have faith things here will work out. All's left is for me to hit the road."*

He began making his way towards the exit of the room. A camera that was right above the doorway swiveled towards Sorun's way, and at the same time there was a small swirl of green pixels besides the doorway as Nicole's form materialized in front of Sorun. He greeted the lynx with a wave, who looked towards him with a neutral face and with her arms held behind her back.

"Hey, Nicole," Sorun greeted, "I just finished talking with the Chaotix. They're all doing well. Thanks for letting me use the-"

Without a word, Nicole disappeared before Sorun could even finished speaking. He blinked in surprise as a result, and then looked where she'd disappeared from as he scratched the side of his head in confusion.

"Okay...? What's up with her?" He didn't know her to just disappear like that while somebody was talking. She was way more considerate than that. "Eh, whatever. Maybe she's just caught up with something," Sorun reasoned to himself with a shrug.

He left the room right after, wondering to himself, "So what was I gonna do next...?"

Chapter 59

Recursion Error

Episode 59- Goodbye, Team Dark

"... Man, this is awkward."

The biggest surprise of all that day was when Sorun learned that Shadow was coming here to see him. Somehow, someway, he'd found out about Sorun. And Sorun only knew he found out when he was informed he was coming all the way out to New Mobotropolis just to see him. The initial surprise had been enough to stun Sorun for a few seconds, and after he got over it he decided that the most sensible thing to do was to go to the airfield and wait for Shadow to arrive.

So that's what Sorun did. Went to the airfield to wait for Shadow, inside of the hangar. Tens of minutes later a dark green shuttle had flown into view, had stopped over the runway, and softly touched down before powering down. Only one figure had exited from it: a figure Sorun had instantly recognized as Shadow. He remembered the red-striped hedgehog entering the hangar, and his eyes immediately being drawn to Sorun, who was sitting on top of a small stack of crates. It'd been strange to see how such a flurry of emotions had twitched across Shadow's face, as he'd seemed to try his hardest to stifle them all and maintain his neutral scowl that he ordinarily wore. Even he couldn't contain all that surprise, though. Sorun could have sworn he'd even seen hints of relief and joy that had flashed over the hedgehog's face for what was probably milliseconds. Then again, it could have just been the lighting. Or his imagination. Some combination of the two, perhaps.

Shadow, for his part, hadn't said a word. What he did do was wordlessly step over to where Sorun was, sit on a metal crate right

next to him, and... simply continue to sit there. They probably spent minutes sitting next to each other in silence, with the mood becoming increasingly more uncomfortable by the second, at least for Sorun. The human had committed to glancing over at Shadow occasionally, though all he would find was his crimson eyes looking right at Sorun, his face set almost in slight wonder.

But even Sorun had a limit to his patience.

"You know, usually people use words for these sorts of things," Sorun said. Merely speaking had made Shadow look almost startled, though even so his eyes wouldn't leave Sorun's own. "You're free to speak, you know."

"... You're alive." It was a statement of fact, though Shadow's voice was unusually quiet compared to how he normally sounded. A bit less reserved, slightly softer. Sorun picked up on it, but didn't comment on it nor did he think much of it.

"Not for a lack of trying," Sorun replied. "I had to fight tooth and nail to get those Neo-Walkers to bring me back. Can you believe they had me go through this whole spectacle while keeping the fact I could come back in their back pocket?" He scoffed, faced forwards, and crossed his arms. "I really did have to fight them, too," he added. "I kind of downplayed it when I told everyone else, but... eh, I'm not gonna lie to you, Shadow, I kinda went a bit far with them."

"How far?" Shadow asked, tone simple and curious.

Sorun scoffed. "I reenacted the 'American History X' curb stomp on Aurora's face, so I don't- ah, wait, you wouldn't know what that is. It's this one movie where, uh... eh, you wouldn't be interested," Sorun said with a dismissive wave. "They regenerated, so it's not like I did any lasting damage. And honestly I couldn't care less seeing everything they... well, I don't know. Still my choice in the end to go after the Emeralds."

To his surprise, Shadow shook his head. "They shouldn't have kept you from speaking out. There's still fault that lies with them. I'm... relieved you were able to sort your differences with them and come back. You shouldn't have had to die just for the sake of a planet that isn't even yours." Shadow's eyes became half-lidded in regret, and he'd turned forwards and away from Sorun as his hands were folded into his lap. "I wanted to apologize to you."

Sorun cocked his head to the side as he looked back to Shadow. "Apologize? For what?"

"Back then, with that red Chaos Emerald," Shadow clarified. "I always knew you were hiding something, that your excuses for not wanting to touch that Emerald were nothing but just that: empty excuses. But I could never figure out what the issue was, and you dropped the matter after coming back, so I ceased thinking on it." His head dipped a bit lower. "I blame myself in part for you having to go so far. I should have noticed something. I should have picked apart the meaning behind your words, why you didn't want to be a Freedom Fighter. I don't blame you for having those feelings, knowing it would result in your death, but-"

"Shadow, it's not your fault." The black and red hedgehog looked back to Sorun in surprise as Sorun shook his head. "Even if I wasn't an idiot that never realized I coulda just used Yamato to separate that curse, I wouldn'ta done it. If I knew before I decided to go ahead with it all, well... that'd be a different story. Seeing as this one had a happy ending, I don't really want to focus on the what-if of it all," he said. "I don't hold any blame in you, and neither should you."

His words seemed to make Shadow relax a bit, which Sorun was thankful for. Nevertheless he still had a small, upset look to his otherwise calm eyes. "What made you decide to give your life up?" Shadow asked.

Softly exhaling, Sorun flattened his palms against the top of the crate and leaned back a bit as he looked up at the hangar ceiling. "Same

reason as you, I guess," he said. "I like this planet too much to see it die."

"... I see." Shadow shifted his gaze back forwards. "You like it so much, and yet you're intent on leaving it."

"Aw, don't tell me you're gonna miss me."

With a roll of his eyes, Shadow scoffed. "Don't flatter yourself. It's unbecoming."

"Strong words for a guy that raced all the way out here when he heard I was back to being alive," Sorun pointed out. When he leaned back forwards in a normal sitting position and turned his eyes back at Shadow, he saw that the hedgehog had stiffened up and widened his eyes slightly, as if he'd just been caught doing something. "I didn't make you use a vacation day or something from work, did I?"

"No, you're fine." When he glanced to the side and saw Sorun's blue eyes curiously looking into Shadow's red, he sighed and turned away from Sorun once more. "You're on good terms with the others?"

"Mhm, yeah."

"You're healthy again? No lasting effects, no-?"

"Yes, Shadow, yes, sheesh." Sorun made a breathy chuckle as he shook his head. "No scars, nothing's missing, I'm all good. Quit worryin' so much over me."

"I-!" Shadow turned to Sorun to say something, but while he opened his mouth, nothing came out. Sorun glanced at Shadow as a result, though all the hedgehog did was close his mouth and looked down a bit. "I... I think you going home is the right decision," he said. Sorun didn't bother calling out the sudden shift in topic. "You told me you felt like you didn't belong here, not even with the Station Square humans. You should go back to those you can identify with." His

eyes glanced to the side. "Back to a world you're less likely to be hurt in just because you don't have powers."

Sorun blinked a few times, and then quietly snorted in amusement. "The fact I'm so weak now compared to everybody else has been a bit... frustrating to live with again, I won't lie. But I'm used to it," he informed Shadow. "But you're probably right. It's not fun living in a place where children are stronger than me." He gave Shadow an inquisitive look. "Gonna miss me?"

"... Perhaps a bit," was all Shadow offered as he looked back up at Sorun. "I haven't encountered anybody who's as easy to talk with as you. Not since..."

Shadow cut himself off right there. He'd clamped his mouth shut, and after silently looking at Sorun for a few moments, turned back forwards to look ahead. Once more Sorun blinked, and then did the same thing. What felt like another minute of silence passed before Sorun spoke again, with the both of them still sitting forwards.

"Back then, you said, 'I don't want to lose you, too.'" From the corner of his eye he noticed Shadow flinch. "Who else were you referring to?"

"I don't wish to speak of it," was Shadow's immediate, clipped response.

"Fair enough." Far be it for Sorun to pry. He was curious, very much so admittedly, but he liked Shadow too much to try and breach his privacy. If it was something like he suspected it was, Sorun couldn't rightly blame him for wanting to keep it to himself. Not in the slightest. "Well, at the end of the day, nobody's letting me apologize for worrying them all so much, so you don't get to apologize for anything, either. It worked out."

Shadow relaxed some, and if the look on his face said anything, he was thankful for Sorun having shifted the conversation topic. "That it appears to have," Shadow agreed. "I'd say it all wrapped up rather

nicely, but..." He stopped briefly to take a deep breath, looking like he was readying himself for something, and then continued. "There's something you should know. The reason Rouge didn't join us in that final battle is because she was attacked on the way to our position."

"Attacked?" Sorun repeated, growing a bit concerned. "By what? Is she okay?"

Shadow nodded. "Recovering back at G.U.N., yes. Others... weren't so fortunate. Whoever attacked them only spared Rouge and killed the G.U.N. personnel traveling with her." Sorun's face had grown even more concerned, while Shadow's expression had turned grim. "She spoke with the assailant briefly, though she said he wasn't giving up much. Not even a name. She couldn't even tell what kind of Mobian he was, either, since he was covered head to toe in clothing with not a single part of him exposed. But according to Rouge, he displayed physical prowess far above the norms of a Mobian, and even showed off a regenerative ability."

"So a Chaos energy user, then?" Sorun guessed.

Shadow nodded. "We're assuming so, but it doesn't leave us any suspects." He made a quiet exhale. "There's one other thing. He knew you were dying."

The room had chilled right there after that sentence was uttered, and Sorun couldn't tell if it was his mind playing tricks on him or if the temperature really did drop. He replayed the words in his head over and over in his head in what was less than a second, but no matter how many times he did it, it just didn't make any sense to Sorun. He would have said Shadow was messing around with him, but he didn't know Shadow to do something like that. He'd never joke about something this serious. He wouldn't joke about soldiers dying and Rouge being hurt. About any of this.

It was the truth. And it confused Sorun to no end.

"Shadow." Sorun's voice came out low, his eyes locked right onto the dark hedgehog's with a serious slant to them. "That's literally impossible. There's no way."

"Are you absolutely sure?" Shadow pressed. "You never told anybody about-?"

"I couldn't have if I wanted to!" Sorun shouted out, startling Shadow a bit. "Y-you're telling me- no, you're wrong. I knew, and the Neo-Walkers knew. That's it. You're telling me some random powered-up guy, a guy who I do not recall ever meeting since I'm pretty sure I'd remember someone like that, knew the Chaos Emeralds were killing me when I never told a soul?"

"Rouge said he said it right to her face," Shadow said. "The reason that outpost we went to was cleared of robots was because of this man. He confessed to Rouge he was the one that cleared that place just so you could acquire the final Emerald. He even gave a correct estimate as to how long it would take for you to die. He said around twenty minutes."

That was accurate. Off a bit, maybe, but in the general ball park. Sorun hadn't been keeping track of time when he'd been cutting through hundreds of Badniks so quickly in his mad dash through that ship. He'd been too focused on his goal to keep track of something as meaningless as time. Around twenty minutes sounded right, though.

But it didn't make sense. Nobody could have known. Especially... whoever it was Shadow was talking about. Somebody with powers who covered their entire body with clothes. That could have meant anything, anyone. But that shouldn't have mattered because there was *no way they could have known* ! Sorun himself didn't even know how long it would have taken him to die after getting the seventh Emerald until it happened!

"Sorun... the Commander wanted me to escort you back to the command center. For questioning," Shadow said, making the human

snap his eyes right to him. "They... they just want a statement from you so they can gather as much information as-"

"I refuse."

Shadow winced a bit. "Sorun, please-"

"I'm not going!" Sorun had raised his voice a bit, startling Shadow again, and after which he slid off the crate he'd been sitting on and began pacing back and forth. "Jesus Christ, Shadow, I'm-I'm *leaving* ! I'm leaving literally tomorrow and you decide to drop this bomb on me!? And, and you want me to, to what, *delay* that just so I can go all the way to G.U.N. HQ and tell them I know nothing!?"

No. No, he wouldn't do it. He wasn't going to get wrapped up in another adventure, and he wasn't leaving the safety of the city just to go and do something as useless as that. He was leaving. He was *done* with it all. He wasn't going to be staying on this planet for a second longer than he needed to, and he surely wasn't going to get mixed into whatever this new mess was.

He couldn't do anything even if he wanted to. He was powerless. And he refused to gain that power yet again and lose his way home. He wasn't letting the world get an excuse to hold onto him any longer.

Shadow, for his part, didn't even so much as speak back to Sorun. He looked uncomfortable, if anything, even a bit guilty at seeing Sorun's outburst. "At least tell me if you know-"

"I don't!" Sorun interrupted, making Shadow flinch back. "I don't know who the guy is, okay? I don't know who he is, I don't know how in the world he knew that much about me, I don't know why he let us get that last Emerald, I-I don't know, Shadow." He sighed out, and let his arms go limp at his sides. "I don't know who he is. I just don't know, Shadow." He walked back to the crates, though instead of sitting back on top of them, he sat down onto the ground and

pressed his back against the crates as Shadow watched. "I might have an idea, though."

"You do?" Shadow's eyes widened in surprise. "What do you mean?"

The back of Sorun's head thunked onto the surface of the crate he sat against. "It was when I first met the Neo-Walkers. They, uh... they said..." His head tilted up to the ceiling as he tried to remember what they said. "They said something, some entity, just... showed up out of nowhere. They said they couldn't use their god vision or whatever to see it, that it was blocked from their sight, and that... it's basically what threw everything off-kilter. Whatever that means." He threw his arms up in defeat. "I don't know. If I had to guess I'd say they were talking about your man, but that's all I got for you. For all I know it might not even be that."

Shadow had silently listened to Sorun throughout the entire explanation. He didn't appear to be very satisfied with the answer once Sorun had finished, and he continued staring down at Sorun even after he ceased speaking. "You're sure that's all they said?" he asked.

"That's all I have, Shadow," Sorun tiredly muttered out. "Did you really come here to see me because you wanted to, or were you ordered to?"

"I..." Shadow's face fell, partly in guilt, and partly in regret. "Both," he admitted to Sorun, making him scoff. "Sorun, I primarily came because I'm worried for you."

Sorun made a "tch" sound. "Sure you are."

"Sorun, I *care* about you. I truly mean that."

The sincerity behind Shadow's voice, along with how soft it had gone, caught Sorun off guard. He looked to his left and saw Shadow had slid down his own crate just to sit next to Sorun again, with concern written plainly on his face. And no matter how hard Sorun

tried, he couldn't find any deceit in Shadow's face. He truly meant what he said. Sorun had relaxed immediately right after, feeling the barest twinge of guilt at having been so dismissive of Shadow's concern for that brief moment.

"... Forgive me for my outburst, Shadow," Sorun apologized. "It's... this is a lot."

"Already forgotten," Shadow said back. "Sorun, I came because I care, and I worry. It scares me knowing some unknown person powerful enough to do what he did to Rouge and kill a small squad of soldiers so effortlessly knows so much about you when it shouldn't be possible. It concerns me we know so little and he seems to know so much. It..." He looked down, his teeth grinding a bit. "It frustrates me greatly there's nothing I can do about this. Nothing but be here to make sure you're alright."

"Well... thank you for that," Sorun mumbled. "Listen, Shadow, I get it, but... I don't mean for this to sound callous, but it is what it is. I'm not going to be on Mobius after tomorrow. It's not my problem. I don't *want it* to be my problem." He shook his head in Shadow's direction. "I... I just can't, Shadow. I can't do this kind of thing anymore. I just can't. I'll fall apart if I try."

A look of understanding formed on Shadow's face. He reached out to place a hand on Sorun's shoulder. The exhausted, pitiable look on Sorun's face was enough to make Shadow's own expression turn gloomy. Out of worry for him, Sorun had assumed. Or maybe everything in general. He couldn't decide which was worse.

"... It's technically within my authority to detain you and bring you back to G.U.N. by force if I deem it necessary." Sorun stiffened up greatly, but relaxed at the calming look Shadow gave him. "I'm not going to," he assured Sorun. "What you said is more than enough. Beyond that, I... I want you to leave as soon as possible. Before something happens. In case *he* wants to try something. Just get away from all this. Please."

He almost sounded the same as he did when Sorun revealed he was dying, which only brought the human's mood down even more. He reached up to place his own hand over Shadow's, going as far as to give it a reassuring squeeze as he gently removed it. "I will. Don't worry," Sorun said. "I'm going home tomorrow."

"Good. That's... that's good." With a final nod, Shadow stood back up to his feet. "I'll be returning now," he said to Sorun. "For what it's worth, I..." Shadow trailed off, face scrunching in confusion as he became unsure as to what exactly to say. "I... just, be well, Sorun. Goodbye and farewell."

Looking at Sorun one last time, Shadow turned around and began to walk away towards the exit of the hangar. He'd only made it halfway before he stopped, and then turned around to look at Sorun once more. The human was still sitting with his back against that crate, his eyes having gone down to the ground. Shadow sighed a bit at the sight, offering Sorun one last, hopeful look, and then turned around and exited the hangar.

The sound of Shadow departing barely even reached Sorun's ears. He hadn't even registered the sound of the shuttle he came in taking off, or even the silence that surrounded him once he was gone. He was too wrapped up in his own thoughts to consider anything outside of himself at the moment.

"There's no possible way some kind of stranger could have not only known I was dying from the Emeralds, but could have known an accurate time estimate for when they'd kill me," Sorun thought. *"It's impossible. I told no one. And how could he have known details I myself didn't even know? It makes no sense..."*

It was like when he tried to figure out what the deal with that tablet was all over again. That wooden tablet that was responsible for bringing him here. A tablet with a set of numbers that lead to a world so far removed from the rest of the multiverse its own existence was called absurd by some here on Mobius. It made no sense how that tablet could have had those numbers when it was given to the ruler

of the now-former kingdom so long ago. Why it pointed to that specific place on Earth, at that time, why Sorun had to be there right when it opened, none of it made sense. It made as little sense as how somebody Sorun had never even met knew all of that information.

"Maybe I shouldn't even worry about it. It's like I told Shadow: it's not my problem anymore. I'm leaving. I'm not in a position to worry about it." He shook his head and, slowly, started to get up to his feet. *"I don't even want to think about it. It's gonna be one weird loose end I'll never solve once I get back, sure, but by this point it's out of my hands. It's probably nothing, anyw-... well, alright, it's* something *, but I don't see whatever it is being as bad as Eggman. Not my problem anymore. I'm going home."*

Strange, to be sure. Everything about it was. But Sorun was less focused on thinking about it and more focused on just trying to forget about it entirely. Part of him was almost upset at Shadow for informing Sorun of all this in the first place, but he couldn't find it in his heart to blame him for what he did. He was just worried and trying to look out for Sorun. He could understand that. And he truly was grateful to Shadow for not forcing him to go with him all the way to the other side of the world for some ridiculous statement. He was a good person. Another person Sorun would miss.

"Ugh... this is all such a headache." Having finally stood up, Sorun had made a small sigh while clutching at his forehead with his hand. There was a painful throb in his head just from thinking about all of this. *"I... I need some pancakes."*

Chapter 60

Recursion Error

Episode 60- Goodbye, Sonic

Sometimes in life all a man needed was some pancakes to help the world slow down.

In Sorun's opinion they were the penultimate food, seconded only by french fries. Or at least the ones made by Sonic's mother had that effect on him. He wasn't so sure why. They just had this strange calming effect that helped Sorun to think. Whenever he bit into one of those golden, fluffy discs all his worries seemed to just disappear in that moment. They calmed him down enough so he didn't feel like he was gonna die of a panic attack every second.

He decided to just ignore everything Shadow had told him, a decision reached halfway through the pancakes graciously provided to him by Bernadette. It was weird, definitely so, but he wouldn't be around long enough to worry about it. No reason to look behind him at strange loose ends like that. He'd leave that weird, strange matter in much more capable hands than his.

Wasn't his problem.

He was going home.

"I'm really gonna miss her pancakes." It was with a forlorn expression that Sorun stared down at the empty plate right in front of him. As far as his second last meal went, it was miles better than a damn hotdog. All good things had to come to an end, though, and unfortunately pancakes weren't infinite, despite how much he wished for the opposite. So with a resigned sigh, he took the plate and utensils and walked them over to the sink.

He'd probably only made it through twenty seconds of washing them before a gloved hand shot in from outside of Sorun's view to softly grab onto his wrist. He jumped a bit due to being startled from the sudden contact.

"Oh, Sorun! I thought I told you that you didn't need to worry about the dishes!" The feminine voice reaching Sorun's ears caused him to turn towards its source. He saw that it was Bernadette herself standing next to Sorun and grabbing at his arm. Same warm eyes and same kind smile as always. "You've been through enough without having to worry about that. Go on, just leave it. I'll get to it later."

"A-ah, right. Sorry, Mrs. Hedgehog," Sorun quickly apologized. He'd reached his hand out from the sink, prompting the blue hedgehog to let go of him, though her smile became a bit strained. "I just didn't want to be a burden-"

"Oh, shush now, Sorun, shush. You're anything but a burden," Bernadette chided him with a shake of her head. "Just go on and relax, dear. I'll take care of it."

Even after all this time Sorun couldn't help but be flustered around the woman. Perhaps it was because she reminded him a bit of his own mother. It was because of that he couldn't help but feel inherently bad by the way she wouldn't so much as let him lift a finger to help with anything, and how he'd felt a bit guilty asking her for pancakes at eight at night only for her to agree without any hesitation whatsoever. It was a combination of her just being that genuinely good a person and in part, Sorun suspected, due to some amount of gratitude she held for Sorun for saving her, her family, and everybody else during the destruction of Knothole, as well as helping out with the Freedom Fighters.

It was a sentiment the other members of Sonic's family shared, as well. His robotic father had been acting friendly around him, smiling and patting Sorun on the back while giving him well wishes on his return home. Chuck, who had been visiting his family at the time,

had largely been the same. All smiles and happiness, not a hint of animosity between them directed at Sorun. He was grateful for the family's hospitality, though he also felt a bit undeserving of it. Of just how *nice* they were to him.

Almost five months on this planet and he never got used to how nice people here could be.

"I never got to thank you and your husband for giving me a place to live in all this time I've been here," Sorun said as he sat back down at the dining room table. "I-"

"There's no need for that, Sorun. It was nothing," Bernadette assured him, still wearing that kind smile on her face. "If anything, I'm almost sorry you're leaving. It was nice having such a polite, young man like you spend some time with my son. I was so hoping some of your manners would rub off on Sonic, but, ah, alas... he still won't pick up his socks."

"Yes, he's still the same as always," Sorun finished with a nod. "It's unfortunate you were given such an ungrateful son who can't see the lengths his mother will go for him," he'd jokingly stated, though on the inside he was completely sincere with his statement.

Bernadette made a bit of a giggle at the statement. "He's still my son, and I love him dearly. And I can't exactly fault him considering how many times he's saved, well... the whole planet." She took one glance at the sink, and then looked back at Sorun. "I'll get to those tomorrow. You're free to spend the night here before you go back home tomorrow, dear. I, um... suppose this would be goodbye."

"That it would be," Sorun confirmed. "Thank you very much for taking care of me, Mrs. Hedgehog. Words alone cannot express how grateful I am to you for taking me in."

Her smile had wavered a bit, and past the tan fur on her mouth Sorun could have sworn he perceived a blush on the woman's face.

"It's no trouble, dear," she assured him. "Take as much time as you need to settle in. Thank you for everything you've done."

After that, and with one final nod to Sorun, Bernadette left to some other part of the house. Sorun himself breathed out lightly and leaned back in the chair, leaving one arm laying across the dining room table as he glanced around. As far as aesthetics went, Nicole had done a more than decent job recreating the Hedgehogs' new home here in New Mobotropolis. Wasn't the exact same, of course, and from what Sorun understood they had to retake a lot of pictures since the old ones were lost in the bombing, but otherwise it was still a very homely-feeling place.

Sorun had only been able to admire the décor of the kitchen for a few minutes before a blue speed blur passed in front of his vision, followed by the sensation of somebody sitting next to him. Sighing out, Sorun turned to the side to see Sonic sitting in a chair right next to him, forearms softly tapping on the table's surface as he grinned at the human.

"Hey-hey, my man, Sorun," Sonic greeted. "How're you feeling about tomorrow?"

"As well as I can be," Sorun answered. "All things considered I'm pretty excited to leave."

"Oof. Don't gotta act that happy to be leaving us," Sonic said, feigning a hurt expression.

Sorun made a wry grin. "I would stay, Sonic, but... I'm not gonna lie. I don't want to. This world's too crazy for me," he said. "Speaking of which, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask if I can spend one last night in your room. I don't have anywhere else to go, you see."

"Yeah, sure, no problem," Sonic agreed with a nod. "Just, uh... it's kinda messy in there, eh-heh, so if you wouldn't mind-"

Sonic was cut off when, after his face flashed into an expression of annoyance, Sorun reached out and pinched Sonic's nose between his thumb and index finger. The hedgehog made a strangled sound and tried swatting at Sorun's arm to get him to release him, while Sorun stared at Sonic with narrowed eyes.

"I consider it a great shame that such a wonderful woman like your mother has to have such boorish son such as you that can't even pick up after himself," Sorun grumbled out, still keeping a hold on Sonic's nose. "She gives you life and you don't even have the decency to pay her back by keeping your room clean? Have you no shame?"

"Le' 'o of meh!" Rolling his eyes, Sorun finally released his hold on the hedgehog's nose. He breathed in deeply as a result, and then made a groaning sound as he darted his eyes away from Sorun's piercing glare. "Gimme a break, Sorun. You're tearing me apart over one bad habit?"

"You should be thankful that's the only trait of yours I picked out," Sorun said.

"Sheeeesh..." Sighing, Sonic leaned back in his chair enough that his face was facing the ceiling. "Hey, I wanted to ask. You're kind of in a hurry to race back home to Earth, aren't you?"

Though he couldn't see it, Sorun gave Sonic a flat look. "Yes, how could I ever be rushing to make it back to my loved ones I haven't seen in months?" Sorun dryly remarked.

Blowing past his lips, Sonic ceased leaning in the chair. He oriented it back so that all four legs were on the floor, after which Sonic turned to Sorun while locking eyes with him. "You could just stay for a little bit longer, y'know? Few more days ain't gonna do any more harm," he suggested. "Or we could, well... I dunno, just send a letter or something through the portal to explain what happened to you so they don't worry?"

Sorun's mood began to dim a bit, and it began to show on his face. "Sonic..."

"I know, I know. Family's important. You shouldn't stay." Sonic rose his palms up to Sorun as a sign of peace, and then groaned out a bit as he leaned against the table, propping one of his elbows up on it. "I'm... I'm just really gonna miss you. I actually really liked having you as a roommate."

"Learn to fold, Sonic."

"Not just 'cause you picked my socks up," Sonic laughed out, though it was a humorless laugh for the most part. "Hey, listen, I know in the beginning there we weren't really tight an' all, but, well... everything I said back then still holds up, holds up a hundred times over. You're one of the coolest people I've ever met," Sonic confessed, making Sorun's expression shift to surprise. "The way you did everything you did while you were going through all that awful stuff, the way you fought, the way you put others before yourself, it's... you're just really cool, Sorun. Way past it." He began to sheepishly grin as he turned his eyes away from Sorun. "I know asking you to stay would be too selfish of me, but you've been a really great friend. I just wanted to get that out before you left."

"... I feel as if I don't deserve your praise," Sorun admitted. It was Sonic's turn to look surprised as he looked back to Sorun, who had slumped a bit in his seat. "I thank you for your kinds words, Sonic, but... in truth, I simply don't feel somebody like me warrants them."

Sonic's shoulders fell a bit. "Aw, man, this must be serious. You always talk fancy whenever you get serious."

A single, half-amused chuckle left Sorun. "You seem to be the only one who's ever noticed that," he admitted. "Maybe Nicole, too, but she never made mention of it."

"Well, uh... I think it's neat," Sonic said. "It's kinda cute when you do it."

"Never call me or any trait of mine 'cute' in any capacity ever again," Sorun groaned out while shaking his head. The reaction had made Sonic grin a bit, causing even more ire on Sorun's part.

"Just teasin' ya," the Mobian sniggered out, though it died out when he saw the down look on Sorun's face. "What's eatin' at you?" Sonic asked, worry plain in his tone.

What, indeed? Most of Sorun wanted to keep quiet for the rest of his time here just so he didn't have to bother Sonic with some of his problems. But a small part of him managed to reach out and say that they were friends, genuine friends now and not... whatever their relationship had been prior to this. Back when Sorun held all that animosity towards everything and everyone. He didn't have a reason to bottle it all in anymore. It was okay if he talked to Sonic, that part reassured himself.

So, while drumming his fingers along the table, Sorun sighed and began to speak. "I... It's just been a lot," Sorun quietly admitted. "Everything. All of it. Hiding all of that for so long, dying, the... the daily struggle of not just breaking down." Sonic's features grew increasingly strained with worry as Sorun continued to speak. "I really thought that was it when I died. The end of my life, alone in some random, giant metal room. I felt like the worst person in the world. Such a failure, such a bad person, and more than that, I was... I was dying. Was about to die." His eyes shifted down towards the table. "Never been more scared in my entire life. Then I died."

He felt uncomfortable just talking about it, reliving that experience. Sonic didn't look much better, looking both worried and sad as he looked towards Sorun. Even pained, in some capacity, as if seeing Sorun in such a state was hurting Sonic, too. For some reason it made Sorun feel... relieved, of all things. He couldn't tell why. Just that he liked it. The attention he was being given.

"What was it like when you died?" Sonic asked.

"I don't wish to speak of it," Sorun mumbled out. "I went somewhere dark for a bit, then I had to do a bunch of nonsense to pull myself back to life." He paused to briefly reach up and run a hand over his face. "It's not really that that's bothering me," he confessed after lowering his hand and looking back at Sonic. "I feel bad because... well, you never really got to know me. The real me."

"Huh?" Confusion mixed in with the myriad of emotions of Sonic's face as he blinked in confusion, his ears going up straight. "I, uh... I don't get it. Sure I know ya."

Shaking his head, Sorun said, "I don't know if that's true. When I first got here I was just full of so much... confusion, and anxiety, and anger at everything and everyone around me. And then the Emerald happened, I was told I had to kill myself-" Sonic flinched, "- for the sake of the same people that tore me away from my life, and all those feelings were just magnified," Sorun explained. "So much... fear, dread, anger at everything, at the whole world, there were too many emotions for me to list off. Like a cloud smothering me every single day. And I kept it hidden from all of you through that whole time. Every single facet of myself that was eating me alive. And I just felt so... fake the whole time. Hiding the fact I was so depressed for months straight from you all. Like I was wearing a mask all the time just so none of you would worry." He paused. "A really heavy mask. And it just kept getting heavier each day."

"W-well... it's not like it was *all* fake, was it?" Sonic asked. "I-I mean... I get it was a struggle holding that all in, and I'm glad you're getting it all out now and don't have to do that anymore, but it's not like you were faking your whole personality or anything."

"..." Sorun thinned his lips, looked to the side, and then back at Sonic. "Maybe not," he agreed in a hesitant tone. "Some times were easier than others. Fighting, as much as I disliked it... helped take my mind off it for a time. You and all the others being kind around me helped take that edge off. Nicole was... well, Nicole." The corners of Sorun's mouth lifted up the faintest bit at mention of her name. "Some days were just easier to manage than others, while the others

were... a struggle, we'll say. That party, the one I helped Charmy set up, it was... well, that one night was the only night I can think of where I didn't have to wear that mask in front of everybody. It was the one night I could relax and be me."

That and every single time he'd ever been with Nicole, a voice in the back of his mind told him. He didn't want to entertain that thought too much, since those happy memories hurt to look back on now that he was leaving. And furthermore he didn't want to give Sonic more ammo to tease him with.

"See? There ya go." Sonic reached over and softly punched Sorun in the shoulder. "It's not like you not having to hide your feelings anymore makes you a whole other person suddenly. A bit different, sure, maybe, but I like this Sorun *way* better than the old one. If you feel that bad about it though, then... let's just start over!"

"... Eh?" It was such an unexpected suggestion that it completely blindsided Sorun, enough that he felt like he'd been metaphorically slapped. Sonic, on the other hand, had fully turned towards Sorun, smiling widely while holding his arms out to his sides. It did nothing to assuage the utter bafflement Sorun felt at the claim, causing him to shake his head before speaking. "Start... over...?" Sorun slowly repeated.

Sonic vigorously shook his head up and down. "Mhm! Fresh start! No more bad feelings or secrets or anything getting in the way. Just you and me getting to know each other. Not that all the other times we hung out it wasn't real, but if you really feel like they weren't, then now it can finally be real."

"Pffft... hah hah..." He couldn't resist laughing at the suggestion. At how pure and innocent and sincere it was, and how Sorun hadn't seen it coming at all. He barely even knew what to think of it, at how overly simple it was and just how *Sonic* the suggestion felt. Like it was something only he would ever suggest, and somehow, Sorun could see it. "It's a little late to be doing something like that, isn't it?"

Sorun asked. "I'm leaving in twelve hours. And eight of those hours will be spent sleeping."

Sonic shook his head side to side, not surprising Sorun in the least. "Nah, no way. It's never too late to make a friend," he said, and then extended his open hand out to Sorun. "Come on, just go with it. It'll be good for you."

Looking down at the hand in bemusement, Sorun couldn't help but scoff at the gloved hand being offered to him. It was such a ridiculous notion, restarting when they had so much history between them already, but then again... there was some odd appeal to it Sorun himself couldn't rightly describe. And it wasn't like doing such a thing would erase the memories they'd already made together. This was simply... well, Sorun didn't know what it was. Therapy, maybe. Sonic just trying to help him.

Well, he doubted this would help, but he wouldn't deny Sonic this moment. Not when he was just trying his hardest to help Sorun at the very last minute. He was too grateful and respected him too much to do something like that. So after taking a deep breath, Sorun played along, reach forwards, and grabbed at Sonic's hand with his own.

"Fine, have it your way," Sorun said as his hand and Sonic's gripped each other. "Hello. My name is Sorun... Sorenson..." The last name was mumbled out so quietly that Sorun himself had barely heard it. He'd been too nervous saying his last name to say it at a higher volume. He saw Sonic's small, triangular ears flick, though, indicating he had heard the name. And to Sorun's horror, he began to smirk.

"S-Sorenson?" Trying his best to stifle his growing laughter, Sonic began smiling widely. "Your full name is Sorun Sorenson?"

"Shut *up* ..." Sorun bit out, growing angered at the hedgehog's amusement. It was embarrassing enough knowing he had to live with the name, but at least here he could get away with it by never

telling anybody what his last name was. Now that he'd told Sonic it in a moment of weakness he was regretting it immediately and wishing he'd have just lied and made up a cooler last name. Or even better just stolen a cool last name from his mental library of fiction.

"Srnk- okay, alright, I'll take it seriously." Managing to fully subdue his laughter, Sonic took in a deep breath to begin his own "greeting". "Heya, Sorun! I'm..." He paused, and for whatever reason he grew a bit nervous before saying his name. The hesitation was noticed by Sorun, who tilted his head a bit in confusion, though this just caused Sonic to breath out and shake his head. "Ugh, fine, here we go. My name's Ogilvie Maurice Hedgehog, but you can just call me Sonic. In fact *please* just call me Sonic."

There was a moment where, after Sonic finished, the pair just continued to stare at each other in complete silence. Sonic stared at Sorun in slight apprehension after having just revealed his name, while Sorun looked at Sonic in one part incredulity and one part disbelief. The human's expression soon turned to realization that Sonic was telling the truth based on the look the hedgehog was giving him, and then surprise when he realized just what that name really was. More seconds of silence passed as they continued to look at one another.

And then Sorun burst out into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"Ugh...!" The groan Sonic made almost made it sound as if he was in grief in response to Sorun's laughter. The blue Mobian seemingly deflated, his whole upper half flopping onto the table top as he rubbed both sides of his head with his fingers. "Sorun, man, come on..."

"Ogilvie! *Ogilvie* of all things!" He couldn't help banging his fist on the table. Sorun's laughter was so intense he nearly fell out of the chair he was sitting on, which would have left him laughing so hard on the floor he wouldn't have been able to get up. He managed to avoid that fate, though, by some means. It didn't detract from the fact

Sorun found Sonic's name to be the most hilarious thing in the world at the moment. "ha-ha-ha-ha! I-I've never- that's just too funny!"

Sonic didn't find it nearly as amusing. With his chin pressing against the table he stared up at Sorun, a deep frown on his face as well as just the slightest bit of red peaking out from his tan mouth fur from embarrassment. Fortunately for both Sonic's sake and Sorun's lungs, the laughter began to subside.

"Ha... ah, man." Wiping away a tear with his finger, a large smile still on his face, Sorun looked at Sonic with his own teasing grin on his face. "I've never even heard of that name before. That's a new one for me. I don't even know if I can think of a name that tops that one."

"Oh, like yours is so much better!" Sonic slammed his palms on the table to lift himself back up to a upright sitting position. "What kind of parent gives their kid a name that sounds like the family name!?"

"Same kind that names their kid Ogilvie?" Sorun jokingly remarked, causing Sonic to roll his eyes away from Sorun. "She thought it'd be funny, I guess," Sorun said in a slightly more serious tone. "My mother was caught up on the whole Latin thing and, I dunno, guess she picked out the name 'cause she thought it fit, or... yeah, I don't really know. I'll ask her when I get back."

"Yeah, some sense of humor your mom's got." Sonic's eyes drifted back to Sorun's face. "Your dad went along with that name, too?"

"..." The sudden shift in Sorun's mood was enough that Sonic was almost startled by it. His question made the smile that was on Sorun's face drop off instantly, and a slightly cloudy expression overtook Sorun's previous one. "Don't wanna talk about him."

"Huh? Sorun-?"

"Sonic, seriously. Drop it."

There wasn't any anger or malice behind Sorun's request. Not even sadness, which just went on to make Sonic look confused. He couldn't tell what Sorun was feeling just from listening to his words alone, and looking at his face didn't bring Sonic any answer, either. He couldn't tell what was going through Sorun's mind, seeing that vacant, downcast look he had. But then the human teen shook his head, returned his expression back to normal, and then locked eyes with Sonic. There wasn't any evidence on his face Sonic could see of the sudden mood change that had happened seconds prior.

"Sorry. That's a bad subject for me," Sorun quietly apologized. He made a small sigh and sat back further in his seat. "Sorry again if I brought the mood down."

"Nah, it's... it's fine." Sonic turned to the side briefly to let out an awkward cough. "So... names..." He said in an attempt to alleviate the growing tension.

"Yeah. Names." Still leaning back in his chair, Sorun reached forwards and began to idly tap his fingers against the table. "Our parents are evidently pretty terrible at picking out names."

"Ah, I wouldn't go that far..." Sonic denied with a slight chuckle. "Tell ya what. I'll never use your last name or tell anybody it if you never say my real name in front of anybody."

"I'll agree to that." The mood was already beginning to turn lighter as, thankfully, what happened just a minute earlier began to be forgotten by the two. That's what Sorun perceived when he saw the smile beginning to return to Sonic's face. The less said about that, the better as far as he was concerned.

And then the mood shifted entirely when Sonic sat straight up in his seat as his eyes opened widely. Sorun reacted by jumping slightly in his seat.

"Oh, shoot! I just realized!" Sonic exclaimed. "I never taught you the handshake!"

"The... handshake?" Sorun echoed. "What handshake?"

"The Freedom Fighter handshake!" Sonic said, as if that alone explained everything. "It's a handshake we, uh... okay we made it when we were all kids and starting out the whole thing, but it stuck with us all the way from then to present. I figured, well, you're a Freedom Fighter, so you should get to know it, too."

"It's a bit last-minute to be teaching me the super secret handshake, ain't it?" Sorun pointed out with a tilt of his head, though a small, amused grin appeared on his face. "I don't think-"

Sorun was interrupted when Sonic reached towards him and grabbed at one of Sorun's wrists. He felt some of his joints lock up instantly from the unexpected contact, but otherwise he did nothing but silently watch as Sonic brought their hands together.

"Nah-nah-nah, it's okay," Sonic assured him. "Think of it as something to remember us by. Now here's how it goes, so pay close attention, okay?"

Sorun did so, expecting to see some convoluted, over the top handshake that he'd have a hard time copying as he watched Sonic move his hand while Sorun himself mimicked the movements with his own hand. He was severely disappointed to find that the coveted Freedom Fighter handshake was, by all means, a fairly bog-standard handshake. Enough to the point that Sorun had to wonder if Sonic was messing with him.

"Alright, so we fist bump up like this, then down, then we center it, then you take your finger and-"

"Sonic, this is just an ordinary set of fist bumps with a finger twirl mixed in," Sorun deadpanned as he copied the hedgehog's hand motions. "This is the most lackluster secret handshake I've ever seen."

"Oh, come on! We didn't even get to the part where we lock pinkies and then do the thumbs-up at the end! You have to see it first!" Sonic complained, right as they reached the aforementioned steps of the handshake.

Looking completely unimpressed, Sorun shook his head and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "I can tell you made this when you were kids," he commented. "I know a whole bunch of complicated handshakes on Earth that would put this one to shame."

"Oh, and you're suddenly such an expert?"

"I'd like to consider myself a sommelier of overly complex handshakes. Me and my group of pals back home used to make up a bunch for funsies."

"Somme-what now?" Sonic's eyes narrowed a bit. "... That's not a real word. You made that word up just to confuse me."

Sorun snorted in amusement. "I really didn't. You know, you should be thankful I'm teaching you all these new words, Sonic. I heard girls like guys who have a vocabulary that contains more than just three-syllable words."

"Man, whatever. I try to do something nice for a guy..." Sonic mumbled out, sighing a bit and shaking his head. "Alright, alright. If the handshake doesn't interest ya, Mr. Wordsmith, then I'll leave you with something else."

Once again Sorun found his wrist being grabbed by Sonic's hand. He didn't act surprised like the first time, and made no outward reaction as Sonic jumped off his chair and pulled Sorun all the way into the house's living room. The room itself was vacant, save for Sonic's pet dog, which was sleeping in a small bed in the corner of the room. He was practically forced to sit on the couch by Sonic, though right after he'd released Sorun's wrist and then disappeared somewhere in a blue speed blur. Sorun stared off in the direction

Sonic had run towards, blinking in confusion, but then merely shrugged as he sat back against the couch.

Not even two seconds later Sonic had returned, this time clutching something in his hands. A guitar, Sorun had recognized with a disbelieving scoff. A plain-looking one, but a guitar nonetheless. Sonic sat down in the spot right next to Sorun, fiddling with some of the tuning knobs meanwhile and strumming a few of the strings to make sure it was tuned.

"You play guitar?" Sorun asked, half skeptical and half impressed by the mere sight of the instrument.

"Ah-huh," Sonic confirmed with a nod. "You ever try an instrument?"

"No, never," Sorun answered with a shake of his head. "Thought of picking up violin, but, eh... I wasn't really serious about it. Would have cut into my video game time anyways."

"Ahhh. 'Course." Giving Sorun a knowing smirk, Sonic strummed his fingers along the guitar's strings. A small, melodic tune flowed out as a result. "I'm a bit out of practice, actually, but I wanted to play all the same." His fingers began to continually strum along the instrument's strings. "I dunno. I just wanted to relax and do one last thing with you before you left. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not a bit." Kicking one leg over the other, Sorun's back sunk further into the couch while at the same time he interlaced his fingers behind his head. "Play away, Sonic."

And so he did. Sorun was the furthest thing from a music connoisseur, but at the same time internet back on Earth, as well as various forms of media, made Sorun's ears very traveled when it came to music. Sonic playing a simple guitar didn't much compare to the hundreds of songs, music tracks, and game OSTs he'd heard in his life on Earth. Even so, Sonic wasn't half bad. Pretty good, actually. The simple notes being played out by the guitar certainly had a charm to them. It was nice. Calming.

As far as his final night on Mobius went, this wasn't a bad way at all to be spending it. Sorun found himself actually enjoying Sonic's playing after a short time, and eventually Sonic even began humming a song under his breath. It made Sorun happy, oddly enough. Sitting there, relaxing next to a friend as he played his music. He could have fallen asleep right there he felt so peaceful.

It was a nice way to end things.

"Well... looks like this is it. Goodbye, Mobius."

Chapter 61

Recursion Error

Episode 61- Goodbye, Earth

The room was separated in half by a wall that had a giant window that spanned the entire length of the wall, save for the door that was on the very end of said wall that lead to the other side of the room. On one side was a long array of consoles and buttons pressed up against the wall, with multiple cords and cables at the bottom going through small ports at the bottom of the wall and snaking through the floor on the other side of the room in order to connect something at the very far end of that room. It was what the cables were connecting to in the other room that was Sorun's sole focus at the moment.

He hadn't really known what to expect when it came to how the portal machine would look like. A large, circular metal thing that would make a portal perhaps, like something out of 'Stargate'. Or a large platform with a bunch of pillar things around it. Something along those lines. He'd seen too many examples of portal machines in various forms of fiction back on Earth to make a singular guess for what it would be.

In the end, he... wasn't too far off the mark, Sorun had supposed. It was indeed a circular 'gate' of sorts in that the main component he was staring at past the window was a large, metal ring set up on a small, metal platform. On either side of the portal were two tall, metal poles topped with, oddly enough, red spheres decorated with yellow stars. And *those* poles were each attached to small consoles on their sides by power cables, from which Sorun could see from here had the Chaos Emeralds slotted into them. Three of them inserted into the left console and four on the right.

"The weird star post things are a bit off-putting, but, uh... whatever works, I guess." At the end of the day Sorun didn't really much care about how the thing looked as long as it worked, and he knew from experience it worked.

It was finally time to go back home. The anticipation alone was killing Sorun. Leaving it all, going back home, the mess he was going to have to deal with seeing as he'd technically been missing for almost five months over there, seeing everyone again and leaving everyone here. To put it mildly he was feeling jittery. Excited, too, enough that he could barely stand still seeing the portal machine. It was almost intimidating to look at.

There were a couple of other people in the room besides him. Tails was over by all the consoles, making various adjustments and such to get the machine ready. A scientific process that was way over Sorun's own head for him to even begin to understand what he was doing. Sally was there, too, mostly just to oversee that everything went as planned and supervise Sorun's departure. She'd approached Sorun's side as the human teen was staring out at the portal machine on the other side of the window, looking down at his torso with curious eyes.

"Hey, Sorun." Her voice drew Sorun attention towards her, where he saw her examining his torso. "Where'd you get that?"

"Hm?" He looked down at what she was looking at. "Ah, this..."

Earlier

"A last-second gift? For me? You shouldn't have."

Looking up from the item he held in his hands, Sorun saw the yellow cat standing in front of him blink her golden eyes, and then turn her head away in slight indignation. She'd crossed her arms over her chest as well, while her tail began to swish back and forth in an irritated manner.

"Well, if you're going to be like that then just give it back," Honey said, not sounding nearly as irate as she looked. "I'm sure I could find an owner actually appreciative of it."

"I didn't mean to detract from your kindness, Honey. It was just a bit of sarcasm." Sorun looked back down at what he was holding. "I actually quite like it."

Simply put, it was a leather vest. A navy blue vest, almost black it was such a dark blue. A vest that would have been normal otherwise were it not for the texture it had. The interior was lined with a soft, silky-smooth material, but its exterior, the dark blue leather surface, was a different matter. It wasn't the soft, smooth texture normally found on leather. As he ran his thumb over the vest, it... almost felt like he was touching the scales on a lizard, strangely enough. Or at least something that tried to mimic that sensation, as it still felt *like leather.*

A strange vest, to be sure. And for some reason Sorun couldn't help but be drawn to it.

"What gave you the idea to make something like this?" Sorun asked, his eyes still transfixed on the vest.

"Remember that one time I asked if I could see that sword you used to have for inspirational purposes?"

"Vaguely," Sorun answered, looking back up at Honey.

"Well, I noticed back then the, er, handle part was made of this weird blue, scaly stuff," Honey explained, her own head having already turned towards Sorun. "I wanted to make you something to take with you back home as, well, a souvenir, and I thought if I made something like that it'd make it personal for you." When he continued to silently look at her, the cat Mobian began shuffling her feet while growing a bit sheepish under the look. "I-it came to me in a dream, so the next morning I got some faux leather and silk out from my storage and threw that together."

"Oh, she uses fake leather? Eh, one mystery solved." *Humming, Sorun looked towards his own chest. Honey'd been nice enough to give him a new black t-shirt to replace the one that had the hole through its chest. Without another word he slipped his arms through the arm holes in the vest, and then reached for its center in order to zip it closed.*

He couldn't be too surprised at the way it fit so snugly against his torso, and yet at the same time wasn't uncomfortable in the least. All in all the vest was perfect.

"I'd say you outdid yourself, but considering that's pretty much a gold standard for you I'm not sure the phrase does you enough justice," Sorun said. The nervousness disappeared from Honey altogether at Sorun's comment, prompting her to stand up straight with a proud, smug smile on her face. Her tail began swishing around even faster. "I love the vest. Thank you, Honey."

"Wellll...~ I suppose there's a lot of truth to that," Honey said, her nose pointed high in the air and her expression growing more smug by the second. "As expected of somebody who knows they stand so close to greatness. Really, you're the luckiest guy in the world to have somebody as amazing as me as a friend who showers you with gifts like this, Sorun."

Sorun's own smile began to become strained, and one of his eyes twitched. "Yes, I'll... miss this humbling attitude of yours so very much..."

"As you should." She looked back down to lock eyes with Sorun, after which Honey's smile softened. "But really, I can't thank you enough for everything you did to help my business out. I really am gonna miss you." She began to idly twirl around one of her black pigtail-tied bundle of hairs with her finger. "I have way more than enough people that do business with me, but not a lot of people actually talk with me normally like you do. I'm not so sure why."

Sorun's face twitched violently.

"Ah, well. I'll be fine." Her finger lowered away from her head. "Anyways, take care of yourself, y'hear?" Honey finished out. "And don't you dare *ruin that vest. You don't have to fight killer robots anymore, so you don't have any excuses."*

"I'll do my best," Sorun assured her with a smile. "Bye, Honey. I doubt I'll ever meet another person like you ever again. I still don't know whether that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"Alright, alright. Don't push it." With a teasing look on both of their faces, Honey reached over and pushed Sorun on his shoulder. "Go on already. You have a home to get back to."

"... It was a parting gift from a friend," Sorun answered in response to Sally's inquiry. The fact he could comfortably say that he considered the cat as a friend was still something that mystified Sorun, but despite all her faults, of which there were numerous in Sorun's opinion... well, she was still a good person who gave him nice clothes. It was hard for him to not like her.

"Gift, huh?" Sally gave the vest he wore an appreciative nod. "It looks good on you. Honey?"

Sorun nodded. "Yeah."

"Hm... maybe I should go to her one of these days." She looked down a bit and tugged at her own open vest. "Not that I don't like this one, but..." She looked back at Sorun's vest. "Yours has so much detail. She must have put a lot of work into it."

"She did." Sorun gave Sally a half-amused smile. "I guess blue vests are just in. Congratulations on being a trend setter."

"Har, har." Mirroring Sorun's amusement, Sally shook her head, and then rolled her eyes towards the window dividing the room in half. "So... this is it."

"That it is," Sorun confirmed. "Thanks for keeping your promise, Sally."

Chuckling a bit, Sally turned back to Sorun. "I'd be a terrible princess if I didn't keep my word," she said, and then extended her hand out to Sorun. "It's on behalf of all the republic's people that I thank you for your service with the Freedom Fighters, Sorun. I realize everything that's happened to you hasn't been the least bit ideal, and I'm sorry the most we can do to repay you is undo what we did by sending you back to your zone, but you still have everyone's thanks, as well as my own personal thanks." Her smile became wider, more genuine and happy. "Thank you, Sorun. For sticking with us and being such a great friend."

Sorun stared down at the hand. If this was right after he learned he was dying, he probably would have smacked the hand away from him. If his current personality had any semblance to what he was like back then he wouldn't have bothered saying goodbye to anybody and would have just waited for the portal to finish so he could storm through it and back to his own world. But that was then, and this was now. And he valued Sally too much to ever consider doing something like that anymore.

"It's been an experience I'll never forget, Sally." Sorun reached his own hand forwards and grasped at Sally's brown-furred hand. "Good luck with things over here. And with, you know... the whole royalty thing."

"I'm still questioning just how much my title of princess is worth with the way the government is now, but I'll try my best." They shook hands, and then retracted their hands back to their sides. "As for things here, don't worry. Eggman's still out there, but we'll all still do our best to keep the world safe."

"You better. If I died to keep this world in one piece only for you guys to screw it up I'll find a way to come back here just to slap you all."

The lighthearted jest caused Sally to laugh a bit. "We'll do our best to avoid that," she assured him. "Bye, Sorun."

"Bye." He spent the next few second taking in Sally's face one last time, which was still smiling at him. Afterwards, he bid the chipmunk a farewell with a nod, and then walked away towards the panels lined up against the room's window. He stopped right besides Tails, who was still working on the various controls on the machines. "Hey, Tails."

"Hi, Sorun," the fox greeted, turning away from his work briefly to give Sorun a smile. "I'm just working on some calibrations before I get the portal up and running. Already have the coordinates punched in and everything, so I should only be a few more minutes here."

"Sounds good, m'man." Sorun looked to the side and out the window, towards the other end of the room where the portal machine was. "So how does this whole thing work, anyways? Does it just open a hole between two points in space like my Yamato did?"

Tails shook his head. "Not exactly. It's a bit more complicated than that." He turned his gaze back to the machines he was fiddling with. "I don't think you realize just how far your zone is compared to all the other zones. Usually if you want to go to another zone it's as easy as using Chaos energy to open a way to the Cosmic Interstate Highway-"

"The what?"

"- and after that you can just take a road to a new zone," Tails continued, making Sorun sigh and flip his hand up at the ceiling at being ignored. "But your zone isn't even connected to that. It's really weird, 'cause, well... every single zone in the entire multiverse is supposed to be connected to the Highway. But yours is just so removed from every other zone that I'm honestly shocked anything could be that far out. The entire reason we need the Chaos Emeralds is because that kind of sheer distance creates a power requirement no other possible energy source could provide."

"... The word 'Highway' is just being used metaphorically, right? Like, there's not just a literal highway-"

"Even then," Tails continued, making Sorun groan loudly, "there's only so much we can do. Having an unlimited energy supply doesn't do us much good when the actual hardware is still limited in how far it can be pushed. We had to cobble this thing together from spare parts we took from Badniks, after all."

Pursing his lips, Sorun leaned forwards and leaned his forearm against the window. "How does it work, then?"

As he turned a nearby knob, Tails stuck his tongue out as he thought of an answer. "It's like, uh... well, take your Yamato answer from earlier," he began. "Normally, yeah, that's how a portal would be made, but the longer the distance between the two points you're trying to bridge, the more power you need and the harder the hardware has to work. Jumping from one zone to another is one thing, all you have to do is go far enough to hit the Highway, but as I said, yours isn't connected to the Highway for some reason, and it's so far away..."

"The machine itself gets stressed?" Sorun mumbled out in a questioning tone.

"Tearing open a portal to link a distance that vast would melt the entire thing," Tails confirmed, nodding at Sorun's understanding. "I kinda had to get creative with the workaround. It's less about tearing a hole open to bridge the two points in space and more like tunneling a path from here to there while punching holes in space to make the entranceway. There's no technical 'space' in this tunnel, so the distance is zero, but it's less effort to use brute force and tunnel to your zone than fold that much space to connect the two points. Metaphorically speaking. It uses a process that..."

The technobabble Tails began spewing out proved to be too much for Sorun's understanding, so he tuned the young Mobian's words out as he continued staring out at the portal machine. He didn't have

any idea what the "Cosmic Interstate Highway", as Tails called it, was, but it had to be some kind of placeholder name for something weird. Sorun didn't really care too much for whatever this vaunted Highway was or how the machine really worked. It worked. That's all he needed to know.

"Sorun? May I speak with you for a moment?"

"Huh?" Sorun turned around away from the window, while Tails had gone back to focusing on the electronics, having finished his longwinded explanation that Sorun had ignored. Nicole had materialized behind him. Hands clasped behind her back and her face set in a mostly blank expression, save for her eyes. They looked almost downcast, her green irises switching between looking at Sorun and the portal on the other end of the room, separated by the window. If nothing else, Sorun found her look peculiar.

He still pushed himself away from the wall, and traveled towards the center of the room where she was waiting for him. He actually had wanted to talk to her regardless; he was aware he never got to give her a proper goodbye outside of when she confronted him in the park that day when he revived, and he wanted to rectify that with the precious few minutes he had left in this world. She deserved that much, and he truly did want a proper goodbye with her.

"Nicole. Hey," Sorun greeted after stopping in front of the lynx. "You're here, too?"

"I'm overseeing some of the preparations along with Tails," she answered. "I wanted to speak with you one last time."

"Oh. Yeah, alright." Sorun unconsciously rose a hand up and began scratching at the back of his head. "You've been kind of acting weird ever since I told you I was going back home," he noted. "Did I do something?"

A look of confliction briefly flashed over her features. So brief, in fact, that it had been too fast for Sorun to possibly perceive it, and thus he

hadn't noticed. She settled for frowning a bit, softly biting her lower lip before relaxing again and transitioning into a neutral expression. "I was... I was just surprised," Nicole confessed to him. "Admittedly I was somewhat upset to learn that you are leaving. Forever, that is." She paused, the frown somewhat returning to her face. "I'm sad to see you go."

Sorun made no outward reaction, though he did look a bit to the side while exhaling through his nose. He had some slight suspicion that was what this was about, but he didn't know how to address it other than remind her of the cold, hard truth: he was leaving, and that was that. He didn't know how to make it sound any better than that. "I'll miss you, too," he tried as he looked back at Nicole. "But I have to go. Besides, you have all the others. You won't be alone."

"I realize this," she replied, voice a bit quiet and toneless. "But none of them could ever replace you."

Making a small sigh, Sorun had to resist saying the first things that came to his mind. Asking her what she wanted, or what she wanted him to say. He wanted this goodbye to remain as friendly as possible. He didn't want to accidentally escalate it. "I know," Sorun said. "I mean, who else is gonna play games with you and actually be able to keep up?"

The corners of Nicole mouth upturned the smallest bit. It was more a sad smile than anything else, but the smile itself looked genuine enough to Sorun's eyes. "Perhaps nobody," she admitted to him. "I've had some time to process it all, and I've come to the conclusion... well, I..." Hey eyes dipped down to the floor for a second, and then she looked back up at Sorun. "Your family takes precedence over everything else. I realize this. So you returning to your zone is the logical decision to make."

"Um..." Blinking in confusion, Sorun tilted his head to the side and gave the AI an odd look. "Where are you going with all this?"

"Nowhere," Nicole answered with a shake of her head. "Just promise me you'll be safe and happy back home."

"Of course, Nicole. I'll do my best." Clicking his tongue, Sorun began to roll back and forth on his feet. Both he and Nicole kept looking at each other, neither finding any words to say to the other for some time. "Bye, Nicole. I hope things go well for you here."

She nodded at him, the sad smile growing. "As do I," she said. "Goodbye, Sorun. I truly enjoyed our time together."

"Hey, Sorun? We're all set to go."

His eyebrows rising, Sorun turned back towards Tails. He was looking back towards the human, while right next to him the myriad of lights and diodes on the consoles in front of him were all brightly glowing with green and white lights. Realizing that it was time, Sorun nodded at the fox, sending him, Nicole, and Sally all one final look.

"Well, uh... guess this is it." He rose his hand into the air, gave them all a two-fingered salute, and then turned towards the door to the wall separating the room in two. "Take care, guys."

Sorun approached the door in the wall, opened it, and then stepped through. The door sealed shut behind him, leaving him alone in the half of the room containing the portal machine. He walked forwards, and then stopped in the center of the room, right in front of the inactive machine. Looking back over his shoulder introduced Sorun to the sight of Tails at the controls behind the window, along with Nicole and Sally standing right besides him. All three of them were giving Sorun reassuring smiles, helping ease some of the tension Sorun felt, while Tails had even given him a thumbs-up before looking down at the console in front of him. Switches were flipped, buttons were pressed, and knobs were turned, resulting in Sorun hearing the sound.

It was a sound that was reminiscent of crackling lightning, making Sorun turn back towards the portal machine in front of him. The

Chaos Emeralds slotted into the metal boxes powering the machine began alternating between dimming and glowing brightly, and at the same time he saw green energy began sparking out from the cables connecting them to the star-tipped poles and the hollow gateway. More green sparks began flying out from the balls on top of the poles, and seconds later a beam fired out from each of the spheres. The two beams converged right in the center of the inactive, metal gateway, after which there was a bright flash of light that forced Sorun to close his eyes.

The flash had only lasted for a second, and when Sorun opened his eyes back up, there it was. The exact same green portal he'd seen at the beginning of all of this. A green, swirling portal fitted perfectly inside of the metal gateway in front of him. All he had to do was walk right on through and he'd be home free.

"Huh. Just that easy, huh?" Sorun thought. *"After all this time, I can finally go back. All I gotta to is walk on through."*

Sorun lifted up his foot, and then planted it forwards. He did the same with the other foot, and then kept going. Each and every tentative step towards the green portal filled him with more and more equal parts anxiety and excitement. The anticipation alone was making it feel like his heart could explode at any second, and it was certainly beating fast enough that such a thing was plausible.

"Ah, man, mom's gonna be so upset at me for being away so long. Dunno what lie I'm supposed to spin to explain it all away." He was almost there now. Just a few more steps away from the portal. *"Wonder if any good games came out while I was gone? Wanna try and catch up on some of my shows too, and- oh, egh, wonder how school's gonna work? Is there any catch-up work I can do or am I just gonna have to repeat the year? Eh, I'll figure it out."*

He stopped directly in front of the portal, close enough that the tip of his nose was practically touching its surface. His entire vision was overtaken with the green color of the portal, and the quiet thrumming

of the machine filled his ears. Sorun took a deep breath, and then held it in for a few seconds before exhaling.

"Well... here goes nothing. Let's go home."

With that final thought, he stepped into the portal.

"There he goes." This was said by Tails, right as he and the other two by his sides watched the human step into the green portal. "He said that the portal appeared in a grocery store at his end, right?" Tails asked as he turned towards Sally.

The red-haired chipmunk nodded. "Yeah." A small smirk grew on her lips. "Every time he brought it up he kept complaining they were out of orange juice. Maybe they finally restocked some."

"Well, I mean, they have to have by now, right? It's been months," Tails reasoned. "Though, eh-heh, I think he's gonna have bigger concerns than some orange-"

Sorun fell back through the portal.

It was an event so sudden and unexpected it caused all three observers to jump in surprise and snap their gazes back towards the room. The portal was still open, though the nearby machines were beginning to spark more and more violently as the window it could remain open closed further and further. But, for some reason, Sorun was back. He'd stepped through the portal only for a few seconds before he'd tumbled back out to their end.

"U-uh... what... what's Sorun doing?" Tails mumbled out, his eyes glued to the human's body. "What's going on?"

"Huh...?" Sally seemed just as confused as Tails was, and only grew more confused as she stared out at Sorun. The way he'd fallen back out of the portal on their end made it so he was sitting on the ground with his feet and hands against the floor, though from this position

they couldn't see his face. Just the back of his head as he stared up at the portal. "Sorun...?"

Sudden movement on Sally's right side caused her to turn her head. She'd ended up looking towards Nicole, who'd straightened her body in response to something. Her ears had folded back a bit, and the previous confusion on her face was replaced by something that made Sally begin to worry. She looked extremely concerned.

"Nicole?" Sally voiced. "What's going on?"

"The nanites in the room, they're... I'm..." The lynx's face began to transition from concern to being suddenly alarmed. "I'm reading a high amount of radiation flooding into that room..."

Sally had taken some steps back, while Tails had jumped right out of his seat. Both looked confused and horrified at Nicole's claim, while Nicole herself had already vanished, and then reappeared on the other side of the room. She'd materialized right next to Sorun, and then proceeded to crouch down right next to Sorun.

"Sorun!?" Nicole reached a hand out and grabbed at one of Sorun's shoulders. Even after calling out his name and shaking him, he wouldn't look her way. "Sorun, please say something!"

He wouldn't respond to her no matter what she did. His eyes were locked onto the portal, widened to their limit with the irises alternating between dilating and constricting in a rapid fashion. He was panting heavily, far too heavily for Nicole's comfort, and a cold, panicked sweat was beading down his face. Throughout the entire ordeal he continued staring at the portal, his face terror-stricken and his entire body refusing to budge or move despite how much Nicole shook him.

Her own eyes wide and mouth agape in worry, Nicole swiftly stood up and, quickly, looked towards the green portal. For a single second the teeth of her holographic body grit together as she processed her

thoughts. She came to a decision in mere milliseconds, and then moved towards the opening of the portal.

After she arrived at the portal's entrance, she stuck her head through. Not her entire body; just the head of her body, enough to see out to the other side. Nicole had only maintained this position for a single second before she pulled her head back out from the portal. When she had, the alarmed look on her face had shifted to a horrified look. So horrified, in fact, she'd stumbled a few steps away from the portal.

"T-Tails... you need to close the portal..."

"What!?" The twin-tailed fox had already made his way back to the portal's controls, though his face was marred in worry and panic as his hands clumsily made their way to the buttons and knobs. "Nicole, what-!?"

"TAILS, CLOSE IT!"

The panicked scream from Nicole shocked Tails enough that he flinched, but, understanding the severity behind her voice, he managed to pull himself together quickly. In just a few seconds he'd located a large, red button on the dashboard of controls he was standing in front of, and then banged his fist down on it.

A loud *clunk!* sound echoed throughout the room the instant Tails hit the large, red button. Alongside the sound the beams firing out from the two posts disappeared, and in that same moment the green portal disappeared, leaving the hollow gateway. Right after the Emeralds slotted into the machines besides the portal started shaking violently enough that they began to come loose from the slots housing them.

Nicole, quick to act, had waved her hand up at the ceiling. The nanites that comprised the entire structure obeyed her silent command, after which the ceiling dissolved and opened up due to the nanites receding, revealing the open sky. Not a moment too

soon, as the seven Chaos Emeralds shot out from their slots in the machines that they had been plugged into. They'd bounced around the walls of the room for a bit, with Nicole going as far as to cover Sorun's body with her own in an effort to shield him, but fortunately they soon enough found the opening in the ceiling. The seven colored gems shot up into the sky, each one then shooting off in a different direction towards the horizon after rising far above the city. Nicole had paid exactly zero attention to the display, instead choosing to wave her hand again to prompt the ceiling to close back up. She hadn't even waited for it to finish reforming before she'd picked Sorun's body up and ran towards the door.

Without her even touching it the door had opened right as Nicole, still carrying Sorun, approached it. She bolted right through, and the door had closed again once she'd ran past it. It was only after she was out of the room did the lynx stop, and then carefully began setting Sorun down on the ground. Tails and Sally meanwhile, both tense and concerned, slowly approached the two.

"Nicole," Sally began after they both stopped next to them, "what's going-?"

"Don't go in that room," Nicole hastily stated as she finished gently laying Sorun on the ground. "It's saturated in radiation."

"Radiation?" Sally's eyes darted towards the windowed wall separating the room, and then, with her eyes widened, she looked back at Nicole. "If that room's contaminated-"

"I'll deal with it later!" Sally had looked taken back at the AI's outburst, though Nicole hadn't seen it. She hadn't even looked towards either her or Tails, her focus solely being on the human lying down in front of her. "Sorun! Sorun, please...!"

She'd began cradling his head with one hand while using the other to brush the teen's black hair that matched her own out from his face. She grew more and more visibly worried when she saw his face was a paler color than normal. His eyes were half-open and unfocused,

while the rest of him looked drowsy and weak. He wasn't responding to any of Nicole's pleas, even after she began to rub at his face with her hand to try and get him to focus on her.

"Nicole!" A strong hand clamping down on her shoulder finally got Nicole to look away from Sorun. She saw Sally crouching right next to her, a gravely serious look on her face underneath the concern. Tails, standing behind her, wore a pained expression as he looked down at Sorun, who was beginning to move less and less. "If that room is contaminated with radiation, then Sorun got exposed. The hospital can treat him, so you need to teleport us there right now before his condition gets worse."

"R-right." Shakily, Nicole gave her a nod. The panic on her face had subsided by a fraction, though she still looked nearly as terrified as Sorun had seconds prior as she looked back down at the teen. "Sally, his home..."

Sally roughly shook her shoulder. "Tell us later, Nicole! Sorun needs a hospital right now!"

What was he expecting when he walked through that portal?

A store, simply put. The same beyond-average grocery store Sorun remembered going into before getting dragged to Mobius. The same aisles, the same refrigerated racks full of drinks, maybe even the same employee sweeping the floor. The sensation of his feet touching down on tiled ground, that same scent of frozen produce, the same moderate lighting.

He remembered his foot touching down on the tiles, and there'd been so much pure *joy* Sorun had felt. That one step confirmed it all for him, that he was finally back and it was all over with. Mobius was a thing of the past. It was gone, over with. He was home. He could see everybody again, go back to his life, go back to his mother and friends. He planned on going home first thing just to see his mother

again, once he'd managed to assemble some sort of excuse, of course.

Two steps out of the portal and that joy, that happiness, magnified tenfold. He was back, finally back, finally in the world he belonged in. In a world filled with his people and his culture; a world he was comfortable in. No more fighting for his life, no more of the insanity that was the entire universe Mobius resided in, none of it. He'd felt so light, so happy, and so free that he could finally put that awful chapter of his life behind him and move on with his life.

Sorun's entire body passed through the portal. He was still trying to figure out *how* he'd return to his life. Reuniting with his mother would be a challenge all on its own. His education would be another thing. He planned on visiting David as soon as possible right after he settled all of that, and he was certain his friend would round up the boys and they'd all plan some big party for him. Maybe he'd end up telling Dave the truth; Sorun felt he'd actually believe him for some reason. And after Sorun figured out how to get his life back on track he could go back to doing things he loved. Go back to games and pirating shows off the internet. Maybe he'd take up literature again. Hell, maybe *he'd* write something himself. Make an adventure novel about his time on Mobius. He'd have to change some things of course, couldn't rightly write a story using Vergil's powers without suffering some form of copywrite infringement, but he'd find a workaround.

It was going to be alright. He was home. It was all fine now.

But then he'd taken a look around right after he'd exited the portal, and something was wrong. Very, very *wrong* . It was the grocery store alright- he recognized the layout. Although some aisles were knocked down for some reason, he recognized it as the same store. But there weren't any lights. In fact, there wasn't even a ceiling.

And then Sorun made the mistake of looking up.

It was either dawn or dusk from how the sky looked. That deep red color. Through the completely vacant ceiling Sorun saw the state of the city he'd been in his whole life. Once pristine buildings that he managed to see through the open ceiling were now cracked apart. Almost all of their windows shattered, and some were dangerously leaning over or were even toppled over completely. They looked less like buildings and more like ruins.

There was a burning sensation, too. It was slight, almost unnoticeable to Sorun, but it was there. And he knew it was there. And that, along with the state of the store, along with the states of the buildings, that hellish image he'd stepped out of the portal to see, all said enough for him to understand.

He'd stumbled back, dazed at it all. He tumbled right back through the portal, back to Mobius and onto the floor of the room where the portal machine was. He didn't even notice it. All he could do was stare at the portal he'd just fallen out of, so much in shock that he couldn't even move. His thoughts weren't in any better shape.

"I... what, I... that... I don't... why... I- that isn't- when- I-I-I..."

His eyes saw Nicole next to him, doing something. His mind couldn't register her presence, though. All he heard were muffled sounds when she tried speaking to him. He didn't feel his heart hammering in his chest or his breathing that was so rapid and heavy that, were he conscious of it, Sorun would find painful. He wasn't aware of when he was physically picked up and carried away. He was so much in shock that nothing was registering with him. What he *was* aware of, if just barely, was the fact he was rapidly growing more tired and weak by the second. His breathing began to grow more shallow as his movements slowed, and alongside that his jumbled thoughts began to become more and more disjointed.

"Why...?"

There was no describing how sharp of a change Sorun had felt when he saw his city once so pristine and shining now destroyed. To have

gone from being so hopeful and happy to what he was now. Horrified and confused and anguished and a hundred other emotions bundled together in such a way that he didn't know what he felt. His mind couldn't make sense of any of it. It was all just nothing but noise that made him feel awful, that was scrambling his thoughts so much he couldn't think coherently. And as Nicole laid him down on the floor, everything was becoming quieter. His own body as it slowed down, his breathing, his thoughts, his emotions. Everything continued to rapidly slow down as Sorun's eyelids became heavier and heavier.

He saw forms in his blurring vision. A brown and purple form with splashes of black and a hint of green. A lighter brown with blues and reds. Yellow and white. He knew who they were, could put names to the forms, but he couldn't think to say anything. What little focus he had between him shutting down and the maelstrom of emotions swirling through him was all focused on a single thought, the one, single thought Sorun successfully managed to form as his eyes closed further and further.

"Why is my home dead...?"

The last thing he saw before everything went black was the brown and purple form frantically shaking him.

A/N- You know in hindsight I don't think all these fakeout goodbye chapters are gonna hold much weight to people in the future just getting to this part when there's gonna be however many chapters after this one. A fact I realized way early on, because I originally planned a short goodbye chapter for every single character before realizing I didn't wanna put that much time and effort in for just that: a fakeout. At the same time I didn't wanna skimp, either, and I still had to throw a few things in there like Shadow informing Sorun about Rubrum's existence, however vague it was, so we got what we got.

But hey, good news for people who wanted Sorun to stay on Mobius: he's staying on Mobius. It's not at all good news to

Sorun, but the truth of the matter is we still got a whole lot of story to go through here.

Chapter 62

Recursion Error

Episode 62- Home was never in the cards

"Nicole, please calm down."

The situation was awful enough. Between Sorun and *everything* happening with him, Sally was already reaching her limit, and a headache continually threatened to form. Sitting in the hospital's lobby and watching Nicole pace around back and forth, wringing her hands together like a nervous wreck, though, was proving too much even for her.

On the other hand, she wasn't doing all that better herself. It was probably experience alone that was keeping her from going into a similar state out of worry for both of her friends: Sorun, and Nicole, who looked more scared than Sally had ever seen in her life. Seconded only when she saw Nicole's reaction to Sorun's mutilated body back when Knothole had been lost.

"I am calm," was Nicole's quickly-delivered response to Sally. Seeing as she was still pacing, she didn't believe it for a second.

Blowing past her lips, Sally slumped forwards while cradling her head in one of her hands. "Nicole, Dr. Quack's treated people with radiation poisoning before, remember? We had that whole incident with that group of Overlanders way back when, the group Hope was with, and they turned out fine after he treated them."

"I'm not worried about the radiation poisoning!" Nicole snapped, though unlike before Sally didn't react in the slightest to the small outburst. "He's catatonic! He's not responding to the doctors or anybody else! He... he just keeps staring at the wall!"

"He's in shock, Nicole. He just found out his home suffered a nuclear apocalypse." Making a small sigh, Sally turned her eyes up at Nicole. She'd hoped a logical explanation would go far in calming the AI down, but all that did was make her begin to pace around even faster. She sighed again. "Are we sure that's what happened?"

Nicole stopped pacing, though she still had her hands clasped together in front of her. She made an anguished face, like looking back at the mere memory was painful for her. Sally couldn't find herself blaming her. She'd seen that look Sorun had on his face. That shocked stupor mixed with terror, the way his skin had gone so pale. It hurt her just remembering that look he had before he passed out from sheer shock alone.

"There's really only one conclusion we can come to, Sally," Nicole quietly stated, eyes downcast towards the ground. "His zone was full of buildings in ruins. That in conjunction with the lethal levels of radiation that leaked through the portal leaves very few conclusions. And I would think Sorun's reaction alone says more than enough."

"... I guess so." Sighing for a third time in the last few minutes, and for probably the hundredth time in the last hour, Sally turned her gaze back to the ground. Nuclear annihilation. She knew firsthand how dangerous weapons of the sort could be, even the science behind them. She didn't know the circumstances behind their presence on Sorun's world, though. He never talked about *that* aspect of him home. Until he told them those specifics, all they could do was speculate.

And right now he couldn't even speak, let alone give them an in-depth history lesson of how extensive his world's use of nuclear technology was.

Admittedly she really was as worried as Nicole was over Sorun, more for his mental state than anything else. Going back home was all he would talk about when he'd been brought back to life. Even during his time as a Freedom Fighter at least a half of Sally's memories of the human was him talking about something or

someone from back home. Usually his friends. Or his mother. Who were all more than likely gone now. A fact she was sure Sorun was acutely aware of. With all of this she didn't know how he would cope with it, or if there was even some conceivable way of coping with it.

Losing a home and fighting to reclaim it and its people once again like she and everyone else did was one thing. She didn't know how to deal with permanently losing a home like that...

A high-pitched zooming sound caught Sally's attention, making her look up. Her vision was immediately filled with blue when she saw Sonic standing right in front of her. He looked alarmed and confused, and kept looking back and forth between Sally and Nicole, like he was looking for answers simply from their expressions. His own face began to turn grim when he saw the sad looks they both were giving him.

"H-hey, guys, I... Tails told me..." The hedgehog shook his head and looked to Sally for answers. "What's goin' on with Sorun?"

"... His home's gone, Sonic," Sally said in an empty tone, not at all sure how she could possibly gently break the news to him. Sonic's face fell as a result. "From what we can tell a nuclear weapon was used on the city he lived in. We don't really know what the implications of this means, and Sorun isn't..." She stopped herself and shook her head, not wanting to worry Sonic even further. "He's not really in a condition to be speaking right now."

"Oh... oh, no..." His ears completely flattening against his head, Sonic held his hand to his forehead while looking down at his shoes. "I... that's terrible. What's gonna happen with Sorun?" He looked back up at Sally. "C-couldn't we just send him somewhere-?"

"That would require us to gather the seven Chaos Emeralds once again," Nicole interrupted, voice quiet and full of worry. "Even if we did, we have no way of deciphering the universal coordinates. Editing even a single digit could prove disastrous. It could send Sorun to the center of his world, or somewhere in space, or a

different zone entirely, and even if it did just send him somewhere else on his planet we don't know what the state of the rest of his world is." She shook her head as she looked to Sonic. "It's... simply not feasible to send him back..."

"He's... going to have to stay here with us," Sally added in tone equally as sad as Nicole's. "Permanently. It's too risky to try and send him back, Sonic. Dr. Quack is treating him right now for radiation poisoning."

Sonic's face fell even further as grief overtook him. His arms seemed to go slack by his sides, and some small sound came out of his mouth as he tried to speak. "What happened with all his folks?" he finally got out.

Sally and Nicole glanced at each other. Nicole then shook her head, making Sally breath out slowly as she turned back to Sonic. "They're probably gone, Sonic," she said. She stood up out of her seat after seeing the sad, horrified look overtake Sonic's features, and then walked close enough so she could place a hand on his shoulder. "It's terrible, I know," she said, "but there's not really all that much we can do right now for him."

"Yeah... I know," Sonic replied. "Should I go see him?"

Sally quickly shook her head, surprising Sonic somewhat. "Sonic, I *really* don't think that would be a good idea. It's too soon," she stated. "Later, for sure. Definitely. But not right now. If, um... if you could check on Tails for us that'd be great, though. He was kind of shaken by what happened."

"Alright. I can do that." Nodding in understanding, Sonic took a few steps back while Sally had removed her hand from his shoulder. "Sorun's gonna be okay, right?" he asked her.

"I really hope so, Sonic." The unsure tone in Sally's voice did nothing to assuage the visible worry on both Sonic's and Nicole's faces. "But honestly? I'm not too sure. And it's scaring me..."

So apparently he'd gotten radiation poisoning.

Made sense in hindsight. What else was one to expect when they walked into a radiation zone? Oh, but apparently Mobian technology was perfect for curing that. Sorun didn't know what that stuff Dr. Quack injected with him was. Wasn't iodide or anything like that. Some substance made from the wacky scientific rules this world operated under that cleared Sorun's body right up from any harmful radiation. According to the duck doctor he'd be completely fine.

How fucking fortunate.

"..." He was sitting in a chair outside the examination room, inside a waiting room that was adjacent to it. The empty chairs around him and the small collection of toys in the corner meant to entertain waiting children may as well have not existed for him with how he was right now. Leaning forwards with his hands clasped together in front of him, head bowed down so low that his hair was obscuring his eyes.

He could barely think. Every time he tried thinking forwards, making new thoughts so he could try and sort through it all he just kept going back. Back to the moment he stepped through that portal and saw the apocalyptic state his city was in. That and all the implications behind it. It kept running in a loop inside of his mind and he couldn't stop thinking about it no matter how hard he tried. It was fading, slowly, agonizingly so, but he was getting back hold of his mind one piece at a time.

So, in the face of his fractured mind that he was slowly managing to piece back together, he tried working in those memories. Trying to piece together what he saw, what it meant, how he could begin to understand it. He didn't like any of the conclusions he came to. Conclusions he was able to come to after only having seen that landscape for just a few seconds. But they'd been enough. He only needed once glance at those buildings and a dose of harmful

radiation to understand the how of what happened, and just what exactly that meant.

He just couldn't understand the why of it.

Eventually Sorun had gained enough of his semblance back that he finally noticed somebody was standing near him. He managed to muster enough focus together to peer past the locks of hair covering his eyes and saw that it was Sally standing right there. He didn't know when she showed up, or how long she'd been standing there looking at him. Just that he finally managed to notice her. Her and that incredibly sorrowful, worried look.

"... It doesn't make sense."

Sorun's voice had come out as quiet and slightly cracked. It was still enough to startle Sally, who'd been standing there and staring at Sorun for some indeterminate time Sorun couldn't figure out. She regained her composure in the same breath Sorun's words had surprised her, after which the chipmunk cleared her throat and spoke out to Sorun.

"What doesn't make sense, Sorun?"

"What I saw. That. It doesn't make sense."

Sally's shoulders slackened. "I know it doesn't, but-"

"No. You really don't." Sorun shook his head a slight amount. "I can't believe somebody would actually use a nuclear weapon on a city. I just can't. There's no way."

"I... Sorun, you know I'm not familiar with how your world worked," Sally said. "Why is it so unbelievable?"

"It's not like every single person and their mother had a nuclear missile sitting in their basement," Sorun muttered out. "Officially there were only five countries with the things, and between all of

them they had enough weapons to erase all life on the planet. Multiple times over."

The room went completely silent following the explanation. Sally had completely stilled, looking down at Sorun with wide, slightly-shaking eyes. He'd heard a small gasp to the side, and when he glanced in the direction of the sound, past the black hair covering his eyes, he saw Nicole off to the side looking at Sorun. Eyes equally as wide and horrified as Sally's with her hand covering her mouth. He didn't know if she just showed up or if she'd been there the entire time without him noticing until now.

Finally finding the will to speak, Sally asked, "Why would... Sorun, why would your people... just *why* ?"

He wasn't surprised the concept would shock and confuse Sally so much. It'd probably have that effect on any Mobian. This kind of concept was a thing he doubted anyone in this entire republic would ever conceive. "It was for the sake of mutually-assured destruction. The idea was if one country used their nuclear weapons against another, it was a free pass for the country being attacked to use their nukes against the one firing on them. Since countries with nukes had so many, it'd basically mean the end of those countries. But with that many nukes in play, that many nuclear detonations of that size would create a nuclear winter that would end the entire world." He finally looked up at Sally, his black hair falling away from his eyes as he gazed at the chipmunk's face. "Do you get what I'm saying? Using a nuke was tantamount to suicide. That's why I can't believe anybody would use one against my home. Because my home country had the second-largest stockpile of nuclear weapons in the whole world."

"B-but... that doesn't..." She'd had to hold a hand to her head and shake it just to get the thoughts through. She almost looked like she was in denial with what Sorun was saying. "Sorun, that sounds like insanity," Sally said to him. The outright disturbed look she had on her face said enough about her disapproval with the idea. "How could anybody think making enough weapons to end all life on the planet is a good thing?"

"I'd say it worked pretty well seeing as it stopped the world wars that kept happening." She didn't calm down in the slightest by Sorun's statement. If anything, Sally looked even more disturbed by what he said. But she remained silent when Sorun continued. "But I'm telling you, Sally. Nobody could actually be stupid enough to use nuclear weapons. Not the Americans, Not the Russians, not the Chinese, not France or the United Kingdom, *nobody* . There's no way another world war broke out while I was gone. Not in just a few months. Not even half a year. Relations between all those countries were better than they'd ever been Sally, they... I just don't see it happening."

It made no logical sense. No moral sense. It didn't make any kind of sense. The whole idea of mutually-assured destruction was that nobody would use nukes since it would lead to the end of the world. There was absolutely no reason to make such a decision, regardless of country, regardless of beliefs, regardless of *anything* . No government would possibly be so spiteful towards another, not in his day and age, that they'd resort to the very last resort never even meant to be used. None of them. Not under the threat of everyone dying.

He had too much faith in humanity to believe anybody would be stupid enough to end the entire world for any reason. Because as far as he was concerned one country using a nuke against another meant all the nukes being used. So if somebody had nuked Detroit, then that was that. Game over for the world. And it had to have been a nuke; reactors melting down by accident couldn't cause the destruction Sorun had seen in those few seconds. With the radiation, it had to have been a nuclear weapon. Had to be. But it couldn't have been a weapon, because nobody would ever dare use one against another. But there was not other explanation he could see.

None of it made sense to him.

"Sorun... I understand what you're saying, but you have to look at the reality of what happened," Sally softly said to him. "Your home is gone because of a nuclear weapon. If what you're saying is true-"

"Maybe it was an accident." Sorun had leaned forwards, staring at the ground in no particular directions. His hands were still clasped in front of him. "There were tons of stories of nukes almost being used because of stupid accidents. Maybe that's what happened. Maybe it was a nuclear meteor that hit the planet or something. I don't know..."

Sighing deeply, Sorun's hands finally unclasped and limply hung by his side. He leaned back in his seat, his unfocused eyes traveling up towards the ceiling. He just couldn't make sense of any of it. There weren't any signs of war by the time he'd left Earth. Even if there were, nothing could escalate that drastically. But an accident seemed unlikely, with how much security they had around those weapons following previous near accidental launches in the past. A random nuclear meteor hitting the planet in the short window he was gone seemed even more unlikely. No matter how much Sorun thought he couldn't figure out what could have possibly happened.

Why did his home have to be dead? Why couldn't he figure out what had happened? What could have possibly even happened? He didn't know a single answer to any of these questions. Not a single thing made sense.

"... There's no way to send me back to any other part of my world, is there, Sally?" He could have been staring up at that whole ceiling for minutes before speaking out again and Sorun wouldn't have known it. He couldn't find it in himself to keep track of the time. "No way I can go back and... maybe figure out what happened?"

Much to his expectation, Sally said, "We'd have to gather all the Emeralds again. Even if we did, we can't send you anywhere else in the world but your home, which... which is contaminated with enough radiation to kill you, Sorun. Even if we could send you somewhere, if what you said is true then the rest of your world..." She trailed off, letting Sorun finished the thought.

"... Gone. I know." So no. He couldn't go back. Go back and try to piece together what happened to the world. If everybody on Earth

really was dead, which, from just that single glimpse Sorun had caught, made it seem likely. He couldn't do any of that. Not if they were only able to send him to that one specific spot in the destroyed grocery store in the middle of a poisoned city. "There's no going home..."

Somehow that news hurt almost as much as seeing his destroyed home. The knowledge he couldn't even go back to figure out what happened. That he really was stuck here on Mobius forever. Again.

Again, again, again...

"Over and over, like I've done this millions of times..." His breathing began to become shallow and quiet. His head had dropped so it was centered towards Sally, though his eyes weren't focused on her nor Nicole. Nor anything else in particular.

"I had so much hope, you know?" Sorun began, his voice no more than a mumble. "When I first got here, all those months ago, the only thing keeping me going was the hope I'd be able to go back home one day. After I came into contact with the first Emerald, I began losing it. I was chasing after a vague hope that maybe I could find a way to remove it so I could use it to go back and not die, or find some alternate way back home, but deep inside I knew there was no way. But I kept hoping and searching for one, because I didn't want to give up on it. I didn't want to die.

"Eventually, though, I realized it was a foolish, idiotic thing I was doing. So I gave up, right after I ran. I wasn't going home. I was going to die. I ran out of hope and had to live with that every single day, over and over, that I was going to die. Over and over and over. Every time I woke up. Every day I lived through. Every time I went on a mission to go kill robots for you."

Both Sally and Nicole glanced towards one another, each holding worried looks of their own over the human sitting in the chair, vacantly staring off in a random direction.

"And then I died, and I came back, and I really thought this time I could go home for real now. All that hope was back, so much bigger and brighter than before, because everything was going so great and it seemed like such a sure thing. But then it happened again. Something happened, and now I can't go home again. My hope keeps getting torn away from me."

He began to lean forwards in his chair, looking down at his hands. Pale hands that just hung there, limply, like they weren't even alive. As far as Sorun was concerned he himself didn't feel like he was alive.

"I don't know what to do," Sorun said. "Getting home. That's all I wanted. But I can't get that anymore. And even then, back home, I had no aspirations. No goals. No direction I wanted my life to go in." Sorun lifted his hands up to grab at his head, letting his dark hair spill through between his fingers. "I don't have my powers anymore. I can't fight. I don't *want* to fight. I don't want to be a Freedom Fighter. It's too much. I can't, I... I don't... what am I supposed to do...?"

Neither Sally nor Nicole had an answer for him. All they could do was watch Sorun sit there completely silently, that pitiful and blank look on his face. Eventually Nicole was able to make a move, and materialized right besides Sorun. She knelt down right besides him and laid a hand on his shoulder, though Sorun didn't even react to the touch. This just saddened Nicole more, who then looked up at Sally.

"I... I'll take him," she told Sally. "I think maybe you should go home and get some sleep, Sally. It's been a strenuous enough day for all of us."

Wordlessly, Sally nodded at Nicole in agreement, eyes still locked on Sorun. Despite this, she wouldn't budge from her spot. She could only keep looking at Sorun with an anguished expression.

"Come on, Sorun. Come on." Nicole had grabbed hold of Sorun's wrist with one hand and his shoulder with the other, and then helped

the teen up to his feet. He was putting so little energy into standing up that she practically had to hold him up for him. "I'm going to take you somewhere, okay?"

Slowly, Sorun blinked and looked to the side just far enough to see Nicole. "Where are we going?" he mumbled to her in question.

"Just please come with me." Nicole briefly took her hands off from Sorun just to ensure he'd continue standing on his own. When he proved to be able to do so, she softly wrapped her arms around one of his own and began to walk away towards the waiting room's exit, using Sorun's own arm to guide him besides her. "I promise it isn't too far, Sorun. Just to the residential district."

Sorun, his arm being held by Nicole, agreed and followed her. His movements were more akin to a zombie's than an actual human's, but Nicole had noticed this and walked at an incredibly slow pace for Sorun's sake. They'd reached the exit to the room and left outside of it, leaving Sally alone in the room staring off after them. She'd spent whole minutes staring off at the door before sighing for a final time, and then ran a hand over her face as she herself made her way to the doorway.

When they left the hospital, it was nighttime. It was slowly coming back to him, but between now and after the portal this afternoon Sorun's concept of time was entirely shot. So without asking he had no indication for how long he'd been in that hospital. Just that it'd apparently been quite a few hours if the sun was already gone.

Nicole was leading him somewhere. He didn't know where. She probably would tell him if he asked, but he just didn't feel like pressing her on the location they were going to. He was pretty sure the only reason he was walking was because Nicole was leading him by the arm. Sorun knew he should have been thankful for that, for her being there for him, for doing whatever this was for him, and he *wanted* to be thankful and express that to her, but he just couldn't feel it.

He couldn't feel anything. His mind still felt stuck on the prior events. His own thoughts were still sluggish in that regard, as everything he'd said to Nicole and Sally in the hospital was already blurring in Sorun's memory.

The homes scattered around the residential district were recognized in Sorun's vision, but he couldn't tell where in the district they were. Just that Nicole had lead him somewhere in there. He couldn't even recognize whose homes they were. To him, they were just blurry shapes.

"Sorun? We're here."

Nicole's voice was the only sound that could reach Sorun's ears that didn't sound muffled. Everything else, even his own voice, was hard for him to hear. Not her, for some reason. It was why he was able to understand her words and look up at what she'd lead them to.

It was a house. A small, one-floor house that looked like a cross between a house and a hut. Same off-white walls the rest of the houses had, same brown roof. Nearly identical to the rest of the homes around, really. But he couldn't understand why Nicole was paying so much attention to this house.

"Wha...?" Sorun's vocal confusion caused Nicole to look back at him. She was still holding his arm. "I-I don't understand..."

"It's yours," Nicole explained in a simple, quiet tone. "This house belongs to you."

He didn't have the energy to look surprised. Just confused. "... You made me a house?"

The lynx nodded. "I wanted to give you a home of your own. It was meant to be a surprise I'd wished to give you after that mission where you..." She trailed off, stopping herself and looking like she didn't want to finish the sentence. "I just wanted to give you

something," she tried again, tone slightly quicker. "It's yours. You can live in it."

"Oh." He looked back at the house, expression blank aside from tiredness. "Is this what you wanted to talk to me about on the roof? And at the park?"

Nicole didn't answer him immediately. He felt her two-armed grip around his own arm tighten slightly, and that conflicted look returned to her face. But then she shook her head and turned away from Sorun towards the house. "That isn't important right now." She began walking again, leading Sorun behind her. "Come on. I'll show you what it looks like inside."

So they'd approached the home. There was a small cobblestone path leading from the sidewalk across an incredibly small lawn, all artificial and composed of nanites, to the front door of the house. Nicole had turned the door's knob and lead Sorun inside, who didn't even bother closing it behind them. She lead them right to the living room of the house, which was just outside of the house's main entrance.

The house was... relatively spartan, Sorun had observed. A living room, a kitchen, a hallway that lead off to other rooms. There were basics amenities: a fridge and an oven in the kitchen, a table and some chairs, some cabinets. The living room had a TV and a couch. Even a game console and some controllers plugged into the TV, the set from the HQ, Sorun had recognized. But that was it. The house was empty of everything else otherwise. No other furniture, no decorations on the wall. Just that same off-white color everywhere.

"It's empty," Sorun quietly noted.

Nicole faltered a bit, and then looked towards Sorun. "I-I didn't know your preferences or what types of furnishings you'd want," she quickly explained, voice uncomfortable, like she was fearful of Sorun's disapproval. "If you would only tell me what you desire for your home I can easily-"

"It's fine."

Sorun's barely-audible voice cut the AI off, causing her expression to shift. Her ears slowly began to fold against her head, and she'd tightened her grip on Sorun's arm in an effort of bringing him closer to her.

"It's not okay, Sorun. It's too empty," she mumbled to him. "I'll make anything for you. Anything. Please just tell me what you want."

She kept holding Sorun's body close to her, and her voice almost sounding pleading to Sorun's ears. He couldn't understand why. Why she was talking like that, or why she had that look on her face. So sad and worried, and for some reason him being upset at that look she had was the one emotion that was breaking through what felt like a blanket of heavy fog smothering the rest of his emotions. He couldn't figure out why. Or what he could do to make her feel better. He couldn't even find it in himself to try. It just went to make him feel more upset.

"... The house is fine the way it is," Sorun said to her at last. "Thank you anyways, Nicole. For offering. And for the house." His eyes took a quick half-glance around. "It's a nice house."

She didn't look satisfied with his answer, not nearly so from the way her large, triangular ears remained folded against her head, but Nicole at least seemed accepting of it from the nod she gave Sorun. "You are going to be okay here, correct?"

"..." Sorun's head turned around to look back into the empty house. "Everyone I knew back on Earth are gone, aren't they, Nicole?" He turned back to her. "What do I do with that?"

She didn't have an answer for him.

For Nicole, emotions, at least ever since she gained the ability to formulate her own feelings, were simple and at the same time

incredibly complex. It was a paradox that realistically shouldn't have existed, but when it came to emotions, it just did. And everybody acted like that paradox was normal. Like it was a standard part of living. It was just something to expect.

So she'd went along with it in the beginning, asking some questions here and there but otherwise going out to discover things for herself. It was easier back then, during those experimental trials. Things that made her happy made her happy. Seeing her friends happy made her happy, helping others and doing things that pleased her friends made her happy, doing things Nicole herself enjoyed made her happy. Then there were the bad emotions. Her friends putting themselves in danger for the sake of being Freedom Fighters made her mildly concerned, though the confidence she inherently had that assured her they'd be fine like always worked to mitigate this particular emotion. Frustration from the days she'd been confined to that handheld body, or when she'd been making preparations and creating lines of code for the nanite city, only for things to not run right in simulations she'd create because of a single pesky line of code being improperly written ruining the entire system.

Coding the nanites were finicky like that. She'd refined it to a fine art in record time, to a point her mastery over them was practically reflexive for the AI, but even she'd admit she'd had a time of getting to that point. She imagined if she actually had an organic body it would have caused her the headaches she often heard others complaining about. If it was anything like what she felt when that drone she sent to Angel Island was destroyed, the one during that Enerjak incident, she didn't envy them constantly experiencing those.

There were other feelings, of course. Good and bad. Anger at seeing a friend hurt, joy whenever someone would talk to her just to have a pleasant conversation, excitement at unveiling a surprise. Like the city she'd made, for example. Or... the house she'd made for Sorun...

The house that'd been part of a surprise she'd painstakingly been preparing for Sorun. A surprise she was preparing because she'd

wanted to see what look his face would make at such a surprise. She couldn't blame him for how things turned out, of course, but she wouldn't deny some part of her felt disappointed in how it had gone. That along with everything else.

That was part of the issue, really. Feelings used to be just that for Nicole. Good and bad. Binary descriptors used to identify feelings appropriately felt at different circumstances. That was easily understandable. She'd picked up on the concept almost immediately when she'd developed her own emotions with little difficulty. Her incredibly high intelligence only made it easier. She had no trouble understanding them.

But Sorun made things difficult for Nicole in terms of understanding emotions.

In many ways he made her more happy than anything else. Playing games with her, doing things with her, merely speaking with her, everything he did with her made her happier than anything else she could think of. She couldn't figure out herself why it was like this, just that it was, but it was something she enjoyed so much that she was tempted to just not delve into the reason behind it. But for her, something like that was next to impossible, so she looked deeper into the relationship they shared all the time. Sometimes things would become clearer for Nicole, other times more murky, but not matter what she never got a definitive answer on what she was feeling towards him.

Because sometimes things like this would happen. Something would happen to Sorun, and she'd feel more dreadful on the inside than she thought possible. Not just for Sorun, but for *herself* . When he'd died, she'd felt like she had lost some piece of herself Nicole could never reclaim. She remembered being inconsolable for those days he was gone, and when he came back, just like that, she'd been so *elated* . Sorun was back, the bad feelings associated with him and herself were gone, and she was glad because she didn't want to feel bad whenever she thought about Sorun. He was back, and things

could go back to normal. She could surprise him with the house, maybe even finally get around to asking that question.

That question. The one she kept going back to over and over. She suspected she knew what these peculiar feelings she felt towards Sorun were. It was an odd sensation. Both exciting and... terrifying, somewhat. Having those special feelings, wondering if he felt the same. She kept wanting to ask him about them, and if, in fact, he did feel the same, if they could... do something with that. She desired so much to say it right there when she found him in the park, especially after the opportunity escaped her on that roof. Like she needed to ask him as soon as possible before something else happened.

Except, something did happen. Sorun had told her he wanted to go home, back to his own zone, and once again she found herself feeling negative whenever she thought of Sorun once again. Not like when she'd been so dreadful when he'd died. Not when she was left questioning herself that one time why he kept avoiding Nicole during that one period, wondering what happened between them and if she'd done something or if it was because of *what* she was only to later learn it was Sorun's attempt at trying to spare her feelings. Learning he wanted to go home made her feel, strangely enough, bitter. She understood why he wanted to go, even completely agreed with him, but Nicole still couldn't help but feel bitter about the whole affair. He was leaving, *again* . And she had to watch him go, *again* . And deal with him begin gone, *again* .

She'd tried to accept it. Be happy for him going home, tell herself that it was for the best, that he didn't belong here and he needed to be back with those closest to him. But at the same time Nicole didn't want him to go. There'd been a period of time where she'd debated with herself if she should try asking Sorun to stay, but she'd given this idea up. She knew he would say no, and she didn't want to ruin their friendship by making him feel so awkward and sad for the last time they'd ever see each other. So she'd forced a smile on her face, for Sorun's sake, and bid him farewell in the friendliest manner possible. And it was strange, interacting with him before he went

through that portal. Because Nicole felt happy and sad at the same time, all for a person she was supposed to feel exclusive happiness over, and it mystified her to no end.

And then the portal happened. Sorun came back, Nicole went to see why, and understood immediately when she saw those ruins. His home was gone and he had to remain here on Mobius. And once again, she felt conflicting emotions. She wasn't strictly *happy* over the fact he was remaining with them, given what it took for this to happen, but she couldn't deny she was somewhat relieved of this fact. That he was back with them all, for good this time. It made her feel awful about herself, that she could feel such a thing, but she reasoned that the events that lead to this point were outside of both Nicole's and Sorun's hands, that maybe it was natural to feel this way. Either way it was still massively overshadowed by how awful she felt for Sorun's sake.

Here it was again. Something else happening to Sorun that made Nicole feel bad, because somebody she adored so much just suffered an unimaginable tragedy and he was not dealing with it well. He was speaking and cognizant now, at least, which was good, but... there was still something wrong with Sorun and Nicole didn't know what. How little energy he had, his movements, how quiet his voice was and how little he was speaking. It was all wrong. She knew why, he'd all but said why he was like this in front of her and Sally, and Nicole could well understand how everything that had happened could rattle Sorun so much, but it didn't change the fact that it hurt her seeing him like this and she wanted to fix him so that he would stop suffering.

But she didn't know how to fix this. She was still learning about her own emotions, let alone trying to fix someone else's emotions. Nobody else she knew of experienced tragedy on Sorun's level. People who had lost people, of course, but not on the sheer scale Sorun had. Not an entire world full of family and friends and his own people. Not gone as in out of reach, but *gone* , as in they'd all perished. Nobody, not a single person in the city she'd created, not

anybody they knew, had ever had to deal with something like this. The closest Nicole could think of was Knuckles, but even then he still had his family, his team, and his species wasn't entirely extinct like Sorun's now was. She didn't have a benchmark to compare it to. She didn't have solutions.

She... didn't know how to help him, despite how much she so desperately wanted to.

So when Sorun asked her how he was supposed to deal with the fact his world and every single person there, and his history, his culture, every single facet of his life previous to Mobius, was now all completely gone and dead, she didn't have an answer for him. She just didn't know, nor could the AI even begin to speculate on an answer. It was uncharted territory.

"Sorun, I..." Nicole's words fell short. She had a perfect memory as an AI. Could think thousands of times faster than any organic being could ever hope to, could make advanced calculations in seconds with her own mind when it would take experienced mathematicians hours using a cumbersome amount of assistive tools. None of it was helping her with answering Sorun. Not her thinking abilities, not her database of information her mind was frantically searching through to find an answer that didn't exist, nothing. She didn't know. It frustrated her even more than being stuck in that handheld. "We... we're all here for you, if you need us."

It was such a predictable answer that Nicole had to hold back from visibly cringing, and afterwards had to wonder if she'd really said that in front of him. It had to count for something, though, right? She knew people in grief often clung to others as emotional aids to help them through times such as this. Familial units and friends and such. He didn't have the former, but he certainly had the latter. Especially her. And it was here she realized some part of Nicole *wanted* for Sorun to latch onto her for support, and the very idea of holding such an emotion repulsed her. She didn't want to exploit his pain just to be closer with him. That was wrong. She just wanted to help him be

better so he'd stop being like this. She cared about him too much to see Sorun in this miserable state.

He didn't react in the slightest to what Nicole had said to him. He just continued staring at her with that empty expression he'd worn ever since the doctor at the hospital finished examining him. That hollow look. The neutral position his mouth was in. His vacant, sunken-in eyes. He wouldn't stop making that face. Nicole didn't even know if he was aware of the expression he was wearing.

"I know." That was all he offered her. He still kept giving her that hollow look, like all the emotion had been drained out from him. "..." He wouldn't speak further. He just kept staring at Nicole, like he wasn't sure of what to say. He wouldn't even move in the slightest. He only kept standing there staring at Nicole.

Even when she'd leapt forwards, wrapping her arms around his torso in a bear hug, holding their bodies so close together she had to rest her head on his shoulder, he didn't react.

"I can't imagine how painful it must be for you." She'd gone as far as to stroke his back with one hand and the back of his head with her other, in some desperate attempt at giving him some comfort, but all he would do was continue remaining limp in her hug. "I realize this home will never compare to the one you lost, but... this is still your home, Sorun. Your new home. We're all still here with you. *I'm* still here. And all we want to do is help you, okay? You just need to ask. We'll do whatever we can to help."

"..." Sorun still wouldn't speak to her. Nicole broke the hug and pulled away, both hands resting on his shoulders as she looked to his face. He'd gone back to staring aimlessly in a random direction, and it was here Nicole realized just how dreadfully tired Sorun looked. Tired in a way she couldn't describe.

"I... I'll come back tomorrow. I'll check on you every day." She still had a city to steward over, after all, as much as her responsibilities to the citizens were vexing her at the moment. But she'd find time for

Sorun. She'd *make* time if she had to. "Please just go to sleep for now. You need your rest. Do you think you can find the bedroom on your own?"

Thankfully, Sorun nodded in Nicole's direction. She would have preferred a verbal confirmation, but just the fact he was still responsive and hadn't gone back to being catatonic was enough to put her at ease for now. She released Sorun's shoulders, and slowly her body began disappearing as she began transferring herself back into the city's systems.

"Goodnight, Sorun. We'll talk more tomorrow."

The fact that he didn't say anything as she faded away only made Nicole more worried for the person she adored so much.

It was probably a single second after Nicole disappeared that Sorun's body tilted backwards until his back fell against the floor. He noted the back of his head hitting the ground, but the pain was dulled. Distant. Not all there. He didn't care.

He was grateful to Nicole for everything. For the house, wanting to be there to help Sorun, just existing and being around him, everything. He felt bad not being able to vocalize these thoughts, but he didn't have it in him. He couldn't even stand right now, let alone pour out all his feelings for her. He just couldn't.

"Mom's dead. Dave's dead. All my friends are dead. Every single person on Earth is dead. It's all dead. Gone. I'll never see them again."

And here he was. The last, sole surviving member of the human species, surviving only because of freak coincidence it seemed. Stuck in a world of animal people and robots and, as far as he was concerned, off-brand humans that didn't truly count as humans. Here he was. All alone in a world that couldn't even comprehend his culture, while he, in turn, couldn't comprehend the world around him.

The others were there, at least. There was that. Some small comfort Sorun could just barely feel in his heart. If nothing else, there was that. He didn't know if he could keep on living if it weren't for the sole fact that there were people here in this world that cared about him. He wouldn't bother anymore otherwise.

"..." His head tilted to the side a bit. He saw himself, sitting on the ground and leaning his back against the wall, right next to Sorun. He looked as empty as Sorun was. "You realize they saved our lives by kidnapping us," he said to him.

"Don't wanna hear it." Sorun turned his head away from Sorun. "That doesn't fucking absolve them."

"Kind of does if you really think about it, intentions aside. You can't seriously still hate them."

"I don't feel anything right now. And neither do you," Sorun said.

"..." Sorun looked back up at the ceiling. "What are we supposed to do now?" he asked, his voice unsure. What was he supposed to do, really? He didn't have any plans. He didn't even know what he was supposed to do when he woke up tomorrow. Sorun had no idea what to do going forward. None whatsoever.

What was he supposed to do now that his world was dead?

Sorun, looking down at Sorun lying on the ground, sighed and stood up. "I don't care anymore," he said, voice scathing and sad at the same time, "about anything. Do whatever you want. None of it matters anymore. I'm going to sleep."

He walked off out of Sorun's view. Sorun sighed at him leaving, his eyes still up at the ceiling. It was only after Sorun left that Sorun realized just how tired he really was, and rapidly his eyelids began to become heavier and heavier.

Sorun decided it wasn't worth getting up to find the bedroom and decided to just sleep right there on the floor.

Chapter 63

Recursion Error

Episode 63- The hustle

He was back in that ship once again. Cutting through so many robots in his attempt at trying to get at Eggman. Sprinting through the dark corridors, cutting down everything in front of him. Wielding a sword with supernatural reflexes and skill no normal human could ever possess. It'd felt so natural, swinging that sword through everything the way he had. The style, the technique, it'd come to Sorun so easily, so instinctually, like he was meant *to hold that sword for the sole purpose of slicing through everything in his path. An effect of the Emerald and Devil's Body, maybe, or his knowledge on the proper way of using that sword, a combination of the two, perhaps, he hadn't known and hadn't asked questions. He didn't care. He just wanted to keep going.*

There'd been hundreds of Badniks he'd sliced apart on that ship. Always moving forwards, never stopping or resting. They had no resistances to the katana capable of cutting through space, no defense whatsoever, and they weren't nearly fast enough to avoid Sorun. All they had was offense, but with his own powers and regenerative abilities, not even that could stop him.

They'd shot him, stabbed him, smashed him with hammers, tried blowing him up, but no matter what they tried he never stopped moving, never stopped going forwards to cut them all down. Any damage inflicted on him healed in the blink of an eye. He'd be riddled with so many scars he wouldn't look human otherwise.

Hundreds. Hundreds and hundreds. Dozens in seconds. His clothes were stained in oil, his blade practically black as it dripped with the fluid as he stood above a lone Egg Pawn, cowering on the ground

and holding its hands out to Sorun, like it was begging for its life. And Sorun, coldly looking down at it, black oil splattered all over his face, didn't bat an eye as he swiped his sword in front of him to cut the robot in two and kill it. And then he'd move on to the rest.

But it always ended the same, no matter how fast he went, no matter how efficient he was in dispatching everything in his way. He'd die before he'd get a chance at killing Eggman. He'd only get far enough to see him before he'd feel his heart stop, and then his body would refuse to move, and then Sorun would die right there. Sometimes Eggman would leave immediately, too terrified of Sorun to stick around even though he was dying. Other times he'd have the cheek to stay and gloat over Sorun, and the last thing his ears would hear is his mocking voice ridiculing Sorun before he'd die.

And when he'd die, he'd never go back to that void again. It was always his home city he'd wake up in. Sometimes in his home, or at his high school, even just somewhere in the street sometimes. But it always ended the same regardless of where he woke up. There'd be a white flash, and oddly enough, the sound of a shotgun going off as opposed to a booming, distant explosion. The clear, blue skies would turn red, and in the distance Sorun would see a mushroom cloud rise up as a fiery shockwave engulfed the city.

Windows would explode as buildings would buckle, with some falling down. Streets would crack and blow apart, cars would overturn, and the screaming, always so much screaming. Sometimes he'd see people he knew, his friends, his mother, and he couldn't do anything but watch as their bodies were completely obliterated by the shockwave from the nuclear blast, and then he'd have to feel his own skin get torn away, his organs rupture and his bones shatter as he was completely scorched by nuclear fire-

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The sunlight hitting his face woke Sorun up. His eyes cracked open to the window next to his bed, with the morning sunlight shining through it. He made a short sigh, and then turned onto his back.

The bedsheets that had been covering him were lazily thrown off his body. The teen sat up in his bed, groggily blinking his eyes as he looked around. Still his same room that contained nothing but a bed and a closet. The same room he'd been waking up in for a week now ever since he'd moved into his new home.

"That same dream again..." He reached his hand up to run a hand over his face, choosing to brush away some of his disheveled hair. The nightmares were a frequent thing. Happened every night at this point. He didn't bother telling anybody about them, and he didn't care enough to do anything about them. So he simply endured and ignored them, and then moved on with his day.

Swinging his feet off the edge of the bed, Sorun slid off it and let his feet touch down with the floor. He turned towards the closet, moving towards it with languid motions and then reached out to open it as he gazed at the articles of clothing inside of it. A pair of black boots, some socks. Blue pants and a black shirt. The dark blue vest Honey had made for him. His only clothes.

He quickly threw them on and left the bedroom. The same blank, off-white walls that decorated his entire house greeted Sorun as he walked his way towards the kitchen, form slumped forwards and arms hanging limp, a blank look on his tired face. In the exact same ritual he'd been performing every single morning since he began living here he made it to the fridge and then opened it to see what food was inside so he could calm down the dull ache in his stomach.

"... Running out of food," he realized when he looked into the sparsely-populated fridge. He was mildly surprised he was already running low considering he only ate once a day, sometimes twice if the hunger was especially bad. But at the moment just seeing the contents of his fridge, or lack thereof, sapped away any motivation Sorun had of eating, so he closed the fridge and went to sit down in one of the chairs next to the kitchen table. *"What a pain..."*

Sitting down in the chair, Sorun briefly went over his options. Running out of food was a problem. He could only go so long without

eating before Nicole noticed something, and if she figured out he didn't have any food and wasn't doing anything about it, Sorun didn't imagine it would end well. And she would eventually figure it out. She made it a point to visit him every single day here. The other Freedom Fighters made visits to him, too, brief ones to ensure Sorun was doing well, but from what he heard things with Eggman were picking up again, so they were back to doing that. Nicole was the only one that found the time to see him every single day, sometimes multiple visits in the same day. But either way it was a constant.

Normally for Sorun her visiting him was the brightest part of his day, since the rest of it usually composed of him sitting on the couch in the living room and staring up at the ceiling all day before he got tired and walked to the bedroom so he could go to sleep. It was the only thing he had to look forwards to. The only spot of color in his day. But now he had to worry about her fretting over him because of the food situation. He didn't want to burden her with that and make life that much harder for her.

It was something he'd have to rectify before she noticed.

"Maybe I can just steal food from the food storage site," Sorun internally mused. *"No, wouldn't work. Nicole would catch me on the security systems. Steal from the market at night? Same problem: Nicole. It's pretty much impossible to do any kind of crime in this city without her catching you. Illegal actions aren't viable. So... the only course of action I have is legal action. So how do I legally obtain food?"*

Growing his own food was an option, but that presented multiple problems. He'd need pots and soil for that, since fruits and vegetables couldn't grow in the faux-nanite soil this entire city rested on. He didn't know how to acquire those. Even if he did, Sorun didn't know the first thing about gardening. Even worse was that it was too slow to solve his very immediate problems. Above all that, though, he just didn't want to.

Beg for food? Eh, an option. Not a very appealing one, but certainly doable. Last resort. Except... that'd probably be very noticeable. No, on second thought, not an option, either.

Buy it? Probably the most pragmatic solution Sorun could find. He had some money, given to him by Sally to help with his "adjustment period" - he could have scoffed right in her face when she said that - to settling in to New Mobotropolis and his new home. She hadn't given him much, though. Just enough to get by for a little bit. He wouldn't be able to rely on that money for long, a few more days *at best* if he rationed the food. Long-term he'd have to find a way of generating his own income.

So... he needed a job, then.

"... Not like I'm doing anything better with my day." Maybe getting a job would be a good thing. Give him something to do and stop Nicole from worrying about him all the time. Every time she'd visit him there'd be this undertone to her entire demeanor. She kept trying to hide it, probably for Sorun's sake, but he could practically feel her concern for him. The way she kept asking if he was alright, the way she'd look at him like she was examining him, the frequent visits.

He was grateful for them, greatly so, but they kept making him feel bad for himself. Like he was some burden making her life and everybody else who was worried for him inconvenient just by existing. Maybe doing something productive would help fix it. Show he was doing something to move on and get some structure in his life, if such a thing was even possible for what happened to him. Either way he needed a way of getting money so he didn't starve.

"Guess I'll go get a job." Sorun lifted himself off the chair and made his way towards the front door of the house. Opening it caused Sorun to be assaulted by pure, unfiltered morning sunshine, causing him to squint and shield his face with his hand. He hadn't stepped foot outside this house ever since Nicole first showed it to him. He forgotten how bright daylight was.

Lowering his hand, Sorun looked out to the residential district. The sun was shining, the sky was clear, and overall things looked peaceful. His house was still surrounded by all the other houses in the neighborhood, though he had no idea who lived in those houses. He did see some Mobians walking up and down the sidewalks though, happily going along with their day while waving and smiling at each other. Sorun even got a few waves himself, and Sorun, not knowing at all how to respond, had merely just awkwardly waved back while keeping a nervous look on his face.

It was when he was waving his hand, and it'd moved near his face, that Sorun had accidentally smelled himself. He'd blinked in surprise, and then slowly lowered his arm while giving it, and his entire body, a contemplative look.

"... Shower first, then job," he decided, and then walked back into his house while closing the door behind him.

One shower later and Sorun was in the one place in the city he figured he was most likely to find a job: the marketplace.

Sorun didn't really know what the job market in New Mobotropolis was like. He knew there couldn't be any positions in infrastructure or construction since, well, Nicole and the nanites took care of pretty much all the city's needs. Most likely ditto for any electrical, plumbing, or any position falling under maintenance when it came to the city itself. Nicole was in charge of all that, as well as running the city's inner systems. So what was left after that?

Well, plenty, probably. There were all the guards and soldiers in the royal - or would it be republic now? - army, as small as it was, but with his distaste of fighting, or really just a lack of general ability, Sorun didn't see that going well for him. There were other specialized positions: educators and doctors and the such, but he didn't have the education for something like that. So he was unqualified for any of those.

He knew a sizeable part of the population worked in producing food for both trading and for maintaining the city's food reserves, which were all stored in a food storage site. Those were usually the people found in the marketplace, as well as other craftspeople that sold various things they crafted. Other than that there were people like Honey that ran their own independent businesses for a living. Even in a city that ran itself people found ways to make a living.

There had to be something out there for him.

"Alright, job hunt time. Never, uh... never really done anything like this, but it's gotta get done." Admittedly a great part of Sorun was nervous about undergoing this endeavor as he walked through the marketplace. What did this process even entail? Did he just go up to random people asking for a job? How was he supposed to act? Was there some kind of procedure or etiquette he had to follow? Were there weird rules that applied here but not on Earth that were in effect he wasn't aware of? *"Speculatin' ain't gonna get me anywhere. Might was well just go for it and hope for the best."*

He made a resolute nod to himself. No lack of ever working a single day in his life, work as a Freedom Fighter aside, was gonna stop him from at least trying this.

"Ya... want a job?"

Sorun quietly clicked his tongue, made a sharp inhale, and nodded his head while keeping his hands respectfully clasped behind his back. The pig Mobian in front of him was giving Sorun the once-over, looking him up and down with peculiar, questioning eyes.

The job hunt lead Sorun to a stall in the marketplace, which was connected to a small, house-sized structure. What drew him in was the "help wanted" sign out in the front window, and entering the small building lead Sorun to meeting the aforementioned pig Mobian he was asking a job from. Apparently he was a local distributor of produce that traded food to some of the other market vendors who

then sold the food to the citizens paying for it. Hell if Sorun knew how that system worked, but it did, and the guy needed help while Sorun needed a job. Seemed like a good place to start to him.

"Yes, sir, that's correct," Sorun stiffly replied with a nod, having put on his most respectful face. "I, er, noticed the sign, so-"

"Ah, wait, I know you!" the pink-skinned pig Mobian suddenly exclaimed, causing Sorun to jump a bit in surprise. "Yer that one human Freedom Fighter, right? The one with the weird blue arms an' swords an' all that."

"I'm... still the only human living in New Mobotropolis, yes," Sorun confirmed, forcing himself not to twitch in any way. "And indeed was... that guy you saw fighting Eggman and the mech suit while you and everyone else were trapped in the Egg Grapes. I was there for the whole Enerjak thing, too."

How the fuck was he not more recognizable when he was the *only human* that lived in the city? Not even that he was with the Freedom Fighters, but lived in the city exclusively full of Mobians otherwise. And an AI. Sure, he'd... he'd never really gone out of his way to interact with many of the citizens, really, but goddamn. He stuck out like a sore thumb compared to everybody else. Even Nicole had a Mobian form for her body. He was the only one on the whole damn continent not rocking fur, for crying out loud.

... Well, him, Eggman, and Snively, with the latter two somewhere in the ruins of New Megaopolis, but the point still stood.

"Ah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah, I know you." Maybe he was being a bit too hasty with his judgement. It wasn't like this random Mobian didn't know him at all or forgot him, clearly. Sorun just... didn't really get around that much. That had to be it. "Aren't you doin' work with the Freedom Fighters? Why d'ya want a job from me?"

"I'm retired," Sorun explained. "Indefinitely. Permanently. Forever. I don't fight anymore."

The pig blinked. "Oh. Why not?"

"Come on, man, I came for a job, not to give my autobiography." What was he supposed to say? That he was too scared and traumatized to fight anymore? He wouldn't even bother his friends with his emotional baggage, let alone some complete stranger he was begging a job from. He decided to just go with the *other* ugly truth: he was too weak to be a Freedom Fighter. Or fighter of any kind, really. "I don't have my powers anymore, so I can't really fight. Hence my retirement and me seeking alternative employment, sir."

The change in the Mobian's demeanor was instantaneous, and not the good kind of change, which made Sorun grow concerned. He looked a lot more hesitant all of a sudden, blinking in surprise and growing a bit uncomfortable-looking. He winced and glanced behind him, at an open doorway. Sorun peered through that doorway and saw an empty room full of crates of food stacked up on one another. The pig Mobian made a small hiss, and then turned back to Sorun.

"Oh, uh... lost the powers, huh?" he asked. "So no, uh... no super strong arms or, uh, the-the weird clone thing?"

"No...?" Now Sorun was progressing from concern to full-blown worry. "Is that a problem?"

"Well, er, yeah, actually. It is," the Mobian admitted. "Look, Solder-"

"Sorun."

"Sorun, I got a lotta product I gotta be movin' on the daily. I'm a supplier of a lot of the vendors here and even some of those fancy-schmancy restaurants further inta town," the pig explained. "Thing is, uh... the boxes're heavy, see, an' humans like you ain't really, well... you're not known for bein', you know, very strong." He looked down to avoid Sorun's face while reaching a hand up to scratch the back of his head. "Thing is I already got a buncha other applicants, too, an' one of 'em was a tiger. So unless you can hold four pallets of food

over your head with one hand like that guy can there's nothing I can do for you." He looked back up at Sorun. "Can ya?"

"... I could probably pick, like, one up. With both hands," Sorun answered in a quiet voice.

"..."

"..."

"..."

"... I don't have the job, do I?"

"N-no, no, you don't. Sorry."

Sighing in defeat, Sorun slumped his shoulders. Probably should have seen that one coming, he realized. What was he compared to a Mobian with borderline super strength? He could probably cross off any type of physical labor job if that was the case. Narrowed his search down, at least, but also closed off way more doors than he was comfortable with. This job hunt was looking less and less viable by the second.

The pig Mobian, seeing Sorun's distress, grimaced a bit and held his hand out to Sorun as he turned to leave. "Aw, geez, wait up a sec." The human did so, freezing mid-step and turning back to the pig. "Listen, I ain't got work for ya, but one of the restaurants I do supply for I mentioned earlier might have a position open. Waiter or somethin' like that. You could try there."

"Waiter? Huh, that's... actually a pretty decent idea, yeah. I mean, shit, waiter was a common job for high schoolers back in my world. I was friends with a guy that waited tables. Yeah, sure." After taking a few moments to think, Sorun nodded in thanks at the pig. "Alright. I'll go do that. Thanks."

"Yeah, no problem. Hey, good luck, kid." The pig waved to Sorun on his way out, with Sorun doing the same as he left. The door closed behind the teen, with the Mobian nodding to himself in satisfaction as he turned around to conduct the rest of his business for the day.

And then he was forced to turn back around when he heard the door open, only to then see Sorun poking his head back in.

"H-hey, uh, could, could you give me some directions to that restaurant, please?"

The restaurant Sorun had been pointed to was a place that went by the name of Crème De La Crème. Real fancy name for a real fancy eatery, the kind of place Sorun never dreamed of ever being able to afford going to. Fortunately he wasn't there looking to spend money. He was there looking to get paid.

Unfortunately it didn't seem like that was going to work out.

"So you're not hiring?"

"Afraid not, sir." Sorun never even made it to the manager of the restaurant. Or inside the place for that matter. He only made it as far as the damn greeter. An old orange fox Mobian, much to Sorun's consternation. "All of our waiting positions were recently filled. The proprietor of this establishment isn't seeking any additional help."

His shoulders slumping in defeat once again, Sorun looked off to the side. There were a few outside tables under an awning connected to the restaurant seated with guests. From what Sorun saw they were all being waited by a rooster Mobian. And on the actual inside of the restaurant were even more waiters tending to the guests.

Place was fully staffed, then.

"... You sure you don't need a dishwasher or something like that? Or a janitor?" Sorun tried. All he received from the fox was a raise of an

eye ridge. "I'm... look, man, I'm really desperate here."

"No, *sir* , I assure you we do not." There was an edge to that aged, sophisticated tone the Mobian greeter was speaking in. A very annoyed one, directed right at Sorun. The piercing gaze he was giving the human wasn't helping his nerves at all. "Now if you don't have a reservation, I'm going to have to ask you to move along."

Sorun could take a hint. This one, at least. He wasn't wanted here, and frankly, he didn't want to be here right now. "Fine. I'm gone."

"Have a good day, sir," the greeter called out as Sorun turned away.

"Don't tell me what to do." He hadn't turned around to see the Mobian's reaction as Sorun left, but he didn't think he needed to seeing as he could practically feel him glaring a hole into the back of his head. He didn't care. He just wanted to put as much distance between him and that restaurant as soon as possible so he could put the place out of his mind.

"Fuckin' foxes. It's not just the Prower family. They're all out to get me." The teen shook his head as he rounded a corner, stopping to relax and lean his body up against a nearby wall as he looked up at the sky. *"Well, that's that place out of the question. It's not really looking too good so far, but the day's still young. There's gotta be someone out there willing to hire me for everything."*

The further this went on, the more Sorun was convinced there wasn't a single job available for him in the whole city.

He'd just now walked out of a bakery, back hunched forwards, his head bowed down, and his hands tucked into his pockets. This was the tenth place that had either turned him down or just didn't have any openings. Including that fancy restaurant he tried he'd been to three whole restaurants, and they all turned him down. The other seven places always had the same story: nobody wanted to hire him either because they were fully staffed, or because they didn't want

him due to his status as a "weak, jelly-armed human that couldn't do a quarter of the work a Mobian could." He'd actually had that said right to his face by one person.

It was a cutthroat job market in New Mobotropolis apparently.

"Ugh... this is getting me nowhere." How was he supposed to support himself going at this rate? At the speed he was going he'd starve to death before he'd ever find anybody willing to hire him, if such an opportunity even existed here. And he was starting to see that as a preferred alternative to getting turned down over and over like the way he was. He felt emotionally beaten. Like every single turndown he got was a kick to his soul. That one incredibly rude Mobian that called him a weak, jelly-armed human especially.

Wasn't even that anybody forgot who he was, either. Not like anybody *could* seeing as he'd had his arm torn off in front of the entire city when he was busy saving all of their lives. Some Mobians profusely apologized to him that they couldn't hire him despite his service as a Freedom Fighter and all he did for them. Others weren't nearly as nice and didn't even acknowledge all he'd done, and instead just pointed right at the door after outright refusing to hire him right to his face. For the most part, though, people kept acting like they barely even knew who he was. Which was true, Sorun supposed, and he wasn't the kind of person to try and use everything he'd done as leverage to try and garner himself a job, left a bad taste in his mouth, but even if he did he wasn't even confident it would work.

Nobody wanted him, plain and simple. Nothing he could do to change that.

He'd briefly entertained the idea of going to one of his friends for advice, but Sorun decided against it after some debate. He didn't want to bug them with this. Didn't want to drag them down with his problems or make them worry further. Besides, they were all busy with the whole Freedom Fighter thing. They didn't have time to worry about someone like him. He had to figure this out himself.

Right. As if that was going well.

"Well, with how things are going, it seems like there's only one thing left to do."

"So how are you doing today, Sorun?"

"Ah, you know," Sorun calmly answered, not even looking at the lynx sitting besides him, his eyes staring right at the TV. "Fine."

He'd decided to give up looking for a job altogether and opted to just go home and wait for Nicole to visit so he could play video games with her. He didn't want to deal with the emotional duress that was getting turned down left and right. Didn't want to be reminded of his own inherent ineptitude due to being a human in a city full of Mobians.

At the very least, Nicole was there with him on another visit. He didn't know how he was going to resolve the food situation, but there was that. Her visiting let him ignore all of his problems for just a little bit, which was something he desperately craved at this point.

"That's good to hear." Thing was Nicole wasn't even looking at the TV. She was looking at Sorun. Her whole focus was solely on him. And he could tell, too, because she wasn't playing nearly as well as he knew she could since she was barely even paying attention to the game.

Somehow she was still better than everyone else, barring Sorun, at games even without focusing on it. At least enough to make him put effort in.

"I saw you leave the house today," Nicole continued. "What were you doing?"

Sorun won the round right as Nicole finished the question. A bit too easy for his taste, but he was too scared of upsetting Nicole to

comment on it. He had enough sense to not complain to her for paying too much attention on him instead of a video game. "You were watching me on the security cameras again?" he questioned her.

"I simply just noticed you walking around through them," she said.

"Ah." He wasn't sure he believed her. He didn't care either way. "I... decided I should probably try and find something productive to do with my day. So I went looking for a job. You know, just something I can do to keep me busy."

"Oh! I see." There was a small chirp to Nicole's voice, and her ears straightened up as a smile broke out on her face. A *real* smile, and not that fake one she'd been wearing to mask all the worry she'd had over Sorun this past week every time she came to see him. Like him getting up to go do stuff was a sign he was getting better, which in turn made her happy. "And how has that been going?"

It was here that Sorun had to consciously refrain from sighing and sitting back in the couch. To give any sign that he was under duress. She didn't seem to know why it was he was walking around all day, just that he was, so that was good. He didn't want to tell her he was an utter failure at finding a job here. He liked seeing her legitimately happy instead of trying to fake it for his sake, and he didn't want her to start worrying again. But he also didn't want to lie to her on the moderate chance she figured out he couldn't find a job.

Eh, he'd just be evasive about it.

"Still exploring my options. Went to a bunch of different places, haven't made up my mind on what to do yet, it's still an ongoing process," Sorun vaguely answered her. When she kept staring at him expectantly, Sorun endeavored to change the topic. "How's everybody else doing?"

"As well as could be. Operations against Dr. Robotnik have been going without issue thus far," Nicole said to him. "There has been

one development. Due to the events of your last mission as well as Enerjak's attack on his city, and due to us all having dismantled his production facilities beforehand, his autonomous forces are practically nonexistent. To compensate he's enlisted the help of the militant echidna organization Knuckles and his team often fought against on Angel Island."

"The Dark Something Or Other?" Sorun asked, prompting Nicole to nod. "I thought Enerjak eye-zapped all their cybernetics away? What're they doing working with Robotnik? And also why?"

"Evidently he restored their cybernetics on the condition they align themselves with him. We're not sure of the specifics." The lynx turned her face away from Sorun at the same time to corners of her mouth began to lower. "I find myself questioning what possessed those echidna to act in such a way. Why their attachment to technology is so strong they'd go to such lengths just to replace parts of themselves with mechanical enhancements." She rose her hand up to her face and flexed it closed, and then opened it again. "It's... confusing to me. How they could be so enamored with cybernetics when they have their own bodies."

Sorun silently stared at her hand, and then looked up into her eyes. "Because they're doing the exact opposite of what you wanted for yourself?" he asked.

"Perhaps," she confessed to him. "Some of them go as far as replacing their limbs with artificial replacements for no other reason than they're marginally more efficient than organic Mobian limbs. Limbs, eyes, internal implants and artificial organs and the such. Unfeeling metal replacements. Prosthetics for lost limbs is one thing, but they're voluntarily doing this to themselves. It just doesn't seem worth it to me to give things like touch up in exchange for a moderate boost in strength now that I've experienced touch for myself."

"I don't really get it, either," Sorun admitted. That delved into a territory Sorun didn't like going into- echidna history, and all the fuckery behind that. There were probably solid reasons why the Dark

Legion were like this, but that would require asking Knuckles to go further into the history of things. Which Sorun absolutely refused to do due to his genuine dislike of their entire species with the exception of a few members. And he had better things to do than try to understand why a bunch of cybernetic fanatics were the way they were. Like stare at the ceiling.

But he could understand why Nicole would be so confused over them. For the longest time she wanted a body for herself, and this holographic form of hers was as close to a real body as an actual, physical body could get. A physical body that could move around and feel sensations like an organic body could, however... however that worked, Sorun wasn't sure of the science. He had to wonder if she was thinking those echidna were taking for granted what they had and were willingly giving up just for cybernetics. Maybe she was even insulted by the very notion of replacing organic parts with mechanical, which he wouldn't be surprised over.

"I wouldn't stress so much about it, Nicole. Those echidna are crazy," Sorun told her. "They gotta be screwed up in the head if they're working with Robotnik for no other reason than they want a shiny arm. The guy that wants to rule over the entire world and enslave everybody. The turbo dictator. Who cares what those nutjobs think at that point?"

Nicole smiled a tiny bit, and her shoulders briefly shook in subdued laughter. "You're right. Their reasons are their own, even if I think them wrong. Even if... everybody else thinks they're wrong in what they're doing. Robotnik has his own reasons for what he does, and he's clearly in the wrong." She placed her hands on the couch and stood up off of it. "I apologize if this wasn't a pleasant subject of conversation, Sorun. I know I shouldn't be concerning myself with their actions. I just can't help in trying to understand."

Sorun shook his hand and waved in her direction. "Nah, it's fine. I like talking with you." He paused and turned his head away from her. "Um, thanks for this. For... coming back to check on me all the time. I know I'm not really making things easy for you-"

"Nonsense. It hasn't been any trouble for me at all." He felt a hand lay down on his shoulder, causing Sorun to look up and see Nicole smiling down at him. "You're a very dear friend of mine. I'm just happy to see you're doing better." Her smile faltered a bit as she looked more directly into Sorun's eyes. "You *are* doing better, correct?"

"... As well as I can, I guess," he honestly answered. He didn't want to tell her about the nightmares. As far as he was concerned that was a secret he had to keep from everybody. That and, no, he wasn't really doing better and his thoughts kept going back to his home. She didn't deserve to be weighed down by concern over him. "It's... you know."

Nicole blinked. Her had slid off from his shoulder, and at the same time her ears lowered a bit as the smile left completely. "It'll be better, Sorun," she promised him. "I wish the others could visit as frequently as I do, but with how things are it isn't feasible at the moment. But I'll keep visiting," she assured him. "I really do think you're getting better, though. You're speaking much more than you have in the previous days!"

"As opposed to not at all?" Sorun numbly thought. "You don't have to keep doing this *every* day, you know," he reminded her, despite how much he wished she'd keep doing this.

"But I will. Because I want to," she said, brightening Sorun's mood a bit. "That said, I do need to leave now. But I'll see you again tomorrow, okay?"

"Alright." As he watched Nicole's body begin to disappear, Sorun managed to find the will to bid her a goodbye. "Er, bye."

"Goodbye for now, Sorun." She'd managed to give him one last smile and a wave before disappearing. And then she'd vanished, leaving Sorun alone on his couch in his living room.

And just like that, with Nicole's absence, it all began to slowly set back into Sorun. The emptiness of the house, the quietness, nothing but his own thoughts to occupy him. Thoughts of his home and everything that was gone now, which made him slump back in the couch and drop the controller on the floor. He tried thinking of something else to take his mind off of it. Usually that just entailed Nicole in some shape or form. But in this particular moment he couldn't help but focus on what she said about Eggman. Him and the echidna.

Those stupid, stupid echidna.

"Why do they always have to cause so much trouble? Garbage fucking species," he mumbled under his breath as he examined his right hand, feeling twinges of anger under his skin. "'Dark Legion', pfft. Probably did something lame and put 'Egg' somewhere in it now that they're with him. 'Dark Egg Legion'. Dumbass name." The hand dropped to his side. "I guess it's probably a good thing I lost my powers and dropped out of the Freedom Fighters when I did. I don't imagine the others would have reacted well if I started cutting through cyborg echidna. I know Knuckles wouldn't have liked me killing so many. There's not too much of his species left, thankfully."

Killing robots with mass produced basic AI was a whole different world than killing real people. Sorun would call himself a fool if he didn't realize this. And on the inside, he recognized it was more of his anger towards the entire echidna species in general talking. The more he thought about it, though, the more he had to wonder.

"... Would I even go as far as to kill them?" he asked himself. "If I still had all my powers incapacitating them would be easy. And everyone else, well... they don't even see it as an option. They'd probably never speak to me again it's such a taboo to them." Sorun sighed and turned his head up to the ceiling. "Alright, maybe on second thought I wouldn't have killed any of them. Eggman and Snively, sure, but... egh. I don't know." He rose his hand back up to rub at his head. "Could I even?"

He'd never taken a life, after all. When it came to Eggman and Snively it wasn't a question of if he could and live with it, because with them, Sorun could. Almost had some occasions. The anger made swinging the sword easy enough when he'd tried, and after all they'd done, he knew he wouldn't be losing sleep over their deaths if he ever succeeded. Random echidna grunts he didn't even know were another matter. He didn't know if he'd be able to do it or if he'd just freeze up trying. Or what would happen afterwards. Maybe incapacitating them *would* have been easier just so he didn't have to deal with these kinds of moral quandaries. Everybody else seemed to handle it well enough, anyway.

It wasn't like he ever *wanted* to actually kill anybody. And the more Sorun thought on it, the more he realized the prospect of killing people who weren't genocidal maniacs kept leading him to more and more uncomfortable thoughts, echidna or not. Killing Eggman was easy for him to justify. He couldn't put the same labels he had on those echidna. They weren't universally hated like that man was.

"... Egh, why am I even thinking about this? I'm never fighting again. I'm done with it," Sorun murmured to himself. "I kept my hands clean the whole time I was here and I don't see myself ever getting the opportunity to kill anyone ever again. Doesn't matter."

His out-loud musing were interrupted when Sorun heard a knock at his door. He sat up straight in his couch, and then turned his eyes over to the closed doorway. He once again heard knocks, making him tilt his head questioningly at it.

"A visitor?" He stood up off the couch. "Who?"

A short trip to the door later and Sorun found himself opening it. There were two figures of greatly varying size on the other side, though Sorun found himself focusing on the significantly smaller one that was floating right in front of him. A small floating creature with silver, cylindrical horns adorning his head.

"... Virgil?" Sorun blinked in surprise at the Chao. Virgil, in response, gave Sorun little more than a nod, though the human couldn't help but note the strange way his eyes looked. They were a bit wider than normal, more alert. Searching, particularly towards Sorun. He almost looked worried. Worried over Sorun, maybe.

Behind the Chao was a significantly tall Mobian. Taller than Sorun, at least, which made the human sigh out a bit at the sight. A light-furred rabbit with orange highlights here and there. *"That's Cream's mother, isn't it? What was her name? V-something, something... Va, Varnish-? No, Vanilla. Yeah."*

"Um... hello," Sorun greeted in his best polite tone. "Did you come to the wrong house?"

"No, I'm quite sure this is the right one," the tall rabbit said. "I came here for you specifically."

"... Vanilla, right?" When she nodded at his question, Sorun looked down at the Chao floating in front of him. "Don't tell me you made her take you all the way here just to see me."

"... Chao."

That small, affirmative noise was enough to confirm Sorun's suspicions. They were only confirmed further when Vanilla stepped a bit closer to gain Sorun's attention.

"Little Virgil has been upset since news of... well, what happened to you reached us," the woman gently explained to Sorun. "He's been restless, so my daughter assumed he wanted to see you. I had to ask around a bit to find where you live and wanted to bring him to see you. And also to check up on you."

"I barely know you," Sorun said in a blank tone. "This is the second conversation we've ever had. Why do you care?"

She straightened up a bit, a bit stricken. Like she'd been slapped right across the face. She gave Sorun an astonished look as a result. "I don't see how that would affect me caring about your wellbeing," Vanilla said to him. "More than that, my daughter is quite fond of you."

"I've also only talked with her twice."

"She took a liking to you since you used to take care of Virgil. There are not many that can care for a Chao like my daughter can, you see," Vanilla explained. "Beyond that she heard stories. Of you, I mean." She began twisting at her long skirt with her hands. "Of how you're this brave Freedom Fighter who goes out of his way to save everybody-"

"Overblown, really," Sorun interrupted, making the rabbit freeze. *"Mobians..."* his thoughts continued as a tired look overtook his features. Barely even knew these folks and even they were fretting over him, even if he'd just been using them as a convenient excuse to dump his Chao on them. They were a nice enough family. He just could barely understand why they'd care about him so much. "Please tell me you didn't tell your daughter what happened with me," Sorun asked Vanilla.

Much to his relief, she shook her head. "I just told her that you couldn't go on the trip you told her about after all," she informed him. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't think telling a little girl seven billion people died would be a good idea. So thanks for not doing that."

He started to regret saying that when Vanilla's entire demeanor changed completely. She looked positively horrified, having widened her eyes at Sorun while holding a hand to her mouth. Virgil's reaction was much more subdued, but even so Sorun could still see the worry in the Chao's face. The worry and sadness and the way his head was bowed a bit.

"Oh, my... Sorun, I had no idea..." The hand slowly lowered from the rabbit's mouth, though that sorrowful, pitying look was still present in her eyes. Sorun felt himself bristle from that look. "I-I knew they said your home was lost, but I hadn't realized that many..." She stopped herself, and then allowed her eyes to travel down lower to Sorun's body. He couldn't understand why, but for some reason her examining his body caused her to grow concern on top of everything else. "Pardon for me asking, Sorun, but I'm not very knowledgeable of your kind. Are... are you supposed to be this thin?"

"..." Sorun looked down at himself. He had grown a bit thinner as of late. Probably because of how little he'd been eating. It suddenly dawned on him why Nicole always kept looking at his body with worry every so often whenever she visited. He hadn't realized it'd grown so visible. "It's fine," he lied as he looked back up at Vanilla.

She didn't look convinced in the slightest. "Dear, have you been eating?"

"Damn mother's intuition," Sorun thought. "Some. Once, twice a day. Quit asking."

Her eyes widened. "S-Sorun-!"

"You wanted to check on me, and I'm fine. Nice seeing you two again, now leave me alone."

That should have been the end of it right there. He'd turned around back into his house and made to close the door behind him. But he'd only managed to close it halfway before a hand reached out and stopped Sorun before he'd managed to close it fully. He sighed, and then looked back. Of course Vanilla was there holding the door open with her hand, and she'd even gone as far as to push her foot in the doorway. She wasn't alone, either: Virgil was hovering in the doorway like he intended to use his entire body to block the door from being closed.

And neither one looked like they were willing to let the matter go.

"What are you-?"

"You are coming to my home for dinner right this instant."

And now Sorun's eyes were widened, only slightly so, as he shot the woman a bewildered look. But Vanilla, for her part, didn't at all look phased by the look. In fact, she looked... awfully serious at the moment, bewildering Sorun even further. And so did Virgil.

"Excuse me...?" He shook his head and refocused on Vanilla's face. "You want me to-"

"Yes. Right now," she demanded. *Demanded* , with that authoritative tone only a mother could have that made Sorun freeze and stiffen his back up. "I won't be taking no for an answer."

"Why?" Sorun bit out. He wanted to refuse. Desperately. But that tone she was using with him kept stopping his attempts. That motherly, authoritative tone. It gave him painful reminders of his own mother. He'd even heard Bernadette use it on her own son whenever she scolded Sonic.

It had to be some strange ability exclusively hidden among mothers. Sorun couldn't think of any other explanation otherwise. And her voice, that way she was looking at him, those eyes, everything about her kept him locked in place. And he felt so nervous he couldn't look away from her.

How the hell did they do that?

"I simply want to treat you to dinner is all. You're a friend of mine and Cream's, as well as Virgil's original owner," Vanilla calmly exclaimed in a firm voice that made Sorun's spine more rigid. "And afterwards we can have a talk. Just you and I."

"Say no," Sorun tried thinking to himself. *"Refuse, close the door, she can't make you do anything you don't want, just say no and-"*

Later

"How the fuck did it come to this?"

Well, here he was. At another home's dinner table, with food laid out before him. Food that he was awkwardly staring down at in an effort to avoid the eyes of everybody else sitting at the table. The rabbit child sitting on the left side of the table from Sorun's point of view, and her mother who was sitting on the other end opposite to him. Both of which were looking at him.

It was all her fault. Vanilla's. Her fault Sorun was sitting in her home practically being forced to have dinner with her family. It'd been in her eyes. That knowing look, the questions about his deteriorating weight. The fact he went and confirmed to her he'd been undereating in that moment of weakness. It wasn't even just that tone of hers that she'd used on Sorun that had frozen him to the spot. It was that hidden threat she'd had behind her eyes, her body language, the implications behind all of it.

Sorun was intensely worried she would go and tell the others what was going on with him. So of course he'd given in and followed her back home. Admittedly he was still worried she'd go and say something to them. He hoped to try and clear it up seeing as she wanted to have a talk with him after dinner. Whatever that entailed.

He didn't know what the hell he was supposed to clear up seeing as she was spot-on with whatever concerns she had over him, though.

How he was supposed to survive the dinner alone was another mystery Sorun couldn't unravel. It seemed like even the food was taunting him. The food he was staring down at to avoid everybody's eyes. A plate of steamed vegetables. Mainly carrots.

"I don't even like carrots."

"Thank you for-"

"Dammit, they're saying words."

"- coming to dinner with us, Mr. Sorun!" Inhaling deeply, Sorun looked up from his food and to the left side of the table. Cream was beaming up at him happily, face full of youthful and blissful innocence that Sorun desired to possess at the moment. Vanilla, over at the end of the table, at least seemed to be in a calm, easy mood. She still kept maintaining a level look with Sorun regardless. He couldn't tell if that warm look she had was just a front she was putting up for her daughter or if she was just that confident in cornering Sorun like this.

"Why do all mothers have to be like this?" Sorun blinked over at Vanilla once and then shifted his gaze to Cream. "Technically I should be the one thanking you," Sorun said to the young rabbit. He'd idly picked up a fork and began mindlessly stabbing at one of the steamed carrots, though he never endeavored to actually eat anything. "It, uh... it was very kind of your mother to invite me. I didn't expect it." He glanced at Vanilla. "Really, really didn't expect it..."

The warm look and level gaze wouldn't disappear off her face. She was doing this on purpose. Had to be.

"Mhm! Mother can be very kind like that!" Sorun found some small amusement in how Cream kept carrying on like she couldn't sense the tension between himself and her mother. Probably couldn't for how young she was. He wished he was as clueless so he didn't have to feel so awkward. "What happened with that trip you said you were going on, Mr. Sorun? I thought you said you weren't coming back once you left?"

"My trip. Right." How the hell was he supposed to go about this? He didn't want to tell her what happened with Earth. He wasn't even sure she knew he was from a whole other zone, if anybody ever told her. "It got cut short, unfortunately," he said. "I wasn't able to go on it after all, so I'm staying here in the city."

"Oh... that's too bad." Cream visibly deflated in her seat. "I hope your family is doing alright."

Sorun darted his eyes away from Cream's. "Yeah, we keep in touch. It's fine."

Vanilla cleared her throat. An attempt at trying to change the subject, Sorun had assumed. He sent her a thankful nod, causing Vanilla to nod back before speaking. "You know, Sorun, you're allowed to eat the food I made for you," the older rabbit pointed out.

He was suddenly a lot less thankful. "I realize this." He glanced down at the carrot he'd been stabbing with the fork, and then stuck it fully to bring it up to his mouth. *"Alright, maybe if I try really hard I won't gag and- wow, what the hell, this is actually good."*

Never did like vegetables. They were too bitter for Sorun, too tasteless. Fruits, sure. Vegetables? He steered clear away from them all the time his whole life. It was the reason he expected to be completely disgusted by a plate full of vegetables, but for some reason these ones actually had flavor. And decent flavor at that.

... He was also apparently hungrier than he thought he was, because after taking that first bite Sorun suddenly felt ten times hungrier.

When he started eating with a newfound fervor, a kind of eagerness that would have resulted in him practically attacking the plate if he didn't exercise an excruciating amount of self control to just appear to be eating quickly, Sorun noticed Vanilla's expression change just the slightest amount when she and her daughter began eating as well. She had just the slightest hint of smug on her face, the self-satisfied kind of smug. And beneath that her eyes relaxed a bit as the hidden worry that Sorun just now noticed in her eyes. A worry he only now noticed was there due to the fact it was absent now.

"This woman really scares me. She's also a great cook," Sorun thought to himself. *"Now I just kinda feel like a jerk for trying to blow*

her off back at my house. She's just worried about me like everyone else."

Didn't surprise him that she'd be so caring despite the fact they barely knew each other. Mobians were just like that. A belief Sorun didn't believe in quite as much with today's events, but with all he'd seen that supported this point of view, it couldn't be denied. He was still concerned about her informing the others, which would lead to all sorts of awkward questions he didn't want to answer, but at this point there wasn't anything he could do but hope he could smooth it out with her.

"I, uh... wanted to thank you. Again. I mean I know I already did, but, uh... thanks, Vanilla. Y-you know, for the dinner," Sorun stammered out. "I don't really have a lot of food back at my home."

Vanilla's face shifted again. He knew the worry was back, but she was hiding it well, to the point Sorun didn't notice it. But he *had* noticed the change in her expression. And she was looking right at his eyes with a leveled gaze again. "And why is that, Sorun?" she asked.

Sorun placed his fork down on the plate. He made a sigh, and then leaned back in his chair. "I'm pretty financially challenged," he admitted to her. "I tried going out to look for a job, but it didn't go really well."

The worry was growing more apparent on Vanilla's face. By now Cream had stopped eating and was looking at him, too. "What went wrong?" Vanilla pressed.

"Well, the problem is that there isn't really a lot of positions open for me. I never even technically finished my high school education, so there aren't many options I have. And this is a pretty small self-sustaining city with a population that doesn't even break a thousand. There just aren't that many jobs period." He glanced away from the two rabbits in embarrassment. "Doesn't help I'm physically the weakest and slowest person in the whole city."

"So what is it you plan on doing?"

Sorun shrugged. "I dunno. Starve to death, I guess." When he looked back at the mother and daughter, Sorun felt himself internally wince when he saw them both giving him alarmed looks. *"Why did I say that out loud?"*

"Ahem!" Vanilla had quickly and loudly cleared her throat, and then rose up out of her seat. "Cream, dear," she began as she looked at her daughter, "I think it's time you went to bed, don't you?"

"Huh?" Cream looked down at her half-finished plate. "But mother-"

"I'll take care of it, dear, don't worry about it. Come along, now." Without further protest, Cream hopped off of her chair and walked towards her mother, who had already left the table. They grasped hands and began to move away towards another end of the house. Right before they left, though, Vanilla had turned hear head around so that her eyes met with Sorun's for a single second before both rabbits disappeared around a corner.

She didn't look too pleased with him.

After they left his sight, Sorun sighed loudly and sat back in his seat. He didn't have the willpower to eat anymore, with that look Vanilla gave him having wiped out his entire appetite. *"One of the most wholesome people you've ever met that invited you to her own home for dinner because she was worried over you... and you manage to piss her off. Nice job, Sorun."*

Some time passed after Vanilla left to go put Cream in bed. During that time Sorun had continually been alternating between states of self-pity and mortification, and it'd taken him whole minutes to finally find it in himself to get up off of the table. Half of him just wanted to leave right there and just go home so he could go to sleep and forget all this. The other half didn't really want to leave things as they were, and he still needed to have that talk with Vanilla.

Because of these conflicting desires, he'd only made it as far as leaning against the end of the wall separating the house's living room from the hallway that lead to, Sorun assumed, Cream's bedroom. He wasn't nearly brave enough to go as far as to approach the bedroom just to run into Vanilla faster. And from here he could see the front door, almost taunting him to just go and leave. He was tempted to bolt right out. In fact he almost did before he heard a soft pair of footsteps begin to approach him from down the hallway he was next to.

He might have accidentally startled Vanilla a bit when she finally reached the hallway corner he was leaning. She'd flinched and stepped back once in surprise when she noticed him leaning there, and then blinked a few times before she began to visible calm down. And then the worry began to show on her face. That and stern. A large amount of stern.

"I had to assure my daughter her friend wasn't going to starve to death," she told him in a dry tone. "She's very worried about you. *I'm* worried about you."

Sorun sighed and looked down away from her eyes. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"I didn't very much appreciate you lying to my daughter, either."

"What was I supposed to say, Vanilla? You actually want me to go and tell your daughter that a whole world of people died because... agh, I don't even know why."

Looking a bit hesitant at her answer, Vanilla shook her head. "No, but... you could have at least just tried to avoid it altogether. What do you think she'll say if she learns what really happened?"

"I'm not good with kids, alright?" Sorun pushed off the wall and turned around, towards a nearby couch. He walked towards it, with Vanilla following him and watching as he turned back around only to

then lean on the arm of the couch with his arms crossed. "How's she doing otherwise?"

"She's doing well," Vanilla answered.

"Adjusting to the city alright? Gotten used to things, both of you?"

"Yes, yes." She folded her hands in front of her, and then looked off to the side, towards the hallway that lead to Cream's room. "She told me she wants to be a Freedom Fighter."

Sorun scoffed when he heard that. A quiet, sad-sounding scoff that caused Vanilla to look back at him. "I was a Freedom Fighter once. I wouldn't recommend it as a career choice. Pay's terrible," he said. When he saw her giving Sorun a disapproving look, the teen shook his head and tried again. "Why does she want to be a Freedom Fighter?" he asked.

Vanilla had to take a second to think of an answer. "Cream has always been a kind soul that thinks of others before herself. It's why Chao are so drawn to her, I suppose. She sees all these other heroes in the city, like the world-famous Sonic, and Amy who keeps visiting since she's good friends with my daughter, and you, and... well, she admires you all very much. Enough that she wants to help people like you all do."

A child wanting to emulate her heroes and be a hero herself. Common enough, Sorun guessed. Fit in with how caring Mobians could be, but the amount of care Cream had was a category all on its own from what he'd seen. Couldn't rightly blame her if that was the case.

"Do you think she should be one?" Vanilla continued in an apprehensive tone.

"Tch. No way," Sorun denied with a shake of his head. "Look, Cream, she's... I mean she's young. Like, *young* young, not... teenage like me. Developed. Mature," he said. *"Still innocent. Too weak,"* another

voice in his head hissed out in warning. "Besides," he added, "this whole Freedom Fighter thing is almost done with anyways. Robotnik's still hanging on for dear life, but that problem's almost taken care of and once it is they won't have a reason to keep being Freedom Fighters anymore. It's too late."

Vanilla had a mixed reaction. She looked mostly relieved, but a bit saddened at the same time. Glad her daughter didn't have to go risk her life but sad she couldn't get her dream fulfilled was Sorun's best guess. Probably a natural reaction for a mother, but he wouldn't know. "Well, that's... a logical way of looking at it. Admittedly I never did approve of the idea of my daughter throwing herself in the face of danger."

"You'd probably be a terrible mother if you did," Sorun said. "And no offense to your daughter, but, well... I know she's got a flight ability, but that's about it. That just doesn't cut it when it comes to those robots Robotnik keeps throwing at people. And nowadays I hear it's actual people instead of robots, and that's a whole host of other issues I don't wanna get into." He looked to the side, away from Vanilla. "It ain't a good idea. 'S all I'm saying."

Still worried him even speaking about it, the fact the Freedom Fighters were fighting actual people now instead of just robots. Those cyborg echidna. Real people had cunning the half-baked AI in those robots didn't. Planning. Cruelty. Considering the lengths they would go on their own bodies he didn't want to imagine how far that kind of cruelty stretched, and his imagination went *quite* a bit far from all the media he'd consumed on Earth. The only saving grace was that a large majority of Freedom Fighters had powers, and all of them had experience and the others backing them. Sorun had to believe that was enough to keep them safe. They made it this far, after all.

"Is that why you left?" Vanilla asked, drawing Sorun's attention back to her. "I understand you lost the abilities you used to have." She glanced at his right arm. "Though I'm glad you recovered from your

injuries so you don't have to use them to compensate for, well... lost parts."

"..." Sorun rose his right hand up to his face. "Partly," he admitted. "Mobian children are stronger than me, after all." He re-crossed his arms. "That," he continued, "and because it was stressing me out too much. I don't know, Vanilla. I don't know how the others do it. Risking life and limb day in and day out, all the close calls, the brushes with death, it-it just washes off all the others. I don't know if it's because they're just used to it because they've been doing it since they were five or because a Mobian's mental constitution is just way higher than a human's or if I'm just that weak-willed, but I'm-I'm not like them, you know? It just keeps sticking with me. All of it. But them, they, they just... they're able to stay normal. Like they can keep doing this forever." He sighed and shook his head. "Well, I can't. Five months of Freedom Fighting was way too much for me. My limit was, like, two days. Christ, Vanilla, I'm only sixteen but I feel like I'm fifty."

He didn't even know if the concepts he was talking about was something all his friends in the Freedom Fighters could even *understand* . How could they when none of them ever acted like him? When they all acted like all these things that kept giving him nightmares was just an ordinary Tuesday for them. He was envious of them for that. That they all had such strong wills that all this stress Sorun had accumulated was probably incomprehensible to them since they always acted like they could never fall as low as Sorun had. He didn't think they could if they tried. For him it was the exact opposite.

Always had to be different from them in everything. His will, his species, his strength, all of it. Everything in this world was backwards to Sorun.

"And how are you feeling now, Sorun?" Vanilla's voice brought Sorun's attention back to the outside world, making him focus back on the rabbit's concerned face. "Now that you're not fighting anymore?"

"... Dealing with it," he answered.

"And... your home?"

"Dealing with it less successfully." He sighed and uncomfortably shuffled a bit under Vanilla's gaze. "Where's the kid's dad?" he suddenly asked in an attempt to change the subject.

It seemed to work, as Vanilla's demeanor shifted entirely. She looked surprised that he'd ask such a thing, though her face fell into another expression that caused some surprise on Sorun's part. It almost looked like contempt. "I try not to speak of him too much, for Cream's sake. She doesn't even know he exists, and I try to keep it that way just so she won't miss something that will never return."

The air between the two began to grow uncomfortable, causing Sorun to nervously tap his foot on the ground a few times. "So he's dead?" Sorun hedged out. He was surprised to see Vanilla shake her head.

"No. Maybe. Perhaps. I don't know," she said. "To put it simply, he... wanted me, but didn't want a child. So when I told him we were having one, and he protested, I gave him a choice. Either stay with his family or don't." Her hands, still folded in front of her, began grabbing at her long skirt, hard enough that Sorun could hear Vanilla twisting the fabric. Her shoulders were even shaking slightly. Whether in anger or sadness he didn't know. Maybe both. "I don't know what became of him. Perhaps he found a life somewhere else, or maybe he was captured by Dr. Robotnik's machines and was roboticized. Maybe he turned back along with everyone else, or maybe he perished in some mine somewhere. I don't know. And as harsh as this sounds, I don't find myself particularly caring seeing as he abandoned me and his daughter."

So that's what it was. Sorun understood immediately. "A father who didn't want their own child, huh?" Sorun looked to the side at a nearby window to look out into the dark night outside. "I know a lot about what that feels like."

He felt Vanilla's mood shift again, and from the corner of his vision he saw her looking at him with sympathy. "Ah. So, your father... left as well?"

"... In a manner of speaking." He looked back at Vanilla. "It's not a thing for Mobian ears to hear, so I won't speak of it."

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean, Sorun."

"Better you don't." It was the same reason he kept censoring himself in front of everybody he even remotely cared about. He'd seen enough to learn that Mobians in general were innocent in a lot of areas. He didn't want to tarnish that innocence in any way, even inadvertently.

Then again, what his father did wasn't nearly as terrible as his whole world dying. He'd keep quiet on it regardless.

"Listen, Vanilla... you're not going to tell the others, are you?" Sorun asked her. "That I'm... probably not doing as well as I say I am?"

The one topic he'd been dreading and stalling for as long as he could. He felt terrified just waiting for Vanilla's response to the question, and it didn't help his stress at all when she kept looking at him. A deep-in-thought look, like she was trying to make her mind up on something. He was so afraid she would go and tell them everything, and he didn't know how to deal with that. He didn't have any plans for that kind of contingency. He didn't know what to do at all.

Finally, Vanilla sighed out and began walking away. "Wait here," she'd all but demanded. Sorun did so, too scared to even budge from his spot for fear of whatever was about to happen. He didn't know what Vanilla was doing other than the fact he heard some rustling in the nearby kitchen. A few minutes later Vanilla had returned carrying something in her hands.

It was a basket full of food.

Sorun knew immediately what she was trying to do, and nearly recoiled away from the basket she was holding as a result. He didn't want it. He didn't want people pitying him, or people making sacrifices to give him handouts. He hated the very sight of that basket. He wasn't taking it.

"I won't accept that," Sorun grumbled out as he turned his head away from Vanilla.

"You *will* ," Vanilla said with emphasis by forcing the basket into Sorun's hands, "or I'm marching right over to the nearest Freedom Fighter I know to tell them you're starving yourself."

Sorun blinked, and then looked down at the basket in his hands. He glared at it in confusion, and then looked up at Vanilla with even greater confusion. "This is the most backwards blackmail I've ever been subjected too," he informed her. "Why are you doing this?"

Vanilla's shoulders relaxed with a sigh as her eyes grew a bit more calm. "Sorun, I know a thing or two about loss and how painful it can be. But I can also understand wanting to hide it from those you care for. More than you probably think," she explained to him. "With how things are going for you right now, I really don't think you can keep carrying on like this. But I want to give you this so you have a chance of finding some way. And I think we both know that if you don't find one by the time you run out of food the others will find out. They care about you too much not to, and you know it."

That he did. And he was surprised Vanilla was reading him so easily like an open book. Maybe she really did understand a bit of what he was feeling if this was her reasoning. "You're trying to buy me time to find a way to get myself together so I won't worry the others?" he asked as he looked down at the basket. "Why?"

"It's less buying time and more helping you on your way. Whether you manage to do so or you finally swallow your pride and accept help from your friends, or they find out on their own and help you regardless of what you do, you'll be fine in the end, which is what

matters the most. But I can sympathize with what you're trying to do. So I just want to help a bit. That's all." She looked over her shoulder. "But, just in case, I think you should take him back."

When Sorun looked back up at Vanilla, wondering what she was talking about, he felt his eyes widen a bit when he saw a small, blue and black creature with silver, metallic horns peaking over the tall rabbit's shoulder. Virgil floated up and away from Vanilla, only to then float towards a dumbstruck Sorun and land on his shoulder in a sitting position.

"Chao," came Virgil's unenthused greeting mixed with a bored expression on the Chao's face.

"..." Sorun looked from the Chao back to Vanilla. "Won't Cream be upset?" he asked.

Vanilla shook her head. "She actually wanted to give him back to you," she said, surprising Sorun further. "She knew how close you were and said she didn't want to keep you two apart anymore. And I'm confident little Virgil here will be keeping an eye on you to make sure matters regarding your health don't become too far out of hand. Isn't that right, Virgil?"

"Chao." Virgil made a nod.

Ah, so that was the play. She was counting on Virgil snitching to the Freedom Fighters if Sorun somehow managed to keep his deteriorating state from them. Which he doubted he could in the first place. But if Virgil was going to be staying with him now it'd be nigh impossible. Which meant he really did have to solve this food problem before the others found out. It was certain now. Except he had no confidence he'd be able to find some way of supporting himself before that inevitability arose.

Well, time to wait and do nothing and hope the best would happen, Sorun supposed. At least he got his pet back. He'd missed Virgil.

"You're a caring woman in a devious sort of way," Sorun told the Mobian woman. "Thanks, I guess. For giving me a shot." He looked back down at the basket. "Even though it ain't gonna be enough."

Vanilla made an accepting sigh. "Sorun, you know it would be easier for everybody if you just asked for help right now instead of making the others worry even more once they find out you're starving."

"Maybe. Don't wanna burden them," Sorun murmured. "I already feel like a leech taking just this from you."

"That isn't how they would see it. But I understand your thinking. I wouldn't be doing this otherwise." The rabbit stepped forwards a bit and placed a comforting hand on Sorun's shoulder. "Whatever happens, it'll work out for you in the end. I'm sure of it. Call it a mother's intuition."

Sorun released a dry chuckle. "We're onto that now?"

"Apparently so." Vanilla offered him a small half-smile. "I wish you luck and hope things get better for you sooner rather than later, Sorun. I really do. Now, I'm off to bed for the night. I highly suggest you and Virgil head home so you can do the same."

Giving him a final nod, Vanilla separated her hand from his shoulder and slowly took off back in the hallway she'd come out of previously. Sorun watched her leave, and then lifted up the basket to his eyes to scrutinize it. Enough to maybe last him another week in addition to the food he already had at home. He doubted it'd be enough to tide him over until he found a solution. There *was* no solution other than asking for help. Maybe this was Vanilla's way of secretly telling him that.

Well, he wasn't biting. He was eking this out for as long as possible if it meant even the slimmest chance of not alerting the others to how bad he was doing. Even if it was in vain.

... Who was he kidding? It was most definitely in vain. He didn't have a chance of hiding it from his friends. Nicole especially. Wouldn't stop him from trying.

"Tch." He looked to the side at his shoulder, where he saw Virgil looking at him from the side of his eyes. "Alright, warden, come on. Let's go home."

A/N- Everybody deadass just left Sorun to live alone thinking he'd be fine. It's extra screwed up when you realize Sorun's never lived alone before and doesn't know how to independently function in a society. Which is even worse because this particular society isn't built to accommodate him.

On another note, I have no idea what the in-universe economy is like in canon. The comics never really touch on it other then that there's an official currency, which is mobiums, and my best guess is that those equate to around the same value as US dollars since it's an American-published comic. Or at the very least because the kingdom/republic is located in the post-apocalyptic remnants of where America used to be. But again, they never really go into detail on it, so I'm flying blind in that regard and making it up as I go. The economy system, that is. Not the story itself. That's all planned out.

Chapter 64

A/N- I feel I should clarify that Sorun isn't outright racist against the echidna. At the same time he really, really doesn't like them. From his perspective some of the worst things that have happened to him were in the form of omnipotent sky echidna messing with his life, and a malicious god-echidna, and the crazy cyborg echidna he has to worry about now, as well as him just hearing how bad off their species is. It's to a point where Sorun just thinking the word "echidna" automatically makes him mentally associate their species with bad emotions because of his limited experience with them. It's less racism and more like a really strong, negative unconscious bias towards them.

So I guess in a way it kinda is racism. He'll make exceptions for ones he actually likes like Knuckles and Tikal, and it's not as bad to the point that he'd go out of his way to attack or even antagonize random echidna if he saw any, but otherwise he'd rather just not think about and avoid echidna.

Another thing I wanna talk about, which I was asked on by a few people, is time dilation between zones. So we all know Sonic got blasted hundreds of billions of lightyears away or whatever the insane distance was that one time, and time on Mobius passed by a year while it took him a few weeks to get back because of the wonky relationship light and time has with each other. That's due to distance in the same zone. At the same time there's multiple points in the comic where characters go to whole other zones, and the time that goes for them is completely linear with how long they're gone from their home zone. So, say, going from Mobius to Moebius didn't mean a few seconds on Moebius was a few minutes on Mobius or what have you. It's a second-to-second ratio. It was a linear progression of time. So we can extrapolate from this that the

same amount of time Sorun spent on Mobius passed on Earth regardless of distances between zones.

Recursion Error

Episode 64- Sorun steals Tails' plane

Virgil wasn't a normal Chao. Indeed, he was fairly certain there wasn't a single Chao in all of Mobius quite like him. No, he knew for certain he was alone in what he was. He was... different. Unique. And he liked that aspect about himself. With that uniqueness came strength, the kind of strength he'd never imagined himself having when he was in his previous state. That state that failed to set him apart from every other unevolved Chao in the world. That weak state.

All because of his owner that was different from every other thing in this world. Much like him.

Inherently Chao were able to form bonds and connections with those that took them in due to their links with the Chaos Force. It was these links that allowed them to form bonds with others, should a Chao decide to follow them and that person chooses to care for them. It was the strength of that bond and the relationship between the Chao and their owners, as well as the owner's personality, their inclination towards positive or negative emotions, that dictated a Chao's evolution *if* the Chao was capable and the bond was strong enough.

Sorun was curious in Virgil's eyes because he didn't have a Chaos Force link, which shouldn't have been possible. Everything in the world did. But he didn't. And yet he'd also had Chaos Force powers, which, he'd later heard from listening to others, was a result of him absorbing Chaos Emeralds. A trait of his species, apparently, which was unique in that they were void of a link. Well, Sorun had saved his life and fed him apples, and at the time his Chao Garden and

colony was entirely gone. So of course he'd latched onto the human and allowed him to be his owner. He'd even given him a name. From "someone cool" he'd been told.

That kind of relationship necessitated a bond, which had been difficult, because Sorun didn't have a link. He did have a soul, though, curiously enough. A strange, tiny, weak little thing that was little more than a spark of life piloting an organic body as opposed to the spirits every other living being on Mobius possessed. So small it was practically nonexistent. But it was there. And it was good enough for Virgil.

Time passed, and their bond grew, and through that bond Virgil was able to get a better reading of Sorun through that thing he called a soul. He'd learned about Sorun's inclination towards positivity or negativity: it was a confusing mess. He'd gravitate back and forth between being extremely aligned with dark emotions and being extremely aligned with light emotions. Rapidly. Every second of the day. He'd oscillate all over the spectrum, sometimes leaning to one side or the other in an extreme, other times being various mixes of the two. It was wholly different from how natives of Mobius acted. Alignments were never supposed to move all that much except for special circumstances. The Mobians Sorun was always around, for example, were all extremely aligned towards lighthearted emotions and feelings. Virgil felt it just by being near them. That funny little Overlander man Sorun liked punching was aligned with dark desires and emotions as another example. But Sorun was different in that he kept flowing back and forth, over and over, like his very being couldn't make up its mind on what it wanted to be. Or, perhaps more accurately, it *desired* to be both. Another complexity to his owner. Nothing on Mobius was supposed to do that.

When their bond was at its strongest, and thus prompted Virgil to undergo his evolution into what he was now, he'd been able to peer into Sorun's soul, or at least as much as it allowed him. Normally not something possible, but due to having to have bonded with a soul instead of a Chaos Force link, such things had become an

unintended side effect. Much of a Chao's evolution depended on the preferences and alignment of who they were bonded with, but since Sorun's alignment was all over the place in its constant flux, he'd decided to peer at the surface of Sorun's soul and, as Sorun would put it, "wing it".

He was compelled in knowing more about who he was named after. The person Sorun looked up to that Virgil was named after. Vergil. The cool guy.

To that end, Virgil learned much through his bond with Sorun's soul. He'd seen the man and felt that Sorun held a great, *great* amount of respect and admiration for him, his ability, his power. And also that... he was a fictional character, apparently, but it was a moot point for Virgil as far as he was concerned. He'd seen a man different than Sorun, with white, slicked-back hair and a blue coat, carrying the same sword Sorun had used to carry. And then there would be flashes of blue lightning and a wave of blue energy particles, and when the light died down, it would be something completely different standing there. Where there had been a human was a different creature entirely. Coat tails had turned to folded wings, pale skin to blue and black scales, hardened hide and carapace, finger nails to sharpened claws, and the sword itself had fused completely with the creature's left arm.

But the most striking thing to Virgil had been the horns atop its head. Those shining, silver, cylindrical horns. Almost regal-looking in their design.

This was who Sorun had named him after. This being that radiated so much power just from memories inside of his owner's soul. So that was what he'd evolved into. Or some approximation of it, at the very least.

Sorun had approved when he saw his transformation, and Virgil himself had approved when he felt the power his evolution had granted him. That and the flood of memory and knowledge Virgil had gained when his connection to Sorun facilitated his evolution.

Another side effect of the soul-bond. His personality had completely shifted that day. For the better, as far as Virgil was concerned. He was more alert like this. More attentive. More... relaxed. Powerful. But relaxed. Calm. He could actually think clearly with his newfound intelligence.

And power. So much power he could hardly believe it. Enough that Sorun no longer had to call him too weak to fight and could bring him along on the fights he went on. He even did, once, when Virgil had prodded enough. It'd been a good day.

And with that evolution came a strengthened bond, and Virgil realized just how much his owner was suffering. He'd often be in a haze of negative emotions. Some days had been easier than others, some worse, to the point Virgil had always intensely worried for him, for Sorun, for the person that saved his life and gifted him this form. But Sorun would always act fine around him and the other Mobians, which greatly confused Virgil. He couldn't understand why Sorun would hide how he felt until he'd told him directly he simply didn't want to concern them.

Personally Virgil hadn't agreed with the logic, but Sorun was his owner, so he hadn't complained and just went along with it, acting like all was normal alongside Sorun.

He'd felt he'd made a mistake when he felt the bond between him and Sorun sever when the human died. It'd been a shock to the Chao, feeling that bond intertwined with his own soul suddenly vanish like that. Virgil had known the implications immediately and had mourned in his own silent way. Some part of him knew that Sorun knew he was dying, which was probably why he'd left him to the rabbit Mobian and her Chao.

She was alright. Nice. Bit too nice for Virgil's taste, too caring and touchy-feely, but there were worse owners.

Cheese was a punk.

Sorun had come back, though, which Virgil had felt when the bond suddenly reappeared. And for the first time since Virgil met Sorun he felt... happy. Normal. How he should feel, and his alignment was more steady and slowly but surely drifting towards the light. He was sad to hear his owner, his *true* owner that saw Virgil as an equal and not a pet, was leaving once more, but as long as it meant Sorun's soul continued to remain at the peace it was in now, he'd understand. At least it meant he got to stay with the nice rabbit girl and continue to prove his superiority to that unevolved Chao weakling with the stupid bowtie.

He hated that bowtie. Virgil didn't know why. He suspected it was that color. Red. He didn't like red.

But then Sorun's home turned out to be lost, and his alignment was once more in flux, now more wild than ever. Beyond that he was feelings emotional depths Virgil himself didn't even know was possible. Levels of despair and hopelessness that, frankly, made the Chao uncomfortable. But he'd endure it, for his owner's sake. Because he knew he was only feeling a fraction of what Sorun was feeling, and he had to wonder how he could keep living feeling like that all the time.

This was probably why the matriarch of the rabbit child had talked with Virgil and pleaded with him to keep an eye on Sorun, as apparently his owner was starving himself and was unmotivated to support himself. His friends would find out eventually, and failing that, Virgil himself would just tell them. Or failing that bring them back to the house to show them his sorry state. But they'd wanted to give Sorun a chance in the hope that he'd be able to pull himself together to avoid worrying his friends, for Sorun's sake. Virgil felt it was the least Sorun was owed. A chance to pick himself up.

Well, he didn't. Days after that dinner and Virgil's relocation to his true owner lead to this. Sorun passed out on the couch. Empty bottles of that Chao-Cola soda he had a pension for strewn about on the floor, as he'd given up on acquiring food and spent the little

money he had left on the sodas. He was completely out of food. And the nice disappearing lady Sorun really liked was nowhere in sight.

Floating right next to the sleeping human, Virgil sighed. Well, he'd given him a chance. It was time to fetch the others so they could get Sorun to his senses. Just because his owner was fine with starving didn't mean he was, and he wanted his apples.

Virgil liked the things Sorun likes and disliked things Sorun dislikes. A consequence of the bond they shared and Virgil being able to sense Sorun's emotions along with him having similar tastes to Sorun.

The disappearing computer lady, for example. Sometimes to Virgil it felt like Sorun was a completely different person when he was near her. The negative emotions would fade, and positives would swell, and his alignment would temporarily stabilize and hover towards the lighter side. And he felt... strange, too. Strange in a good way Virgil couldn't describe, or even understand. But it was a nice feeling that only ever came with the nice disappearing lady. And Sorun liked her very, very deeply. So Virgil liked her. Enough that she was the only one aside from Sorun allowed to pick him up and handle him.

The blue hedgehog, whose home Virgil was floating to now. He didn't like him. Sorun didn't, either. Interactions with him had often left Sorun with feelings of envy. Jealously. Loathing. Scorn. And alongside that was a driving need Sorun had that screamed at him, demanded him, to be better than the very fast hedgehog. Feelings he could never satiate because he'd never accomplished such a thing. These feelings had faded over time, of course, muted nowadays as Sorun was more friendly with the hedgehog and liked him. But those feelings remained under the surface.

Virgil... tolerated him, since Sorun liked him now.

"Alright, guys, I'm off- AH!" The door to the house opened just as Sonic opened it. He'd only taken a step out before he saw Virgil and

then leapt back in fright, his arms held defensively in front of him. "Oh, uh... Virgy. Hey there."

"Chao..." The hedgehog was fortunate Virgil wasn't strong enough to wound him.

"I heard you were livin' back with Sorun? Good for him, he, uh... kinda needs the company right now, I think," Sonic said. "Hoo, man, I'm still really worried about him. Glad you're here, though. Sheesh, if I'da known a pet was all it'd take to mellow him out I would have got him a Chao his first week here. You really did help calming him down those days, y'know?"

Virgil was aware. He wasn't here to reminisce. He needed Sonic's help. "Chao. Chao-chao."

"Huh? Hey, no." He had the audacity to try and swat Virgil away when he floated near. "I ain't got time to play, Virgil."

"Chao- *chao* ." As loath as he was to admit it, Virgil needed the hedgehog. Unfortunately he didn't seem to understand the severity of the situation.

Curse his inability to form the words they used to communicate.

"Virgil, seriously, let go!" Sonic cried out as Virgil began pulling on his ears. He tried reaching up to grab at the Chao, to no avail. "I'm warnin' ya!"

"Chao!"

"Alright, you asked for it!"

The hedgehog was fast. Too fast for Virgil to hold onto. And after he'd transitioned to a speed that forced Virgil to let go, he disappeared from his sight.

Well, good riddance. He had other friends of Sorun's he could try. Friends Virgil could certainly tolerate much better than the hedgehog. Like the chipmunk. Or that coyote with the stupid hair that talked funny. And as it happened Virgil encountered that coyote while wandering around looking for Sorun's friends.

"Non, non, release me at once, you fiend!"

He wasn't very cooperative, though. Not for a lack of Virgil trying. Words didn't work because he didn't possess words. Gestures didn't work because the coyote, and Sonic apparently, confused it for him vying for attention, as if *he* needed such a thing. So action was the only solution Virgil sought.

Except pulling on the coyote's hair wasn't working, either.

"Alright, now. Calm down little feller." Cold, metal fingers grasped around Virgil's torso and lifted him off the Mobian's head. He turned his head to see a metal arm attached to the rabbit - the one that spoke weird - extending her arm out towards him. "Yer gonna pull his hair out if ya keep doin' that, Virgil."

Good. He should be thankful to Virgil for removing it. That thing was atrocious. It had to be if Sorun didn't like it.

"Now, if ah let ya go, ya promise not to attack mah husband again?"

She'd retracted her mechanical arm back to its normal length midway through her sentence. Virgil, of course, nodded at her. She sent him a cautious look as a result, but still believed him and opened her hand to free the Chao.

And then he flew up and began tugging at her ears.

"Gosh darnit, Virgil!"

"Chao! Chao!"

He'd been pulled away by her hand again. Roughly. Green eyes bore into his own blue, and the rabbit didn't look too pleased with the Chao's actions. He didn't care. He *did* care that she didn't seem too cooperative despite his best efforts. He couldn't understand why they didn't see how urgent he was.

"Jus'... go home, wouldja?" The rabbit asked as she released Virgil, though she seemed much more guarded now in case Virgil tried attacking her again. "We got important things tah be doin' today. We ain't got time fer your tomfoolery."

"Oui, and tell Sorun to be keeping a better eye on you," the coyote added, still rubbing at the top of his head Virgil had been pulling at.

"Chao!" Sorun was the whole reason he was here in the first place!

"Do not be taking zat tone with moi! Eet was my zinking zat Sorun taught you bettair manners zan zis."

Virgil rushed the coyote and began pulling his hair again.

"Bunnie, help! Help!"

"That tears it!" Once again Virgil felt metal fingers grasp around him. The rabbit looked much more upset now. "One more little outburst like that and we're headin' straight to Sorun. Now leave us alone."

Maybe he should keep attacking them. Them going to Sorun was what he wanted. He didn't care what happened afterwards, and Sorun would understand. Probably.

Well, he wouldn't, but it was still for his own good.

Except Virgil never got that chance. Because the rabbit had extended her arm far away from the couple's home, a whole ten meters, and deposited Virgil right in the air. Any thoughts of returning

to gain their ire and lure them to Sorun's home was stunted when he caught the glare the half-robot rabbit was sending him.

Perhaps he'd have an easier time trying somewhere else. Sorun had other friends. Friends that weren't as fast and couldn't handle Virgil with a robot arm. He would have sliced that arm to pieces if he didn't know that Sorun wouldn't have been so forgiving to that kind of retaliation. But there were other friends he had a better chance with.

Where was the annoying pink one?

Pink one hadn't worked. All Virgil got for his efforts, in which he'd been slicing cuts into her dress, was the pink hedgehog screeching and swinging her hammer at him. He'd gotten her attention, yes. But she wouldn't follow him. She'd just kept trying to hit him with the hammer whenever he got close. A no-go.

The chipmunk Sorun liked wasn't an option. Virgil didn't want to gain her ire, both out of respect for her and fear. She was... built different from the others, he felt. More commanding, authoritative. And the wisdom gained from the bond Virgil had with Sorun told him not to mess with that. Besides. She was kind and nice, and Sorun had a lot of respect for her. Virgil let her touch him on occasion as a result. Not hold. But touch was okay.

He was aware that the fat, purple walrus had a back injury. Virgil didn't find use in attacking a defenseless, weakened Mobian. And Sorun wouldn't think attacking the crippled was cool.

The yellow fox? Certainly an option. Sorun's feelings with the two-tailed Mobian were mixed. Sorun had dark feelings around him the same he had with Sonic, though the feelings he had towards the fox were more malicious. Subdued and dulled these days, hidden by happy emotions associated with the friendship the fox shared with Sorun. The same case with the negative emotions he felt towards Sonic, and like those emotions, that animosity Sorun had for the fox remained in Virgil's owner. Muted, but still there. So he didn't like him

very much. So he seemed perfect to annoy and lure to Sorun's home so he could finally find some help for his owner.

Too bad he couldn't find him.

The rabbits that had cared for him? He didn't want the mother to know Virgil was failing in his task of looking after Sorun. In front of *their* Chao. That unevolved one, Cheese. That was a weakness he refused to show in front of him. He had to remain superior to his fellow Chao at all times he felt. To prove he was better. And he and his owner, the rabbit girl, were inseparable. Any news he gave the mother would certainly reach the child, and thus, the Chao.

No. He couldn't go to them.

What to do? Nobody would follow him back to Sorun. The computer lady, Nicole, would eventually learn of Sorun's state when she visited again, so Virgil wasn't wholly worried. It was a matter that would resolve itself if he didn't. At the same time he wanted this solved sooner rather than later, for worry of Sorun. Who was probably still passed out on that couch.

If only that black and red hedgehog was still around. Shadow. They were similar in a lot of ways, him and Sorun. Virgil felt it, saw it. He would have understood Sorun's plight, and probably would have followed Virgil without him even having to lift a hand to gain his attention. But he'd left for somewhere. The only other person Virgil was aware of who had a ever-shifting alignment. Not nearly as wild, varied, or extreme as Sorun's. But still shifting nonetheless. The two understood each other, even if they didn't know it. They were both oddities.

During Virgil's silent contemplations, where he'd been aimlessly floating down the street, he'd seen a pair of people walking down the street. A yellow-furred pair of Mobians, a male and a female. He didn't know the male, but the female one with the purple hair spilling over her shoulders was recognized by him. She was... that one singer Sorun and Nicole took Virgil out to see that one time. They'd

never got to hear her sing, though, because of the incident caused by that fat Overlander Virgil felt that Sorun *hated* . Virgil had been disappointed the concert had been cancelled, and Virgil felt that Sorun had been disappointed as well that they'd missed out on her music. And then Virgil had felt Sorun became doubly disappointed when he realized Nicole hadn't been able to hear her sing, either. Triply so, even.

Well... Sorun was on friendly terms with the singer. They weren't friends by any margin, at least from Sorun's perspective, but they were still friendly. Virgil knew that much. On the other hand, she was hardly somebody Virgil thought appropriate to show Sorun to. And yet... his options were limited. There was nobody better the Chao could think of.

Far from perfect, but it would have to do.

"How long are you going to fiddle around with that thing, Ash?" he heard the female yellow Mobian ask as Virgil floated towards them. The male yellow one had and object in his hands. A cube made of smaller, colored cubes, Virgil observed. One constructed in a way that sides of the cube could be turned and shifted around. The male seem intensely focused on it.

"I'm gonna figure it out," the male mumbled, "just gimme a sec."

The female shook her head. "I don't understand why you bought that. You've been at it for hours- oh!"

Both she and the male had stopped when they saw Virgil floating directly in their path. He regarded the surprised Mobians with a neutral face, his mind wondering what he was to do to gain their attention. Hair pulling and cutting hadn't been working out so well so far, and he couldn't afford to mess this one up like the others. He needed to bring them back to Sorun.

"Um... what's that?" the yellow male asked.

"That's... oh, I know you!" the purple-haired Mobian exclaimed. "That's Sorun's pet Chao! I forget his name, though," she said. "I think it started with a V, but... hm, I'm not too sure..."

While they were conversing among themselves, Virgil looked down at the odd cube in the male's hands. He seemed attached to it, somewhat at least.

... An idea formed.

"- Orun? Err... Sorun? Sorun...?"

With a groggy groan, Sorun opened his eyes. He'd been having a relatively peaceful sleep for once until he heard someone call his voice out while also poking him awake. No dreams, but no nightmares, either. Which as far as he was concerned was the best sleep he got in a long while until somebody chose to wake him up.

His ceiling greeted him. His living room ceiling, and not his bedroom ceiling. Why was- right, the couch. He'd fallen asleep on it while lamenting he'd drank the last of his soda and ran out of food finally, and that he had no way of fixing it. He assumed it was Nicole waking him up, finally realizing something was wrong, and Sorun was left wondering how he was gonna survive facing the music.

... Sorun didn't recall Nicole having yellow fur and purple hair.

"What the- wha- Mina?" He just barely managed to recognize her, but he remembered her as being a Mobian he was vaguely acquainted with. The singer. He remembered her having been rather pleasant, sent him a card once if he recalled, but they never spoke that much outside of that and the whole concert fiasco. He didn't know why she was standing next to his couch right now. Or even how she knew he lived here. Or why she was intruding in his home for that matter and waking him up. "What are you- huh?"

As he sat up in a sitting position on the couch, he recognized another Mobian standing to the side of the couch and looking at Sorun. Another yellow mongoose like Mina, but male and black-haired. What drew Sorun's attention though was that this Mobian was *dressed* . Jacket, jeans and all. The most dressed Sorun had even seen a Mobian. He even had a pair of dopey, red hippie shades.

"Wow, that's... you have pants," Sorun commented, making both mongooses give him odd looks. "You're the only Mobian I've ever seen wear jeans. I didn't even know jeans existed here. Who are you?"

"Um, this is Ash. He's my manager. And boyfriend," Mina introduced, her voice going a bit shy at the last part. Ash, in response, waved at Sorun in uncertainty.

"... Hey." Sorun nodded at Ash and turned back to Mina. "What are you two doing in my house?"

He felt he should have been slightly more alarmed at the two intruders inside his home, but at the moment Sorun couldn't really find it in himself to care all that much. Besides, he knew Mina... meh, reasonably well. And the boyfriend guy seemed alright. Had to be if he had pants on. He'd still like to know *why* a person he barely ever interacted with and her boyfriend broke into his home, though.

"Really should start locking that door..."

"Well, it's your pet Chao," Mina informed him, making Sorun tilt his head questioningly at her. "He stole something of Ash's and flew all the way here. We chased him here, and after we saw you sleeping here we got worried." She looked up a bit, over Sorun's shoulder. He followed her gaze and saw Virgil floating right behind him with an object clutched in his arms. "I'm surprised he was even able to outrun me."

"Eh, Virgil's special," Sorun said, though he kept his eyes on the Chao with a small frown on his face. Virgil met his glare with a scowl, causing both of them to scoff. *"Bastard finally tried ratting me out,"* he thought as he looked at the object in- wait. "Is... is that a Rubik's Cube?" he asked, seeing the colorful, mismatched puzzle cube held in the Chao's hands. "You guys have Rubik's Cubes here?" Sorun asked as he turned back to Mina.

"Um... it's just a puzzle cube Ash bought from the market," Mina explained as Sorun took the cube from his pet Chao.

"Yeah," Ash continued, "you're supposed to turn all the sides 'til the colors on the sides are all the same. Pretty sure it's impossible. I bought it with all the colors mixed up and I haven't been able to figure it out."

"Mmh." Sorun's fingers began to rapidly spin the sides of the cube around. While he did this, he looked back up at Mina. "I'm sorry about Virgil's behavior, Mina. He's usually more well-behaved than that."

"It's fine, Sorun. No harm done." The female mongoose began to glance around the house they were in as Sorun continued turning the cube's sides. A concerned expression began to slowly etch over her features. "So... this is your house, Sorun?" She looked back at him. "It's... a bit dreary..."

"Haven't bothered decorating."

"I see..." She glanced towards the kitchen. Empty glass soda bottles and other pieces of trash littered the floor. "Um, Sorun?" Mina asked. "Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Solved it." Sorun announced, reaching over to place the puzzle cube in Ash's hands. All the sides were solved, the sight stunning both Mina and Ash, with the latter proceeding to turn the cube's sides and mix the colors up again.

Mina got over her own surprise at seeing the puzzle solved as quickly as Ash had, and then focused back on Sorun. "Are you sure you're alright?" she asked the human. "I heard through Sonic what happened with your home zone. It sounds awful, what happened..."

"Yeah. Hey, can you do that again?" Ash asked, offering Sorun back the puzzle cube with the sides all mixed up again.

"Ash!" Mina shouted, admonishing the other mongoose's behavior and causing him to flinch back as Sorun took the cube.

"Ash is fine," Sorun assured Mina as he began turning the cube's sides again, causing her to calm down. "I wouldn't say I'm... I... I don't really know, Mina," he admitted to her. "It just really blindsided me. How was I supposed to know I was coming back to *that* ? There weren't any warning signs of something like that happening before I left. None. And I don't- oh, here." With the cube once again solved, Sorun deposited it back into Ash's hands. The male mongoose's shock only lasted a few seconds before he furiously began mixing the colors up again.

"I just... I kind of want to go back," Sorun continued after handing the cube off. "I really find it hard to believe somebody finally went far enough to fire off the nuclear missiles. In fact, I don't believe it. I want to go back and figure out what really happened. Try and piece together if it was some giant accident or mistake, or if it really was a meteor or something, *anything* . Anything other than that." Sorun sighed. "But the only way for me to go back is using all the Emeralds, and I can only go to that one specific spot. And the others would never let me go back since the radiation levels there are deadly and they wouldn't have a reliable way of organizing me a way back here. They won't even collect the Emeralds for me again."

Skeptical. He was so skeptical humanity on Earth killed itself with nuclear war, because Sorun just couldn't believe anything would cause things to come to that. It wasn't impossible; he wasn't that naïve. He did recognize it was *a* possibility. At the same time he had a hard time believing it would happen with things having been so

well at the time he left. And it was bugging him to no end that he knew so little of what happened. If only there was some way he could pop over there for a bit and then come back...

Sorun was dragged from his thoughts when the Rubik's Cube was practically shoved into his face again by Ash, once again scrambled. He didn't know why he kept making him solve it, but he still shrugged and began rotating the sides as he watched Mina open her mouth to speak again.

"It just must be so awful for you. Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Hmm." Sorun hummed out in thought as he continued rotating the cube's sides. "I don't really wanna impose, but if you happen to have any spare sodas lying around I'll take those."

"... Sodas?" Mina repeated, sounding more confused than anything at the request.

"I like them. They remind me of home. Here, Ash." Sorun tossed the solved cube back to Ash. He caught in out of the air, looking one part disbelieving and one part frustrated.

"How do you keep doing that!?" Ash angrily hissed as he glared at the puzzle cube. "I was trying to solve this thing for hours and you're doing it in seconds!"

Sorun shrugged. "We had them back in my zone. I looked up the formula on how to solve one, and then I did it 'cause I was bored one day."

"There's a formula for solving this thing?" Ash asked as he looked back at Sorun. "That's the trick?"

"Yeah, it's, like... super long and complicated, but once I did it I was able to memorize it."

"Huh? Really? You a brainiac or something?"

Sorun shook his head. "Nah, I... I've always just perfectly remembered how to do things with my hands." He rose his two hands up in front of his face. "Like, if I do things with my hands it... I dunno how to describe it, it's just easy to remember the movements and patterns and stuff. How do you think I'm able to pull off consistent frame-perfects in games?"

Ash gave him an odd look. "I didn't understand a single word in that question you asked me."

The look Sorun gave back to the mongoose was one full of disappointment and disgust. "... Why am I even talking to you, then?"

While the two conversed, Mina had tiltered her head down as she thought on Sorun's request. And then, in a outburst so sudden she's startled Sorun, Ash, and Virgil, she'd shouted, "Oh, wait!"

Mina's head had lifted up as if she just realized something. She turned around and bolted out of the house right after, at a speed that was too fast for Sorun to keep up with. He blinked in surprise as the mongoose departed, and then looked to the side at the other mongoose, who was staring at Sorun awkwardly with the cube still held in his hands.

"..."

"..."

"... So what's it like dating an idol?" Sorun asked in an effort to relieve the settling tension.

"It's, uh... great, I guess." Ash began to nervously turn the cube around in his hands as the two continued to uncomfortably look at each other. "She's nice, you know?"

"Mm." Didn't really tell Sorun much since most Mobians were generally nice, but alright. "Out of curiosity how'd you two start dating?"

Ash grew a bit more uncomfortable. "Whhhhy are you asking?"

"Come on, man, I helped solve your cube. You can't humor a guy after he does a solid for you?" Ash seemed to accept the logic with a reluctant nod, prompting Sorun to continue. "I'm just a bit curious is all. Like, did you just ask? Is that how it works?"

The Mobian honestly looked like he didn't want to answer, and Sorun saw he kept glancing at the empty doorway Mina had sprinted out of, looking like he was cursing her for leaving him alone with Sorun in this situation. Sorun couldn't tell was was making the poor mongoose more uncomfortable: being left with a complete stranger and a cube thief or the dating question. "I don't know, man, we worked together for a long time and got along great so I just worked up the nerves one day-"

"So it was you?" Sorun pressed. "You initiated it? It's totally okay if the guy asks? That's how dating works?"

"I don't- it worked for- we just met, why are you asking-!?"

"I'm back!" At hearing Mina's voice accompanying the rapid sound of footfalls suddenly ceasing, Sorun turned back forwards. She was indeed there again, and holding something out to Sorun. He blinked at it in confusion, and then gently took it from her so he could examine it.

... It was a small, cardboard case that had three glass bottles of grape soda in it. And a spot for a fourth bottle was missing.

"It was a gift I got from a fan during a world tour me and the band were doing," Mina elaborated when Sorun looked up at her with a questioning look. "I just realized I never really got to thank you for

the whole concert thing anyways, so since you like these kinds of things I figured you could have it! You know, as a get-well present."

"Uh... thanks...?" Seemed like the most random thing to Sorun. When he glanced to the side at Ash, though, he didn't even look the least bit surprised at the sudden, spontaneous gift. He looked tired, actually. Must have been a weird quirk of hers or something. "Grape soda?" Sorun asked when he looked back at the bottles.

Mina nodded. "Mhm. I tried one and didn't really like it. And that tour was... gosh, almost a year ago now, I think. It's just kinda been sitting in a cabinet back at our studio."

"Ah. Year-old grape soda," Sorun deadpanned. "Thanks, Mina. It's just what I needed to overcome starvation." He'd still drink it, of course. If only because he didn't want to waste soda. Was probably gonna be the flattest soda in existence, too, but he'd still go for it.

"... Starvation?" Sorun felt his stomach drop when he heard Mina repeat that word, after which he mentally cursed himself for the verbal slip. "I, um... was actually looking in your kitchen and noticed it looked a bit... well, sparse."

"How the hell could she- oh, goddammit, I left the fridge open."

"Sorun?" Mina looked back at him, looking significantly more concerned than previously. "Why don't you have any food?"

"Ah, yeah. That." He cleared his throat to try and put her at ease. It didn't work. "I can't get a job. So I'm broke and starving."

Concern was mounting at an alarming rate. "And... what's your plan for that...?"

"I mean, nothing, really. I kinda just gave up."

Probably wasn't the best idea to be flat-out telling Mina all this, but from how Sorun was seeing it, she pretty much had him cornered

thanks to Virgil bringing her here. She saw all the lack of food in the kitchen. And if *she* noticed, then it was basically a guarantee Nicole was gonna notice when she came to visit him again.

He was hosed. Utterly and completely. He might as well give it one last hail mary, though, just in case.

"Hey, Mina? I'm grateful for the soda and all, but can you do me a favor and not tell anybody I'm kind of starving?"

"N-no! Of course not!" she exclaimed, making Sorun sigh loudly. "Sorun, you can't just sit here wasting away like this! Why can't you get a job?"

"I'm a flimsy human in a city full of people so superior to me in physical ability that the children can bench press me. And also there aren't that many jobs. And I'm uneducated," Sorun said. "My opportunities ain't even slim. They're nonexistent."

Both Mina and Ash cringed a bit in understanding. "Couldn't you ask somebody for help?" Mina asked in a softer tone. "You're friends with Sally, and she's connected with everybody in the city. I'm sure she could find you something. I mean, her brother's the king!"

"Yeah, Mina, I could, but then it's not just my problem anymore. It's other people's problems, and I don't wanna drag people into my problems," Sorun told her. "All my friends are busy balancing their lives and the whole Freedom Fighter thing. I don't wanna bother 'em because Sorun, that one inconvenience in their lives they have to deal with, has *another* problem they gotta bail him out of."

"I think you're selling yourself too short, dude," Ash commented from the side. "Just talk to them about this. Sometimes in life asking for help is more humble than trying to do things on your own."

"Man, what do you know? You can't even solve a Rubik's Cube," Sorun scoffed. "No. I ain't doin' it. I'd rather starve than bug someone with this. Which is exactly what I'm doing."

Mina made an uncomfortable sound and kicked at her feet. She didn't look agreeing with Sorun at all. More worryingly, she looked like she wanted to help with that sympathetic look she had on. "What if we just told someone for you?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"But it solves everything, doesn't it?" Mina asked him. And to Sorun's horror, a smile began to break out on her face. "If I go tell Sally she can find a way to help you and then you don't have to worry about stressing her out since I'm the one that told her!"

Ah, his one fear of something happening. Exactly this. "That's the most backwards logic- Mina, wait-"

But it was too late. She looked like her mind was made up. "Don't worry, Sorun. I'll go talk to her and we'll get this all sorted out." She started to make towards the exit of the house, her torso still turned to Sorun as she waved at him. "I'll go find her right now, even! You don't have to worry about a thing!"

It was with a blank, deadpan stare that Sorun watched Mina leave. Ash was right behind her, casting Sorun one last glance as he nervously turned one of the sides of the cube back and forth. "Yeah, that's Mina for you," he mumbled. "Uh, look, sorry about the soda thing, Sorun, she's... kinda random like that sometimes."

"Hah, I'm not really complaining," Sorun said as he lifted the case. "Don't suppose I can convince you to convince Mina to keep my poverty a secret?"

He wasn't surprised when Ash shook his head. "Yeah, I don't really wanna do that. Mina'd be mad at me. Plus you really look like you need help, man."

Sorun gave Ash a firm nod. "You're a good man, Ash. Now get out of my house."

He did so, snorting lightly in the process. It was when the door closed behind him that Sorun slumped in the couch as Virgil floated closer to him, with one hand rubbing across his face as the other continued to hold the grape sodas.

In a turn of events that didn't even go to surprise Sorun, he'd been made. And now his friends were gonna know what was going on with him. He predicted he wouldn't even make it to the morning before he started getting concerned knocks at his door. And now he had to live with inconveniencing everybody once again. And he'd knew they'd try and help him, too. They were too nice not to.

"I hope you're happy with yourself," Sorun snapped as he turned to Virgil. "Now everybody's gonna know I'm a loser than can't take care of himself."

Virgil made an uncaring shrug. "Chao."

"You're just happy 'cause now you don't have to starve along with me!" Sorun exclaimed.

The blank look Virgil sent him said it all.

"Ugh." Sighing, Sorun pulled out one of the bottles from the cardboard case. "Guess there's nothing left to do but wait for the end credits on this horrible chapter of my life. One among many." He pulled the cap off the top of the bottle, and then leaned back a bit in surprise when he heard a small *hiss!* escape the bottle. He brought it to his nose and sniffed it, acknowledging that, yes, it was grape. Grape and a hint of something else he couldn't make out. Blinking down at it, Sorun made a shrug and decided to go for it.

It was actually surprisingly good.

"Wow, that tastes purple," Sorun commented as he pulled the bottle away from his lips. "Mina's crazy. This stuff is great." He smacked his lips. "It's got a really weird aftertaste, though. Eh."

A small hiccup escaped from Sorun. He ignored it and went on to continue drinking from the bottle as Virgil watched on.

Virgil was fairly certain this wasn't normal behavior.

It started happening after Sorun finished drinking a single bottle of that purple stuff Mina had gifted him. Or maybe even a bit before that. He'd gone... weird, simply put. Virgil could feel through their mind Sorun's mind go fuzzy and blurred, like he was... well, Virgil wasn't rightly sure how to describe it. He just felt wrong.

And then he stumbled out of the house, and Virgil was forced to follow him. Night had just fallen over the city a few minutes prior, so nobody was out to see Sorun walk all funny-like through the streets, much to the Chao's chagrin. Something had to be wrong with him; he'd seen Sorun walk, and he most *certainly* didn't walk around like that. Like he was fit to fall over on the ground at any second.

"It'sh all... it'sh alwaysh the same thing," Sorun slurred out, the case with two remaining bottles still clutched in his left hand as he continued walking along the streets. "Erryone's gotta be so amazin' an' great at everythin', an' I get left in the dusht like... like the loser I am. Can't do anything on my own 'thout needin' help from someone, like a parasite." He wobbled on his feet a bit. "Man choose, obey slave, golf... where- House, where are ya, I got the club an' I need the xp!"

He was fairly certain Sorun didn't talk like that, either.

On the one hand, Virgil was extremely concerned about this strange state Sorun was in and wanted to go find someone to help. On the other hand, it was freshly nighttime, nobody was around, and Virgil really didn't want to leave Sorun unattended while he was like this. So he was stuck with following him, hoping nothing bad would happen.

Like Sorun wandering towards the airfield.

That probably constituted as something bad happening.

On its own, probably not a good sign. But then he started to move towards the hangar, and Virgil was aware that the hangar was where the flying machines were kept. Like that blue biplane the flying fox used. And the really big ship the others would pile in sometimes. And Sorun was stumbling right inside there. Maybe he was just wandering around aimlessly, maybe he just happened to walk in here by mere chance, he didn't feel like he had all his faculties in check so perhaps-

Oh, he was beginning to climb up on the biplane.

"Chao-chao." Making very annoyed and worried sounds, Virgil flew up behind Sorun and tried tugging him back by pulling on the collar of his shirt. But, alas, while he was quicker than most, or more likely all Chao, and the blades on his arms were sharp enough to cut through the toughest of metal... Virgil's strength didn't seem to be enough to pull the human off from the plane. In fact, he'd ignored Virgil entirely and sat right down in the pilot's seat.

"Call me a bad pilot..." Sorun set down the case of bottles at his side and began reaching for the controls. "Gonna show you all I ain't worthless..."

It appeared Sorun was trying to start the plane. And succeeding, it seemed, because he was pressing buttons and dials and switches and lights were beginning to turn on. And to Virgil's mounting worry the plane was shaking to life.

"'Member how to do this," Sorun mumbled as he gripped the throttle. "Pitch and... pitch'n law, yeah."

"C-chao-chao..." When the plane began moving forwards on its wheels after the propeller began spinning, Virgil meekly sat down in the seat right next to Sorun. It didn't look like there was getting out of it now. Sorun was steering the plane and Virgil didn't know how to stop it outside of cutting the plane itself apart. He even considered it,

but refrained from doing so in fear of that propeller and how fast it was spinning.

The plane made it out onto the runway. When it began to drive down that runway, Virgil began to fidget in his seat right next to Sorun while trying to avoid panicking. And Sorun, meanwhile, didn't even look like he was focusing on anything as he continued steering the plane. He looked half-asleep if anything.

And then they took off to the sky, resulting in Virgil deeply regretting not having cut the plane apart before Sorun even stepped foot in it.

There were only two notable things Sorun could pay attention to upon waking up. One was the splitting headache he felt. His eyes weren't even open and he could feel he was sprawled out on something... something soft and course at the same time, but he didn't need to see to feel that sensation in his head. Like somebody was trying to drive an icepick through his forehead. He didn't know why he felt like this, because when he reached up and felt at his forehead it felt fine, but the throbbing pain in his head was almost unbearable. Ebbing away slowly, thankfully, but still too intense for his comfort.

The second thing he noticed was the gentle sound of softly-crashing waves.

By now, he'd chosen to open his eyes. He outwardly groaned and covered his face from the harsh sunlight beaming down on him, which only intensified his headache, and had to stay there for whole minutes before he could finally sit up. Sorun then heavily began blinking his eyes a few times to try and clear the blurriness from his vision, and after a bit he began to get his perception back and see what was in front of him.

Ah, that's why he heard the sound of waves. He was on a beach.

"..." Sorun looked down. He was indeed sitting on sand. When he looked up, ocean. Nothing but endless blue ocean in front of him. He blinked a couple more times, and then looked behind him. Just behind where he was sitting was some foliage and a few palm trees, but past all that he saw another beach and the continuation of the ocean behind him.

So not a beach, then. An island. A really small island. An island in the middle of the ocean he appeared to be stranded on.

Something off to the side drew Sorun's attention. A few meters away from him was the wreckage of what was once a blue biplane. Tails' plane, which he only recognized due to the tail of the plane sticking up from the wreckage with one of the fins snapped off, with Tails' logo just barely visible on the side. There were some bits and pieces in the pile of rubble that once upon a time could have been a plane, but now it was less a vehicle and more a pile of scrap. Virgil was sitting on top of the pile, arms crossed as he glared at Sorun with narrowed eyes.

Sorun, ever unflappable in the face of such adversity, looked back forwards at the ocean.

"Huh."

Chapter 65

Recursion Error

Episode 65- That's not how it works

"You know, maybe this is just the fresh start we need. Island life! Some time to ourselves to sort through our head." Sorun, who stood at the edge of the island's beach, bent down to pick up an imaginary stone and made a show of skipping it across the water in front of him. "In the grand scheme of things this most recent fuckup of yours may not be the worst fuckup yet."

Besides Sorun sat Sorun, who was sitting down on the sand and watching the waves crash against the beach. Over and over, receding and rushing forwards over the sand. Again and again.

"That being said we should probably be thinking of a way to get out of here," the standing Sorun continued as he threw another imaginary rock. "'Cause we're gonna die of thirst in a couple days if we don't. I predict we have roughly fifty hours before sea madness takes over and you attempt to drink the ocean, after which we die." He glanced down at the sitting Sorun. "You'd probably like that, wouldn't you? Us dying so we don't have to deal with this bullshit anymore. The bullshit that is life on Mobius!" A third invisible stone skip.

The sitting Sorun ignored that remark, and then spoke out while continuing to stare at the water. "How'd we even end up here?" he hollowly mumbled.

"Hell if I know. One second we're drinking that purple soda Mina gave us, and the next second we wake up on a deserted island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Atlantic Ocean?" The standing

Sorun took a quick glance around. "Damn, are those names even applicable in this world? Is it just 'the ocean' here?"

He couldn't make sense of how he wound up on this island with Virgil. In Tails' destroyed plane. Did... did he drive it here? Why? Why here of all places? Why was he even in the plane to begin with? Why didn't he remember?

None of it made sense. At least the headache finally faded away.

Sighing, Sorun stood up. "You think the transponder in the plane still works?" he asked Sorun.

"In that slag heap?" Glancing back at the destroyed remains of the plane, Sorun shook his head and faced back to Sorun. "Super doubtful. That thing looks like it took a nosedive right into the island going max speed. I'm still trying to figure out how we didn't end up getting mangled if we're really the ones that drove it here."

"Well, then I don't see what we can do," Sorun said in a plain tone. "We don't have a way to call for help and no way off the island."

Sorun made a sigh. "Can you knock it off for five minutes?" he tiredly asked him. "You're seriously gonna give it up at minute one? *Really* ? You could at least pretend to put effort in!"

"Maybe I don't want to," Sorun snapped back at Sorun. "Maybe I'd rather bury my head in the sand and not bother."

"Well, hey, there's the sand right there." Sorun pointed at the beach. "Get to buryin'."

He couldn't really tell why Sorun was acting like this. Ever since he'd woken up Virgil had just been sitting on the remains of the flying machine, watching him. He'd had a vacant, uncaring look the entire time, just slightly confused, and after looking around a bunch he'd

just faced forwards at the ocean for twenty minutes mumbling to himself.

And now he was pacing back and forth, seemingly arguing with himself.

"Why do you have to be like this? It's always poor me, woe is me, but you'd rather just sit there and mope than do anything about it! I did do something about it, what, you weren't there when I was walking around from place to place trying to get a job somewhere!? You gave up on the first day! We got turned down ten times!" He was pacing back and forth in the sand, hands in his hair with his eyes facing down at his feet. "It's your fault we're in this mess in the first place! Oh, oh, it's my fault!? Suddenly everything's all my fault!? It's always your fault! You and the stupid decisions you're always making!"

Humans were pretty weird, he decided.

"Why do you even care!?" Sorun shouted at Sorun. "You said you didn't care anymore! Now suddenly you're over here criticizing me for every mistake I've made-"

"I'm criticizing you because you spent the first week of our new life here staring up at a ceiling, and then you tried to do something about it, and when that didn't work you went back to being an apathetic good-for-nothing wasting away and waiting for somebody to notice so *once again* somebody can come help us out. You've been like this-"

"What, since we found out everybody, every *thing* , I ever knew died on Earth?!" Sorun shouted at him. "How am I supposed to feel about that!? What, am I supposed to be *glad* we get to stay here with them!?"

"It's a helluva lot better than anywhere else in this world!" Sorun shouted back. "At least it's in a place where people actually care

enough about us not to let us starve! Oh, but what did you do when that stunning revelation was about to be revealed by Mina? You ran! You ran again!"

"I didn't r-" Not even being able to finish the sentence, Sorun turned away from the other Sorun in anger, gasped out a breath, and then rounded back at him while pointing a finger at him. "What is with you!? You really flipped from hating everybody to yelling at me for not accepting them!?"

"I'm yelling at you because we got a second life, a hard-fought life we kicked teeth out for, and you're using it being a depressed vegetable! It sucks! Yeah, I get it, it sucks Earth's gone, but there's nothing we can do about it now! I'm not saying we get over it, hell I don't think we can *ever* get over it, this shit's with us for life probably, but we still have a chance at making *something* of our life and you're over here starving yourself and hiding behind flimsy excuses! For god's sake actually do something because what you're doing right now is straight misery!"

"Maybe I don't wanna do anything." Sorun turned his back to Sorun and began walking down the beach. "What are we supposed to do? Go back and live a life? Doing what? Get real. We had a life. It died with Earth. This isn't living a life anymore. It's just living."

"..." He heard a loud scoff from behind him. "Oh, is that how it is? Figures you'd wanna give it up. It's what you're best at doing."

Nothing was said between them as Sorun walked away. From the plane and Virgil and everything else. He just kept walking down the beach, eyes fixed downwards at his feet as he kept walking. His feet softly touching down on the sand and the sound of the waves was the only thing he heard.

"What's even the point? I... what's there to live for here?" Sorun wondered to himself. *"I don't have anything going for me. Everybody has their own lives, even past the Freedom Fighter thing, but what do I have? Antoine's got a wife, Sonic's got his whole hero thing,*

Sally's royalty, Tails has the whole kid genius inventor angle, everybody has their own families, and what do I have? No family, no skills, nothing that gives me meaning, no... no anything. Everything I used to have is in an irradiated city of the dead in an equally dead world now. All I have is an empty house and a group of friends too busy saving the world to give me the time of day. I'm nothing past that. I can't do anything, there's nothing I want to do, so why-?"

His foot caught on something, making Sorun trip forwards and hit the sand.

The only upside to Sorun falling right on his face was that the sand provided some cushioning to his fall. He still laid there in the sand for a good ten seconds before sighing, placing his palms and the sand, and lifting himself up. He shook his head to loose the particles of sand from his hair, and then sat up on his knees to look forwards. This followed him twisting his face in confusion when he saw bootprints ahead of him.

"How out of it was I that I didn't even notice I made a full circle around the island? And what'd I even trip on?" Sorun wondered as he turned back around. There was a small bump in the sand, likely what he tripped on, though what that bump actually was he couldn't figure out due to the sand covering it. He tilted his head as a result, humming and moving backwards in order to examine it further.

"What is this? A coconut or something?" Sorun silently asked himself as his hands begin digging through the sand. His fingers finally grabbed at the object, something that felt extremely smooth, and lifted it up out of the sand to- *"Fuck, not again!"*

It was a Chaos Emerald he'd tripped over. The blue one. He'd noticed the glow before anything else once his hands lifted it out of the sand. And then he saw the color, the shape, and put two and two together, and then he immediately realized what it was and then threw it away. He'd even shouted out of fright, fell on his back, and then crawled away out of fear of the thing as he watched it land in the sand in front of him.

And then, he froze.

"... Wait, what?" The Emerald was still there in the sand where he tossed it. When he lifted his hands up in front of his face, they were empty. *"Huh?"* He looked back at the Emerald. It was still there. *"What? Isn't... why didn't it stick to me?"*

He had enough experience with the things to know that, once he touched one, that was it. He was absorbing it. But that hadn't happened here. He'd managed to pick it up and then throw it away. It hadn't affixed itself to his hand like all the other ones always had.

"That shouldn't be... maybe it's 'cause I don't have any in me," Sorun thought to himself as he stood up. *"That first one took a while for me to absorb compared to all the other ones I think. Maybe I didn't hold onto long enough? No, that... that doesn't sound right."* He took a few steps forwards, ending with him standing above the blue Emerald. *"What's going on here?"*

Against his better judgement, he bent down to pick up the Emerald, and then straightened himself up as he turned it around in his hands. It wasn't sticking to him no matter how long he held onto it. He gripped it with both hands, squeezed on it, even tried grabbing it in different areas, but nothing was happening.

There was still *something* there, though. A strange, tugging sensation he felt in the points his hand made contact with the Emerald. Like a gentle pulse going from the Emerald to his hands. There was a feeling inside of Sorun, too, something trying to reach out for the Emerald, but he squashed that feeling down as he continued examining the glowing gem.

"Maybe it ain't a real one?" Sorun reasoned with himself. *"Like a fake or... or something."* He began to idly toss the gem back and forth in his hands. *"I mean, come on, what are the odds I'd crash-land on an island that just happens to have a Chaos Emerald? But this feeling though... no, there's no way, it's gotta be-"*

In a flash of blue light and ethereal, blue particles, the blue Chaos Emerald turned into the Yamato. Once again Sorun yelped out in surprise and dropped the sword.

The sheathed katana fell onto the ground, partially burying itself in sand. In another flash of light and particles, it turned back into the blue Chaos Emerald.

"Okay, what the hell...?" He bent down and picked the Chaos Emerald back up. Once again, it turned into the Yamato. *"It's real?"* Experimentally, he tried willing the sword to turn back into an Emerald. His confusion only grew when the Yamato turned back into the blue Chaos Emerald in his hands. *"What the... that... that's not how... what the fuck, that's not how it works!"*

He actually made a frustrated yell and threw the Emerald down in the sand again. Huffing out in anger, he bent down once again and picked the Emerald back up. Once again, it turned into the Yamato.

"That's not how it works!" his mind screamed. *"I touch the Emerald, it gets stuck in me forever in exchange for a power, and I lose twelve years! That's what's supposed to happen! I'm not supposed to just be able to touch it and... what is this!?"*

He could control it, he realized as he examined the Emerald further. He could freely switch back and forth between the sword and the Emerald. And when he let go of it entirely, it turned back into a Chaos Emerald upon losing contact with Sorun. And he didn't feel any of the pains he associated with absorbing the Emeralds. Nothing but that urge of the Emerald trying to tug into his body he kept resisting, that urge that only appeared when he touched it.

"That isn't... why...?" Sorun made a frustrated growl and gripped the sword hard enough that it began shaking. "Arrgh, this doesn't make any sense!"

"What doesn't make any sense?"

With the sword in his hand, the first reaction Sorun had to hearing the unfamiliar voice besides him was to go rigid, tightly grip the handle of the sword, and then sharply pull it out from the sheath and hold its edge up near to where he heard the voice. His eyes had widened a bit in panic, and even Sorun's breathing had gone a bit heavier just from being startled by the voice. And so, with the edge of the blade still held up to the unknown speaker, Sorun slowly rotated his head just the barest amount to get his eyes on the newcomer.

"A... shark...?" It must have been what it was. He didn't know anything else that possessed that kind of dark, bluish-gray skin. Or the dorsal fins on the head that had iron rings going through them. Or the incredibly sharp teeth it had. It was still a Mobian, though. Still bipedal, and still roughly as tall as Sorun. He couldn't help but be slightly disconcerted looking at its face, though, and the human-like features on the shark's face that looked so out of place with those teeth. The widened, yellow eyes that were looking down at the sword up against their owner's throat and the hands raised up besides its head. Hands with more fins on the forearms.

"H-hey, man, take it easy," the shark stuttered out. Definitely male from the voice and body shape from what Sorun observed. "I was just comin' to say hi."

Sorun blinked, and then looked further down at the shark's waist. He was wearing a piece of green rope around his waist like a belt, with a small pouch tied to it. Worryingly there was also a small knife attached to his hip. Also something that looked handmade like the belt, but it was still secured in its scabbard. He was bare of any other clothes aside from a necklace decorated with random gold bits. Even the gloves and shoes he normally saw on other Mobians were vacant on this one.

"Didn't know aquatic Mobians were a thing," Sorun thought to himself. Despite the knife and the teeth that looked like they could bite Sorun in half, the shark seemed genuine. Had to be if he kept the knife in its scabbard even after sneaking up on Sorun like that,

which alone had probably been unintentional from the way the shark was reacting to him. *"Tch... he seems alright."*

"Sorry. You spooked me," Sorun quietly mumbled as he removed the sword's edge from the shark's throat. The Mobian sighed in relief and lowered his hands back down, while at the same time Sorun slowly slid Yamato back into the scabbard. "Why'd you sneak up on me like that?"

"I... I called out to you, but you didn't hear me, so I got closer," the shark innocently explained as he blinked his yellow eyes at Sorun.

Making a displeased sigh, aimed mainly at himself, Sorun rose his hand up and rubbed at his forehead. "I must have been too distracted to notice you," he said. "I'm a bit out of it right now. Things aren't really going that well for me." He glanced down at Yamato, held in his left hand. "Again, sorry for that."

He couldn't say he was too surprised when the shark offered him a tooth-filled smile in forgiveness. "Eh, it's all cool. Anyways, I'm Razor!"

"Sorun."

"Sorun?" Razor had repeated his name with a hint of confusion in his voice. "Never heard of that name before. In fact, I don't think I've ever heard of a Mobian that looks like you, like, ever."

It was Sorun's turn to look confused. "I-I'm not a... look, don't worry about it," he said. "How'd you get to this middle-of-nowhere island, anyway?"

"... I swam?"

"Right." Sighing and reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose, Sorun shook his head and looked off to the side. "Is there civilization nearby? Somewhere I can go to so I can hitch a ride back to the mainland?"

Razor shook his head. "Not really. This place is pretty removed even from where I live. In fact, nothing really ever comes around here."

"Fantastic," Sorun sighed out. This place really had to be remote if the shark Mobian that probably lived in the ocean barely even knew this place.

Noticing the disparaged look on Sorun's face, Razor asked, "Can I ask how you got here?" The question made Sorun face the shark again. "I just, uh... I'm not really seeing any gills or fins on you or anything, and I'm pretty sure if a Mobian like you lives in the sea I'd know, so can I ask how you wound up here? I don't even see a ship or nothin' parked anywhere."

"I crashed," Sorun deadpanned. "You might have seen the metal heap piled up on the other side of the island?"

Razor's face lit up in realization. "Ohhh! You came in that! Yeah, I saw that, but I didn't know what it was." He looked over his shoulder and began rubbing at his neck. "I saw a weird-looking Chao there and left my own with it and decided to follow the footprints I saw in the sand to you. Was that Chao yours, too?"

Sorun's head perked up. "Oh, you have a pet Chao, too? Yeah, he was mine." A beat. "Oh, you left him with Virgil?"

For some reason, the simple confirmation that Virgil was Sorun's Chao made Razor visibly relax. "Crusher? Yeah." He looked back at Sorun. "Why? Is that a problem?"

"Virgil, uh... he doesn't really play well with other Chao," Sorun said, much to the shark's confusion. "I mean he's only ever interacted with the one I know of post-evolution but he really didn't get along with him. It's this weird superiority complex thing he has, I dunno."

Nodding in sympathy, Razor said, "Yeah, Crusher's kinda like that, too. Always was kinda more violent than a normal Chao since he evolved with me." They both locked onto each others' eyes, both

growing concerned. "You, um, you think everything's okay over there?" he hesitantly asked.

He was an odd Chao that came with the weird fish Mobian thing that had suddenly appeared out of the water. This weird black and green Chao. Smiled too much for Virgil's liking, but he had sharp teeth like him, too, which he found a bit interesting. But then there had been that smile- that cocky, overconfident smile, like he was challenging Virgil. And he only started doing it once that Mobian walked out of sight following Sorun's footprints.

So of course Virgil decided to fight him. He seemed interesting. Much more so than the rabbit child's Chao, that pathetic thing that needed to be coddled. This one actually evolved like he had. And that smile... it irked Virgil.

The fight itself hadn't nearly been as interesting as the Chao itself. It liked punching- inelegant compared to the black blades attached to Virgil's arms as far as he was concerned. Inelegant and much, much too slow. It hadn't lasted more than ten seconds, ending with Virgil sitting atop the now-struggling Chao as it tried in vain to free itself from the fate of being Virgil's chair. The smile was all gone now, replaced with angered snarls as it tried and failed to remove itself from Virgil.

As far as Virgil was concerned the fact he wiped that stupid smile off the new Chao's face was victory enough.

"... I'm sure it's fine," Sorun assured Razor, not sounding very convinced himself. "But anyway, yeah, I... flew in on the plane and crashed here on the island. Still trying to figure out how that actually happened."

"You flew?" Razor asked in an incredulous tone. "Like... like a bird? You flew in the air?"

"... Yeah...?"

"In *that* ?"

"Man, have you never seen a plane before?"

"No! But wow!" Razor's expression grew from disbelieving to astonished. "That's really amazing! How do you get something so heavy to fly in the air!?"

The sudden enthusiasm made Sorun take a step back. "Uh, you know, w-with aerodynamics and propellers and... stuff..." Sorun trailed off, unsure of how to describe exactly how a plane flew. In all honestly he wasn't sure of the science himself. Likewise, Razor's amazed look began to fade. "I don't know, dude, I didn't build the thing," Sorun said with a sigh, making Razor grow a bit disappointed. He looked off to the side and saw that the sun was beginning to dip towards the horizon. "You think we can pick this back up over by the plane?" he asked, turning back to Razor. "It's getting late. We can make a camp or something."

"Hm? Oh, sure." Razor gave him a nod, the prior disappointment disappearing in an instant. "Yeah, come on. We'll meet up with our Chao and pick it up from there."

"Alright, so let me see if I got this right." Razor took in a deep breath, flattened his hands together, and pointed the tips of them at Sorun. "There's Overlanders, which aren't Mobians, and then there's humans, which are like Overlanders but aren't, and you're a human, but, like... not a *human* human."

"If anything I'm the *human* human and the rest are offshoots, but sure, yeah," Sorun confirmed with a nod.

"And... the thing that separates humans from Overlanders is... the location...?"

Sighing, Sorun shook his head. "Not exactly, Razor, no."

"Gah!" Razor leaned back on the log he was sitting on and grabbed at his face. "This is so confusing! Why does this have to be so complex!?"

"I ask myself that a lot," Sorun mumbled, leaning forwards on the log he sat on opposite to Razor as he stared at the small, smoldering campfire between them. "You really are clueless with what goes on in the world, huh, Razor?"

The shark's hands lowered from his face. He made a huff and turned his head away from Sorun, pouting slightly. "All the going-ons that happens in Meropis City pretty much only involve things under the sea. Nobody involved themselves with the surface communities because there's no point. It's all too far away on land and we already have everything we need in the sea. Why bother?"

It was a narrow-minded view of the situation, but Sorun could see where he was coming from. There was apparently a gigantic underwater Mobian community according to Razor. One he didn't even knew if the others back in New Mobotropolis knew about because, according to the shark, they were a reclusive bunch that didn't bother with anything outside the sea. It showed from how much Razor knew of the surface world's history, which was to say, he didn't know jack. Sorun probably should have been clued into that fact the moment he mistook Sorun for a Mobian.

He didn't even know what an Overlander was, or anything surrounding humans. From the way Razor made it sound, any history was self-contained to the underwater communities, and anything outside of that on land was a mystery to them. A mystery they'd rather keep shelved and never explore since they were all content with what they had under the ocean.

Closeminded, maybe, but with all the insanity that happened on the surface he wasn't too sure he blamed them for the reclusion.

Probably more peaceful that way. He wouldn't be one to criticize a community with how it chose to work.

Sorun glanced off to the side when some movement caught his eye. Virgil and Razor's Chao, Crusher, were chasing each other around, sometimes catching one another and wrestling on the ground for a bit. Ten out of ten times Virgil would win, but no matter how many times he was beat down, Crusher wouldn't be deterred. And much to Sorun's shock, he actually caught Virgil smirking a few times as a result. Not a full-on smile; a mean little smirk that was more amused than anything else. But he was fully welcoming the other Chao's defiance of him. And Crusher seemed to be having fun with it, too.

"Those two sure got along quick, huh?" Razor asked, looking towards the two Chao with a smile on his face. "I was kinda worried when you told me about Virgil, but they look fine to me."

"Mf." Sorun made a grunt and poked at the fire with a nearby stick he had on hand.

"Still though," Razor continued, looking back at Sorun, "your Chao looks weird. How come he doesn't have that, um, that thing?" He pointed above his head. "The weird emotion dot thing? Every Chao's supposed to have one."

Sorun glanced to the side at the Chao. Crusher had that floating dot above his head. A green, spiky thing, but a dot was a dot, he supposed. He recalled Virgil formerly having one, too, back when he was an ordinary Chao. "He lost it when he evolved," Sorun answered. "Dunno why. Chao're weird."

"That they are," Razor agreed. "It's nice seein' Crusher have so much fun. None of the other Chao back where I'm from ever like playing rough with him like this."

Leaving Razor to his thoughts, Sorun turned to the object that was sitting at his side. The blue Chaos Emerald, with its glow illuminating the surrounding area darkened by the twilight sky. He took hold of it,

rolling it around in his hand while giving it a contemplative look. In a flash of blue light and particles, it'd turned into Yamato. With some concentration, he managed to turn it back into a Chaos Emerald, and while he was holding onto it, he felt something resting on his shoulders. The blue claws of his Bringer Claws. He dispelled them immediately and continued staring at the Emerald.

"I can use any one of my powers while holding onto this thing without having to absorb it. But only when I'm in physical contact with it," he thought. *"It keeps defaulting back to Yamato for some reason, though. I have to concentrate to get any of the other powers. But Yamato just comes to me immediately. I don't know why."*

He felt that he *could* absorb it if he really wanted to. He figured that's what that tugging sensation he felt was: the Chaos Emerald wanting to go into his body. But he was... what, resisting it? Controlling it? He didn't know what it was. He *did* know he didn't want to absorb it. Getting permanently locked to a single power wasn't too appealing, nor the twelve years off his life. Temporary access to any power he wanted at no cost seemed more efficient. Especially since he was planning on using Yamato to go back to New Mobotropolis at some point. Once he'd worked up the nerve to show his face to the others.

"But why now? Why is it doing this to me now? What changed?" Sorun wondered to himself. *"Did something happen to me to change the rules on how this works? Am I just that much more experienced with it, or is this a result of something happening? I'm not sure. Maybe the others back hom- back in New Mobotropolis will have answers. I sure don't."*

It was curious. Terribly curious. And like many things, Sorun just didn't have an answer for it. At least he had *some* power back now, albeit temporarily. As much as he'd disliked them, he'd admit he felt... somewhat naked without the powers. Vulnerable. Having just some back helped to put him at ease.

"So what's the story with that?" Razor asked, dragging Sorun out from his silent musings. He looked up to see the shark pointing at

the Emerald. "The glowing thing you keep turning into a sword and all that other stuff?"

Turning the Emerald back into Yamato, Sorun looked further up into Razor's yellow eyes. He seemed intensely curious over the sword which, Sorun would grant, made enough sense. Probably wasn't every day he saw someone conjure a magical katana. "It's a really long and sad story I don't wanna get into," Sorun said, making the shark deflate a bit. "To make it a short and mildly depressing story, me being a *human* human, as you put it, makes me special. And because of that I can make special things with Chaos Emeralds."

"And Chaos Emeralds are...? Ow!"

Sorun had reached forwards and softly bonked the tip of Razor's nose with the tip of the sheathed Yamato's scabbard. Not very hard, but enough that the shark had still recoiled in shock while swatting an amused Sorun's sword away.

"Get out more," Sorun said as he pulled the sword back to his side. "They're special rocks with nigh-unlimited power. And I get to turn them into swords. Ain't life grand?"

"Grand's a word for it. Sure," Razor mumbled as he rubbed at the spot on his nose Sorun had touched. "Could you not touch that? My nose's sensitive."

"Is it, now?" A small, mischievous smile played across Sorun's face as the katana turned back into a Chaos Emerald. Blue electricity momentarily arced around his body. "You should probably tell that to him."

"Huh? Him-?" Razor was cut off when a blue, spectral hand reached up from behind him, grabbed his nose, and squeezed it. Softly, not enough to cause harm, but it'd been startling enough that Razor jumped off the log he'd been sitting on in fright while whirling around to his attacker. He saw Sorun's spectral Doppelganger waving at him

right before it disappeared, followed by him hearing Sorun's soft laughter at his expense.

Razor turned towards Sorun, his rows of sharp teeth showing as he grinned savagely at Sorun. The laughter the human was making was slowly cut off when he saw that grin and the eyes locked right onto his body, and before Sorun could get a word out, Razor lunged right at him. No words of warning. Not even a sound. He just jumped at Sorun with his arms outstretched towards him.

He'd tried Tricking away, the Emerald was still in his hand, but Sorun was still locked onto the Doppelganger power. He wasn't able to switch it to Trickster fast enough to avoid getting jumped on by Razor. The Emerald flew out from Sorun's grasp, with the teen making a soft grunt when his back impacted the sand. He felt Razor's hands reaching out to pin Sorun's arms down, after which he opened his eyes to see the other teen leaning over him with a victorious, tooth-filled grin.

"Ha ha! Gotcha," Razor said through that grin.

"It would seem so." He tried to sound annoyed, but the incredibly small smile Sorun held betrayed his amusement. He didn't feel as amused when he couldn't lift his arms up from Razor's hold, though the smile remained.

Razor, however, grinned even wider when he felt Sorun's resistance. "You're not very strong, are ya, Sorun?" he asked.

"It's a fact I lament more and more with each passing day," he responded. "Please let me up."

"I dunno. Technically you got my nose twice and I only paid you back once..."

With an annoyed huff, Sorun rolled his eyes. "Razor..."

"Alright, alright." Laughing a bit, Razor released his hold on Sorun's wrists. The human teen sat up, while Razor had already retreated back to the log he had been sitting on, with Sorun returning to his. They both sat down, with Sorun proceeding to return to poking at the small campfire with his stick.

Overpowered by a shark. Somehow not the weirdest thing that happened to him in the last month.

"So what were you doing all the way out here in the middle of nowhere, anyways?" Sorun idly asked. "You said this place was pretty out there even by aquatic Mobian standards."

"A-ah, yeah. Uh, how do I..." Razor began kicking his feet as an uncomfortable look overcame his face. "Sorun, have you ever... you ever have girl troubles? You know, with girls?"

Sorun shook his head. "No. Never. I'm an expert on women."

Nearby, Virgil ceased wrestling with Crusher and stared over at Sorun with a skeptical look.

"Oh, man, really?" Razor let out a nervous laugh and darted his eyes away from Sorun. "I-I bet you get girlfriends all the time then, huh?"

Sorun shook his head again. "Nope, never had a girlfriend. And nobody's ever been interested in me. Believe me, I'd know if somebody was."

Virgil's eyes narrowed to slits, and his mouth opened a bit in disbelief.

"Oh, alright. Cool." Razor cleared his throat. "I, uh... I only ask 'cause, well... this is all about my sister."

"Your sister," Sorun echoed. "Okay, a bit weird, but I'm not one to judge."

"It ain't like that!" Razor yelled out. "It's... agh, it's hard to explain." Razor held a hand to his face and let out a sigh into his palm. "Where do I even start with this...?"

"The beginning?" Sorun suggested.

Razor sent him a pointed look, but then nodded. "Alright, so, don't laugh but... I used to be a pirate."

"... Ha."

Razor grit his teeth and lowered his hand. "Sorun, I'm serious!"

"Sorry. Couldn't resist," Sorun apologized, though he still had a faint smirk on his face. "A pirate, huh? Didn't you say you were as old as me? How'd you get into the pirate game?" He paused and looked out into the ocean. "How is there even a pirate game?" he asked in confusion. "None of the continents trade with each other. All the settlements and places like the Overlander government and the city I come from are all self-sustaining. If there is trade, it's all done in-continent between smaller settlements. Nobody's sending ships full of anything worth stealing, let alone goods, across the ocean to other continents. There's nothing *to* pirate out there."

A consequence of the fact that this was a post-post apocalyptic world, far enough along that the actual apocalypse was a thing of legend. The "Days of Fury", or whatever Sally had called it. Civilization came a far way since then to the point governments and kingdoms were back, but there wasn't anything even remotely close to a global economy. Any and all economies were all self-contained. And as he said, most settlements were self-sustaining. He doubted there were even ships period that traveled the ocean, especially considering flight was probably an easier option to those it was available to. He knew Tails had that submarine of his, but that was to be used for specific circumstances.

How the hell could there be pirates in conditions like that? They wouldn't be able to sustain themselves with nothing at all to steal.

"It's 'cause of those metal things," Razor explained to him.

Sorun tilted his head. "The metal things?"

Razor nodded. "It's been a problem for the last decade or so. These... I don't even know what to call them. These things made of metal, machines, except they were moving around on their own and doing stuff."

A lot of bells were ringing in Sorun's head. "They have a logo of a really round, grinning face on them?"

Not surprising him at all, Razor said, "Yeah! You know 'em?"

"It's part of a large-scale problem the entire world has to deal with, though with recent events it should be dealt with soon. I'll give you the details later if you really wanna know since it'd take a while to explain," Sorun offered. "Just call 'em robots if you want."

"Robots. Alright," Razor muttered, whispering the word out and nodding at how it sounded. "Well, almost for as long as I remember these... robot things had been making a mess of the undersea world. Nobody knows where they came from; just that they kept comin'. Harvesting minerals and other things from the sea floor, spreading this awful black stuff around the water that kept making everything sick, it was... it was pretty awful. There's still some areas today that are still polluted with that stuff. One time they stopped for a bit, and then the robots came back looking different and way more dangerous," Razor explained, his expression hardening a bit. "They suddenly stopped coming altogether, though, fairly recently. Nobody really knows why. Not complaining or anything, but... well, it's just weird."

"So Robotnik was doing some undersea operations, and then he died and stuff died down for a bit until Robotnik two-point-oh came to replace him and ramp things back up. Probably upgraded the Badniks in the process. Then during the time when he really had a hold on the whole world with the Emeralds he was really upping the

pressure on everyone down there. But then he started losing ground to the Freedom Fighters around the same time I showed up, likely withdrew his forces in the ocean to help with things on land, one thing lead to another and we're at the point we're at now with him down to almost nothing and hiding in the ruins of New Megaopolis." If that was true then the problem of his Badniks accosting the undersea life should already be taken care of if what Razor said was true. The pollution was another issue, but Sorun didn't have a solution for that. They'd have to deal with it on their own.

"They were never able to take over Meropis City since the guards managed to defend it so well, even during this last year where things got especially bad," Razor continued. "And there was this small group of sea animals that were always fighting against the robots, but the whole ocean was a lot of ground to cover for just them. They couldn't be in every place at once so they weren't able to help with every problem."

Sorun's head picked up. "Was one of them a talking whale?"

"I think so, yeah," Razor confirmed.

"Huh. I know a guy that knows that guy." Sorun gestured to Razor. "I assume a lot of places weren't as lucky as the city?"

Razor grew a bit saddened. "No. Some people just didn't... there wasn't a lot they could do. Whole villages would be destroyed and harvested for resources by those things," he said in a soft voice, hints of anger in his words. "It's not that bad anymore since the robots stopped coming, but back then it was real bad. And for a long time me and my sister were with this one group that kept sailing around the ocean. We'd go to scavenge what was left of the destroyed villages, always moving from place to place and never stopping for long. Just surviving, you know?" He made a bitter laugh. "But... just sometimes, there were survivors. But the captain, he... he never batted an eye at them, never helped. Sometimes he'd even tell us to steal what little *they* had left just so we could live off it."

One of Razor's fists began to clench hard enough that Sorun heard his leathery skin strain from the pressure. The two Chao had long since stopped fighting, both looking towards Razor and listening to the story with somber expressions. Sorun was doing much the same.

"I was the only one ever against it. Even my own sister never questioned it. 'Do what we need to survive,' she'd always tell me. 'It's us against the world, so suck it up.'" He made a loud sigh. "I just couldn't do it, Sorun. I was fine with looting abandoned villages. Those days were... they were fun. But then a couple years ago that thing with survivors started happening and I just couldn't go through with it. I told everybody we should stop, maybe even try to help people. I mean, we'd been doing this for so long that we had more than enough to help people besides ourselves, maybe even do some trading with Meropis City to try and help rebuild some of the outlying settlements."

"And how'd they respond?"

Razor grit his teeth in a mixture of anger and anguish. "They threw me overboard and left me for dead. Just like that. Like I never mattered to them. My own sister didn't even try stopping them."

Sorun hissed through his teeth and lowered his head a bit so he didn't have to see Razor's face. It was upsetting him seeing the shark look so down. "That's rough, buddy," he mumbled out in sympathy. "I'm not so surprised, though. A while ago I ran into this group of jackal Mobians back on land that were harassing this one village. They were these... nomadic bandits, I guess, doing what they could to survive. Just like your pirate pals. Their leader almost cut the head off this one guy that helped me out when I was lost. He was caring for a kid whose parents died."

Razor looked up to Sorun's eyes, horrified by what he heard. He looked almost scared when he asked his next question. "A-and... what happened with them?"

"I broke all his limbs and told them to never return to that village again," Sorun stated in a low, even tone. Razor's eyes had widened dramatically while his body had gone rigid, and his long shark tail made an uncomfortable-looking flinch. Off to the side, Crusher looked towards Sorun in surprise while Virgil made an approving nod. "The old man's alive in case you cared," he added.

"Oh. That's good." Razor exhaled and shook his head while making a nervous chuckle. "Eh-heh, wow. You really don't mess around, huh?"

"... I liked the old man and the kid. That's all," Sorun mumbled. "And I was in a pretty bad place at the time."

"Yeah, I bet," Razor commented. His face lowered a bit as his shoulders drooped. "Why do they do that, Sorun? People like the ones I used to be with and those jackals? How come they keep hurting people?"

"To live, I guess. The world's pretty messed up because of the person behind all the robots. It's as bad up here as it is down there, but it's getting better." Sorun looked up towards the darkening sky. Stars were beginning to become visible. "People that are too scared to die will do desperate things to live. I used to share the sentiment. These days though, I'm... I'm not too sure."

"What is that supposed to mean?" A worried look overtook Razor's features as he looked towards Sorun. The human sighed, and lowered his gaze to meet the shark's eyes.

Sorun didn't know why he was considering telling Razor about his home. A complete stranger. Something about Razor, though... Sorun couldn't quite pin it down. There was just something he liked about him. Maybe it was the fact he was a fellow Chao-owner. His attitude, maybe. He didn't know. He felt at ease around him. And as it was he needed to get this off his chest. Besides, Razor had already shared a lot of personal stuff. It only seemed fair to Sorun's eyes.

"My home is gone, Razor. Everybody I ever knew there is dead." He slumped forwards and looked towards the slowly dying fire, not missing the hurt look Razor had adopted. "I don't know why, and I don't know how, because I can't even go back to the ruins. And now I'm stuck living among Mobians trying to live a lifestyle in which I have no idea what I'm doing. Nobody understands me. I can barely understand anybody. Everyone's... different. In more than just our bodies. And I'm supposed to just figure out how to do all this while I'm coming to grips with the fact my home's gone? I'm just supposed to accept New Mobotropolis as my new home and move on like nothing happened? I can't even get a job to keep myself fed, and most days I'm just staring at a ceiling. What am I supposed to do?"

"... You feel like you're being suffocated. You're aimless, like you're stumbling around, and your mind just keeps replaying the same things over and over and you can't get past it." Razor's words caused Sorun to raise his head, with the human growing surprised at the content of his words as he stared towards the fire with Sorun. "Everybody feels like a stranger, and when you try to figure out what you're supposed to do you don't-"

"- Even know what you want," Sorun finished.

"Yeah..." Razor mumbled with a nod. "Can't say I've had something as tragic as what happened with you happen with me, but getting thrown overboard half-alive by the only family you ever knew is probably a close second."

"Some would argue it's probably worse," Sorun quietly agreed. Which was worse? Everyone dying or everyone betraying you? Sorun didn't know the answer. Didn't even know if it mattered since the end result was the same either way: loneliness.

Maybe that was why Sorun liked Razor so much. He understood in some capacity. They were similar. When Sorun spoke Razor could actually comprehend what he was describing. It was like taking a breath after nearly drowning. That was how relieved Sorun felt listening to the shark speak.

And then he grew sad. Because the only reason Razor understood was because he went through something similar to Sorun. It hurt him knowing somebody else was hurt the same way he was.

Razor made a sad chuckle. "Maybe. I dunno." The corners of his mouth lifted a bit as he looked back at the fire. "I was rescued by a couple of good friends. They look after me. They're *all* that look after me," he added. "Nobody else in the city really looks at me the same way as they do. Because I'm an outsider, a former pirate. And city life is just so different from what I'm used to that I can't really understand it all, so I just stay with my friends at this little temple they live in. Simpler that way. There's even a Chao Garden there, so that's a nice distraction."

Sorun made a small hum. He really did understand. "I know the feeling. I have friends, too, but they're so busy trying to help everybody that they can't spare much time for me. Beyond that, I can't do anything. I just feel like a deadweight." He made a small scoff and gestured towards the nearby wreckage. "Involuntary or not, it seems I ended up running away. Again. I couldn't handle life so I stole my friend's plane and crashed on an island in the middle of the ocean. Worst part is I don't even remember doing it." Sorun shook his head. "You ever screw up this badly? Trying to cope with all this?"

"Nah, never." Razor flashed Sorun a light tooth-filled grin, causing the teen to scoff and roll his eyes. "I've been in the same place, though. But the people who rescued me, my friends who I practically spend all my time around, make it easier. I didn't know what I wanted until I realized I didn't want to be without them. So I decided I'd stay. For them." He gave Sorun a considering look. "Don't you have people like that?"

Nicole's image briefly flashed through Sorun's mind. "Perhaps," he answered, glancing towards Virgil and then back to Razor. "Does it help?"

Razor had to pause to think on the answer. "I... think it's a way forwards. Forwards to what, I don't know. I'm not really good at this thinking thing. But it's a weird thing. You don't feel yourself getting better, but then after a while you look back and realize how worse off you were back then than you are now. So I think that means it works?"

"Maybe," Sorun admitted. He didn't know, either. "You never answered what your sister has to do with you being here," he suddenly said, wishing to change the subject.

"I don't want my sister to be with those guys anymore, Sorun. They're bad news," Razor said with a sigh. "The robots are gone. Villages aren't being destroyed anymore, and the only way they supported themselves was from raiding those villages that were ransacked by the robots. What happens when they run out of places to loot? I've already seen them stealing from people that need it more than them. I don't want to see my sister end up like those jackals you told me about," he said with a shake of his head. "Even if she disagrees with me, even if I have to drag her away from them kicking and screaming... I don't want my sister to do something she can never take back and will regret for the rest of her life. She's my sister. My only family. I can't bear the thought, Sorun." His eyes narrowed as Razor's face grew more determined as he looked out to the ocean. "This is a travel route they frequent. I know from my time with them. They like to come here for some of the fruits that grow here," he explained. "When they come here, I'm taking her back to where me and my friends live." A chuckle, a nervous one. "She, uh... she's probably gonna really hate me for what I'm about to try. But I have to do it, you know? For her sake. Even if she never talks to me again."

"All for family, huh?" Sorun couldn't say he shared the sentiment. He never had siblings, after all. A mother, but that was it. He could understand it somewhat in that respect. Not so much when she let him be thrown overboard. "Even though she left you for dead?" he asked.

Razor nodded. "Yeah. Even then."

Foolish. Maybe. Probably. Sorun couldn't rightly say. Maybe he was wrong in thinking it foolish and Razor was in the right after all. He couldn't blame the guy wanting to save his sister from crossing lines that couldn't be uncrossed. Not when there was an alternative. "The rest?"

"I'm turning them into the city guard. They're wanted criminals anyways," Razor said. "What they do isn't exactly unknown. Maybe it'd even get the guards off my back. They keep sneering at me whenever I cross one. This one uppity guard even accused me of bein' a thief once when it was a completely different guy. Aaaaand maybe I wanna get a little even for what they did to me," Razor quickly added when Sorun gave him a look. "But it's mostly to save my sister! And to stop anybody else from getting hurt."

"So that's your plan? You're gonna singlehandedly fight a whole band of pirates?" At seeing the shark nod, Sorun made a sigh. "Numbers?" he asked.

"Including my sister? Six."

"Okay. So six pirates versus you and your Chao?" Sorun asked, raising an eyebrow.

Hearing that made a troubled look cross Razor's face, which made Sorun think he hadn't even thought of the odds yet. So desperate to save his sister he'd jumped at the plan without thinking on it. But, instead of looking worried, he just gave Sorun that tooth-filled smile of his. "Eh. It'll work out."

He doubted that. "Will it?" Sorun mumbled. "Your friends even know you're here?"

"Yours know you're out here?"

"... Fair." Sighing through his nose, Sorun looked off to the side. The blue Chaos Emerald was lying in the sand nearby. He regarded it for a few moments, and, after making a resigned sigh, reached forwards to grab it. "I'm supposed to be retired from fighting, you know. I don't like doing this kind of thing." He firmly grasped the Emerald between his hands and turned back to Razor, who was giving him his full attention. "But I guess I can make an exception for you."

"Wait, what?" Razor's features brightened up immensely. "Y-you will!? Seriously!?"

"Against my better judgement," Sorun muttered under his breath. "But," he continued in a louder voice, "I will. We're friends, after all."

"R-really...?" To Sorun's horror, the shark was starting to get misty-eyed. Not only that, but his smile was threatening to split his face. "Sorun, I-"

"If you cry the deal's off and I leave," Sorun snapped, making Razor visibly jolt. He was already struggling with all these emotions. He didn't need more, dammit. It was too much as it was.

"Huh!?" He hadn't even noticed what was going on with his eyes. Razor was quick to lift his wrist and wipe away at them. "I-it's the heat from the fire! I'm not used to it!"

"Ah. Of course." Sorun didn't even care about the state of the shark's eyes. He was more focused on trying to figure out why he just agreed to fight pirates. A thing he was explicitly supposed to be avoiding. He should just take Yamato right now and leave Razor to his fate.

But... he didn't want to. He didn't like the odds the shark was facing. They were abysmal, and frankly, Sorun didn't think he'd win without help. And he was too scared and worried to think about what Razor losing would mean. It shocked even Sorun how quickly he'd grown fond of him, but he didn't want to see anything bad happen to him. And he deserved to have family back, even if it was an ungrateful

sister. Didn't deserve to be lonely like Sorun. No one did. So he'd help. He'd help once and leave.

At least he'd get to say he fought pirates. That surely had to be a plus.

"So what's the plan?" Razor questioned him. He still had a big smile on his face.

"I've dealt with way worse than a band of pirates with way less. You deal with your sister. Leave the rest to me. We'll let the Chao do what they will." Sorun paused, and then looked to Virgil. "Hey, no dismemberment."

"Chao." That didn't sound very committal to Sorun's ears. He shrugged, not very much caring if a pirate or two ended up permanently crippled. Less risk of something going bad.

The way Razor fidgeted in his seat didn't make it seem like he shared the sentiment. "Er, uh, that's a joke, right?"

"You know those robots you hate so much?" Razor gave Sorun a nod. "I've seen Virgil cut through them with ease."

He started fidgeting more. "Could we, uh... not go too far with this?" Razor asked him. "I just want them captured so they stop hurting people. I don't want to seriously hurt them over it."

Another Mobian too soft to do what was needed. Sorun repressed a groan at hearing the request, but still gave Razor an agreeing nod. "Can't promise I won't break bones. Neither me or Virgil will do anything permanent, though," he promised. "... Except teeth. Some people might lose some teeth."

"I think I can live that that," Razor said with a grin.

"Good enough for me." Sorun looked to the side, up at one of the palm trees. He formed a Bringer Claw using the Emerald he was

holding, and had it extend towards the nearest coconut he saw. "We'll have a devil of a time with them. Don't you worry." He grabbed the coconut and reeled it back to him. Afterwards, he grabbed both ends with the Bringer Claws, and had them pry to coconut in two halves. The water inside sloshed around as Sorun handed one of the halves off to Razor. "To, uh... us, I guess."

The awkward toast didn't seem to bother Razor in the slightest. Even though it seemed impossible, it only went to make him even happier. "Ha ha! Yeah! To us!"

They bumped their coconut halves together. Sorun was the first one to drink the water inside of it... and then immediately regretted it. He'd had coconut-flavored candy and snacks back on Earth. He expected the water inside the coconut to taste at least similarly to what he'd had in the past.

It didn't. It really didn't. It just tasted like off-flavored, sweet water. And that off flavor wasn't a good one.

"I've always wanted to eat a coconut. Suddenly the reward is feeling less fulfilling than the journey here," Sorun mumbled as he poured the water out from the coconut. Razor made an amused noise as a result. When Sorun finally drained the coconut, he tore some of the white meat out from the inside, threw it into his mouth, and began to eat it.

It was even worse.

"W-wow, this is... this is awful..." Sorun mumbled as he continued chewing the coconut piece.

"You're nuts. These things are great," Razor claimed. "What'd you expect out of a coconut?"

"I dunno. Flavor?" There wasn't any flavor as far as Sorun could taste. Just... nothing. "Ugh, and this texture. Feels like I'm chewing

on a piece of styrofoam. This is the worst. Why do people eat these things?"

This was nothing like a coconut snowball at home. He'd rather starve than live off these things while stranded on an island.

"Heheh. I dunno what this styrofoam stuff is, but it sure sound funn-uh." Razor looked into the coconut in his hand, and then paused. He blinked a few times. "Hey, Sorun? You didn't eat any of this, did you?"

Sorun looked up and gave the shark a deadpan stare. "No, Razor, I only put it in my mouth while in full view of you."

"Oh." A beat passed. "Sorun, this isn't a coconut. Er, well, it is, but a different species of coconut." He turned his own half of the coconut over for Sorun to see, and then held it out in the light of the campfire. When Sorun leaned closer, he could see that there were small, purple spots in the white part of the coconut. "Yeah, I was warned all the time about these when we came here. You're not supposed to eat these. The purple stuff puts you to sleep."

"... Why is that even a thing?" Sorun mumbled as he looked down at his half of the coconut. Indeed, when he looked closer he saw purple. Purple he hadn't noticed earlier due to the low light. And just when he did notice, he felt his arms go numb, causing him to drop the coconut. "Aw, come on, not agai-"

Sorun was out like a light before he even finished his sentence.

A/N- Yeah, Razor and all the other aquatic Mobians are from the Post-Genesis Wave timeline in the comics. I said like a million years ago that timeline had *some* stuff in it I liked and wanted to use. I had to heavily modify the characters to make them fit into this setting, but I think it worked out.

Chapter 66

Recursion Error

Episode 66- See that pirate? See his face? Punch it.

Waking up after getting knocked out by a *goddamn coconut* of all things was much like waking up at the doctor's office after being put under by anesthetic. You went under and snapped back awake seemingly in the exact same second, like no time passed at all. That's what being put under from the coconut felt like to Sorun.

No dreams, not even a brief memory of black, nothing. It was like blinking, except that he felt way more groggy all of a sudden when he opened his eyes. His mental faculties seemed to be in working order, though. And Sorun used this opportunity to curse the coconut.

"Exactly what environmental factors makes a separate genus of coconut evolve the ability to put things to sleep? That's just messed up." A tired sigh left him as he attempted to raise his arms up to rub at his eyes. *"... Okay, why can't I move my arms?"*

He opened his eyes. Shockingly, it seemed to be the middle of the day. Even more shocking, Sorun wasn't on the ground. He saw why when he looked down further and saw his arms were bound to his sides with rope tied around his entire torso. The same rope was tied to the top of a palm tree, suspending him in the air.

"I am extremely displeased with this."

"O-oh, uh... hey, Sorun. You finally awake?"

That was Razor's voice. Sorun couldn't rotate his head very far, but he was able to look back far enough over his shoulder to see one of the fins on the side of the shark's head. So he was up here with him, the both of them tied back-to-back and suspended up off the ground.

Went to explain the weight Sorun felt pressing against him. Not so much the *why* of it.

"Razor. Why are we tied up?" Sorun asked, trying to maintain a calm voice. On the inside he was growing worried. Significantly less panicked knowing Razor was tied with him, but the situation as a whole was still disconcerting to him. He wanted answers.

"Eh-heh, yeah, about that... it's a hilarious story, actually."

"A real side-splitter, I'm sure," Sorun deadpanned. "Of all the scenarios I wake up tied and bound by rope, this is the least favorable one."

"... How is there a favorable scenario to this kind of thing?" Razor asked, clearly sounding confused.

"You'd be surprised. Now what exactly happened while I was under?"

"The pirates showed up while you were sleeping."

"... Ah." As far as explanations go that was probably the only one that made sense. "So how'd that go?"

"They... snuck up on me and held you hostage. While you were sleeping. There wasn't really a fight."

Oh. Well now Sorun was the one feeling bad. The shame of being used as a hostage combined with the embarrassment of being in this position. It was a very heated emotion that Sorun didn't like at all. Emotions that were giving way to anger. Pure indignation at this entire thing. And to make it even worse Razor was forced to share the same fate as him. Somehow that was making him even more angrier.

"Okay, remember what Bunnie said. Just breath." Using the trick that'd probably saved him a thousand times by now, Sorun deeply

inhaled and exhaled. He felt himself calm down, an insignificant amount as far as he was concerned but it was something, after which a heavy scowl settled over his features. Focus on the now. Attain bloody retribution later. None of this would matter as long as it ended with them saving... well, getting Razor's sister and capturing the pirates.

Maybe he'd string them up on a tree. See how they liked it.

"I'm sorry, Sorun," Razor apologized in a saddened tone. "I dragged you into my mess and now look at us. I shouldn't have talked you into-"

"I talked myself into it, now shut up." Razor did so, letting Sorun focus on their surroundings. "Where're the Chao? Didn't they help?"

"So don't get mad, but, uh... they got into the purple coconuts."

"..." If he wasn't restrained Sorun probably would have bashed his head against something. It took a lot of willpower not to beat the back of his head against Razor's. "Hey, Razor?" he asked when he suddenly realized something was missing. "Where'd the Chaos Emerald go?"

"It was a big, glowing jewel and we were attacked by pirates," Razor said in a mimic of Sorun's deadpan. "What do you think happened?"

Sorun idly began wondering if the concept of keelhauling existed in this world and if he should introduce it.

"But hey, it'll be fine!" Razor assured him. "I'm sure we'll find a way to get out of this. Somehow. Hey, do you know how to undo knots?"

Sorun made a hum. "Razor, my friends are all guerilla fighters who spent a majority of their lives fighting a maniac overlord with an army of robot henchmen. I learned a lot of stuff when I got inducted with them. I can arm bombs, pick locks, sneak into highly-secure facilities

and commit various acts of subterfuge with... well, not with the best of them but I'm halfway decent."

"Oh, cool! So you can undo the ropes?"

Sorun hung his head. "No, surprisingly ropes never came up alongside all that other stuff."

He could almost feel the flat, disappointed face Razor was surely making at Sorun. "Wow, Sorun..."

"What do you want from me, Razor!? I can't even move my hands anyways!"

"Alright, sheesh. I hear ya." A sigh escaped Razor. "So any ideas?"

"I'm working on it." In other words, Sorun had none. But he wouldn't admit that to Razor.

The shark sighed. "Alright, well, tell me how that works out."

In fairness to Sorun, he did try thinking of a way to free them from their binds. He never came up with any decent ideas that could be put to practical use, but he'd tried. If he still had his powers he'd be able to just use his Bringer Claws to rip through the rope. Or use his Summoned Swords. The Doppelganger. He could have just shrugged the ropes off if he still had Devil's Body.

But he didn't have any of that. Without that Emerald he was as good and weak as any ordinary human. And because of that they were stuck. It was a frustrating feeling Sorun didn't like. The helplessness.

"Maybe I should have just absorbed it for Yamato. Nicole woulda killed me for taking twelve years off my life, but jeez, at least I wouldn't be stuck here. Sheesh..."

Why couldn't life ever be simple with him here?

"You know, Razor, I figured you being a shark would mean you'd have really rough skin, but now that we're tied together I gotta say. You're skin is unusually smooth and soft." It was downright comfortable, actually, which was a welcome distraction from the chaffing rope keeping the both of them aloft. Sorun was just glad he had the shirt and vest on to keep it from digging into his torso, but his arms weren't spared. He imagined it probably wasn't going as well for Razor.

Caught unaware from the compliment, Razor made an abashed chuckle. "W-well, um, uh, th-thanks, Sorun. You, er..." Razor trailed off, and Sorun felt his head move as he looked down. "Hey, look!"

Sorun looked down towards the ground. Coming out from the shrubbery in the center of the island and wadding through the sand towards them in a position they both could see was a black and green Chao. Razor's Chao. He looked a bit bleary-eyed, likely from recently waking up, but he still seemed to have enough lucidity to look up at the two hanging teens.

"Crusher! Help!" Razor called down.

The Chao blinked up at them. Curiously, its gaze shifted over from them to a palm tree that was right next to him. Crusher waddled over to the tree, reared back one of his hands, and then punched forwards and struck the tree's trunk.

The tree and its giant palm leaves shook. A coconut had dropped down from the top and right in front of Crusher, who then proceeded to punch the coconut once. It split in half, after which the Chao proceeded to begin eating it in full view of Sorun and Razor, who the Chao seemed to be outright ignoring.

"... Your Chao's an idiot," Sorun said in a flat tone as he stared down at the Chao.

"H-hey, he's not... a little, yeah," Razor admitted with a sigh.

More grass rustled as a second small form came out of the same spot in the brush as Crusher had. A black and blue Chao. Virgil.

"Virgil! Help!" Sorun called down.

The Chao had only briefly regarded the two of them before he looked up, and then flew to the top of the nearest palm tree. He slashed his bladed arm out once, causing a coconut to fall down to the ground. He landed right besides it, after which he used the blades on his arm to cut the coconut in half and then began to eat it.

Sorun could have scoffed. What was two teenagers tied up against their will to a coconut? Betrayal had never hurt as much before.

"Why do we keep these things as pets?" Sorun asked, staring down at his own Chao with narrowed eyes.

"I don't know." Sorun felt Razor shift a bit behind him. "So what now?"

"Aren't you a shark?" Sorun asked as he craned his head as far as it could go over his shoulder. "Can't you just bite through the rope?"

"Does it honestly seem like I can get my mouth in a good position to bite at ropes pressing against my chest?" Razor asked, tone a bit tired and irate.

"I meant the one above us."

"Oh." Making an apologetic wince, Razor looked up at the rope holding them up. "No, it's a bit too far. I could probably get my head far back enough to saw through it with a single tooth."

Sighing, Sorun shook his head. "Nah, it'd take too long to cut through with... wait, cut, don't you have a knife?" He distinctly remembered Razor having a knife. His hands were tied to his sides, but he had just the barest amount of movement and could feel Razor's hips. He

could probably... *"Wait, there's no way they would have actually left him with the-"*

His thoughts cut off when, during his fumbling, he managed to feel the hilt of the knife. Sorun blinked in surprise, and even made a confused noise when he located it.

Razor, for his part, seemed much more enthusiastic. "Oh, right! You think you can get it out and cut through the ropes?"

"... Probably?" He'd already managed to pull the knife out from its sheath. Awkwardly, due to how little space his hand had between the ropes, he'd managed to flip the knife around and press forwards. He saw the knife's blade peek through the ropes tying Sorun to Razor, after which he began sawing through the nearest cord. "Why did they leave you with this? You'd think they would have stripped you of something you could have used to get through the ropes."

"Eh. I guess they're not very good at this." Razor did his best to shrug. "I mean, it's not like we've ever done something like this before. At least they didn't when I was with them."

"Ah. So they're not just pirates. They're mediocre pirates." The first cord of the rope was sawed through. The knife was sharper than it looked, apparently. *"I guess I shouldn't have expected much from a small group of people who made a living looting and stealing from helpless folk that can't defend themselves. They probably don't have a lot of experience dealing with people. This'll be easier than I thought if that's the case. They won't be as prepared to deal with us."*

Cutting through the second cord of rope seemed to be what did the trick. The second the knife cut all the way through, Sorun felt the ropes binding both him and Razor slack completely. And then gravity took over, resulting in both teens yelling out in surprise when they began falling.

There was a small burst of sand when Sorun and Razor impacted the beach, followed by the loose rope coiling on top of the both of

them. Sorun was the first one to move, making a sigh as he pushed up off the sand and looked up to see Virgil and Crusher right in front of him, with both of their coconuts right in front of them.

"I'm glad we keep such dependable company," he grunted out as he stood up to his feet. Razor rose up alongside him, and then paused in surprise when Sorun handed him his knife back. He was stuck staring down at the knife while Sorun had walked completely past him, making his way towards the end of the beach.

"Now I gotta hunt down a band of fucking pirates just to get the damn rock back," Sorun thought to himself. He couldn't tell what was worse- his frustration over this whole situation or the anger at him and Razor having been tied up. Both made him feel miserable. And beyond that he felt rushed to find them as quickly as possible since they held his only means of returning to New Mobotropolis. He didn't want to lose them. *"Maybe Razor'll have an idea of where... seriously?"*

He saw it once he made his way to the edge of the beach where the waves were rolling over the sand. A classic-ass pirate ship. Anchored a good eighty-ish, maybe a hundred meters away from them.

"Oh, hey, they're still here." Razor had caught up with Sorun and stopped right besides him. Sorun, meanwhile, was still dumbstruck and staring out at the ship in silence. "Pretty lucky of us, huh, Sorun?"

Sorun finally found his voice and asked, "Why are they still here?" in a defeated, confused voice. He would have thought the whole reason they tied them up in the first place was so they couldn't follow them. That should have constituted them moving far away from the island. He couldn't fathom why they would stop so close.

"Eh, they actually do this sometimes," Razor said in response to Sorun's question. "You were asleep when they took it but they were pretty excited when they got that big, glowing gem of yours. Said it'd make 'em a fortune and last them years. I guess they couldn't wait to

drop anchor and celebrate. They'd do it all the time whenever we got a big score."

"Didn't even bother to put a decent amount of distance between us," Sorun muttered. "They really are amateurs."

"What do you mean 'didn't put distance between us'?" Razor asked as he gestured out to the ship. "That looks pretty far to me."

Sorun shook his head. "That's not distance. It's not distance if we can still *see* and track them."

"Sure, but how are we supposed to get over there? Our only option is to swim and it's broad daylight. They'd see us coming a mile away and they'd haul anchor and take off before we got close. I can swim fast, Sorun, but I can't swim faster than a ship." He glanced at Sorun. "And you don't look like you can swim fast at all."

"Can't you just go deep enough they can't see you approach?"

"Well, yeah, I can. But you can't."

He had a point there. Distance really didn't matter all that much if they'd see them coming. Even further was that Sorun himself didn't have a chance of swimming out that far. The distance alone was daunting. Running a hundred meters was something Sorun could pull off reasonably well, but *swimming* ? He doubted he could even do that, and if he could, he'd wind up exhausted in the process. Razor could make it easily, he was built for that kind of thing, and the Chao could just fly, but he didn't have a good shot. He didn't count on him being able to hold his breath for that long, either.

"That's... a potential problem, yeah," Sorun admitted. "Well, we still need to get over there, Razor. I need the Chaos Emerald they stole to get back to New Mobotropolis, and you need to deal with your sister."

"And stop the pirates," Razor reminded.

"Ohhh, don't you worry about that, Razor. I'll deal with them alright." By the time he was done with them they were gonna wish they never became pirates to begin with. "Just gotta figure out how we can get over there..."

During Sorun's and Razor's silent contemplations, Virgil had flown over to the pair and started looking between the both of them. He looked back and forth a couple of times, and then looked forwards towards the ship in the distance. He nodded to himself, and then flew up to Sorun's face.

"Chao." Virgil pointed out towards the ship when Sorun began looking at him. "Chao."

"Yeah, we gotta get over there," Sorun said. "You got an idea of how we can get there?"

"Chao."

Sorun's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Really? How?"

Instead of making another sound, Virgil pointed over towards the plane, at the front where the mangled propeller was. Sorun looked over towards it, and then back at Virgil, who had lowered himself into the water. His V-shaped wings were folded as far as they could go, and his bladed arms were extended out to his sides.

And then, he began spinning. Like a small, blue and black propeller. Virgil's body became little more than a round, blurred object as he began spinning, causing water to fly and splash out in all directions. But most importantly, he was *moving* . Extremely fast. Almost too fast for Sorun's eyes to keep up with. He'd even gone out far enough that Virgil was so deep under the water he wasn't disturbing the surface, though Sorun could still see his dark form zipping around underwater.

Eventually, the Chao made his way back to Sorun's and Razor's position. He quit spinning and rose up out of the water. He was

dripping wet, but otherwise he seemed completely fine.

"Chao." Once again, Virgil pointed towards the broken propeller, seemingly ignoring the wide-eyed looks Sorun and Razor were giving him. "Chao." He pointed back to the ship.

"You... learned how to spin really fast from watching a propeller work...?" Sorun mumbled in disbelief. *"What is it with things in this world and spinning? Kinda reminds me of the Vortex technique from the first 'DMC' game."* He made a hum and looked towards the ship. *"Virgil ain't really that physically strong... he is fast, though. Fast enough spin like that, at least. Could that work...?"*

"Sorun, please don't tell me you want Virgil to spin us all the way over there." Razor seemed to have already caught on to the idea, and had taken a step back away from them. He seemed queasy from the thought alone. "I don't really handle spinning that well..."

"I mean, it should work." Razor let out a groan as Sorun began rubbing at his chin. "We can make a chain or something. You hold onto Virgil's foot with one hand, hold onto my hand with the other, your Chao can grab onto me, and then Virgil the living propeller-"

"Chao."

Sorun winced at the harsh-sounding chao Virgil gave him. "Then Virgil uses Vortex to propel us over there."

Razor's eyes squinted a bit in confusion. "Vortex...?"

"Don't worry about it." Waving off the shark's confusion, Sorun turned to Razor and said, "I can hold my breath for a minute. Ish. Give or take ten seconds. Should be enough time for him to get us over there while hiding us underwater."

"Okay, but can you hold on while doing that *and* being spun around?"

"Well, no. That's why I need you to hold on for me." If he tried doing it he'd just lose his grip and get flung away. But Razor was a Mobian with freakish Mobian strength. He could hold on fine. All Sorun needed to do was endure what was hopefully a very short ride.

Razor, however, did not seem very onboard with the plan. In fact he was shaking his head and hands while backing up further. "Nuh-uh, no way. I don't do spinning. Sorun, come on, think of something else-"

"You want to save your sister or not? If you got a better idea then I'm all ears."

That managed to stop Razor in his tracks. He looked towards the ship, and then took in a deep breath while gripping his hands. "Grrr... fine, *fine* ." He pointed up at Sorun. "You better be sure this works, 'cause if it doesn't-"

"I have the utmost fate in Virgil, Razor." Sorun glanced to the side at the Chao, who gave him a nod. "See? He's got it. It'll be completely fine. Now hurry up and grab onto him. I wanna get this over with quick."

"You and my both..." Razor grumbled as he began dragging his feet towards Virgil. Literally. His feet were leaving trenches in the sand. "This is gonna be a mess."

"Razor, it'll be fine. Trust me."

In Sorun's defense, it had worked.

That was the only good thing he could think to say about the plan.

Oh, they'd gotten there. For sure they'd arrived. Sorun hadn't been able to *see* it because his entire world turned into a blur when Virgil started spinning. He was glad he had Razor hold onto both him and Virgil, because there was no world where Sorun would have been

able to hold on during all that chaos. He was pretty sure halfway he'd failed at holding his breath and accidentally swallowed more seawater than he was comfortable with.

The only upside was that the duration of the trip was just under twenty seconds. Eighteen, maybe. Sorun hadn't counted. Probably couldn't have if he tried.

He was so dizzy afterwards that he hadn't recalled what happened next. Razor, with the help of the two Chao, had hauled him somewhere. Now all he knew was that he was lying down on something flat, everything was dark, and he smelled a lot of wood. That's all his senses could perceive past the intense vertigo and nausea he felt.

"Sorun... you're not allowed to make plans anymore..." Past all the blurriness in his vision Sorun managed to turn his head and catch Razor sitting next to a square hole in what he assumed was the ship's hull. "Never... never again-"

"Shut up. Just shut up." Sorun groaned and lifted both his hands up to rub at his face. He heard a faint ringing in his head and his shoulders felt like they were about to fall off. They still worked, at least. "Where're we?"

"Virgil cut a hole in the ship. We dragged you in," Razor mumbled back in response. He didn't sound much better than Sorun. "We're, uh..." He took a second to look around. "I think this's... storage? Yeah. Looks right..."

"Sure. We'll go with that." The dizziness and nausea was slowly fading, thankfully. Moving slowly, Sorun had rolled onto his stomach and pushed up onto all of his fours. "Would the Emerald be around here somewhere?"

"Probably. Our luck's still holding." Groggily, Razor rose a hand up and pointed to the side. "Look over there."

Sorun followed towards where Razor was pointing. There was... definitely stuff over there, that much was certain. A blurry pile of items he couldn't make out. That was as far as Sorun got because the vertigo returned, and when he tried standing up it only resulted in him falling onto his back.

His legs weren't working. Or gravity. Something. He couldn't stand. Was barely resisting the urge to throw up as it was.

"Virgil, can you... do me a favor a go see if the Emerald's over there somewhere..." Sorun mumbled out, lifting up his hand and waving in the general direction Razor had pointed to.

Wordlessly, the Chao flew over Sorun's form towards where he pointed to earlier. There was the sound of things being shifted and tossed around, some cutting and bashing sounds as boxes were cut into. Clinking sounds as metal objects fell down to the ground. Sorun didn't know what any of it meant. And with how he felt, he just couldn't find it in himself it care.

"Chao." Something glowing was placed next to Sorun's head. He turned to the side, seeing Virgil float next to him and a blue, glowing gem having been set down besides his head. With a single, drawn-out groan, he lifted his closest hand up and placed it on the Emerald.

A couple seconds after making contact with the Chaos Emerald, Sorun's hair began to shift from the color black to a pure white color. He made a sigh of relief as a pleasant, cooling sensation began to race through his body. The pain in his shoulders vanished seemingly instantly. The nausea and dizziness left. From the moment his hair turned white, Sorun had went from the mess he'd been seconds prior to feeling fine. Better than fine. Like he could take on the entire world and win.

"Forgot how good this feels," Sorun thought as he sat up straight. Completely fine. So light he felt like he could float on air. The power, the strength he felt... it truly was intoxicating. Alas, he only wanted Devil's Body to heal the vertigo, and thus cut the power off. His hair

darkened back to black, and the inhuman vitality Sorun had felt faded with it. He actually found himself frowning when he got brought back down to... to *this* . Back to normal human physical limits.

"Alright. Back at a hundred percent," Sorun said as he stood up. He didn't *feel* at a hundred percent despite the fact he was. Being deprived of that supernatural vitality was responsible, he supposed. It wasn't pleasant snapping back from having so much power to having an ordinary human body again. He didn't like the sensation. "Um... apparently you aren't," Sorun observed when he saw Virgil laying at his feet. Sleeping seemingly. When he turned to Razor, he saw that Crusher was in a similar state.

"I don't think they can handle all that spinning," Razor groggily explained.

"Unfortunate. You doing okay?" Sorun asked Razor.

"Gettin' there," he mumbled as he shakily got up to his feet. "How are you already okay?"

"Wacky magic nonsense." Turning away from the shark, Sorun turned back to where he presumed Virgil had obtained the Emerald. They'd ended up in what he assumed was the cargo hold. If Razor hadn't already told him they'd come in from the bottom through a hole Virgil cut he could guess as much based on how the contours of the walls curved in a way that suggested they were at the bottom of the ship. It was mostly boxes and random items strewn around in random piles in the spacious room, some bound to the walls with nets, other seemingly haphazardly thrown about in the aforementioned piles.

Coins he didn't recognize here, jewels, silverware, and other valuable-looking items there, barrels of something he was sure was stolen, crates of likely equally-stolen goods, even some nice-looking furniture. Food, too, that Sorun managed to spot in some of the crates that happened to be open. A lot of food. Way more than six people could ever go through even if they rationed for a whole

month. There were some classic-looking pirate chests as well, some of which looked like they'd been cut into. Virgil must have broke into them looking for the Chaos Emerald. Probably the one that had other jewels spilling out of it.

"So this is is where they store the swag, huh? The swag storage." He heard some footsteps as Razor stopped right next to him. "They actually do anything with this stuff or are they just hoarders by trade?" Sorun asked.

"Eh. Depends," Razor answered with a shrug. "The captain has all these ties to all these fences and shady people in the not-so-white market they hawk this stuff off to most of the time."

"Even the food?"

"What they can't get through before it spoils, yeah. There's a market for everything down in the undersea. Only stuff we never got rid of was stuff we could use. Or wanted to keep just because."

"I see." Sorun glanced to the side at Razor. He was staring down at the stolen goods with a saddened expression. "It took everyone betraying you to realize maybe this wasn't such a good thing to be doing?"

He only grew sadder. "Wasn't always like this. Used to be we just did it to survive. And we never hurt anybody raiding abandoned ruins. Now I... I just don't know when it changed."

Sighing, Sorun turned back to looking at the stolen things. "Sometimes there isn't something as definitive as a changing point. Sometimes it's just gradual, little things you don't even notice adding up over time. You don't see the change happening because you get used to all the little changes. Then something like what happens with you happens and I guess it becomes really obvious when you look back and remember how different it used to be."

"Yeah." Razor hung his shoulders. "I guess you know the feeling, huh?"

"A bit." A moment passed. "What are you planning on doing about your sister? You even have an idea of what you're gonna say?"

"I was thinking of appealing to her better side to try and convince her to stop."

"Alright, and when that doesn't work?"

"Tie her up, bring her home, and kinda just leave her alone until she calms down?"

"..." Sorun huffed out a breath and shook his head. "It's honestly a horrible plan, but I don't really have a better idea."

A nearby rattle caused Sorun and Razor to perk their heads straight up. The rattle soon ceased, after which came the soft, squeaking sound of a door opening. Both teens turned their heads towards the source of the noise, at which point Sorun noticed a door that was at the end of the cargo hold. A door that was currently open. An open doorway with a short, purple-furred Mobian standing in it and giving them a wide-eyed look.

Before the Mobian could do anything a blue, spectral hand shot past the space separating them and gripped his face. The Mobian made a muffled scream into the spectral palm holding him and frantically scratched at it as the hand pulled him into the cargo hold, closer to where Sorun and Razor were, the former having formed his Bringer Claws. The panicked, muffled screaming was abruptly stopped when Sorun willed the arm holding him to lift him in the air and slam the back of his head down on the wood floor they stood on. The Mobian went limp, prompting Sorun to let him go as he calmly stared down at the fallen Mobian.

Razor didn't look nearly as calm. "Geez, Sorun, did you have to be so rough with him!?" he whisper-yelled at the human. "You probably

concussed him doing that!"

"We're gonna have a very difficult time going about this if you criticize me for every wound I'm gonna inflict on these guys," Sorun said back. "Gimme a break. He's fine. Just knocked out."

"I..." Razor took in a deep breath, and then released it as he looked back at the purple Mobian. "I know, you're right. I'm sorry. But out of everybody here Dive's the best one. He was always in it more for the adventure than anything else."

"Well, too late to do anything about it now." There was, admittedly, some twinge of guilt Sorun felt upon Razor telling him that. He managed to convince himself it didn't matter; a pirate was a pirate and they all had to be captured by the end anyways. He was complicit by staying with them. Razor wanted to capture them all and take his sister away from this life for a reason.

He was only unconscious anyways.

"I promised you I wouldn't leave any permanent damage on any of them, Razor, but that doesn't mean I'm not playing it safe. They're pirates." One Bringer Claw stretched out to lift up the purple Mobian's body. The other one shot out to punch the lock off a nearby chest and open it. "I do things quick a brutal. It's efficient. And less risk for either of us."

Ironically it was a lesson he'd had to learn for himself as opposed to it being taught to him by the Freedom Fighters. The fictional media he'd consumed during his life on Earth helped in that respect, but back when he'd had very few powers and was fighting things much more strong than he was it was a quickly-reinforced lesson. Others like Sonic, who liked to crack those never-ending jokes of his mid-battle, never seemed to learn that lesson. Maybe because people like him never needed to because they were so strong. Shadow was an exception, likely due to a case of over-professionalism Sorun suspected, and other Freedom Fighters weren't completely ignorant

to the method. Couldn't afford to since some didn't have powers and had to rely on other means.

Then there was Sonic who always had to fool around in fights...

None of them had ever been as weak as Sorun, though. Nobody on this planet was. Not until he'd gotten the powers, and even then a number of those missions he'd been on so many times back then had been dicey. So he'd learned quick to end it fast. Perhaps it was one of the reason his subconscious took such a taking to Yamato. It and its in-universe owner were the epitome of dispatching enemies with utmost precision and efficiency. It certainly served him well enough.

Probably wouldn't in this case when he wasn't allowed to sever body parts. He'd promised Razor.

"Can we please not put him in the box?" Sorun paused halfway to placing Dive in the open chest when Razor's voice reached him. He turned towards the shark to see an uneasy look on his face. "He doesn't like the dark. He'll freak out if he wakes up in there."

Sorun could barely repress the sigh that almost left him. "Razor..." he half-groaned, half-whined out.

Razor bent down and picked up a nearby bundle of discarded rope. "Here, just give him to me. I'll tie him up."

A pirate afraid of the dark. Sorun would have laughed if he wasn't so busy handing the Mobian off to Razor so he could tie him up, prompting the Bringer Claws to disappear off Sorun's back. He crossed his arms, one hand still holding onto the Emerald, and leaned back on a nearby pillar as he watched Razor work. Virgil, meanwhile, had floated up and landed on Sorun's shoulder to watch alongside him. He'd woken up finally. Still looked half-asleep, but hanging in there thankfully enough

"So is there a plan on dealing with the rest of them?" Sorun asked. "Besides just leaving them all to me and Virgil while you deal with your sister."

"Yeah, about that." With a final pull of the rope to tighten the knots Razor used to bind Dive, he got up from his kneeling position to look at Sorun. "You think we can try talking to them first?"

"No."

"Chao-chao."

"Guys, come on!" Razor half-shouted in a pleading voice. "I at least wanna give them a chance first!"

This time, Sorun did sigh while reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Razor, our goal is to incapacitate these people so the guards in the city you live in can incarcerate them. They're not just gonna give up their freedom 'cause it's the right and proper thing to do. They're gonna fight for it." He glanced to the side. "'Sides. They're pirates. You don't honestly think there's a chance they'll see reason?"

Hesitantly, Razor looked down to his feet. "My sister might," he said.

Sorun doubted it. Extremely doubted it. He looked back at Razor and opened his mouth to say so, but when he saw that miserable expression on the shark's face, he paused. He wanted to tell Razor it was a futile effort and they should just go in swinging for the surprise advantage, that it'd be less risky that way and that talking would just make it that much harder for them. But then there was that look on Razor's face, and Sorun didn't want to make it worse.

Thus, Sorun groaned loudly and looked up at the ceiling. "Fiiiine, we'll... we'll *talk* first. For whatever good that'll do," he grumbled.

He wasn't so sure if adding extra danger onto all this was worth the smile Razor gave him. Felt nice, at least. "Thanks Sorun. It'll be fine,

you'll see."

"'It'll be fine, you'll see,'" Sorun mockingly repeated in his mind. Holding in the scoff that threatened to come out, Sorun pushed off the beam as Virgil floated off his shoulder. "If you say so. Alright. Let's get this show on the road."

Before he could even get a single step in, Virgil's eyes rolled into the back of his head as he fell back into unconsciousness. He dropped back onto the floor.

"... Guess he ain't over it yet..."

It'd taken some creeping around the ship by the two of them to confirm that the five remaining pirates they were looking for weren't even in the ship. Razor had pointed out that they were probably all celebrating up on the top deck of the ship, which, after approaching it from the inside of the ship, they managed to confirm through the myriad voices they heard above them.

This lead to Sorun and Razor, the two unconscious Chao cradled in Razor's arms, crouching behind a nearby gathering of barrels on the edge of the deck of the ship after having snuck up a small flight of stairs. Sorun himself never got a single look at the five pirates. He imagined the one that was Razor's sister would be a shark like him, but he didn't know about the rest. He was a bit tense, but otherwise calm.

Razor wasn't so calm. He was breathing a bit heavier than what should have been normal, and his hands were clenching and unclenching under the Chao. From whether it was nervousness over what was about to happen, or him feeling some emotion due to him having to confront what basically amounted to a family that abandoned him, Sorun didn't know.

"When oh when was the last time I fought Mobians? Just that one time with Infinite? I only had two powers then." Sorun looked down at

the Emerald in his hand. *"Now it's whichever of the seven I need. So which one do I use?"*

One of the ranged ones, maybe. Tricking was nice for defense, but dodging wasn't going to get him anywhere, and he wasn't good enough to switch them too fast to make it viable. Yamato would be nice, but that was too easy to hurt with... Bringer Claws? Worked last time.

He would have thought on it further if Razor's current state wasn't distracting him so much. He looked up to see the shark gripping the handle of his knife, not having yet committed to pulling it from its sheath. The two Chao were laid down at his feet. "You gonna be alright, Razor?" he whispered to Razor over the nearby talking.

Razor gave Sorun a staggering nod. "M-mhm. Yeah. Just... gettin' psyched, y'know?"

Sorun didn't find himself believing Razor. He sighed, and then looked ahead. There was nobody in the raised section of the ship where the steering wheel was, with a guardrail being at the front edge of that section and a small set of stairs on either side. Sorun tossed the Emerald up and down in his hand once in thought, and then glanced back at Razor.

"I'll start it off. Just follow my lead," he said.

Razor's eyes widened. "Wait, wait, I'm not ready!"

"No time like the present."

And with that, Sorun Tricked away and reappeared sitting on the guardrail above the main section of the deck. He saw four of the five Mobians that were supposed to be there down below him, conversing with each other with calm expressions on their faces. It looked like a completely normal gathering.

"What a crock." Sorun looked closer at the group. *"Kinda a tall-looking Mobian with a pirate coat and eyepatch an' everything. Teal-furred... fuck is that, a mouse? Eh."* He looked at the others. *"Red-skinned shark girl, gotta be Razor's sister. Yellow... Jesus, that a jelly fish?"* By and large she was a normal looking Mobian, save for the fact she had a circular, gelatinous... thing on her head with wavy tentacles hanging around her like extremely-deadly hair. *"Then there's the fourth guy..."*

Sorun didn't even know what he was. The biggest one by far, at least twice the size of a normal Mobian. A white-furred thing with, oddly enough, claws for hands. A big shell on its back and a yellowish, round head with antennae. Some kind of sea creature, but for the life of Sorun he couldn't figure out what it was.

"What the hell in the ocean has white fur and claws? A..." Sorun's thoughts stalled. *"No, I got nothing."*

While he was thinking one of the pirates must have noticed him. He noticed all the conversation had ceased, and when he looked back down at them, they were all looking up at him with surprised, confused faces. There was complete silence between them that lasted for a whole twenty seconds before Sorun pointed at the big guy.

"Before we begin somebody tell me what that is," Sorun requested. "I can't figure it out."

He saw the blue probably-mouse blink his left eye, the right covered with a patch, and look to the side at the large Mobian. He looked back at Sorun, visibly confused and bewildered at the request and Sorun's presence. "He's, uh... he's a yeti crab," he answered. Sorun had twitched slightly when he heard that pirate-like accent leave his mouth.

"The abominable snowman?" Sorun mumbled, more to himself than the group. "Huh. All the continental drift must have made his species

relocate from the north pole. So I guess that means they're real? Huh. Weird."

The captain's mouth opened a bit in confusion as he tilted his head to the side. "I haven't the slightest wha' I just heard. Who are ye?"

"Who I am is nobody. The reason I'm here is twofold." Sorun held the Chaos Emerald up, and watched as the captain's eye widened in recognition. "Half that reason is 'cause of this. You stole it from me."

"Ahhh, now I remember ye," the captain said with some realization. The other three around him began frowning up at Sorun as the confused looks faded. "You were the sleepin' beauty we found alongside with that traitor on the island. 'Fraid that gem there was rightfully taken, lad. We didn't steal nothin'."

"It's mine by right of finders keepers," Sorun argued, making the captain grin a bit in amusement. "I found it, so I get to keep it. But then you took it while I was sleeping. I'm here to take it back."

"Aye, by that logic we get to keep it by findin' it. 'Tis yer fault fer keepin' yer eyes offa it," the captain argued back.

"Is that so? Because I just happened to find this in your cargo hold," Sorun said. "So I guess that means I get to keep it."

"Ha!" The captain barked out in amusement, even going as far as to slap his knee. "Ya got spirit, lad. I can't letcha go wit' that, though. Ya even know what that little item is worth?"

"Do *you* ?" Sorun challenged. To embolden his point, he had the gem shift back into Yamato, making the four flinch back in surprise. "You idiots don't even know what this is or what can be done with it. Just let me have it." He slung the sheathed katana over his shoulders. "The purple guy down below didn't like finding me."

At that, the four of them stiffened. The deep frowns had turned a bit worried at seeing the katana, but now they were all throwing hostile

glares at him when he mentioned Dive. "An' jus' what *exactly* ," the captain ground out, "did ye do to Dive?"

"He's breathing. Scarred for life. But breathing," Sorun said. *"Mentally scarred, but eh, they don't gotta know that. The intimidation factor might work with me here."*

"Sorun, cut it out!"

"And then he comes in and ruins my fun," Sorun mentally sighed out as he watched Razor pop up from behind the barrels. Surprisingly the demeanor of the pirates didn't change all that much even with Razor's reveal. They looked a bit more shocked as he marched towards the front of the grounp to down directly under Sorun, but they were still mainly angry. And at Sorun, of all people. It made the human grow a bit confused himself at all the ire he'd earned.

"An' there he is. The traitor hisself," the captain said in a scathing tone, single eye narrowed at Razor.

"He's the other half of the reason I'm here," Sorun helpfully supplied in a light tone, his feet playfully kicking off the edge of the guardrail.

"You shut up!" This had come from Razor's sister. The shark pirate. Red-skinned with bits of black on the tips of her fins and other parts. Same eyes as Razor. She stomped forwards towards the head of the group and angrily pointed at Razor. "And *you* !" she yelled out. "What are you doing back here!?"

"What am I doing here!? I'm here to get you out of here!" Razor yelled back. "I need to get you away from these people before you do something you can't take back, Blade!"

"What- that doesn't- just who do you think you are, you-!?"

"Now, now, lass. Let's all calm down." The tall, teal-furred Mobian placed a calming hand on the red shark's shoulder. She was still practically snarling at her brother, who was shying back a bit in

shock, but her eyes were up and focused on Sorun as well. But she'd still allowed the captain to gently push her back into the crowd as he stepped back ahead of them again and cleared his throat before speaking. "I shan't be speakin' with the one that abandoned us, but I think you an' I be needin' introductions. Sorun, was it?"

Sorun blinked, but otherwise said nothing. They were all staring up at him again. And they still looked beyond angry. Rage, pure and simple. Razor's sister, Blade, especially. Her sharpened teeth were practically gnawing. The captain seemed more guarded than anything else, but there was no mistaking the anger in his eye as well.

What had he done to make them so mad at him?

"... Yeah, I'm Sorun," he confirmed. "You the captain?"

The Mobian nodded. "Aye, that be me. Captain Shellbreaker of this here band of merry misfits."

Sorun snorted. "Shellbreaker the mouse?"

The frown on Shellbreaker's face deepened. "Otter, lad. Otter."

"Ah. I'm a human, in case you cared. It's not important if you don't know what that is." Probably should have figured out he was an otter in hindsight, but oh well. "Listen, Shelly, my good friend Razor here's worried about his sister. And the fact you guys are kinda terrorizing the deep sea. So that's gotta stop."

"Alright, I think I'm seein' how it is." The frown disappeared off from the captain' face. In its place was a small smirk that formed as he began pacing in small amounts back and forth in front of the group of pirates, making a random gesture with his arms at some points. His eye would sometimes flicker down to Razor, but for the most part his focus was maintained on Sorun. "We're naught but outcasts tryin' to get by, lad. Despite what this traitor may 'ave said to ye-" He drew

the cutlass at his side and pointed its tip at Razor, "- we didn't choose to be dishonest folk makin' a dishonest livin'."

Sorun tapped his shoulder a few times with Yamato. "Maybe," he admitted. "I don't know anything about what happens in the ocean. I'm really just here to get my rock back and help a friend out. I couldn't care less what the circumstances that lead to all this are." His fingers began drumming along the handle. "And I don't care what happened to you. He said you're going around robbing folks in need."

"Whatever Razor told ye was a gross overexaggeration of what we did."

"I don't care about frequency. You still did it." Sorun's eyes flicked down to Razor. "And it ain't my choice. It's Razor's choice. And he wants his sister back and for you all to stop." He glanced back up at the one-eyed Mobian. "So you stop. Or I make you stop."

He noticed Razor look up Sorun. Surprise and gratefulness was written on his face, which made Sorun shift a bit in his seat out of the emotional uncomfort of the attention given to him. The captain had seen the reaction, too. He was actively looking between Sorun and Razor as a dawning look settled on his face. And then he resumed pacing and tried talking again.

"Oh, Razor. Ye couldn't fight yer own battles, so ye tried bringin' in new talent to do it for ye," Shellbreaker said in a admonishing tone.

By now, Razor had pulled his knife out. He was gripping it roughly as an angered expression grew on his face. "It isn't like that!" he growled out. "Sorun chose to help me with this! It was all his decision!"

"An' I can respect that. Loyalty. It be a precious commodity these days. Wouldn't ya agree, Sorun?" The one-eyed Mobian looked back up at Sorun. "I've been havin' a stroke o' bad luck when it comes t'

loyalty, Sorun. The traitor firs', then another of our crew up and left us."

"Yeah, I was wondering about that," Razor spoke, eyes narrowed and both hands still firmly gripped around his knife's handle. "Why're you acting captain, Shellbreaker? What happened to Abyss?"

"She left," Shellbreaker informed him in a clipped tone. For reasons Sorun didn't know due to a lack of context, that caused Razor to drop his guard slightly. "The piratin' life weren't good enough for her. Said she was leavin' to go pursue bigger ventures. Feh. Whatever that be meanin'," the teal Mobian grumbled. "I've been havin' crew betray me left and right, Sorun. I know very few 'sides Mr. Bristles right here-" he nodded his head at the weird shelled yeti, "- who I'd trust with me own life. Lads like you who'd lay it all down for a friend I'm presumin' they jus' met is a rare thing. Rare thing indeed." He flipped his sword around in a reverse grip, and then stabbed its point into the deck to lean on it like a cane. "How's life treatin' ya, Sorun? It must be grand if you're able t' be lookin' down yer nose at us lowly pirates like yer doin' right now."

A scoff left Sorun. *"Charismatic fucker. This his recruitment pitch?"* Knowing one's way around words was a must for being a pirate captain, he supposed. Even Sorun would admit there was something to that captain's words that were drawing him. The charm, the accent, the content of his words. It was alluring, to an extent. Not the man himself, but the words. If he didn't know any better from seeing how many of the same example in movies in games, he'd probably be completely captivated.

Well, he'd seen 'Pirates of the Caribbean'. He knew what the score was, and he wasn't gonna be fooled by this. Even if he didn't see the way Shellbreaker kept sneaking those scornful glances at Razor. Sorun couldn't say if the otter was faking it or being genuine with Sorun, but there was no denying that he had an intense dislike of Razor. Which meant Sorun didn't like Shellbreaker.

It was sad in a way, Sorun realized. Razor going against them really did seem like a genuine betrayal in their eyes. And it was here he realized why they were so upset when he implied he hurt Dive badly. The concern over him, and the resentment of Razor. They really were a small little family out here.

"You've dragged me into something really complicated, Razor," Sorun silently lamented with a sigh. *"It's too bad it'll end the same regardless. I could have gone on not knowing these details. I'll play along to what Mr. Pirate Man has to say, though. For clarity's sake."*

"I can't hold down a job and I'm slowly starving to death 'cause nobody'll give me a chance. Life ain't too grand at all," Sorun said to him in response to his previous question.

The grin on Shellbreaker's face grew. All it did was make Sorun sigh again when it confirmed his suspicions. "See, we're not so different after all, now, are we? We're vagrants. Vagabonds. The world we live in wouldn't accept us, so we take what we want from the world to go on. Outcasts drawn together by a common need, all of us."

The other pirates behind him were nodding to the captain's words in agreement. Blade especially, much to Razor's visible sorrow.

"We took the twins in when they had nothin' jus' like us, and how did Razor repay us? By questionin' everythin' we stand for," Shellbreaker continued. "But Sorun, you and us? Cut from the same cloth, we are. Can see it even with one eye. I'll tell ye what. I can't letcha keep the gem, but if ye were to stay with us, well then that ain't givin' it away, now, is it?" His smile widened at Sorun. "Come on. Said so yourself. Why keep goin' on when ye can join yer fellow misfits?"

"And there it is," Sorun whispered, just loudly enough that everyone managed to hear him. "I ain't that desperate, pirate-man. Gonna be a hard pass for me." He slung one leg over the other, with one hand resting in his lap while the hand holding Yamato continually bounced it off his shoulders. "You're raggin' on about loyalty this an' that, but you're leaving the part out where I'd have to betray Razor's trust by

doing that." He made a "tch" sound and turned his head. "Besides. I wouldn't be caught dead lowering myself down to your lot."

After that, the smile on Shellbreaker's face was all gone in an instant. The kindness and welcoming look left his eye. Now he was deeply frowning again and holding his sword in a normal grip. "What's that supposed to be meanin'?" he asked Sorun. "You steal from us and claim you aren't on our level?"

"I was *born* with a higher moral standing than some filthy pirate like you," Sorun said, once more drawing the ire of the four pirates. "And regardless of right or wrong, I'm taking this back. If you want it, then you'll have to take it." He stopped bouncing the sword on his shoulder. "You don't have a problem with me taking the gem just because I can, right? You people do it all the time after all."

He sent a cold glare down towards Shellbreaker, who met his gaze and matched it with a cold gaze of his own. They continued to stare at each other, unflinching and holding their own respective swords with rigid postures. The other pirates, likewise, were sending their own glares at Sorun. It was Razor who broke the silence of the stare-off after he began looking back and forth between them with an uncomfortable look.

"H-hey, Sorun, you can tone it down a bit, man," Razor said. "I'm not out to-"

"Just who do you think you are?" That fiery, tomboyish voice. Razor's sister. She stepped up to the head of the group, looking up at Sorun with sharp teeth practically gnashing. "I don't care what my brother said to you! You don't know a thing about us! Not a single thing!" she screamed up at him. "I don't care what life for you is like. You just got here, so don't you dare sit up there and look down on all of us like you know everything and you're better than us!"

"I'll do what I want." Ignoring the red shark completely, Sorun looked back to the captain. "I'm done with words. You giving up or not?"

"I shan't be thinkin' we'll be doing such a thing, Sorun." Shellbreaker rose his cutlass up in a more defensive posture. The tentacles around the yellow jellyfish Mobian began waving threateningly, the strange aquatic abominable snowman began snapping his claws, and Blade had drawn a knife of her own. "I'll give ye a counterproposal. Drop the gem and I'll let the both of ya walk away. Or fight and we'll throw you overboard to wash up and be stranded on that island."

"Bet."

With a small groan, Sorun slid off the guardrail and dropped right next to Razor, who was looking at the four pirates with a worried expression. He was switching on which person to aim his knife at, looking unsure as he glanced at Sorun.

"Hey, uh, Sorun? It's great Abyss is gone, but this is still four on two. Are you sure we got this?"

"Just deal with your sister," Sorun said. His voice was free of all worry, though that and his expression seemed a bit tight as he looked at the four pirates. "I'll help out if you don't finish by the time I'm done."

"You sure? Sorun!" Razor's yell went ignored by Sorun, who continued to slowly walk towards the pirates. He saw Blade walk past him in his peripheral, who'd given Sorun a hateful sneer as she approached her brother. He let her pass and focused on the last three pirates.

Three on one. Better odds than he'd come in thinking he'd have. Support from the Chao would have been nice, but he'd make do. It wasn't like they had any special powers. Just normal Mobians. Though the jellyfish one was making him nervous with those tentacles, and the size of the big, white-furred one was making him a bit nervous. Best not to get grabbed by either of those.

"You're makin' a mistake, lad," Shellbreaker said to him. "By the time the day's ended we'll be sailin' for the sunset-"

Sorun tore Yamato out from its sheath and made a high slash in a single movement, causing the three to duck their heads. A single, blue slash appeared in the middle of the mast of the ship, which quickly disappeared to reveal a neat gash cutting clean through the pole. A snapping noise and the sound of groaning wood was heard, making the three turn around to see that the mast was tilting off to the side. Quicker than Sorun would have thought it'd have gone the mast, and the sails connected to it, fell over the side of the ship and right into the water, with the three pirates watching with widened eyes.

"Gonna be pretty hard to do that without any sails," Sorun pointed out in a calm tone.

Tightening the grip around his cutlass, Shellbreaker snarled and turned around to Sorun. "Now you've done it, you-!"

Sorun swung the Yamato out again. There was a small, metal *ting!* sound as the katana's blade effortlessly cut through the cutlass blade being held out to Sorun, leaving the sword cut down to the hilt. The actual blade was sent spinning end-over-end through the air, with four sets of eyes following it as it fell down and impaled itself in the ship's deck.

"You were saying?" There was a flurry of movement in the corner of Sorun's vision, though he was too slow to react as a pair of flat, yellow tentacles wrapped around his sword arm. "Hey, now."

The tentacles were coming from the head of the yellow Mobian. The one wearing the black dress with skulls on it. There was just the faintest hint of fear in her eyes, but the confidence in that smirk of hers overshadowed it massively. Sorun wondered why until he felt it- the sharp feeling of something puncturing his skin in the same areas the tentacles were grabbing him. Multiple puncture sensations going off simultaneously.

"Tch!" It'd felt like feeling a shock race up his whole arm up to his spine. Sorun'd nearly lost his grip on his sword as a result. What *did* happen was that he began to feel dizzy. Intensely dizzy. That and a burning sensation beginning to grow in his arm. Mild for now, but it was exponentially growing worse and worse with every second.

It got bad quickly enough that Sorun was forced onto a single knee, with the human hissing out as he grabbed at his arm, which wasn't listening to him anymore. The sword slipped through his fingers, turning back into the blue Chaos Emerald which he caught with his left hand. That alone took a lot of effort for him: the dizziness and burning was increasing more and more, and the jellyfish wouldn't let go of his arm.

"Hah... you... you got 'im, Opal?" Shellbreaker panted out, looking towards Sorun as the concern in his eye began to fade.

"Oh, don't you worry." The cockiness, the sheer smug that came out of the Mobian woman's mouth, was enough to get through the pain Sorun was feeling in his arm. He'd frozen and felt strong indignation begin to course through him at that tone. "There's enough venom in him to put Mr. Bristles down. Even if the pain doesn't knock him out, he isn't going to be getting up." A small laugh left her. "Guess he was all talk after all."

Panic and worry began to set inside of Sorun. Panic and worry that was being massively overshadowed by the anger swelling in him. Anger over being inflicted to this pain. The humiliation and that *tone* the jellyfish had. That superior, cocky tone. So much like his. Sonic's. Sorun hated it so much.

His hair turned white.

"Huh?" The jellyfish stepped back in shock when Sorun stood back up to his feet, lips peeled back in an angry grimace as he felt the burning sensation in his arm immediately begin cooling as feeling returned to it. He even felt the yellow Mobian, looking more worried by the second, try to inject him with the venom again and again. He

wasn't feeling its effects, though she still wouldn't let go of him. "Wh-why isn't it working!?"

Growling, Sorun made the arm being grabbed by the tentacles reach up and grab at them. Ignoring the small, stabbing sensations in his hand and arms, he yanked back and forced the jellyfish to stumble towards him. Once she was close enough Sorun shot his bound hand forwards and gripped her shoulder roughly, trapping her in place.

And then, he reared his head back, only to then bring it forwards and smash his pale forehead right into the Mobian woman's mouth. She screamed out in shock and pain and tried to wrench herself away from Sorun's grip, and he felt the stabbing sensations increase even more as she tried injecting more venom into him, but no matter what she tried Sorun didn't let go. He just continued to smash his forehead into her mouth, over and over. He'd noted drops of blood fly past his peripheral, and just barely managed to notice the scared Mobian was missing a number of teeth in her mouth after a few headbutts, but he didn't relent and reared back for another one.

He was interrupted at a flash of steel, after which Sorun felt the Emerald get knocked out of his hand. His hair darkened back to black as a result. At the same time the sound of it rolling away reached his ears Sorun saw that Shellbreaker was standing next to the jellyfish, a new cutlass in the otter's hand with a panicked look on his face. After that was the stabbing sensations Sorun felt in his hand and arm, along with the new sound of bones creaking and cracking as the tentacles tightened around him. Sorun hissed out in pain, but before he could do anything the tentacles flexed, and then flung Sorun away from the pirates.

Flying through the air for a brief second, Sorun felt his back impact the edge of the ship before he collapsed on the ground. The shock of the impact made it hard to move, and the burning sensation was returning to his arm. He'd cracked his eyes open and noticed a blue glow in his peripheral, and turned his head to see that the Emerald was sitting right next to him.

By some stroke of luck, he'd been tossed right next to the Emerald. Sorun didn't think too hard about it and instead reached out with his left hand to grab the Emerald. Yamato without its scabbard appeared in his hand automatically upon touching it, and in that moment, in an instinctual act of wanting to get rid of the intense burning sensation in his right arm that was becoming unbearable, he stabbed the blade into his arm as one desire raced through his mind: to separate his body from the sensation of pain.

It was like a switch had been flipped in almost the same moment the blade's tip dug into his flesh. Just like before in the past, all sensations disappeared from Sorun. Pain, sensation, even the ambient temperature. He breathed out a sigh of relief as a result, though much to his worry he still couldn't move his right arm. The venom, he wagered. That or the fact it was probably broken. When he looked down at his arm he saw it was bent in odd, unnatural angles at multiple points.

With a groan, Sorun collapsed right onto his back. The three pirates maintained their distance and kept away from him, too wary to approach. Opal, as she'd been called, coughed out and rose a shaking hand up to her face as Shellbreaker came to her side.

"Lass? Lass, you doin' alright?" He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder as he looked to her in concern. "Opal?"

"M-muh teeth, he..." Tears of pain mixed in with the blood spilling from her mouth as the shaking jellyfish rose a quivering hand to her mouth. "H-he..."

"It's alright, lass, it's alright..." Stroking the Mobian's back, the one-eyed otter looked out to Sorun's still form. He was still on his back and clenching the katana in his left hand. "Bristles, don't go anywhere near 'im," he instructed.

The large Mobian looked down to Shellbreaker with an unsure expression. "Are you sure-?"

"He's got tricks. Too risky," the captain said with a shake of his head. "Jus' let the venom deal with 'im. Won't be too long. Poor lad's likely to die with how much Opal pumped in him."

Their words all reached Sorun's ears. He cared for none of them, more focused on trying to stay awake as he stared up at the sky. The pain was gone, but the numbing sensation was quickly spreading up his arm and up to the rest of his body. His vision was blurring, and the edges of his sight were darkening. He didn't think his right arm was even functioning anymore.

"So fighting when the source of all your power is a rock that barely fits in your hand isn't that great an idea. Good to know," Sorun sarcastically thought. *"Let them get the drop on me. Didn't go for the bigger threats first. Rookie mistakes. How'd I let it come it this? Shouldn't I be better than this?"*

He couldn't tell which was worse. The venom that was likely destroying his body from the inside, or the frustration that he was feeling. So much confidence he'd had now that he'd had that bit of power back, only for it to be taken away with a single hit. It made him fearful, strangely moreso than the fact he was dying. That his power could be taken away so easily like that. It was making Sorun's confidence quickly crumble. And in the wake of all that was the anger. Anger at himself for letting some two-bit band of pirates overcome him. Render him to this state. *Him* . After everything he'd done and accomplished. He was supposed to be better than this.

This kind of thing wasn't suppose to happen anymore.

What would the others think if they saw him in this state? Sorun blanched at the mere thought. He was glad enough knowing the Chao were unconscious and Razor was likely too busy to notice. But it wasn't a pleasant thought to even consider, what any of his friends back home would think seeing him in this state. Broken and dying due to venom. Brought down to heel in moments. The expressions they'd grow. What they'd think and say to him.

The horrified look Nicole would likely have flashed through his mind.

"Not again." Gritting his teeth and fighting past the dizziness and fading vision, Sorun sat upwards. The three pirates stilled and cast him wary looks as he began to shakily stand up. *"Relying on an item for power isn't good enough. Not when it can be taken away so easily."* Flipping his grip on the Yamato, Sorun rose the sword up. *"I promised Razor. I need to help him. I need to go back to the others."* He roughly gripped the sword's handle. *"I need more power...!"*

It was only inexperience on the pirates' part that saved Sorun. He knew this. Anybody that knew better would have done their damnedest to keep the Emerald away from Sorun. That would have made him helpless. Probably would have even led to him being killed. His friends captured. The thought horrified and scared him to no end. Paranoia that made it hard to focus on much else.

Holding an Emerald that could be so easily taken from him just wasn't good enough. Power that could be stripped away so easily wasn't reliable.

So he stabbed down right into his own stomach.

The act came as an unexpected one and caused the three pirates to step back in shock, with all three becoming petrified in fright when Sorun dragged the blade across his stomach, just under his vest and through his shirt. Blood spilled out from the slit in his stomach that, thankfully, Sorun couldn't feel at the moment. And at the sight of it, Sorun laughed. A single, high laugh that made the three looking at him that much more uneasy.

"Kid's insane..." Shellbreaker mumbled to himself. He watched as the sword turned back into the blue gem, which, much to his an the others' disgust, Sorun proceeded to shove into the slit he'd cut into his abdomen and into his torso. "You sick... jus' what are you doing to yourself!?"

Sorun didn't answer him. He pushed hard enough until the Emerald was settled deep inside of his guts, with more blood gushing past his hand and onto the deck of the ship. With the Emerald safely nestled within him, he pulled his hand out, his fingers dragging themselves along intestines as Sorun finally removed his hand from the slit in his stomach. And then, he took a deep breath.

Rapidly, Sorun's hair faded back to a white color. There was a brief, momentary flash of pain that assaulted Sorun as his sensations returned, but it had been just that: a single millisecond of pain. After that came the cooling relief that washed over his entire body. The hole in his stomach healed, the Emerald safely tucked inside his innards. The venom assaulting his body was neutralized by his demonic metabolism, and any wounds they caused were healed in an instant. The dizziness disappeared, as did the blurriness and darkening of his vision. Aside from the heavy sensation he felt in his gut, Sorun felt better than ever.

Taking a deep breath, Sorun lifted his head up to the three pirates. His irises were constricted to pinpricks, and he had a small smile on his face. A relieved, manic smile.

"I guess I should thank you guys for that," Sorun breathed out as he brushed a lock of white hair out from his eyes with his newly-healed hand. "I should have known holding onto that thing wouldn't be too reliable. This is why I never liked using consumables in games..."

Before another word could be said, Sorun shot forwards in a burst of rapid speed. Black speed lines trailed behind his body as he stopped right in front of the jellyfish Mobian, who stared at him with wide, fearful eyes past her bloodied mouth. A single backhand from a white-haired Sorun was enough to send her sprawling towards the deck of the ship. She'd rolled into a still position and wouldn't rise back up.

The last two Mobians were quick to act. Shellbreaker had sprung backwards, shouting out, "Get 'im, Bristles!" as he backpedaled away from Sorun. The large, white Mobian did the exact opposite

and charged towards Sorun with a furious yell, his right claw raised up and poised to strike right down at Sorun.

Sorun watched the Mobian thrust the claw down towards him with a curious, half-interested expression. The claw coming straight towards him was, in a word, slow. So painfully slow due to the supernatural reflexes afforded to him by the white-haired body that Sorun was able to blink his eyes and tilt his head at the claw *mid-strike* . It was enough that he was even able to casually sidestep it, cup an elbow with one hand, and use the other to rub at his chin with an amused expression as the claw slowly pierced down towards the position he'd been standing at prior.

"Ah, this just ain't fair for 'em," Sorun thought as he, at least from his perspective, slowly stepped in front of the claw as it punched a hole into the deck of the ship. *"Despite Bunnie's best efforts, I never picked up hand-to-hand all that well. On the other hand I'm so absurdly stronger and faster than them right now that I don't think it really matters. Although..."* He rose his right hand up to his face and clenched it. *"I never did make the Beowulf Devil Arm, but I still know the moveset. I wouldn't dream of trying it with a normal body. With Devil's Body, though?"*

It was when the white-furred Mobian's clawed hand fully sunk into the ship that Sorun bolted forwards. A left hook with his fist sunk into the Mobian's torso, with Sorun feeling bone crunch under his fist. This was followed by a low right uppercut, him spinning and releasing a flurry of kicks with his left leg, and finally him dodging backwards and rushing back forwards with a straight right punch. A sequence of attacks that proved sufficient in forcing the large Mobian to stumble backwards after his claw was forced out from the ship.

"Combo B, followed by a Dragon Breaker and a Lunar Phase... this body really makes pulling these moves off way too easy," Sorun internally marveled. *"Probably not carrying nearly as much oomph or speed compared to if I actually made the things, but... well, he's big, but the guy's still just a normal Mobian. Those things might've killed*

him if I tried making them. Or blown my own arms off from the force since I'm limited to using these powers one at a time."

It was strange, though, how naturally performing the movements came to him. He was familiar with them through the games, of course, but something about the way Devil's Body changed Sorun made the movements flow so easily to him. Instinctually. And he liked it. He felt a strange sense of freedom doing it, in flawlessly pulling these moves off and staggering this giant foe in front of him. Every successful hit sparked some small amount of glee in him.

This is what he missed. This power. Not being helpless. The freedom.

As the large Mobian stumbled back, Sorun dodged right below him and crouched down a bit with his right fist cocked downwards and at the ready. He made a short hop, his right fist extended upwards in an uppercut and his entire body spinning around as his fist struck the Mobian's body. He touched down afterwards, and then sprung right back up with enough force that the wooden planks under his feet had cracked. Body spinning with his right fist extended upwards, he'd jumped up far enough that his fist cracked against the Mobian's head, snapping it backwards.

It was only then that, with his right leg extended, Sorun leaned forwards and span. Span hard enough that for a brief moment Sorun's body was a circular blur until he'd ceased his momentum, with his right leg extended over the Mobian's snapped-back face. The momentum of that spinning was carried right into the back of Sorun's leg and heel as he smashed it into Mr. Bristle's face, making blood splash out from his surely-broken nose and his eyes roll back into his head. Sorun then softly touched back down onto his feet while the Mobian tilted backwards and fell right onto his back, unconscious.

All in all, from the moment Mr. Bristles took that first swing to when Sorun had knocked him out with that final kick, the entire exchange had only lasted roughly five seconds.

Blinking in surprise, Sorun looked down at his leg. *"Didn't think Lunar Phase would be* that *easy to pull off. Must be the body,"* he thought. *"All that spinning, though... ugh. Don't even think I can get nauseous in this state, but my vision... how the hell does Sonic handle-?"*

Sorun's thoughts were cut off when he noticed something stabbing towards him from the corner of his vision. Something shiny with sunlight glinting off of it. He rose his right hand up just in time for a cutlass to cut straight through his palm. Standing his ground and allowing his nostrils to flare out in anger, and with half a sword's length poking through his hand, Sorun turned to his aggressor.

It was the otter captain. Shellbreaker, and his newly-acquired cutlass. If he'd been trying to maintain a calm façade, it'd all but faded away at this point. Despite the fact he'd just ran Sorun's hand through, the man looked like he was panicking. The widened eye and heavy breathing. Sorun even noticed the sweat past his fur.

He liked that look. It meant Sorun was winning.

"You're running out of moves." Sorun slid his impaled hand through the sword's edge, towards his fingers. The gash cut into his flesh and bones instantly healed behind the wake of the blade, until finally Sorun pulled the sword free of his hand and grabbed the blade. Shellbreaker looked like he was going to vomit from the sight. "And I'm running out of patience."

"Yer a demon," Shellbreaker hissed out as Sorun casually bent the blade of the sword sideways. "Jus' what are ye?"

"A very concerned friend. You really should have just given up."

With his free left hand, Sorun snapped his fist upwards and punched Shellbreaker right in the face. He crumpled like a sack of potatoes afterwards and collapsed to the deck of the ship just like that. Sorun let out a disappointed scoff at the sight and tossed the ruined sword away.

"Weak. Hm." He looked to his left towards the raised section of the deck, where the ship's steering wheel was. He heard the sounds of a struggle up there. Where Razor and Blade were facing off, he reckoned. "Alright, let's bring it to a close," Sorun mumbled to himself as he made his way towards one of the short set of steps that lead to the raised deck.

Making his way up the stairs and past the steering wheel, likely useless now seeing as Sorun cut the mast away, the white-haired human saw the twins facing off at the very back of the raised deck. Knife fighting of all things. Poorly, too. It was mostly just wild, infrequent stabs and jabs towards one another. Slow, telegraphed strikes both were easily jumping out of the way of. Probably for the best, as Sorun saw, with some relief, that Razor had no wounds on him. Neither did Blade.

"Why did you have to come back and ruin everything!?" Blade screamed as she stabbed at her brother.

Razor jumped out of the way of the knife. "I came back for you!" he screamed back. "You're my sister! Why can't you understand I'm trying to help you!?"

"Why can't you understand I don't need your help!?"

When Blade had reared her knife-wielding hand back in order to commit to another stab, she wasn't able to bring it back forwards. A vice-like grip clamped down on her hand, causing her to wince and look behind her. Her fury only grew when she saw Sorun standing behind her, holding her wrist with a single hand and with an apathetic look on his face as he gazed at her.

"..." He wasn't even able to find the words. With a short sigh, Sorun turned his arm to the side and released Blade. The red shark had been thrown back as a result, with her back impacting the railing of the ship hard enough that the wood cracked and broke away.

She slid down to the deck just as Sorun and Razor stepped in front of her. The knife Blade wielded had been dropped, and both hands were used to support her upper body as she looked up at the pair. Sorun still held that apathetic expression as he looked down at her. Razor was much more emotional in his expression. He practically looked grief-stricken, enough that his own knife had slipped from his grip. All that did was make Blade appear more and more furious as her head turned towards Sorun.

"What... what did you do to them...!?" The golden eyes she shared with her brother were practically burning as she looked up at Sorun. So much hate that covered the visible worry she wore past that snarling mouth full of teeth.

"... What do you think?" Came Sorun's quiet response. "I said I'd come help Razor out if I finished before he did, didn't I?"

Disbelief. Hopelessness and sorrow. Shock. All of that played over Blade's face, and for just a moment all the anger faded away as Sorun's words registered with her and she realized there was nobody else around them. Then the anger began to return to her face. Seething and burning. And in addition to that were the tears. Hot, angry tears that streamed down her angered face as she looked up at Razor's face, whose shoulders had fallen at seeing his sister's expression.

"Why...?" she asked him. "They took us in when nobody else would... when we tried to steal from them to survive, just like they did! The world threw us away and they were the only ones that accepted us! We were a family!" she screamed at him. "So why!? Why did you throw us away!?"

"Blade..." Razor's voice came out as soft and broken. "It's gotta stop. This isn't what it used to be. You're hurting people, and the machines that kept ransacking those villages are gone. This can't go on." He sent her a pleading look, his voice practically begging. "Just come back with me, please. We'll go to Meropis, you can just live with me instead of getting imprisoned like the rest-"

"Back to a city full of people that never bothered to help us!?"

"Big words from the person that just stood by and watched as his brother was thrown overboard," Sorun mumbled.

Blade's gaze snapped to Sorun. "You don't know *anything* . You weren't there. You..." Her teeth began to bare as her muscles tensed. "You're just... just a monster that came and destroyed my family..."

She lunged forwards. Sorun had seen it easily, but the pity he found in looking at the shark Mobian found him rooted to the spot. He still held his right arm in front of himself to defend him, only for Blade to bite down right on his forearm. He didn't make a sound as the numerous, sharp teeth pierced his skin and muscles with enough force he felt his bones creak and crack. Razor, off to the side, was too shocked by the sight to do anything.

Sighing, Sorun's free hand shot forwards and gripped around Blade's throat. Even as he squeezed down and began choking her, she wouldn't release her bite on his arm. She kept clamping down harder and harder, like she was trying to saw through his entire arm with her maw. If it weren't for Devil's Body she very well might have been able to sever his arm with that single bite. But the regeneration kept her from biting clean through the arm, but even as her eyes began to dim, and her movements began to slow, she held on. Biting him, clawing at his face and kicking at his midsection in outright defiance and rage for everything he'd done.

It was only after her eyes closed and her limbs went completely limp did Sorun release Blade's throat. Her mouth was still clamped to his arm despite the fact she was unconscious, forcing Sorun to carefully pry her off and set her down on the deck. The wound on his arm had already healed by the time he'd laid the red Mobian down.

When he stood back up, Sorun looked to the side at Razor. A single tear was running down his face as he looked at his sister. Varying emotions from pity to sorrow marred his face, and when he looked

up at Sorun, it took everything the human had to not look away at seeing the pitiful look in his eyes. It made his heart hurt seeing Razor like this.

"... Your arm fine?" Razor asked, voice hollow and quiet.

"Regeneration. Emerald." It was the minimal amount of words Sorun could say to explain the situation and assuage Razor's fears. It seemed to be enough, as he nodded at Sorun and looked back at his sister.

"... We were orphans fighting to survive," he said in a remorseful tone. "No parents, no... nothing. People in Meropis wouldn't even give us the time of day, so we left. When we tried stealing from these pirates, they... took us in." He made a low sigh and shook his head. "I wasn't lying when I said the days when we just raided abandoned places were fun. It was...nice, you know? Having a family that understood where we came from. What we had to do. I just wish she could see what I see."

"I know." How could he not? It felt like he was in the same situation back in New Mobotropolis. *"Hell. I even thought about stealing from the food storage site. Didn't because of Nicole, but..."* He pursed his lips and looked at the other end of the ship. Towards the unconscious pirates. *"I never wanted to hurt anybody. Not like them. Did they, even? Is that how it starts? Does it even matter?"*

Surely at some point it was for the sake of survival; something that could be understood, even if it was at the cost of others. Unforgiveable, maybe, but understandable. Sorun saw the cargo they had, though. That much went beyond mere survival. Or maybe it didn't, seeing as their source of abandoned villages would be cut off due to a lack of attacks. Where did that leave them? The whole reason why Razor chose now of all times, Sorun supposed.

"You think she'll ever forgive me?" Razor's voice drew Sorun's attention back to him. "Blade?"

"... I really don't know," Sorun honestly answered. "In time, maybe. If not... well. I guess all that really matters is if you can live with what we just did."

Razor made a small grimace. "I don't know if I'm okay with that. None of this feels okay." He looked up and past Sorun's shoulders. "They're...?"

"Alive," Sorun confirmed. "Don't worry. I didn't break my promise."

"..." Nodding, Razor looked back down at his sister. "Thank you, Sorun," he muttered.

"I'm going to get some rope." Sorun hadn't waited for a response from Razor. He simply turned around and left, leaving Razor to have some time with his sister. He felt it was the least he was owed.

It was some time later. Sorun was lying on his back, staring up at the bright, clear sky. Razor had gone about rounding up the pirates and tying them all up while he had simply been thinking on his own.

Sighing, Sorun rose his right hand up in the sky. There was a flash of blue light, and Yamato found itself in Sorun's hand. At the same time his hair turned black, and he felt the heavy weight in his gut vanish. *"Hmph. Convenient,"* he thought. *"Come to think of it... I promised Aurora I wouldn't pursue this power again, didn't I?"*

Turning the sword back into the blue Emerald, Sorun lowered his hand and looked back up into the clear sky. He wondered if she was watching him right now and what she was thinking of him.

He rose his middle finger to the sky.

"Who cares what she thinks?" He bitterly thought as he sat upwards. *"I wonder,"* he continued as he clutched the Emerald with both hands. *"I can make the seven powers. Can I... make anything else?"*

It was something he only now considered. The seven powers he was familiar with, of course. Yamato came naturally for some reason. Other things, though? If he could actively control it to some extent now, he didn't see why. At the very least it wouldn't hurt to experiment.

"Beowulf."

The blue Chaos Emerald dissolved in a flash of light and particles that swarmed to Sorun's limbs. In flashes of white light gauntlets and greaves appeared over his hands and feet. Gray, bestial-looking implements. Gloveless gauntlets with open hands shaped like a screaming maw. Greaves with three metal claws for toes. Lines of white-purple light softly pulsed around the gauntlets and greaves, like veins of pure power.

"Vergil's secondary melee weapon. Neat." Beowulf transformed back into the blue Emerald. *"... Death Note."*

Nothing happened. Sorun frowned, and concentrated harder on the mental image. The black notebook and the white words written on its cover. Despite this, nothing happened. The Emerald remained an Emerald.

"Figures it wouldn't be that easy. You live another day, Eggman." A huff left Sorun. *"Is it seriously still only things from the 'DMC' games? Power shaped by the heart, sheesh... if that's the case I'll just stick to what I had."*

Standing up to his feet, Sorun turned around. The deck below him had five pirates completely bound in rope and all laid next to each other, the yeti crab significantly moreso. All still unconscious. In front of them was Razor, who'd just finished with them.

Moving down the stairs towards the deck Razor stood on, Sorun noticed some movement out from the corner of his eyes. Their two Chao seemed to finally be awake and were groggily making their way out from behind the barrels Razor had left them at. Crusher was

stumbling around in a stupor, while Virgil was shaking his head and looking out towards the bound pirates.

"Chao?" he mumbled out, sounding confused.

"We took care of it," Sorun said as he stopped next to him. "It seems all that spinning didn't do you much good. Sorry for that, Virgil. We still managed, though, so it's fine."

"Chao..." He actually almost sounded upset, for whatever reason. Sorun tilted his head a bit in surprise at the sound, but then shrugged it off and made his way back towards Razor.

The shark noticed his approach and waved at him. "Hey, Sorun," he called out. His mood seemed significantly better than it had the half-hour prior, which Sorun saw as a plus. He didn't look happy by any means, but he wasn't bad enough that Sorun felt bad seeing him. "The Chao are back up?" he asked at seeing the two Chao float around.

"Yeah. They seem fine. Bit dizzy, maybe," Sorun answered as he stopped in front of the shark. He took a momentary glance at the pirates, and then looked back at Razor asking, "What now?"

"Now I go back to Meropis, inform the guards, and bring them here so they can transport the pirates back to the city for trial. Dunno what they're gonna do with the ship," he said to Sorun. "Why'd you go and cut their mast?"

"I felt like it? I dunno. I was in the moment," he answered with a shrug. "I didn't want to say it earlier, but... you sure you can make it so your sister doesn't go along with the rest of them?" Seemed like a stretch; Razor didn't exactly strike Sorun as someone with a lot of political pull. Or any, really. And his circumstances were different than Blade's.

Razor seemed to share Sorun's concerns, as evidenced by the slight grimace he made. "It doesn't look good, I know," he said, voicing

Sorun's thoughts. "One of my friends is really important, though. She's this, uh, priestess, you see, and... well, she promised to help me out with this if I managed to pull this off. Said she'd talk with some people, give my sister a chance. Make the rest's punishments not so bad."

"After all they did?" Sorun asked. "Really?"

"More suffering's not gonna fix anything. I just want them to change and stop hurting people. That's it," Razor confessed to him, sighing as he looked down at the pirates. "They're still important to me, after all."

Even after all they did to him, he still cared. *"Mobians..."* Sorun thought. He couldn't help but admire it- admire Razor himself. A part of Sorun longed to help him.

"... You know, you... if you wanted, you... you could maybe just come back with me..." When Razor looked up at him in surprise, Sorun made a breathy noise and turned away from him. "You and that frenzied terror of yours."

Razor made a small laugh. "Crusher isn't that bad, Sorun."

"Meant your sister. But sure, the Chao, too," Sorun said. "You said not a lot of people in that city look at you right. It wouldn't be like that in the place I live in. You could just leave it all behind and come live with me. I have the room for it."

He technically did since his house had a guest bedroom. Small one, but it was there. He noticed Razor giving Sorun a surprised look, however, and at seeing it Sorun found himself being surprised at his own words. He admittedly hadn't put much thought into the offer- he'd just said it. It was more a passing thought, really, but even so he really did mean it. He just wanted to help Razor. Even his sister, if only because she was related to him. And... perhaps having them around wouldn't make the house feel as lonely.

"Wow. Sorun, that's, uh... thanks." An unsure chuckle left Razor, with the shark reaching up to rub the back of his head as he glanced to the side. "I appreciate it, I really do, but... I-I can't. Leave my friends behind, I mean. I have too much in Meropis. And I think it'd be a bit too dry for me over there anyway," he added with another chuckle. "And I don't think it'd do my sister too much good."

"Yes, right, of course," Sorun quickly said. "I understand. Forgive me for offering, I just..."

"No, it's fine. Thanks. Really." They both looked back at each other. Awkward looks were present on both of their faces. "I have a home, is all. I can't leave that."

"I... perhaps have one as well," Sorun quietly admitted as he looked down at the gem in his hands.

"You do." Razor's words made surprise appear on Sorun's face as he looked up at the shark. He was grinning at him. "Home's less a place and more the people, y'know? At least that's what I think."

Home. It still hurt to call New Mobotropolis his home. It felt like he was abandoning what his old home was by doing so. His home on Earth. Earth itself. Accepting that place as his home, and so soon, felt like he was throwing all that away. What it used to be. But people... maybe that was a different matter. The same? Sorun didn't know. He didn't think he was even close to adjusting to life there yet. All things considered, though, Razor acted like he did. Sorun was somewhat envious of him for that fact.

"People, huh? Well, if it worked for Razor..." The blue Emerald shifted back into the Yamato. "Maybe you're right," Sorun said as he looked to Razor's eyes. "I'm still figuring all this out. How to move on, how to... settle, I guess. But I'm glad I managed to help you with this. I think it showed me a lot. *You* showed me a lot," he said to Razor. "So... thanks for that, Razor."

A third, more nervous chuckle left Razor. He looked abashed at Sorun's words. "I think I should be thanking you," he said. "I don't think I would have managed this without you."

"You're right. You wouldn't have."

"H-hey!" The smile on the shark's face became a bit more strained, especially when he saw the small, wry grin Sorun held. "Ugh, for the... you don't gotta rub it in like that."

"I couldn't resist. Hey, by any chance do you have a map that says where Meropis City is?" Sorun suddenly asked.

"Huh?" Razor blinked, but still reached down to look inside the small, green pouch he had attached to the rope he wore as a belt. "Err, yeah? Why?" he asked, pulling something out and tossing it to Sorun.

The human caught the object and examined it. It was... wasn't paper, exactly, but something akin to it. Some waterproof variation of it. Felt thicker and rougher, and was slightly darken than normal paper. Sorun hummed a bit, and then opened it up to peer at the contents of the map. Much of it was illegible to him, drawings and paths he couldn't make heads or tails of, but there was really only one thing he needed, and that was the coordinates listed near a landmark he assumed to be the city seeing as "Meropis City" was written above it.

"I just wanted to help you with one last thing," Sorun said as he tossed the map back to Razor. Yamato was unsheathed afterwards, and following that a blue cross was cut into the air. The cross folded inwards to create a portal, making Razor jump back with widened eyes at the sight of it. "That's a portal that's directly above the city. I, uh... didn't feel safe opening a portal underwater," Sorun explained. "It should take you directly there. You and the guards will have to take the long way to get here and back with the pirates. I'm not sticking around long enough to ferry you all back and forth."

"Oh." Razor's face fell a bit. "Does that mean you're going back?"

Sorun nodded. "I kinda have to return the plane. Or what's left of it," Sorun explained. "And I suppose, like you, I have those back there I... deeply care for, and they're probably worried sick about me."

"So you're going home?"

"... Home's a strong word," Sorun admitted. "It's all I have anymore, though. So I want to try and work towards it. Like you did."

A hand found itself resting on Sorun's shoulder. He looked towards it, and then trailed up the hand's arm and up to its owner's face, who was giving him a warm smile. "You'll do fine," Razor said. "I really think that."

Sorun reached up and placed a hand over the one on his shoulder. A light blush settled on his face. "Thanks, Razor." He removed the hand from his shoulder, and then gestured to the group of unconscious pirates near them. "Good luck with... all of this," he added, making circular gestures with the hand.

"Yeah. I'll try," Razor sighed out. He made to move towards the portal, with his green and black Chao floating up to grasp onto his shoulder. "So... I just jump through, right?" he asked, stopping in front of the portal and turning back to Sorun.

"Mhm, yeah," Sorun confirmed. "I'm trusting you'll be able to find your way back from there."

"Should," Razor agreed. "Well, um... bye, Sorun. Hope we'll see each other again." He turned back to the portal. "C'mon, Crusher. Let's go home."

"Chao." The Chao on Razor's shoulder turned around and waved towards Virgil, who'd settled on Sorun's shoulder. Virgil only reacted by giving the Chao a small, curt nod and nothing more. Razor had seen the sight and made a small laugh at it, and after casting one last glance at Sorun, hopped through the portal. Sorun swiped his sword and closed it the second Razor and Crusher left through it.

Right as the portal closed, Sorun made a small sigh and lowered his sword. Afterwards, a small laugh left him as a grin grew. "He's gonna be mad when he figures out I opened that portal twenty meters over the surface of the ocean," he said, making Virgil roll his eyes. "Alright. Our work here's done. Let's get back to the plane."

Another couple of swipes with his sword was all Sorun needed to form a portal back to the beach this whole mess started on. He'd made sure to close it behind him as his feet went from walking on hard wood to sand, with the crashed plane sitting there right before him. Sorun had risen a hand to his chin, and began to stroke it contemplatively as he looked at the mechanical wreckage.

"... Alright, how am I actually gonna do this?"

The answer in the end had been "just open a portal under the wreckage and let it fall through back to the hangar". It worked for the most part; Sorun was ninety-percent sure all of the parts had made it through. The important bits, at least. That and a lot of sand. But in the end he'd managed to get the wrecked plane through, and then stepped through with Virgil still clinging to him. He'd swiped the portal closed, and then sheathed Yamato as a small sigh escaped him.

He'd managed to successfully create a portal that lead back into the hangar in the New Mobotropolis airfield. Currently vacant, thankfully, as he wasn't really prepared to face anybody yet. Also... startlingly dark, he realized. When Sorun looked towards the open end of the hangar he was shocked to discover it was nighttime outside.

"The hell- how far did I go? It was daylight over on that island," He thought to himself. *"Eh, whatever. Doesn't really matter."*

He turned back towards the plane wreckage. For all intents and purposes, it was still a wrecked, inoperable plane. He didn't have a clue if Tails would even be able to salvage this or not. Or how mad he'd be at Sorun that he destroyed the pride and joy that was his

plane after stealing it. He flipped out at Sorun for merely scratching it once way back when he piloted it. And this seemed like a bit more than a scratch.

"... Eh, it's probably fine," Sorun mumbled to himself as he walked towards the wreck. He sighed, and then lowered himself to sit on the ground with his back pressing against what was once upon a time the cockpit. Virgil floated off his shoulder and hovered besides Sorun. "Any idea what I'm supposed to say?" Sorun asked his Chao.

Virgil shook his head. "Chao-chao."

"Cool." Clicking his tongue, Sorun turned to the side. A glint of something poking out of the crumpled cockpit he was sitting against caught his eye. He made a small, confused noise, and then reached forwards to grasp at it. He felt his fingers grasp something smooth and cool, and then pulled it back to examine it. *"How in the world did these make it...?"*

It was the purple sodas Mina had given him. The remaining two, still in their carton holder. He'd figured they'd been lost in the crash, but it seemed they were completely fine, hidden in the cockpit. He made a surprised noise, and then, after a moment's contemplation, removed one of the bottles, set the carton with the remaining bottle down, and then popped the cap off the bottle he had in his hand.

Virgil grew visibly concerned for some reason.

"It was one heck of an adventure we had there, Virgil," Sorun said after taking a drink of the soda. "Now to figure out how I'm supposed to explain myself. And this," he mumbled, shaking the sword held in his other hand. "Yeah, this'll be a doozy and a half to figure out..."

Chapter 67

Recursion Error

Episode 67- Charity acceptance

"Sorun stole my plane!"

Sometimes Sorun did things that gave Sally a migraine.

She always tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. She understood things weren't especially easy for him, especially now of all times, and tried to be patient with him as a result. They all did. And for all his faults she really did like him. He was... well, somewhat responsible. At least tried to be dependable, and most of the time managed to be so. It was hard not to like somebody who'd fought besides them all for months and risked his life on multiple occasions to save the kingdom. He was odd, sure. But he was still one of them.

It was why it especially hit them hard when it turned out Sorun's world was dead and he had to remain on Mobius. Sally knew that he was heavily into the grieving process, as she hadn't even seen him leave his house since that day. She and the others had been too busy with their resistance duties to check in on him other than the small, random visit here and there. The only one who was able to visit him on a consistent basis was Nicole, and while she tried her best with him, whenever she talked to Sally about him she'd become increasingly worried with each day and would continually fret over him.

Any other day Sally would have found it cute if she wasn't so worried over Sorun, too.

But then he did something stupid and stole Tails' plane for some reason, which she learned when Tails flew up to her practically

screaming. Upon reviewing the city's security footage it was revealed that, yes, Sorun stole Tails' plane. And took his Chao with him. Thus followed an extremely stressed Sally trying to process all this as she had to listen Nicole's hologram pace around her as she voiced her worries. "What if he crashes, he's probably lost, what if he starves out there, Sally, he could be hurt and I'm not there to help him, he might be cold."

Sally didn't think Nicole mentioned the theft of the plane once.

It carried on like this for an entire day while Sally tried to figure out what they were supposed to do - she couldn't think of anything - and how she was supposed to punish Sorun when they finally got him back - she did have some ideas there -. They were apparently saved a lot of effort as, in the following night, Sorun returned according to the security systems. How wasn't clear, since he obviously hadn't flown in without them noticing, but they still managed to see him in the hangar through the security systems. Following this Sally had assured Nicole she and Tails would handle this, mostly to try and keep things as stable as possible, and the pair of Mobians had gone off to the hangar to meet Sorun.

She didn't really know how to tell Tails that his plane was completely wrecked, which she'd seen through the cameras. She opted to just let him see it for himself and keep quiet on it. The fox's reaction had, well... been about what she expected. They entered the hangar to see Tails' blue biplane a complete wreck, something that barely even resembled a plane anymore. And a lot of sand for some reason. Tails' tails had stopped spinning and he'd dropped right onto his feet as he looked straight towards the wreck, jaw slack and eyes bugging out of his head.

"Wha... what the... why... my plane..." He kept stuttering over his words, uselessly gesturing out towards the hunk of broken metal as confusion, shock, and dismay all mixed into his features. "H-he destroyed the Tornado!"

Sally winced when she heard the anger mixed in with the disbelief when Tails shouted out. "Um, Tails..." she began as she placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure it's not that bad-"

"Not that bad? Not that bad!?" The fox's head whipped towards her, a livid expression on his face. "You think I can actually salvage anything from this!? It's wrecked! Totaled! I'm gonna have to build a new a new plane from scratch!"

Again, Sally winced, deeper this time. It wasn't a secret that Tails practically loved that plane. Maintaining it was his favorite hobby. Probably his only hobby aside from inventing things here and there and talking shop with Rotor. Seeing the plane he'd spent so many years with had to be a deep blow. Knowing a friend was responsible likely another blow.

"Nicole can make you a new plane with her nanites like she did with the Freedom Fighter Special," Sally tried in an attempt to calm him down.

It didn't work. "It wouldn't be the same plane, Sally," he angrily grumbled. "It... it wouldn't be *mine* ..." His ears flattened against his head, and a frustrated growl left him. "When I get my hands on Sorun-"

"Heeeey...~"

The call from the familiar voice drew their attention back to the plane. They stepped around to its other side, and then saw, to their surprise, Sorun. Sitting there against the plane. Virgil was there, too, sitting on what was once the plane's wing and staring down at Sorun with a vacant expression. Sorun seemed oblivious to the looks everyone was giving him, and held empty, purple bottle in his right hand and-

Sally's heart skipped a beat when she saw the sheathed katana clenched in his left hand. *That* sword. His... Yamato if she recalled the name correctly. Tails, likewise, had instantly frozen when he

caught sight of the sword. The sword made as a result of Sorun absorbing a Chaos Emerald at the cost of a chunk of his life. A sword that should have left with the rest of his powers.

So why did he have that sword?

"Sorun?" Sally took a careful step towards him, wary of that blade. "Are you okay...?"

"SSSSS *ally* . Always so nice and - hic! - considerate. What a shining example of Mobian virtue you are." Sorun stumbled up to his feet. He had a blush on his face and looked like he was half-asleep. "Howzit goin'?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but an intense scent hitting her nose caused Sally to close it and hold a hand to her face in revulsion. It was a scent she was the faintest bit familiar with. A distant childhood memory of back when she was four, had got into a cabinet in the castle, and opened a bottle of something that vaguely had the same scent. She'd almost drank it before her panicked father found her, took the bottle away, and scolded her severely for what she'd almost done. It was only years later she realized what that bottle was and what she'd almost done. Even so she'd never experienced it again due to the average Mobian not being able to afford alcohol strong enough to actually effect them, and even then nobody saw the point in it. Part of the reason her own father had that bottle was because he was a king, and of course he could afford it. Even then it was only to be used for special occasions. At least before the coup happened.

Sally had never, ever encountered the scent of alcohol ever again in her life until she smelled the scent coming off of Sorun.

"Sorun, are you... are you *drunk* ?" she asked him startled disbelief.

Tails, already confused from the way Sorun was acting, looking up to Sally. "Hey, Sally? What do you mean by that?" he asked. "And... and what's that weird smell coming off of Sorun?"

"I-it's nothing, Tails," Sally quickly said, biting her lower lip. She wouldn't be the one to expose Tails to this kind of thing. If she had it her way he'd never be exposed to it, which was why she was so appalled that Sorun would do such a thing. "Sorun," she tried again, face going stern as she faced back towards the human. She actually started to feel anger at him over the fact he'd have the *audacity* to do something like this. "Are. You. Drunk?"

"Uhhhh... nah, nah man," Sorun denied with a shake of his head, the least bit affected by her burning stare. "I-I-I'm not... I drank thish," he slurred out, holding the empty bottle up for Sally to see.

Sally squinted her eyes so she could read the label on the bottle. To her surprise it was... a brand of grape soda? "Huh?" The anger began to fade from her as confusion set in. "That's... Sorun, where did you get that?"

"From the, uh... the yellow lady," he slurred out. "Midna... yeah..."

"Do you mean Mina...?" Sally slowly asked out.

"Mina! That'sh tha one!" Sorun loudly confirmed. Tails' confusion grew while Sally began to grow worried. "Sh-she gave me thish tashty purple-y shtuff. An' you know what? I think it's magic, Sally."

"Sorun, I really don't-"

"'Cause I drank shome, and poof! I was on an island," Sorun regaled. "An' I met thish nice guy. And I fighted some pirates!" Sorun dramatically swung his left hand, which was clenching the handle of his sword. The scabbard, already loose, flung off and dissolved in a show of blue particles. "And then bif, and bam, an' I beat 'em all!" Sorun made an exaggerated swing of his sword, its edge glowing blue. Sally made a strangled sound when he swung it towards the destroyed plane, while made the wreck fall apart as it was split in half. A large, straight gash was left in the hangar floor. "It was straight outta the 'Pirates of the Caribbean" movies. 'Cept there... there weren't no skellingtons. There were fish people, tho'!"

And now the worry Sally had was exploding into full-blown panic. A drunk Sorun was bad enough, because she didn't know how to deal with that. A drunk Sorun waving around a sword capable of cutting apart *anything* , and at a distance, was the worst-case scenario as far as she was concerned. It was bad enough that she began to breath heavily at the sight of the dangerous and very lethal weapon in the hands of somebody not even fully lucid at the moment.

"Tails, sweetie, listen to me very carefully," Sally instructed in a deadly-serious tone. The fox looked up at her, blinking rapidly in worry. "Move away from Sorun. And *do not* make any sudden movements."

"W-what's going on with him, Sally?" Tails asked. "He's acting weird. I don't like it."

"I don't either, Tails. He's gonna be fine." She gently tapped his shoulders a couple of time. "Just please move back."

Wordlessly, Tails did so, slowly stepping back away from her and Sorun. Sally then held her hands up towards Sorun as she *very* carefully began moving towards him.

"Sorun?" she calmly called out. "How come you have your sword back?"

"Hm? Yamato?" Sorun waved the blade up to his face up to look at it. That same movement caused a deep slice to appear on the hangar's roof, making Sally flinch. She started shuffling towards him faster. "Found it," he answered. "Why?"

"Can you please put it down before you hurt someone?" The last thing, the very last thing, she wanted was for somebody to get cut in half because Sorun was drunkenly waving around a deadly, magical weapon. Or for him to cut his own head off handling it the way he was.

"Huh? Put it down?" Sorun mumbled. His eyes, droopy as they were at the moment, sharpened a bit. "I won't. No one else can have this, Sally. It's mine. It belongs to a... what was the line?" He waved the sword down and caused a gash to appear in the floor. "It's my power, Sally. Mine. It belongs to me and nobody else."

He thoughtlessly waved the sword around again. Another clean fissure appeared in the ground, and following this was a loud, scared yelp. Sally glanced behind her shoulder as saw that the new gash in the floor was inches away from Tails, who'd leapt back in fright at almost being cut.

Gritting her teeth in frustration and fear, Sally reared her head back towards Sorun. "SORUN, PUT IT DOWN RIGHT NOW!"

Before anybody else could do anything, there was a black and blue blur as a small object zoomed past Sorun's hand. There was a loud *slckt!* sound, followed by a small spray of red and the sword falling out of Sorun's hand and clattering on the ground. It remained there for a single second before the sword reverted back into a Chaos Emerald.

Both Sally and Tails adopted shocked looks and stepped back from the small creature, which was revealed to be Virgil. The Chao ignored them and looked up towards Sorun, an annoyed, troubled expression on his face. Sorun himself didn't react all that much to the deep gash that had been cut into his hand that forced him to drop the Emerald, not even looking surprised as he looked at it. More apathetic than anything else. He glanced from the wound to the Chao, still looking up at him, and then made a sigh as he bent down to pick the blue gem back up.

Instead of the gem turning back into a sword, Sorun's hair turned white. The cut on his hand instantly sealed shut and healed, and in addition to that Sorun's eyes widened. Clarity and focus began to become apparent on his face, his eyes widening and becoming much more alert as the blush disappeared. He stood up to his full height and looked down towards his feet, confused. A dawning look

went across his features, after which he turned towards the broken plane. His eyes traced the lines in the ground back forwards, where he saw the two Mobians looking at him.

"... I see." He looked down at the Emerald in his hand and sighed. When he looked back up, Sally was standing right in front of him. "I-"

"Hospital," she demanded, not looking amused in the slightest. "Now."

There wasn't any room for argument. Not with that look she was giving him. So with another sigh, Sorun turned towards the opening of the hangar and began walking out.

The experience as a whole had been as frightening as it had been confusing for Sally. Frightening in that she'd been legitimately concerned for the health of everybody involved when Sorun began swinging around that sword. Confusion was for everything else: what happened with the plane, why Sorun took it in the first place, why he'd been acting inebriated one moment and completely fine the next, what was happening with him and the Chaos Emerald. Things she could have probably asked him on their way to the hospital, but she was more concerned with actually getting him in that place and getting checked out by the doctor before anything else.

Tails elected to stay behind and look over what was left of his plane. He'd found a full bottle of whatever that purple stuff had been Sorun had been drinking. She'd brought it with her for the doctor to examine while he was looking over Sorun. So she was left in the main hospital lobby, sighing and holding her arms as she stared down at the floor. She still wanted answers to a lot of questions to clear this whole thing up. Hopefully the doctor and Sorun would be able to answer them. And after that...

Well, after that Sally had no clue what she was supposed to do with Sorun.

"Sally?" she looked up from her feet. Nicole materialized ahead of her, hands clasped together and a small frown on her face. "I informed Mina that you needed to see her and that she should come to the hospital. She's on her way right now." She glanced a bit off to the side. "I would also like to inform you that my security feed caught Sonic at the hangar talking with Tails. It seems he caught wind of a disturbance and went to see what was going on. He... appeared less than pleased."

Sally groaned into her hands, and then began rubbing at her temples. "Not the news I wanted to hear, but... ugh, we'll deal with it. Thanks, Nicole."

"Is Sorun well?"

Sally dropped her hands and looked back at Nicole. "The doctor's checking him out, but he seemed okay. Physically, at least," she said. "Sorun, he, um... I'm not really sure to be honest. He got into something and we're trying to figure out what it was. And then there's the whole thing with the Ch-"

She was interrupted when the door leading to the lobby opened up. Both she and Nicole turned towards the door to see a yellow-furred head with purple hair glancing around and stopping on the two of them. Sally sighed in relief and stood up off of her chair.

"Mina. Hey," Sally greeted. She stepped right next to Nicole, while the mongoose stopped in front of the pair with an unsure expression on her face.

"Was something the matter?" Mina asked. "I heard from Nicole that Sorun came back. Did something happen?"

"Kind of," Sally admitted. "Mina, did you... did you give Sorun anything recently? Something drinkable?"

"Hm? Oh, right, that." Recognition flashed in her eyes as she gave the two of them a nod. "Ash and I were visiting him because his

Chao got... mischievous with Ash. I gave him some sodas as a present."

"... Sodas?" Sally repeated. "Just... normal sodas?"

"They were a gift from a fan back when I went on tour," she clarified. "I had one myself and wasn't very partial to it. I gave them to Sorun because, well... he seemed like he needed it."

The explanation did little but cause more confusion on Sally's part. Nicole, on the other hand, suddenly became much more attentive of the yellow Mobian in front of them. "Why do you say he needed the gift?" she asked.

"Oh, right. I wanted to tell you this earlier, Sally, but then I heard Sorun, er... left and decided to hold off. But now we're here, so..." Mina took in a deep breath and began to explain. "Sorun said that he isn't able to get a job. He said that since he's a human and can't do much people won't hire him instead of employing Mobians capable of doing more. I looked inside of his kitchen when I was visiting him and it looked like he was out of food."

Sally's eyes widened in shock at that. Nicole's reaction was much more apparent than hers, with her hands unclasping and her entire face becoming borderline-horrified. "W-what?" she stammered out. "Why didn't he tell us!?"

Seeing the visible shock on their faces, Mina grew uncomfortable and looked to the side while rubbing at her arm. "He said that he feels like an inconvenience to you all and would have rather starved than bother you with his problems."

"Oh, Sorun..." With a small sigh, Sally pressed a hand against her throbbing forehead. It certainly sounded like something he would do, which was the exact reason she believed Mina when she heard it, and immediately began to feel worry for her human friend. And irritation. That worry multiplied twofold when she glanced to the side at Nicole and was forced to perform a double-take. The AI's hands

were clenched at her sides, and a disbelieving, angered look was beginning to settle over her face. *" Oh , Sorun."*

She needed a quick distraction. An awkward cough was enough to gain both Nicole's and Mina's attention. "That's... disturbing to hear, Mina, but thanks for telling us." Sally made another sigh and rubbed at the back of her head. "I'm honestly not surprised he'd try and pull something like that. It's not really the first time. But I'm still trying to wrap my head around what was making him act so off..."

"I think I can provide an answer to that."

Three heads turned around to see a one-eyed duck Mobian enter the hospital lobby. He closed the door behind him, letting out a small sigh before he turned around to face the other three staring out at him. A clipboard was held in his right hand, and the final bottle of the purple soda Sorun had possessed was clutched in his left.

Sally was the first one to speak out. "Dr. Quack," she greeted. "How is Sorun doing?"

"All things considered he's as healthy as he could be," he answered. "That, uh... that thing he does, where he changes is hair white. He says it has a regenerative property. As far as I can tell it cured of him pretty much any and all of his injuries and cleansed his system of any toxins. He's completely fine."

The news brought visible relief on everybody present. "That's good," Sally said. "Has Sorun explained how he's able to do that?" she asked. "The way he was handling that Chaos Emerald wasn't normal."

"He said he can freely switch between his powers now with an Emerald," he answered, looking down at his clipboard. "Wanted me to look into it for him; apparently he's as much in the dark about it as you are. I found something, but I'd rather discuss that with him."

"I see..." One mystery solved, partially at least. "Do you know *why* he was acting the way he was?"

"Well, about that... I did some analysis on this stuff you brought in that you said Sorun was drinking." The doctor held up the purple bottle. "Sorun mentioned that this stuff was pretty old. You're the one that gave them to him, right, Mina?" he turned to the singer. "That true?"

She nodded. "Yes, but I had one of them shorty before I gave the rest to Sorun," she explained. "I felt completely fine. I don't see how they could of hurt Sorun..."

"Well, that's the thing. To put it in terms you would understand, some of the ingredients in this thing, well... fermented over time."

"Fermented?" Mina's eyes widened. "M-meaning it... it...?"

"It's alcoholic, yes," Quack answered, making the others' faces fall in realization. "Weirdest thing is that I ran tests on this, and the actual levels of alcohol in this are low. Really low. A Mobian child would have to drink fifty bottles of this stuff to even get a little bit tipsy."

"But... Sorun isn't a Mobian..." Sally realized with a small sigh. She quickly felt the anger that had been bubbling up over Sorun drinking began to fade away, replaced be relief that it'd been the result of a horrible accident and nothing more. Nearby she noticed Nicole relax a bit as well, though Mina seemed to be doing the exact opposite from how much she was suddenly fidgeting.

Quack nodded. "Yep. As far as I can figure, his system can't handle alcohol like a Mobian's can. In fact I'm pretty certain a bottle of alcohol meant for Mobians would more than likely kill him. Not that I know how he'd get one in the first place since I don't even know anybody in this city that can afford something like that," he added. "Like I said, the white-hair thing cleaned his system out, but I'd strongly recommend you keep him away from stuff like this from now on."

"So he's fine, then?" This question came from Nicole. "There's nothing wrong with him?"

"Physically, no. Mentally..." The duck hummed and looked back down at his clipboard. "Look, I'm not sure what's going on in his head that the first thing he decided to do when he lost all his inhibitions was steal a plane and leave the city for a bit, but based on what I heard about what happened I think I can guess he's not in a good place up there. He practically had no energy when I was talking with him and kept making morbid jokes. A sign of levity, maybe. Means of coping."

"No, Sorun always says weird stuff like..." Sally trailed off, blinking a few times and looking down at her feet. "Oh."

In some fairness, it was easy for her to see. Part of the reason she tolerated much of Sorun's actions was because she was aware of just how much the human had to endure. And while she hadn't thought he'd just be able to walk off the knowledge Earth was gone, Sally hadn't realized that just maybe Sorun was a bit worse off than what he suggested. She shared a knowing look with Nicole and looked back at the doctor.

"Is there anything you'd recommend?" Sally asked.

"Listen, princess, I'm not that kind of doctor. In fact there's nobody in the city qualified for that kind of thing," Dr. Quack admitted to her. "Just... I don't know, talk to him? Be there for him? I fix wounded bodies, not wounded souls." He turned around back to the door he'd previously come out of. "There's a couple more things I needed to discuss with him, but after that he should be fine to go home. Have a good night, all."

He left shortly after saying that. Sally was left with slumped shoulders, exhaling an exhausted breath as she massaged her forehead to quell the growing headache. Nicole didn't seem to be doing much better than her, and Mina had a mortified expression on her face.

"You guys, I am so sorry," Mina apologized in a distraught tone. "I-I would never have given those to Sorun if I knew-"

"No, Mina, it's... it's fine," Sally tiredly sighed out. "We didn't know, now we do, and nobody was hur... it worked out."

"I still feel like I should stay and apologize to-"

"We'll do it on your behalf," Nicole offered. "It's late and I'm sure that it's been a trying enough time for you. We can handle things from here."

Mina blinked and looked towards the AI, who was staring right at her, expression blank and unreadable. After a few moments, she said, "Alright, then. I guess I'll go home." She turned towards the exit to the lobby. "Tell Sorun I said hi. And, you know... that I'm really sorry about all this."

Shortly after Mina left, Nicole wordlessly turned towards the nearest chair and sat down in it. Sally quietly observed as she slumped forwards, cradling her head in her hands and letting some of her black hair spill between her fingers. Sally watched the display, and then sighed and moved to sit down in the chair right next to her. She watched Nicole for a few more moments as she held the position of holding her head, and then reached up to place a comforting hand on her back.

"Hey," she quietly mumbled in her best helpful tone. "You doing alright?"

"He frustrates me so much sometimes, Sally," Nicole mumbled back. "I care for him dearly but he keeps acting out like this."

"The plane?" Sally guessed.

Nicole shook her head. "It was an accident, I can't blame him for that," she said. "It's... it's everything else."

"Right, the food thing..." the chipmunk realized. "Yeah, I hadn't realized things were that bad with him. I wish he'd come to one of us and told us about it."

"But he never does!" Nicole bolted upright in her seat fast enough that Sally leaned back in surprise. She was even more surprised to see the angered look on her face return. "He puts so little value on his own life. It feels like he doesn't even acknowledge how we feel about how he treats himself." She looked to the side at Sally with a pleading look, asking for help. "Why is he like this, Sally?"

"Look, Nicole, he's... Sorun is... the thing you have to understand..." When her mind came up blank, Sally groaned out loudly and shook her head. "There's no getting around it. Look, Nicole, guys are just idiots sometimes."

"Even Sorun?"

" *Especially* Sorun..." Sally ground out, startling Nicole. "He does a lot of things that makes me question his intelligence, but looking past all that he's... it's just this thing with guys. I don't know if it's a pride thing, or some stupid universal rule they all like to follow or what, but sometimes they just do stupid things for stupid reasons." She took a calming breath and held a hand to her forehead. "I really am upset about what happened when he tried finding work, but it's not like I can just go out there and force somebody to give him a job. On the other hand, yes, we could have helped him and he should have come to us."

"But he stayed quiet," Nicole muttered, almost sounding bitter. "Again. He always hides behind that excuse that he doesn't want to trouble us." Her face fell drastically. "Why can't he just understand I *want* to help him...?"

"I don't know. I think there's more going on than just that," Sally said. "You have to realize he just lost his entire world, and it's barely been half a month. I can tell you from experience, back when Mobotropolis was lost when we were kids, that... well, that kind of thing doesn't

just go away overnight, Nicole. Everybody has different ways of coping, but Sorun's always been odd so I don't-"

"I've tried being there for him, though," Nicole argued. "He wouldn't say a single word during that first week. I was worried enough that I thought about bringing him back to the hospital until he said he tried to find work to support himself and keep himself occupied. Things seemed fine in the following days, and he'd opened up to me more. He truly appeared to be getting better. I wish he'd just told me things were going so poorly..."

It sounded to her like he'd been lying again about his own wellbeing. And as unfortunate as it was, Sally was fully aware that Sorun had too much experience in that field. Much more than she was comfortable with anybody having, especially an experienced liar like him. "I wish he'd do a lot of things," Sally agreed with a huff. "Listen, maybe... if he really needs something to do, and if he does have some modicum of his power back, maybe he can go back to being a Freedom Fighter. We could keep a closer eye on him and-"

"No."

It'd been such an intense "no" that cut Sally off she was forced to blink and stare at the lynx sitting next to her in bewilderment. Nicole held a completely different gaze, leveling her eyes with Sally's without a single hint of amusement to be found in her features.

"It was only a suggestion-"

"It's an ill-conceived one," Nicole interrupted, silencing Sally once again. "You saw what he was like, Sally. How he is right now. He isn't mentally fit to be going back into the field as he is at the moment." Her expression softened some, and she looked down a bit. "Beyond that, he... confides in me things he doesn't share with the rest of you. He doesn't like fighting. Every single mission he went on was a struggle that strained him more each time. It's too mentally taxing for him, and he needs less stress in his life, not more. He can't anymore. And I don't want him to try."

Surprising show of protectiveness over Sorun aside, Sally understood, at least in some part. Some people weren't cut out for the life they lived. On the day Sorun found out his world was gone, and he'd flat-out stated to them that he didn't want to go back to being a Freedom Fighter, she understood he didn't have the same limits they did. Saw it all the time when she watched him grow more and more tired and haggard with each and every passing day when he was one. It was only when the truth was revealed to them all she saw that he only put up with it because he had no other choice and was dying anyways. He'd practically run himself ragged working with them for under half a year.

Add into his world and people being gone and recent events and she suddenly realized it was probably no wonder he was acting the way he was. All that stress was likely crushing Sorun. Powers or not, that wasn't something she wanted to put in live combat. More than that she just didn't want to put Sorun through that kind of thing again when he really wasn't willing or able. Physically or mentally.

"You have a point," Sally finally admitted with a sigh, relieving Nicole a great deal. "He's done. I know, I just... I don't know what we're supposed to do with him." She rubbed the side of her head in thought. "Maybe I can ask around, see if I can find something for him since he can't on his own. And maybe in the meantime we should spend a bit more time with him. All of us."

Nicole looked unsure at the prospect. "Is that the wisest decision? With the way things have been going-"

"Eggman's and his new private army of henchmen been quiet ever since we started squashing down every operation he attempts to get a leg-up. We all need a break in the downtime anyways," Sally reasoned. "Now's actually the best time to try and do this kind of thing the more I think about it. I'm sure everyone would be fine with it, and it'd do him some good." She reached over and gave Nicole's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "It's gonna be fine, Nicole. He'll get better. We just need to give him some company and time."

"... Perhaps it's for the best, then," Nicole admitted in a quiet tone. Her face tensed again. "I shall be having words with him about his lying habit. It's beginning to become problematic." She glanced to the side in thought. "Perhaps I should begin monitoring him again as well."

"Um." Sally blinked a few times and tilted her head. "That's going a bit far, isn't it?"

"It's only for a short time. Until I'm convinced he isn't a danger to himself," she reasoned. "Seeing as he evidently crashed an airplane as a result of him trying to 'deal with his own problems on his own,' as Sorun would likely put it, I'm not convinced." She glanced back at Sally. "I'm just worried for his safety. He's fragile."

"Yeah, I know." Even as Sally said this, she watched as Nicole went back to silently contemplating to herself over Sorun, no doubt. What those contemplations entailed was honestly something she figured she was better off not knowing, and decided whatever Nicole had planned Sorun would just have to deal with it. It was his fault, after all.

She had enough headaches as it was.

"In my defense, how was I supposed to know that stuff was alcoholic?"

"Chao chao-chao. Chao-chao chao chao."

"I didn't understand a word of that."

Virgil made an annoyed huff and turned his head away from Sorun. Sorun, meanwhile, made his own huff and turned his head towards the window to look out into the darkened city.

In some strange twist of fate the duck doctor decided to put Sorun in the exact same hospital room he'd been staying at back when he

used to have only one arm and eye. He didn't even know if the doctor did that on purpose or if he did it just to mess with Sorun. He'd been more keen on running all sorts of tests on Sorun, some unnecessary in Sorun's opinion due to the regeneration, others in response to the inquiry Sorun had given the doctor regarding what could have changed in him to cause him to hold and use a Chaos Emerald like he could now.

It wasn't normal. Something in Sorun changed, he just didn't know what. And the doctor, after Sorun had explained this all to him, had agreed and decided to run additional tests. Lots of questions, lots of poking and prodding, lots of needles and blood being drawn, lots of Sorun wishing he'd been anywhere but there at the moment. This was all in addition to him testing to find out why Sorun had been blacking out, which, in a shocking twist, turned out to be because Mina quite literally gifted him poison.

... Perhaps that wasn't doing the mongoose justice. From how Dr. Quack put it Mobians had a stupidly high tolerance to alcohol. Or maybe everything on this planet did since the evolutionary curve was so high above him and he was the strange one weak to alcohol. Wouldn't be the first time him being the most un-evolved being on the planet bit him in the ass. So he couldn't blame Mina seeing as there as no feasible way she could have known how harmful those purple drinks would be to Sorun. And maybe he should have realized that the drinks had something to do with it and shouldn't have opted to go for a second one when he came back.

Probably what Virgil was so upset about now that he thought about it. Apparently he'd been drunkenly waving around the Yamato and Virgil had to cut him to get him to drop it before he accidentally sliced Tails or Sally.

Wasn't one of his finer moments.

"Well, if there's a silver lining to any of this it might be that I might be able to spin to Tails I wasn't in the right state of mind so he can't

blame me for the plane. Maybe. Hopefully." Sorun sighed and ran a hand over his face. *"What a huge mess."*

His hand fell away, and he peered through his locks of dark hair towards the Emerald sitting on the counter nearby, with Virgil sitting right next to it. He hoped the doctor would be able to come up with some sort of answer to what happened to him. It kept nagging at him and he wanted it answered.

Sorun's silent prayers were answered when the door to his room opened and was shut again once the duck doctor, clipboard in hand, walked in. Sorun gave the doctor a half-wave. "Doc. Hey," he greeted. "Uh, things going alright?"

"Hm? Oh, fine, fine." He stopped in front of Sorun and began thumbing through some of the sheets on his clipboard. "You're the picture of perfect health, at least by your species' standard. I'm assuming. I was trained to treat Mobians, you see, but from what I can tell you're looking fine."

Sorun pursed his lips and glanced to the side. "Meant with the others," he quietly mumbled.

"Oh. The one that brought you in." Dr. Quack cleared his throat. "The princess isn't particularly thrilled about all this."

"Oohh..."

"Nicole was there as well. She looked aggravated."

"Ooo *oohhh* ..." That was worrying on all sorts of uncomfortable levels. "Problems for later," he tried to reassure himself as he focused back on the duck. "Well, in any event, I'll try and be careful with what I eat from now on. On another note, that other thing I asked for." He glanced to the side at the blue Emerald. "Did you figure anything out in regards to that?"

The duck followed Sorun's gaze to the Emerald. "You're sure you're not just misinterpreting this?" he asked, looking back at Sorun.

"Doc, there isn't exactly a precedent I'm followin' here. But every time I used to touch one it got, I don't know, subsumed into me?" He gestured towards the gem. "Now I can touch it and use its power without doin' that. It's odd. It's abnormal. I'm trying to rationalize it."

"Does it really matter all that much?" he asked him. "If there are no ill effects-"

"These things are literally poison to me," Sorun pointed out. "For all I know using it just like this is as harmful as me absorbing it, and I'd rather not get years taken off my life again. Had enough of that the first time around."

"Fair point." Dr. Quack looked back to his clipboard. "I told you already that I'm not really an expert on Chaos energies. I'm a doctor, not a... well, I'm not even sure what profession would study that sort of thing. But you'll recall earlier that I examined you with some equipment we have for measuring Chaos levels."

"Really, now?" Sorun demurred. "You claim not to be an expert on it, but you monitor the phenomenon?"

"It's on the off-chance somebody with Chaos-enhanced abilities come to us. I used to examine Sonic a lot."

"Ah." Sorun nodded in understanding.

"Anyways," Dr. Quack continued, nodding his head next to the collection of equipment next to the Emerald that Virgil was resting against, "as far as I can tell you still don't have a link of any kind connecting you to the Chaos Force. That said..."

"Yeah?"

"I compared your bloodwork from the first time you were in here to this time. There were some differences I saw that I wanted you to be aware of." As the doctor flipped through a sheet on his clipboard, Sorun leaned forwards with clear interest. "Minute differences, small changes, mostly in your genetic coding I found."

Sorun sputtered. "T-that don't sound small, doc."

"Well, other than that I haven't noticed any changes with you physiologically speaking, and you haven't noticed any behavioral changes with yourself. Barring, um... outside factors going on in your life, of course." He cleared his throat and focused much harder on the clipboard. "From what I can tell these changes in your genetic structure are what allows your unique interaction with the Chaos Emerald. As for the cause, the only conclusion I can come to is that exposure to the radiation that bled in from the portal leading to your world caused this."

Sorun blinked. He blinked again, and then gave the duck an odd, dubious look. "You said those meds you gave me would clear that up," he warily said.

"Of any potential illness caused from radiation poisoning, yes, but evidently your exposure still caused some inherent change in you," the doctor clarified. "A... mutation of sorts, you could say."

"A muta- come on," Sorun groaned. "Look, doc, I never studied at an accredited institution, but even I know radiation doesn't mutate you to give you super powers." Or magically grant one the ability to suddenly wield cosmic energy capable of doing anything. Energy his entire species was allergic to. That *killed* him. A mutation couldn't change something that fundamental within him, could it? "Th-this ain't a comic book," he said, partly in disbelief. "Mutations that give me a tumor, sure, but-but *that* ? How does that make sense?"

"How does a gem of mystical energy giving you the ability to conjure a sword able to cut through space-time make sense?"

Any further argument Sorun held died in his throat.

Sighing, the doctor lowered the clipboard and looked straight into Sorun's eye with his one good one. "Look, Sorun, I don't have all the answers. Like I said, Chaos energy is just too far outside my field. You asked why you're suddenly able to interact with the Chaos Emerald like you can, and I told you. I can tell you the how of it, just not the why. You'll have to take that as you will."

It wasn't a very satisfactory answer, but it was one Sorun realized he'd have to accept. There was already plenty of weirdness surrounding him and this world. All in all hearing this from the doctor didn't do much to breach that weird ceiling. Disconcerting, slightly, but the doctor had assured him there was actually nothing *wrong* with Sorun, which was relieving on that note at least. Nothing wrong. Just changed.

"It's weird, but... whatever. Mutation. Sure. I'm a mutant now. Why not?" Sorun sighed and slid off the bed. "Well, 'least my hair ain't falling out," he reasoned as he stepped towards the counter. "Thanks for this, doc."

"Sure, it's no problem," he heard the duck call from behind Sorun. "You might wanna meet back up with those two waiting outside for you, though. They're, uh... well, I think they'd like to have a word with you."

"Yeah, don't I know it. Don't be surprised if I wind up right back in here," Sorun sarcastically remarked in a bit of a gloomy tone. He didn't know what to expect walking out there. Other than it'd probably be painful. And Mina had probably told them of his food problem too, which... he didn't imagine Nicole would take a liking to. There'd probably be yelling. At him. Because he was a terrible person who burdened everybody around him no matter what he did. *"Christ, maybe I shoulda just stayed on that island."*

He reached out towards Virgil, pausing when he saw the Chao was still sleeping. He tilted his head at the sight, and then scooped up the

unconscious Chao's body and carefully hung him on his shoulder. It was when he was moving his hand away from the counter, though, that some movement caught his eye. A red needle on one of the doctor's instruments, like the gauge on a speedometer. It was attached to some dish-like implement fitted to a handle. When Sorun moved his hand away, the needle on the gauge went back to resting on the left side, where he assumed zero was amidst all those tick marks behind it. But when he moved his hand back in front of it, the needle went wild, moving left and right in the gauge like it didn't know where it wanted to be. And when Sorun moved his hand back away, it settled back down to zero.

"... Hey, doc?" Sorun picked the instrument up and held it up for the doctor to see. "What's this?"

"It's a tool I use to measure levels of Chaos energy," Dr. Quack answered.

"..." Sorun brought the tool closer to his face. "You said I don't have a link."

"You don't. I checked."

"... Alright, then. Weird." Shrugging, he set the instrument back down on the table, and then reached over to pick the Emerald up. More weirdness he didn't understand. At this point he was more concerned with what was ahead of him than whatever was going on with his body, though. "I'm gonna go. Take care."

The duck Mobian waved him off without another word. Sorun took that as his cue to leave, exiting the room and making his way towards where he remembered the lobby was. Where Nicole and Sally were likely waiting for him if what the doctor said was true. A lot of the time spent walking there Sorun had spent trying to think up what to say. As always, he failed in this regard and had to resort to rubbing his thumb over the Chaos Emerald in an attempt to comfort himself.

It did, somewhat. Holding that power in his hand. A bit of security that he doubted would help him weather this coming storm. It was something, though, and the sleeping Chao on his shoulder sure wasn't much help.

"Maybe I should use Yamato to teleport back to the house? Nah, won't work, Nicole can teleport anywhere in the city. And that'd just make her more mad at me. The ability to stall for a few more minutes sounds rather tempting, however..."

Finally making it to the lobby door and stepping out into the lobby was a harrowing experience in of itself considering how hard Sorun's heart was thumping in his chest. He immediately saw Sally and Nicole, both of which had snapped their gazes towards Sorun. Sally had an assortment of conflicting emotions on her face while Nicole *oh she looked pissed* .

"..." Sorun made a low breath and collapsed in the nearest chair he could find, not having the energy to stand when he saw Nicole giving him that look. Angry. She'd never looked that angry with him before. He didn't know how to deal with that look. It hurt just acknowledging it, knowing he was the cause of her distress. Made him feel miserable.

"I'd... like to apologize for any trouble I've caused," Sorun quietly mumbled in a guilty voice, eyes trained right on the ground out of shame so he didn't have to look at the girls whose gazes he could feel boring into his soul. "I wasn't in the right state of mind at the time."

"Clearly not." That sharp tone Sally took with Sorun had him wincing. He saw her feet stop right in front of him, and then, oddly, saw her outstretched hand enter his vision. "Before anything else, though, I think I should hold onto that."

Sorun immediately knew what she was referring to. He glanced at his left hand holding the Chaos Emerald, which had automatically shifted into the Yamato without him even thinking of it. Reflexively, he

curled the sword into himself, holding its sheathed blade with both hands. "Why? Why's it any better with you than me?"

He glanced up at Sally, who was giving him an exhaustive look. "You almost hurt me and Tails with it," she said. "I just feel it's safer away from you for the moment."

Valid argument. Sorun didn't care. "That was an accident. I wasn't thinking clearly." He hugged the sword closer to his chest. "It's mine. It belongs to me. You can't have it."

"Sorun, you can't claim ownership on a *Chaos Emerald* ."

His eyes grew challenging. "Seeing as how I *died* because of them I figured I'm more entitled to them than anyone else on the planet," Sorun shot back.

"That's not how it works." Sally's face grew frustrated. "Why won't you give it up?"

Because it was his only source of power. Without it he was vulnerable. People he cared about were vulnerable. It was the only thing that gave him any worth or value. Without Yamato he was nothing. "I need it," he mumbled out.

"Sorun..." Sally eyes trailed downwards to the sword, and then back up to Sorun's face. She made a short sigh. "You have no reason to have that," she tried in a softer voice. "You're in the city. You're safe. You don't need a weapon that dangerous, okay? Now please give it to me."

Her words caused him to loosen his grip on the katana somewhat, though he still held it close to him. Sally was giving him *that* look, though, that compassionate look that was becoming more and more impatient, and he knew deep down, one way or another, she was going to get it from him. Fighting her on it wasn't going to do him any good, and he didn't need to add any more tension to an already tenuous situation. So, with extreme reluctance, he handed her the

katana. If turned back into the Chaos Emerald once it left Sorun's hands to transfer to Sally's, but he still felt the effect of it leaving regardless.

Emptiness. Vulnerability. Weakness. He felt frightened knowing the gem was no longer in his possession, and immediately yearned to have it back once more. He knew better than to beg for it, though, no matter how much he wanted to. He had an image, however shot that was at this point. It didn't stop him from maintaining eye contact with the gem.

"Thank you, Sorun," Sally said, though she still kept a wary eye on the human still staring so intently at the Chaos Emerald. "Now do you want to talk about what's been going on with you?"

"What is there to say?" Sorun's gaze dipped back down to his feet when he saw, beyond the Emerald, Nicole was staring at him from behind Sally. She still had that look on her face. "I don't know *why* I stole the plane. I don't remember because of that purple stuff. I came back as soon as I could. I found the Emerald and found out I can use them freely now."

"I'm glad to hear that, Sorun, but do you want to talk about *why* your... inebriated self decided to take Tails' plane on a joyride?" Sally asked. "Or maybe we should talk about your home life and how it's going so poorly?"

Sorun sank further into his chair. "I don't know," he murmured in a quiet voice. He could practically feel the dissatisfaction his answer garnered from both Sally and Nicole. "Maybe drunk me realized how much of a problem just me existing is for everybody around me. Maybe I thought everybody was better off if I wasn't around." His head sagged to the side. "I don't even know why I bothered coming back to life when-"

A flash of green light signified Nicole teleporting right next to him, making Sorun flinch in his seat. He flinched again when he felt her

hand grip his wrist, and when he looked up at her, he visibly withered when he saw her expression had grown worse.

"I will not hear any more of this." She glanced towards Sally. "I will take care of things from here." She looked back at Sorun, her gaze nearly burning. " *You* are going home."

"What-?"

Sorun didn't get a chance to finish. In another flash of green light he found he was no longer sitting on a hard folding chair. He was sitting on something soft. A couch. *His* couch. The one in his house. The house Nicole made for him.

The same Nicole that was standing in front of him looking more cross than he'd ever seen her. A part of him wanted to jokingly ask if she intended to teleport him every single time he did something to displease her. His wiser half smacked the other half and told it that was a terrible idea and that they needed to be silent at the moment.

"I can forgive the incident with the plane, as that involved factors outside of your control," Nicole began, sounding so very close to shouting. "But *this* ? Concealing that you were *starving yourself* and doing nothing to try and remedy the problem? Sorun, *why* ?" She took a step closer to him, her fury visibly worsening. "And questioning the value of your own life like that?"

It was amazing how she could sound so icy and heated at the same time, Sorun thought. "I didn't mean that," he attempted. "It slipped out."

"It 'slipped out,'" Nicole repeated. "I won't even pretend to believe that. And I *will not* hear of you demeaning your life like that again. There are many within this city alone that find your life precious, myself included. I would think you would be of the same mind, but it appears I am mistaken." She leaned closer to Sorun so her face was closer to his, with the human's own face having broken out in a cold sweat. "Why is this?"

It was as much a demand as it was a question. One Sorun didn't know the answer to, because in all honesty, it had slipped out. "I don't know."

Such a childish answer did nothing to placate Nicole, though perhaps the look on his face did. The terror combined with the intense guilt on Sorun's face had given Nicole pause, and a second later she'd stood back to her full height while relaxing slightly. Still visibly angry. But it was a step in the right direction.

"We will broach this subject later in the conversation," she decided, making Sorun uncomfortably squirm in the couch under hey gaze. She wouldn't let it go. "Why did you keep the fact you were starving to yourself?"

"... I did try doing something about it," he weakly mumbled. "I couldn't-"

"You could have come to me!" The dam burst. It wasn't shouting, but the raised, angered tone Nicole took still made Sorun meekly shrink back further into the couch in an attempt to fuse with the cushions. "You could have come to any of us for help! We would have aided you!"

"You always do something to aid me." His hair had long since been brushed in front of his face in a feeble attempt of trying to hide Nicole from his sight, and his own face from her. "I always have to go to people for help. You know what that feels like? Having to rely on everyone for everything all the time?" He sighed and looked up towards the ceiling. "It should just be me that has to deal with all my issues. I shouldn't have to drag down people I care about just for my sake."

Some of the visible anger Nicole held left her in an instant. In its place grew sadness as she looked towards Sorun. "You don't have to do everything on your own, Sorun. You have friends for a reason." She approached the couch and sat down next to Sorun. He flinched when he felt the cushions next to him compressed, but relaxed a

second later. "And I try, Sorun. I truly do try to help you, but sometimes it feels as if you push me and every other person away. But at the same time you hold such disregard for yourself it seems as if you don't even want to help yourself." She looked towards him with a questioning look. "Do you truly believe you don't deserve our help?"

"... It's not that, it..." Sorun trailed off, unsure of what to say. He reached towards his shoulder, plucking a sleeping Virgil off and placing him on the armrest near him. "Well, maybe," he admitted to Nicole without looking at her. "Ever since I lost my home it's felt as if I've been in a haze. I don't know what to do, what I should do, why I should even keep on going. I don't know what the point of it is anymore. Living for the sake of living just seems... hollow, at this point. I'd say it makes me feel like *a* Hollow, but, well... you wouldn't understand what that means."

"Another obscure reference from your world?" she asked.

"It's from a game. A series of them, actually. But I think the tone they had was a bit too dark and dreary for this place," Sorun answered. "... Dave would have appreciated the reference."

Nicole's shoulders fell. Her eyes glanced towards the floor for a moment, and then rose back up to Sorun. She placed a hand on his shoulder while Sorun continued to stare ahead. "Is this why you place so little value on yourself? Why you question being alive?" His silence was enough of an answer for her. "Sorun, that is no reason to be thinking like this. People care about you. *I* care about you."

"I don't see why you care for me when I keep dragging people down. You included."

Some of Nicole's frustration returned. "I told you why I care for you. Or did you forget everything I've said to you?"

"Of course I haven't," Sorun mumbled.

"Then stop speaking foolishness," she said. "I care for your wellbeing, Sorun. It's not a burden if I want to help you. That's why it hurts when you treat yourself like this without even thinking of how I and the others feel. It's as if you're willfully negligent of how I feel. I don't like it."

"That was never my intention. But... for what it's worth I'm sorry. I didn't mean for any of this to happen." When he looked to the side at Nicole's face, it felt like a punch in the gut. All the anger was gone at this point. It was more anguish now compared to anything else, complete with her ears completely flattened against her head. Anguish directed towards him. "I meant somebody while I was gone," Sorun said, making her ears perk up a bit in interest. "He... had similar circumstances to me, believe it or not. Despite that, he seemed, well, normal. I asked him how and he gave a predictable enough answer. He just stuck by to people he was close with." A small breath him, and his eyes glanced to the hand on his shoulder. "I realize I haven't been very... cooperative with your efforts to help me. I really do want to get better," he continued. "Like he did. I... just don't know if I can. Between my home and myself, it's all so much."

Nicole's expression changed, and her entire body straightened. Her face brightened the barest bit, pleased with at least something he said. "I'm glad to hear you say this, Sorun. But you need to stop pushing people away from you." She moved closer to Sorun and, tired of him avoiding her face, gripped both of his shoulders, and then turned him so that they faced each other. "I want you to stop wasting away alone in this house and start interacting with the others. And no more lying to spare others' feelings."

Sorun grew visibly uncomfortable with the prospect and tried leaning out from Nicole's grip. She wouldn't let him go. "You visiting is enough," he tried, though Nicole clearly wasn't convinced from the flat look she gave him.

"Evidently not, as you wouldn't be starving yourself and stealing planes otherwise. I'm still coming to see you, but the others are going to make time to try and get you more involved."

"They have busy schedules, I'm sure they have more important things to do than-"

"That is not for you to decide," Nicole told him in a firm tone. "We're doing this for your sake, whether you like it or not. As for the food situation..." She glanced towards the kitchen, her expression falling a bit at the empty sight. "I'm aware you at least tried to make some effort, Sorun, and that this environment is apparently... not very accommodating of you. Sally said she would ask around and see if she could find anything for you."

There wasn't any room for arguments. That much was clear for Sorun to see, especially with that look she was giving him. Saying "no" just wasn't an option, because if he did they'd probably break down his door and force him to hang out with them. Or whatever they were gonna do. Or even worse Nicole would just make his door disappear. Wouldn't be the first time she used doors against him.

So, with a resigned sigh, Sorun reached up and placed his hands on top of Nicole's. "Fine. If it'll get you to stop worrying about me. No more bottling up my problems. No more bottles period. That was a horrible experience all around drinking that stuff and I don't even remember it."

The faintest amount of amusement played across Nicole's face. "That would be preferable. Speaking of which, you needn't worry yourself over Tails' plane; I'll endeavor to replace it tomorrow. You'll need to explain yourself to him yourself, however." Her form began dissolving away in green and black squares. "I'll bring some food tomorrow to help tide you over until we figure something out. We'll discuss more afterwards. Until then, I've matters to attend to. Have a good night, Sorun."

She disappeared before Sorun could get another word in. He stared after where she disappeared from on the couch, and then made a small groan as he sat back against the couch. Besides him, Virgil turned around where he lied and continued sleeping.

"I feel like she's worried enough that she'll force-feed me if I refuse to accept charity," Sorun grumbled to himself as he rubbed a hand over his face. The weariness was beginning to get to him, and it was only now he realized how tired he really was. "Ugh, man..."

Chapter 68

Recursion Error

Episode 68- It's a step forwards

Sorun didn't know how to deal with depression.

He'd never taken a psychology class. Never was even remotely invested into the subject. Had he seen it? Sure, of course. Half the people he knew on Earth were depressed. Here on Mobius? The concept existed, of course, but Mobians themselves were... robust creatures.

The teen tried looking back at his memories of fiction at severely depressed fictional characters, with his other half reminding him that maybe taking advice from fictional characters about psychological issues wasn't such a great idea, but he'd been desperate and tried it anyways. What had he learned from that mental excursion?

Well, nothing, really. Other than he knew a lot of depressed fictional characters that were either saved through the power of friendship or became raving psychos. Or just... kind of stayed the same throughout their entire screen time with some character development here or there. Or died. Neither fate seemed to appealing to Sorun. All of his friends seemed to collectively agree that the power of friendship was all he needed to boost him out of this "funk" as it were.

Power of friendship be damned, because he was pretty sure they didn't know what they were doing, either.

"Yeah, Amy, because this is what I wanted to waste my day doing. Go shopping with you."

The basic gist was that everybody was given the rundown of Sorun's situation. So of course they volunteered to help. To that end, they'd all decided he'd be rotated between everybody for "friendship sessions" with them to help him get better. He didn't know how that was supposed to work. He was pretty sure they were just trying to distract him as much as possible in the hope that he'd eventually get better on his own if his mind was taken off the more bad parts of his thoughts. He kind of hoped they were right.

Thankfully nobody actually used the phrase "friendship session", because he probably would have punched the person who suggested it.

First on was Amy, who decided they'd do something she enjoyed doing. Which was shopping for clothes. Because nothing cheered Sorun up like watching someone buy something so he could be reminded he was flat broke.

Every man's dream, really.

Amy, in response to Sorun's flippant disregard of her hobby, had pouted at him and placed her hands on her hips. They stood outside the city's market, with Amy's back to its entrance and with Sorun staring at the pink hedgehog with dull eyes. She didn't seem to approve of his attitude. He couldn't find it in himself to care.

"First of all, it's not a waste. Second of all, it'll be fun!" she claimed.

Sorun scoffed. "How's buying stuff for you fun?"

"It's not all for me. Mostly," she quickly mumbled while turning her head to the side. "I just wanted to get some gifts for the others, and I thought maybe you could help me out! Maybe you could buy something for someone you really like if you find something in the process."

"Yes, of course. I'll just use my not-money to buy an extravagant gift." His voice dripped in sarcasm, though it was seemingly lost on

the pink hedgehog standing in front of him.

Amy squinted and tilted her head to the side. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I live in poverty."

He could practically see the gears in Amy's head begin to turn. After they finished, she grew an incredibly awkward I-can't-believe-what-I've-done look, and then began speed walking forwards and away from the market. She'd grabbed Sorun's wrist and began dragging him away in the process, with the human forced to walk with her.

"You know what? Gifts are overrated anyways," Amy claimed. "I'm sure we can find something else that's fun to do! What do you like to do for fun?"

"Sleep," Sorun deadpanned as he was dragged along the streets.

A frustrated huff left Amy, after which they stopped on a sidewalk corner. She released Sorun's hand and turned to face him once more. "That's not what I meant and you know it," she said. "What about those video game things you like so much? I know you have the console from the HQ back at home. We could do that!"

"That wouldn't be fun."

Amy gave him an inquisitive look. "Why wouldn't it be fun?"

"The same reason I wouldn't get any satisfaction from punching a child in the face," Sorun's mind snarked. "You're terrible at games. I wouldn't get anything out of beating the likes of you. A complete novice."

She dared to look offended by the claim. "Sorun, come on, that's not fair. I know I've barely ever touched that thing, but don't you think calling me terrible at it is a bit much?"

"Are you Nicole?"

"... No?"

"Then you're terrible."

"Come on!" she stomped her foot down in indignation and gave him a heated look. "You say that like she's the only fun person you can play those things with."

"She is. She's the only one that can challenge me. She even wins half the time," he said to her. "Not even Sonic compares to her. They're on completely different levels." The corners of his mouth twitched upwards. "Being the fastest thing alive doesn't mean much when the game has a hard limit on how fast it can read controller inputs. And he fails to grasp the finer arts that is playing those games. Pattern recognition, timing, situational awareness and adaptivity. He's too headstrong for most of these. He relies on pure reflexes alone." Given they were *Sonic's* reflexes that actually carried him quite far. In fact, he was fairly certain the only reason he and Shadow were in the middle of the leaderboard, right between the gap separating him and Nicole from everyone else, in those games was because of their absurd reflexes. Vital, sure. But reflexes weren't everything. Sorun was a walking testament to that.

It was because Sonic couldn't learn that button mashing wasn't everything that Sorun would always be superior to him in that regard.

"Sheesh. If you like playing them with her so much then why don't you do it more often?" an exasperated Amy asked him.

"We do. Frequently." Almost daily, really, and times they didn't were just when they decided to talk the whole time. "Speaking of which..."

Sorun turned his head to the side, towards a street lamp. He looked up it, and he could have sworn that the lightbulb in the street lamp looked awfully similar to a camera lens. But then he blinked, and of course when he opened his eyes it was back to being an ordinary lightbulb. Like he'd just imagined it.

Nanites really were interesting.

"She's watching me again," Sorun intoned, making Amy follow Sorun's gaze to the street lamp. "Nicole keeps sneaking cameras around me thinking I don't notice. I notice," he said, a bit more loudly than he normally spoke. "You have any idea what she's doing?" Sorun asked in his normal volume when he looked back down at Amy.

Amy bit her lower lip when she turned back to Sorun. "She's... just worried about you. We all are," she confessed. "You just haven't been yourself lately. We know *why* , we just... we just wanna help you." She made a frustrated sigh and crossed her arms. "And can you really blame Nicole? You didn't see because you left, but you really, really scared her when you stole Tails' plane. She wouldn't calm down the entire time you were gone."

"I... hadn't known that." Nobody elected to tell him what he would have assumed to be pertinent information. He made a resigned noise and glanced to the side. Another mistake he had to rectify. "It isn't so bad," he said. "At least she respects my privacy and only spies on me outdoors. As far as I know, anyways," he quietly mumbled out.

He didn't think she'd go that far. Honestly doubted it, really. There were a lot of hard lines and boundaries Nicole refused to cross out of decency, and disrespecting the citizens' privacy was one of them. Public spaces like sidewalks and the park were one thing. The inside of homes may as well have been a whole other world, and she was acutely aware of this.

"Sorun, come on. You know Nicole wouldn't do that." Amy softly punched Sorun in the arm and gave him a half-grin. "Now come on, think of something fun we can do."

"You decide," Sorun said. "What do you even like doing outside of shopping?"

"Well...~ We could always go visit Sonic."

Sorun mentally recoiled from the idea. "I thought we were supposed to be doing something fun?"

"You don't think it'd be fun to go see Sonic?"

"It feels more like a punishment than anything else." A deserved one, maybe, but just because he deserved it didn't mean he was inclined to endure it.

"Sorun!" That offended shriek from Amy could have probably shattered glass if she tried hard enough. It was enough to make Sorun wince at her while she glared at him. "What do you have against him, anyways?"

"I don't *have* anything against him," Sorun denied. "He's... obnoxious at times. That's all."

"Tah!" Amy waved him off and turned away from Sorun. "Well, I don't know what you want to do, Sorun. You didn't want to look at dresses with me, you didn't want to go shopping-"

"No man wants to do these things."

"And who decided that!?" As Amy yelled that towards the sky, Sorun turned around and began walking the opposite direction of her. "Just because *you* don't like doing things which I think are perfectly normal for everybody to do doesn't mean every guy has to hate it! You like doing lots of things I think are just for children! Like those stupid games of yours." She rounded towards him. "And another thing-!"

Her voice cut off when she saw the space behind her was empty.

"Uh... S-Sorun?"

"Yeah, still here." Amy jumped when she heard Sorun speak just behind her. She spun around to see the human calmly standing behind her with his hands tucked in his pockets. "I walked off halfway

through that, but then realized that was kind of a jerk thing to pull and came back," he explained. "Look, Amy, I don't want to be rude, I just... I really don't want to do any of that, you know?"

"Ah, well..." Amy sighed out and rubbed the back of her head as she glanced away. "I don't know, Sorun, do you at least wanna go get lunch? Speaking of which, you've been eating again, right?"

An embarrassed sigh left Sorun. "Sally's been donating some food to me 'til I figure something out. And Nicole threatened to lock me in a hospital room and have the doctors feed me intravenously if she saw signs of me getting skinnier and not eating." He made a "tch" sound. "Wouldn't be the first time she locked me in a hospital room."

He was pretty sure she was serious with that threat, too. She'd had a pretty serious tone when she said it. And a rather serious face.

"She's just trying to look after you," Amy rationalized. "You... don't really make things easy. For anyone."

"Yeah, I know..." Sorun let out an airy breath and kicked at his feet. "I'm tryin' here." He looked back up at Amy's eyes. "So. Lunch?"

"Oh! Sure, follow me!" The pink hedgehog began to practically skip down the sidewalk. Sorun dragged his feet in following her. "I know this one place that makes these really great crepes and I was thinking..."

Lunch had been... well, lunch. Nothing more, nothing less. Amy tried having a discussion with Sorun, though most of the words she spoke had been tuned out by Sorun with him nodding along to whatever she'd been saying. He didn't even know if she knew he was indirectly ignoring her. He felt bad, in a way, but the crepes helped alleviate some of that guilt.

As long as she at least thought she was helping, he supposed... She at least left looking pleased with herself.

Well, she was gone, and now he was here. At the back of Antoine's house. The coyote himself was absent, out on an errand, apparently, but his wife and Sally were there, with all three of them sitting around awkwardly and not knowing what to do. Sorun himself was sitting on an artificial tree stump, Sally was sitting down on the ground next to him, and Bunnie was standing off to the side with her arms crossed.

He only got here in the first place because he ran into Sally after leaving Amy, and she'd all but dragged him here under the pretense of just wanting to hang out. He wasn't sure he bought it, but then again it wasn't an entirely inaccurate statement. But he still knew why, and knew the consequences of saying no, but he'd still went along with it.

Didn't help that this was more or less an impromptu gathering and neither of the three actually knew what to do to pass the time.

"You know, there's a world of difference between friends coming together to hang out and do whatever and... whatever this even is," Sorun said, hands on the side of the stump. "I appreciate the effort, but you don't think this is awkward?"

"There has to be a reason for us to get together?" Sally asked him. "We're all friends, aren't we? We really need a reason to socialize whenever we feel like it?"

He looked towards her, and much to his surprise she seemed genuine. And, in a way, she wasn't wrong. Sorun knew that. It didn't help how... forced this all felt. Maybe because he felt more like a hostage than a visiting friend. "What do you even want?" he asked her.

"Why do you have to say it like that?" she asked back. "You've been cooped up inside your house for weeks and I just thought you needed to bond with us a bit. What's so wrong with that?"

"I meant right now," Sorun deadpanned. "What do you want to do right now?"

"Ah. Right." Clearing her throat, Sally gestured to him. "Why don't you decide?"

"Hopeless." Shaking his head, Sorun turned to Bunnie, who'd been all but silent for the most part so far. "Bunnie, what do you even like to do for fun?"

"Fun, huh?" The rabbit cupped her chin and looked up towards the sky. "Ah suppose... ya probably wouldn't understand what ah mean, but ah like to fly around a lot," she answered, looking back down at Sorun. "With the thrusters in mah feet. It's freein', ya know? Jus' bein' up there."

Sorun hummed. "Huh. I didn't know that," he said. "I used to be able to fly. I can't do that anymore." His gaze shifted to Sally. "Well, unless someone wants to let me-"

Sally caught his meaning immediately and shook her head. "No, Sorun. The Emerald's staying locked in the vault in the castle," she said.

Tsking, Sorun leaned in her direction. "Well, what about you? What do you like doing in your free time?"

The princess shrugged. "Well, exercising is always fun. Plus it helps me keep in shape and-"

"Yeah, but that's not something Bunnie can do with us," Sorun quickly stated in a higher than average pitch. He turned towards the rabbit in question. "I mean it's not like she can work out her legs and arm when they're made of metal and-"

"Actually there is some physical therapy ah do have to do regularly," Bunnie corrected him, making Sorun freeze. "It wouldn't be too hard for us-"

"Now that I think about it flying isn't something we can all do, either," Sorun said, almost in desperation. "We should do something we all

can do. Equally. All equal-like."

At this point he was down for anything as long as it wasn't exercise.

Both Bunnie and Sally narrowed their eyes in his direction. The deflection was a clear one, though Bunnie had made an agreeing sigh and dipped her head a bit, making Sorun sag in relief. "Alright, then. What do *you* think we should do?"

"I dunno... baking?" Sorun suggested with a shrug. "You tried to give me a piece of that carrot cake stuff you said you made once. We could do that?"

Bunnie's green eyes sparked in interest, though she also looked a bit doubtful. "Antoine told me about you tryin' tah bake once. You really wanna try somethin' as advanced as carrot cake?"

Sorun shot her a questioning glance. "What's so complicated about it? It's the exact same recipe as normal cake but with carrots thrown into the batter, ain't it?"

"..." Bunnie's calm look became a bit strained as she glanced away from Sorun. "Maybe we oughta hold off on baking," she suggested, pushing down the brim of her hat over her face to hide her grimace. She blinked a few times when the action caused her to notice something, followed by her removing her hat to look at its underside. "Goll-darnit, I think there's a hole here."

"That's from the last mission, right?" Sally asked. "I think I saw a laser blast graze your head."

"Yeah, looks like the heat jus' barely got to the hat. Ah think I can fix it..."

A tinge of worry grew in Sorun's stomach. Probably a natural reaction to anybody learning their friend was almost shot, but then he remembered just what exactly almost all his friends did for a living. And that he'd stepped away from that life for a very good

reason. His fingers began to unconsciously tap against the tree stump and, eager to divert the conversation, said, "You know if I had the Chaos Emerald I could show you a really cool hat-"

"Sorun," came Sally's warning voice, causing him to sigh and drop his shoulders.

It was a topic Sally steered away from whenever Sorun asked about it. Since he wasn't a Freedom Fighter anymore, nobody thought he had any reason to gain powers from the Chaos Emerald he brought back. And since they didn't have any other use for it, they locked it away somewhere in the castle so nobody else could use it for any misdeeds. That was the justification Sorun was given, at least. He personally thought they were just withholding it from him because he'd proved to be "irresponsible" during the drinking incident, but it was a baseless theory. And beyond that he saw the logic.

Even so, he felt incomplete without at least the Yamato at his side. It didn't feel right to not be holding the sword. And he didn't like his supposed "friends" were keeping what was rightfully his away from him, even if he saw the reasons behind it. He didn't find himself caring. He wanted his sword.

"When are you going to give me back my Chaos Emerald, Sally?"

"It's not yours, Sorun," Sally rebutted. "And I already told you. You don't need it."

"So when can I have it back?"

A half-frustrated, half-exhausted sigh left her. "Why do you even want it so bad?" the chipmunk asked him. "I get they can't hurt you as long as you don't permanently absorb them, but do you really need it just to hold onto it?"

Sorun scoffed and threw his hand up. "Because everybody has their own thing that makes them distinct," he said. "You're the princess with the genius tactical mind, Bunnie's the cyborg, Sonic has his

speed, Tails can fly and is a genius, Rotor's up there with Tails' brain, Antoine's... got his thing-" Sorun coughed to the side when Bunnie shot an annoyed glare at him, "- and Amy's got her hammer. Need I even mention Nicole? Everybody's got all these different niches, and what do I have?"

"Sorun, you're the only human that lives in the whole city. You have more niche than anybody else," Sally stated, an unconvinced look on her face. "What's this really about?"

She'd sent him a scrutinizing look, and Bunnie had joined her with an equal glare. The looks they both were sending him caused Sorun to sigh. He could try getting out of it, but he didn't find the effort worth it. And he didn't want to give them any misconceptions, whatever possible misconceptions the pair could draw up from this.

"The Yamato is... important to me. On a personal level," Sorun admitted to the two of them. "It's not just about the power. It's the sword itself."

"I think I remember Eggman mentioning something about it. Something about a storybook," Sally said. "Back when we were all in those Egg Grapes."

"Yeah, I remember hearin' that, too," Bunnie added. "What'd he mean by that, Sorun?"

"You guys honestly thought I just created that sword from a mental picture I made up on the spot?" Sorun made a bemused laugh, drawing confusion from the two Mobians. "Well, not entirely inaccurate, I suppose. It's from a story, yes. One very personal for me. There were a series of these stories, and I was introduced to the very first one by my mother, on a birthday when I was young." He looked off to the side, avoiding the two's looks. "It was an exceedingly bad time for me. The gift wasn't even wrapped, like it was a last-second thing. I think my mother just bought the first thing she could find at a store to help distract me."

Sally's expression grew worried. "What happened?" she asked him.

"... It's not for Mobian ears."

"And just what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"It means I won't speak of it," Sorun stated as he looked back at the two, noting the confused, irritated looks both Sally and Bunnie had adopted. "Look, the point is those stories were important to me, and the sword came from them." He looked down towards the stump. "It's my only connection to my home," he continued in a quieter voice, making the two Mobians freeze. "I have nothing else from Earth. Not a single possession. Even the clothes I came with were lost when Knothole fell. That and a gum wrapper I'd kept for good luck. But that's all gone, now. Yamato is the only connection I have left." He looked straight into Sally's eyes. "And you're keeping that from me."

It was only a half-true. Left unsaid was how he detested how vulnerable Sorun felt without the Yamato's power at his side, or any power granted by the Emerald. But even disregarding that the sword alone held incredible sentimental value to Sorun, and he did not like being left without it.

Sally made a deep sigh at the accusatory glare he was sending her. "Sorun, that isn't fair." She almost looked sympathetic with that look she was giving him, though she met his glare with one of her own. "I understand why you want it, but there's nothing I can even do at this point. It was the council's decision to lock the Emerald away since its power is so dangerous, and my word alone isn't enough to overturn a decision of theirs." She leaned forwards a bit and folded her arms over her knees. "I only took it away from you because you were acting irresponsible. Hearing that, and seeing as it was a one-time thing, I *would* give it back to you. I really would. But like I said, it's not my choice. And I really don't think the council or my brother would have the same reaction I do."

He had the same doubts she did. It brought some comfort knowing she would let him have it if she could, and he was thankful for that.

And a bit guilty-ridden for the tone he'd taken with Sally now.

"I'm sorry if I seemed a bit overbearing. It's just important to me," Sorun apologized. "Listen, I don't think this is really working out. I appreciate the effort you're going through, and I'm thankful you all want to help, but this is too awkward." He slid off the stump he'd been sitting on and stood up, hunched forwards with his hands in his pockets. "If you wanna invite me to group things, fine. If either of you or anyone else wants to invite me to something or just swing by my place to hang out, then sure. But forcing an outing like this isn't... it's not doing it for me," he admitted with a shake of his head.

"I know." Sally rubbed a hand over her face and stood up along with him. "I'm sorry if this got weird. We're just-"

"Tryin' to help, I know, I know," Sorun tiredly sighed out. "I already said I appreciate it, but I prefer a natural progression of friendship as opposed to *this* ," he said, gesticulating his hand around to the general area. *"This damn pity parade,"* he thought, but didn't dare speak. He figured the other two got his meaning anyways.

... Or maybe they'd taken it the *wrong* way, because all of a sudden Sally was stroking her chin with a thoughtful look. "Natural, huh...?" she'd mumbled, making Sorun blink in worry and turn away.

"Right, well, I'm going home." He began walking away from the pair before any of them could say anything further. For better - or worse - he'd managed to get away without them making a single sound. He'd left feeling a slight sense of foreboding, but in the end chose to ignore it in favor of just being able to head home. For however much good that got him.

The next day found itself proving that the sense of foreboding Sorun had felt the previous day was correct.

His best guess to why any of this was happening was that Sally misinterpreted Sorun's meaning of how yesterday's little gathering

had been too forced. That must have translated into her convincing "the guys", because that's what he had to deal with now, crashing his home and inviting themselves in under the pretense of hanging out with Sorun was the best idea ever. Which, in fairness, was what they were doing.

In fairness to Sorun he was pretty sure he could classify this as a home invasion if he really wanted to. Then again, he wasn't sure anyone would actually listen to him.

With a sigh, Sorun's relaxed eyes stared forwards at the TV screen telling him he'd won the game. Again. And with one single hand at that, because at this point he needed the handicap to make things at least a little bit interesting. He looked to his right side to Sonic, who was staring at the TV in muted shock with his controller loosely held in his hands.

If there was one thing, *one* thing, he could forever hold over Sonic's head for being better at it than him, it was games. He may have been faster than Sorun, and stronger, and everything-er, but this was something Sorun could have. His element. His specialty. His... well, it was just his. Nobody was allowed to be better at it than him.

... Nobody but Nicole, anyways, but she was special. She was the only one allowed to beat Sorun.

"Maybe I should start using less fingers. Give you a better chance at beating me at this," Sorun dryly remarked to the stunned hedgehog. "What did I say about button mashing?"

"It's gonna work eventually..." Sonic growled under his breath, his mouth set in a thin pout.

"In some situations, yes," Sorun amended. "In most cases, though, it won't. And this ain't one of 'em."

"Well could you maybe show me how exactly that's supposed to work?"

"Tch. You're Sonic the Hedgehog. Figure it out yourself." If Sorun were a better man he would have loved to volunteer to help Sonic learn the finer intricacies. But that would entail Sonic becoming marginally better in an area Sorun liked proving his superiority over in. And would lessen the gap separating him and a spot he personally reserved for Sorun and Nicole. Both of these were unacceptable. So the blue bastard was on his own.

Sonic blinked at Sorun, and then set the controller down. "Okay. Didn't have to say it with that much emotion, but alright," he said. "Things are going fine with you, right? Like, you're okay?"

Sorun exhaled through his nose. Sometimes he had to remind himself there was actually a reason he was friends with Sonic. He actually was a nice guy. Irritating, too, but nice. "I'm getting on," he answered.

"Really? 'Cause Tails-"

"There's only so much I can do to apologize for an accident," Sorun interrupted with a tired half-scowl. He looked past Sonic and towards the kitchen. He saw Tails sitting down at the kitchen table, arms folded and tails slowly swishing behind him. Antoine was rifling through cabinets Sorun knew were empty in the hope of throwing something together for them all. He wouldn't find anything, but Sorun let him search anyways. He liked seeing him fumble around in futility.

"You *did* break his plane."

"How much of that plane was his plane, anyways?" Sorun asked, focusing back on Sonic. "I know the Special was completely lost in the Knothole bombing, but how'd the plane make it out?"

Sonic winced a bit. "In fairness Nicole had to recreate a lot of the parts with her nanites, but it was still *the* plane. Mostly," he said.

"You know, there was a proverb about a ship or a axe or something where I'm from. Some philosophical thing that asked the question of

whether something is something even if you replace all the parts or... was it about the integrity of the spirit, or...?" Sorun frowned a bit, not quite remembering what he was trying to say. Eventually, he shook his head. "Look, even if all the parts are different does it really matter? It's the same plane. You know. In spirit."

"Yeah, try tellin' that to Tails," Sonic grumbled. "Look, he's gonna get over it, just don't, er... don't do that again."

Sorun clicked his tongue. "Guess I'll have to dash my plans for hitting the sauce and stealing vehicles again..."

A small amount of laughter was shared between the two of them. In ended in tapering sighs on both their parts, with Sonic sinking further into the couch as Sorun began idly tapping the controller he held in his hand.

"I'm sorry Rotor couldn't come over with the rest of us," Sonic suddenly said. "Guy's been swamped with all the council work. I hear my uncle complain about it a lot, too. They're practically drowning in paper over there."

"Ah, yeah, I heard Rotor got voted into the council." He couldn't exactly be remiss about the walrus not coming to visit. Three was already stretching Sorun's patience. And while the two were friends, Sorun wasn't overly close to the guy. Worked with him, had a few conversations and hung out a bit. But that was about the extent of that friendship. There wasn't much beyond that. "Must be strange, going from being a Freedom Fighter to politician." And probably as equally stressful.

A wry laugh left Sonic. "Yeah, well, the whole back thing kind of threw that career out of the window. He says he likes where he is now, but sometimes I catch him complaining that being on the council takes a lot of his tinkering time away."

"Right. His back." Sorun clicked his tongue. "That never cleared up?"

"... He said it's manageable."

So no, then. "How'd that even happen, anyways?" Sorun asked.

"I don't even know. We were all fighting, or at least trying to fight, Egghead in that big dumb mech of his, and out of nowhere this giant rock just flies in and nails Rotor in the back," Sonic recounted. "I don't have any idea where it came from. Couldn't have been Eggman, 'cause he was right in front of us. Wasn't Snively, 'cause the Chaotix were dealing with him." He shook his head. "I dunno. I think an explosion from the bombardment chucked a piece of rubble at him. Only thing I saw when I looked back was a bunch of red. Probably all the fire and explosions."

Sorun's head snapped to Sonic. The speed at which his head turned caused the hedgehog to jump a bit in his seat, though the slightly startled look Sorun had on his face quickly died away. "Right. Must have just been an explosion," Sorun quietly muttered out, not quite believing his own words. *"Red, huh..."*

"Sorun! What iz zis travesty of a kitchen!?" Sorun was more impressed that Antoine had the audacity to say such a thing more than anything else as he looked back into the kitchen. All the cabinets had been opened to reveal they were all empty. "How am I supposed to be making zomething from ze nothing!?"

"My sincerest apologies you weren't able to find food in the kitchen. A kitchen that's my kitchen. In my house. The same house you all barged into like you owned the place. Without asking. That house."

"Oui, but where iz ze food!?"

Sorun deeply inhaled through his nose, and was aiming to say something he would have likely regretted saying before Sonic had zoomed off the couch and stopped right behind Antoine. He wrapped an arm over the coyote's shoulders and practically began steering him towards the front door to the home.

"Hey, you know what, I just remembered my mom had a bunch of extra stuff lying around the house," Sonic voiced as he half-guided, half-dragged Antoine towards the door. It was at the same time they left that Sorun realized that only left two people inside his house: himself and Tails. The latter of which was sulking in his depressingly empty kitchen.

"I feel like Sonic did this on purpose." Sorun made a sigh as he stared out towards Tails. *"I could kick him out. Technically. It's my house."* It was all too tempting seeing as he didn't want to deal with feelings talk right now. Then again, he'd have a hard time explaining that away to the others. With in inward grimace he shook his head and rose up off the couch. *"Egh, fine..."*

With a large amount of hesitation weighing his footsteps down, Sorun had somehow managed to trudge his way to the kitchen. If Tails even noticed him sit down in one of the other dining table chairs next to him, he didn't so much as move in acknowledgement. Sorun almost took that as a sign that he didn't want to talk and almost left at that. For some reason his mouth began moving before his feet did.

"So did Antoine not get the memo my pantry is as barren as my wallet?" Sorun asked, resting in arm on the table as he looked to the side at Tails. "Thought you guys had this whole big friendship gathering just to discuss little ol' me."

"He thought you still had some of the food Sally gave you," Tails airily answered, not even looking his way. "What happened to that?"

"She gives me enough to get by. That's about it." Sorun drummed his fingers along the table. "Tails, I'm sorry about the plane."

"I'm not... I..." Tails finally looked over to Sorun. There was some hurt in his eyes that made Sorun inwardly flinch. "I just can't understand why you would do that. Why? You know how much I like that plane."

"Mina poisoned me." He tried to keep his head high and his voice even and steady. It came out a lot quieter than Sorun would have liked.

The excuse didn't do much to placate Tails. "And what does that have to do with anything!?"

"Apparently very little," Sorun mumbled out. He had to be very careful with his words here due to the fact that Sonic and Sally had made it *very clear* they didn't want the concept of alcohol introduced to Tails. Plus his mom was on the council. He didn't need political figures angry at him. "Tails, I can't tell you why I did it because I genuinely don't remember. The, uh... the stuff Mina gave me, it..." He clicked his tongue a few times. "You know I'm from Earth, and this is Mobius, and the fact is there's stuff here on this planet I can't eat because my body isn't accustomed to it."

"Oh... is it like allergies?" Tails asked, looking much more understanding. "I know Sonic's allergic to these specific kind of berries, but he doesn't like talking about it."

"Pfft." Sorun couldn't hold in the laugh that hissed through his teeth. *"Sonic's allergic to something? Fuckin' dweeb."* He didn't feel it was okay to demean something like an allergy, but for Sonic, he'd make an exception. "Yeeeeaah, it's... sorta like that," he said to Tails once he'd calmed down. "'Cept instead of getting bloated or hives or whatever I just... kinda lose my mind a bit. Hence me not remembering what happened," he explained. "The doctor said it blew away all my inhibitions for a bit."

Tails blinked in confusion. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"No idea." A lie, he knew exactly what that meant, even if he didn't know why drunk him decided stealing Tails' plane was the best idea in the whole world. "I don't know why I did it. I don't even remember doing it. I *wouldn't* have done it if I knew that stuff was poisonous to me."

Part of Sorun found it odd he was trying so hard to get the fox to forgive him. At the end of the day, it didn't change anything. Nicole would fix the plane and Sorun could walk away with relatively little to no accountability from the whole thing. The only thing hurting Tails was sentimentality over the plane itself, and even then Sorun couldn't find it in himself to care enough to that extent. He cared about Tails, though. Not so much his opinion, but... well, he did have an image. A poor one, maybe. But he still had it.

"... Ugh. I get it," Tails finally said with a slump of his shoulders. "The Tornado's just special to me, you know? Seeing it all busted up by you of all people... but it's fine. I can understand it wasn't really your fault."

That was probably as good as Sorun would get. He breathed out a sigh of relief and sat back in his chair. "Yeah, I know. You know, there's this old saying about the grandfather's spaceship, or... eh, forget it, I don't remember," he said upon catching Tails' confused look. He faced ahead at the empty cabinets so he didn't have to look at the Mobian. "I never thanked you," he said suddenly.

"Huh?" Tails looked over at Sorun again, who was making a pointed effort not to look at him. "For what?" he asked him.

"If it weren't for you pulling me through that portal I would have suffered through a world-ending armageddon and died," Sorun said. "So thanks for ruining my life. Because apparently that saved it."

Figured it'd be prudent to say that now, because it had to be said at some point. If not for his sake, than at least for Tails'. Maybe it'd go to make the fox feel better, which was a win as far as Sorun was concerned.

"O-oh. That." Tails' ears and twin tails wilted a bit, and he turned his head away from Sorun. "You still died," he mumbled.

Sorun made a humorless chuckle. "Yeah, guess I'm doomed no matter what I do," he agreed. "I came back, though. As it is I'm too

stubborn to die." Sorun sat forwards in his seat and clasped his hands together. "If you really still feel bad about it just consider the plane my way of paying you back and we'll call it even."

That actually managed to elicit some small laugh from Tails, who looked back towards the human. "Sure. I can live with that," he said. "I just... always felt kind of responsible. You wouldn't have had to go through all that if I'd never brought you here, but... yeah, it feels better knowing it was for the best in the end. For you." He looked away from Sorun and began to idly rub at his shoulder. "Are you really okay, Sorun?"

The small amount of amusement that had been building on Sorun's face began to fall off. "What brought this up?"

"You've been acting weird ever since we found out what happened to your zone. Everybody keeps talking about you like they're really worried about you, and then there's this." He gestured to the empty kitchen. "It's got me worried, too," he added, looking back towards Sorun. "So is everything alright? Do you need something?"

"A job," Sorun morosely thought, but chose to keep this to himself. "It's been hard coping with everything on one side and juggling with adjusting to my new life here on the other side," he admitted to him. "I'm trying my best, but this kind of thing has never been... I'm not good at this. And I didn't wanna tell the others for stupid reasons, and that didn't work, so now they're trying to help, I dunno, normalize me?" He shook his head, dropped it, and placed a hand on it. "Don't tell Sonic this, but I really do appreciate you all coming here to check on me and everyone for worrying. It helps."

Helped tell him he wasn't so alone, at the very least. If it wasn't a step in the right direction, it was at least a step forwards towards somewhere better. Dulled the aches in his heart just a little bit more each day, which, Sorun supposed, was a sign of good progress. It'd be better if he could find some way of supporting himself, but it was a start.

He said he'd fix himself. He didn't know how long that was supposed to take or how he was supposed to go about doing it exactly, but he guessed that was why the others were there. To help, because try as he might, this wasn't something he could do on his own. And as suffocating as they were at times he enjoyed the company despite his disposition and outward appearance.

"Well, you're getting better, right? That's what's most important, I think." When Sorun looked back up at Tails, he caught him smiling at him. "But seriously, if you need something you just have to ask. You know we're here for you."

"You've all made that abundantly clear," Sorun half-grumbled, though he still had an amused smirk on. "In that case, would you be willing to break into the castle and steal the Chaos Emerald they have there for me?"

The smile Tails held dropped off in an instant in lieu of confusion. "Huh? N-no. I'm not doing that. Why would I do that?"

"Could you at least ask your mom? I know she's on the council. You can't pull some political strings for me and just, like-?"

Tails shook his head. "I don't think she'd do that for you," he said.

"Can't blame a guy for trying."

The rest of the conversation was cut off when Sorun's front door was opened again. Sonic sauntered in without as much as a single item in his hand. Antoine, by contrast, stumbled in holding so many food items Sorun wasn't even able to see his head. Both Sorun and Tails glared towards Sonic as a result, who gave them both his best innocent grin while shrugging.

"What?" he asked. "I held the door open for him."

"Oui, and I am very grateful." From how sarcastic he sounded Antoine didn't sound very grateful. He somehow found his way to the

kitchen and set the food items down, muttering something in French Sorun couldn't understand as he bent down towards something. "I am just being glad your mother was gracious enough to- mon dieu, Sorun, have you even used zis oven!?"

"I have an oven?" Sorun looked closer towards where Antoine was crouching down towards. That thing had gone so unused by Sorun he'd forgotten its existence. "Huh. Yeah, no, I never really used that."

"Incroyable." With the way he said it Antoine almost sounded disgusted. He'd shaken his head as he stood up, and then turned towards Sorun and grabbed at his wrists. "Alrighty, up, up!" he ordered, pulling a startled Sorun up out of his chair. "Eef you are to be living on your own I will not be 'aving you starve because you did not know how to even work a oven. You are helping me weeth zis."

Sorun's only protest to all of this was a very visible scowl on his face. He'd still obeyed Antoine without any resistance and stood at the kitchen counter next to him. "Ugh, do I have to? Don't even know how to cook."

"All ze more reason to be doing zis." The coyote shot Sonic an annoyed look. "We should all be more zan grateful Soneek's mother 'ad more zan just *hotdogs* to spare and gave us actual food."

The short sound of rapid footfalls followed Sonic standing next to the pair with his arms crossed. "You tryin' to say somethin'?"

"Nothing I am not needing to prove," Antoine grumbled under his breath. He reached towards one of the items he'd been carrying and held it out to Sorun. Sorun only needed a quick glance to confirm his fears: it was a bundle of vegetables. "Sorun, can you start cutting zese?"

Sorun visibly blanched. "I don't want vegetables."

"Oui, well, I am wanting you to be healthy and not go back to ze hospital, so you are eating zem whether you want to or not." Without

another word Antoine thrust the vegetables into Sorun's arms, and then turned around to fiddle with the oven while Sonic began searching around for pans.

"What is he, my mother?" Sorun, scowling down at the vegetables and already planning on how he could avoid eating them, reached to the side, grabbed a knife, and then turned to Tails who'd flown up towards the three of them. "If you can handle a plasma torch I imagine you can handle a knife," Sorun blandly stated as he handed the fox the knife and vegetables.

"Uh, sure." Hesitantly, Tails accepted the items. "What're you gonna do?"

"He can show me where the stupid pots and pans are," Sonic loudly grumbled from the side. "Seriously, Sorun, where'd you put them? And the plates? And the... everything else? I can't even find the utensils!"

"Oh, yeah, I put literally everything in a single, really large cabinet because I figured I'd never use it and it'd be easy to find something if I did need it."

Repressing a loud groan, Sonic rubbed a hand over his face and stood up from his kneeling position in front of an open cabinet. "Okay, I guess we're organizing your kitchen while we're here, too..."

Thus was how Sorun ended up hosting dinner to some of his friends that night. And how he learned to actually *make* a dinner. One kind, at least. The kitchen was a mess, too, but they'd all promised to help him with that.

... Well, Tails and Antoine had. Sonic acted evasive whenever the state of the kitchen was brought up.

Overall, it wasn't the worst. Sorun didn't know if the French accent attributed to it or not, but Antoine was a startlingly good cook. And it was nice, having people just... be there for Sorun. Even if he

wouldn't verbally admit it. All of them talking around a dinner table in an actual house made Sorun almost feel normal for a change.

It was nice.

Chapter 69

A/N- Alright! We made it to the funny number.

Recursion Error

Episode 69- The Great Deliverer

These days Sorun felt dread whenever he heard somebody knock on his door. Mostly because nobody would leave him the *hell alone* . Nicole was one thing, he could never mind her, but it seemed like all his friends made it a personal mission to interact with him every single day now. Not all at once, of course, since everybody had their own lives, but in addition to Nicole he couldn't go a single day without seeing somebody.

It was as endearing as it was exhausting.

As Sorun dragged himself to the door, he debated not answering and pretending he just wasn't home. Hell, he debated leaving the city as a whole for a few hours just to get a break from everyone, but Nicole was still watching him like a hawk, and Sorun didn't actually know if he was allowed to leave the city. Or if that was a morally correct thing to do to him. Realistically speaking if he gave a good excuse he'd likely be able to leave the city, he had extreme doubts anybody would hold him captive here, but when he entertained the hypothetical world where he was held here indefinitely he realized he didn't really care one way or another. Lack of freedom didn't really mean much when he didn't want to go anywhere else and exercise that freedom. Moot point anyways, but an entertaining thought nonetheless.

"Maybe their plan is to exhaust me to the point I'm too tired to do stupid shit. I wouldn't put it past them," Sorun thought as he reached

for the doorknob. *"There's gotta be a limit to this kind of thing. Who is it this time?"*

He expected a lot of people to be on the other side of that door. Sonic wanting to take him out and do something. Antoine wanting to hang out. Sally. It wasn't Nicole, because when she did decide to knock on the door instead of just teleporting into his house he recognized her knock.

He didn't expect to see the king standing there when he finally did open the door.

"I didn't do it." It was the first thing Sorun thought to say. A knee-jerk reaction more than anything. The reaction had garnered a bemused smirk from the crowned Mobian standing across from him.

"And what, pray tell, are you not guilty of?" Elias asked him, the smallest amount of amusement mixed in his tone.

"Whatever it is, I didn't do it." Plausible deniability. Sorun was pretty sure that's what it was called. "Can I help you?"

"Well yes, actually. May I come in?"

The idea left Sorun hesitant. "Am I in trouble...?"

"... Partially, but-"

That was all Sorun needed to hear. "I think you're good out there." The door began to close as Sorun slowly pushed it. "In fact, I... I'm just gonna go ahead and do this..."

"Sorun, please don't close the door." The door was halfway to being closed. "Sorun." Almost there. "Sorun, really!?"

Elias' cries fell on deaf ears, as Sorun had closed and locked the door. He let out a sigh of relief, nodding to himself at a crisis averted. *"Now I never need to think about that again. Wonder what I should do today-"*

"Sorun, I will get Nicole, and she *will* open this door." Elias' muffled voice coming in from the other side of the door made Sorun freeze as he made to turn away and retreat back into his house. "I wouldn't even need to order her."

"... Dammit." He had a solid point Sorun couldn't refute. Sighing again, this time in irritation, Sorun went back to the door and opened it. Elias was still there, his earlier smile replaced by an exasperated expression as he stared at Sorun's face with his arms crossed.

Sorun couldn't fathom why he was so upset. He was the one choosing to accost Sorun with whatever this was.

"May we speak now?" Elias requested in a neutral tone.

"Eeeehhh... sure." The blasé tone Sorun used made Elias make an irritable sound and shake his head. "Come on in, I guess."

Sorun stepped to the side to allow the king to enter, with Sorun making doubly sure the door was closed and locked behind him before following. He found Elias seconds later standing in the living room and looking around. Around at what Sorun couldn't even hazard a guess at since the room was barren save for a couch, TV, and game console. He almost looked surprised at how spartan the place looked, eliciting some bitter chuckle from Sorun as he leaned against a nearby wall.

"You want some water?" he asked. "'Cause it's all I got since it's free."

"No, I'm quite alright. Thank you." Elias stopped looking around the room and focused in on Sorun. "How are you acclimating to living on your own here, Sorun?"

Pretty terribly if he was being honest. "I'm scrapin' by," he answered in half-honesty, pushing off the wall. "Hasn't exactly been spring roses around every single corner, but hey, that's life I guess. I thought for a second this place was a socialist paradise what with

the free healthcare and everything until I ran out of food and got desperate enough I had to start leeching off my friends." He stopped right in front of Elias, hands tucked in his pocket as he grinned at the king with a semi-friendly, sardonic grin. If Elias was disturbed in any way by it, he didn't show it. "But that's neither here nor there. How's life being a king living in a castle, Kingy?"

"It's well," was Elias' clipped response. "Is there something you would like to tell me?"

"Not particularly." Sorun gave a shrug. "I wouldn't dream of burdening people with my own problems. Oh, wait..."

Repressing a sigh, Elias reached up to rub at his forehead. "My sister was right. You do cause headaches..." he mumbled out. "Sorun, I realize you're not completely satisfied living among us-"

"Now you're just putting words in my mouth," Sorun interrupted. "Elias, real talk, there's nowhere else in this world I'd rather be living in. I don't *not* like living here. Ain't home, but second best is second best." He shrugged. "It's just my financial troubles troubling me. And the depression. Mostly the money thing."

For whatever reason Elias only grew uncomfortable once Sorun mentioned money. "Right, of course. And... you're dealing with these issues?"

"Work in progress on both fronts." Everyone was trying their damnedest to try and normalize Sorun, himself included. He'd probably never be able to repay them that much. It was almost funny to think he was practically drowning in emotional debt but had no monetary debt given his situation. "Why are you here, man?" he asked, wanting to get to the heart of the matter for why this guy was in his living room.

"Yes, right." Elias cleared his throat, squared his features, and clasped his hands behind his back. Sorun laughed a bit at the sight.

"Besides your own personal issues, how do you find this city, Sorun?"

"It's nice." The people were great enough, lack of anyone willing to give Sorun a job aside. He had neighbors that gave him friendly waves, which was about all Sorun ever wanted from neighbors. All his friends lived close by, the place was clean, crime wasn't even a thing in this city, and he didn't have to worry about dying. Aside from the fact Sorun was destitute he couldn't really find anything to complain about.

If the rest of the world wasn't such a fucked up place he'd go as far as to call New Mobotropolis a paradise. As it was Sorun only considered it for slice of heaven status.

"That's good to hear," Elias said, looking somewhat relieved. "The Kingdom- pardon, Republic of Acorn tries very hard to provide a safe and caring environment for its citizens. That does include you despite the fact you're not a Mobian. I'd like to think everyone is seen as an equal here."

Sorun bit his tongue to stay the scathing remark that threatened to spill out. "Mh-hm."

"But, as such, a k-republic needs resources in order to continue to function properly. Funds. A functioning economy." When Sorun just continued to stare at Elias blankly, he made a sigh and shook his head. "You've been neglecting to pay your taxes, Sorun."

The world slowed to a crawl for Sorun. Elias' words echoed slowly in his head, repeating multiple times at lowered and slow pitches. Tunnel vision set in over Elias' form. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and his hands suddenly felt very clammy in his pockets. He found himself wishing this was all just a terrible, horrible dream, and even made a heavy blink in the desperate effort to try and wake himself up.

No dice. Elias was still there, looking more confused than ever. And Sorun was left reeling from merely hearing the word "taxes".

"Dear god, no..." To the everyman it was a cursed, evil word. A necessary evil, some might say. Sorun would agree with them if he wasn't so strapped for cash these days, and for the briefest of moments he could have sworn he saw his life flash before his eyes. Again. "Come again?" Sorun softly requested in a strained whisper, wishing beyond all hope he'd misheard.

Elias unclasped his hands and used one to palm his face. "Sorun, what do you think our government runs on? The goodwill of the people?"

"Everyone sure acts like it!" Sorun shouted in a frightened voice. "I-I didn't even know taxes was a thing! This's the first I'm hearing of it!"

"The republic sent you notice letters!" Elias argued. "In fact, I recall signing a good portion of them!"

Lies. "I've never seen these so-called letters of yours!"

"Because you never check your mailbox! I looked inside! It's so stuffed full of letters I wouldn't be surprised to learn you've never once checked it!"

Sorun clammed up. He hadn't even known he had a mailbox. "... Was there anything important in there?"

"If we're going by your definition of important, no, I don't imagine the deed to your home and the welcome letter I signed is of any significance," Elias claimed with a roll of his eyes, voice heavy in sarcasm. "It's documents such as the tax notices, among other things, I'm worried about."

With a sigh, Sorun flopped onto his couch and began rubbing at his eyes. This wasn't what he needed right now. He needed anything but this. He'd take Eggman attacking the city over taxes right now. He

didn't even know how to pay taxes! "So why is the king of the republic coming here to tell me this?" he asked.

"Because we're friends and, knowing you, I figured the issue was due to something inane. Such as you not checking your mailbox," Elias deadpanned. "Councilwoman Prower wanted to send guards to drag you off to the castle to explain yourself. Councilmen Rotor and Chuck heavily objected to this and I elected to come and sort the issue personally."

He sat up straight in alarm at hearing that. "Man, what did I ever do to her!?" Sorun shouted, staring up at Elias with disbelief. "I never even met the woman!"

"I... believe she holds you somewhat in contempt," Elias answered, looking a bit uncomfortable as he rubbed at his arm. "She claims you cause her son an undue amount of stress and grief."

"I cause *him* grief...?" Sorun repeated, eyes wide and disbelieving. *"Fucking Prowers, man..."*

"You did destroy his plane," Elias reminded him.

"Yeah, and he kidnapped me and condemned me to furville. There's been more than enough grief being flung on both sides."

"An act that saved you from death by nuclear annihilation, did it not?"

"Details! Semantics! Shut up!" He turned away from Elias in a huff, but inside he knew the king won the argument. Much to his chagrin, Elias had a knowing look in his eyes when Sorun turned back around to him. "Alright," he sighed out, "let's negotiate."

Elias' mouth dropped open a bit in confusion. "You... wish to negotiate on *paying taxes* ...?"

"Yep." Sorun clapped his hands together and pointed the fingers at Elias. "Ignoring I have no job and no basis from which to pay taxes, I

just plain don't want to." Nobody did. Not really. Nobody except the patriotic nuts who claimed it was an "honorary civic duty", but Sorun wasn't one of those people. He was, however, reasonably certain he was crafty enough to get out of this situation.

It'd be his biggest undertaking yet. Evading taxes.

A frustrated breath left Elias. "Sorun-"

"I ain't even got a job, dude," Sorun lamely stated. "And I've tried. Believe me, Mr. We-Treat-Everyone-Here-Equally. Except when it comes to jobs. Nobody wants to hire a guy who's barely a leg-up from a cripple by Mobian standards."

"I can hardly tell people how to run their own businesses," Elias said. "But regardless, Sorun, you're a part of this republic. You've a civic duty."

Trying to guilt trip him by saying he needed to do his part. It wouldn't work. "I saved everybody's lives once. Literally everyone. That don't even buy me a grace period 'til I get back on my feet?"

Elias shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The laws are equal for everybody, and you're no exception, despite your accomplishments. I really am sorry, Sorun, but as a property owner and citizen that's just how it is for you."

An idea popped into Sorun's head at the mention of him being a citizen. A grin spread over his face, and he wagged his finger up at Elias. "Ahhh, but I'm not a technical citizen, am I, Elias?" he challenged. "Illegal alien, remember? Since I'm not a legal citizen the legal laws don't apply to me. So no taxes."

He didn't take the bait at all. He didn't even flinch at the logic. "That's not how that works. For one, if that were even true I could label you a squatter for living on property while here illegally and kick you out of the city." The finger Sorun was waving in Elias' face shriveled and

fell away with the rest of Sorun's arm. "And second," Elias continued, forming his own grin, "that isn't the case for you anymore."

"Huh?" Before Sorun could fully register the statement, Elias pulled something out of his pocket and gave it to Sorun. A piece of paper. A fancy piece of paper, much to Sorun's mounting horror. He saw things like his name and the word "citizen" on it, which caused his heart to begin to race. "Huh!?"

"That's right," Elias happily said. It wasn't even the malicious type of happiness. It was genuine glee at Sorun's sake, who looked the opposite of happy at the moment. "I finally got around to finalizing your papers! You're officially a legal citizen of the Republic of Acorn as of... well, a few weeks ago, actually." Elias looked to the side. "I found that buried under all your other mail in the mailbox. I meant to give it to you personally, but never had the opportunity. Ha! I suppose it worked out in the end anyways, huh, Sorun?"

"SHIT, I'M LEGAL!" This was bad. Legal citizenship meant a solid basis for taxation. Doubly so since he owned a house on Acorn soil. Nanite dirt. Whatever the ground here was labeled as. The prospect of worming out of taxes suddenly seemed much more bleak. *"Alright, calm down. You've gotten out of worse. There's gotta be some bullshit I can pull here."*

Calmly, he set the piece of paper down besides him. It was a losing battle, but he wasn't going to give up yet.

"I still lack a sufficiently-paying job to support my financial wellbeing," Sorun pointed out calmly, looking back to Elias. "It's quite obvious I am unable to pay these taxes of yours despite my best efforts. Surly there is some sort of system or safety net to help support unfortunate fellows such as myself who have fallen on difficult times."

"None whatsoever." Elias' eyes narrowed in Sorun's direction once the human became startling more verbose. A sign that he was taking this matter gravely serious. And as far as Sorun could see, the king wasn't budging. "If you're truly finding difficulty procuring work I am

sure you could avail yourself to the educational facilities we have in order to try and better yourself?"

No way was he going back to school. Not with a bunch of Mobian kids. He wasn't even keen on school in general. Besides, he didn't have the time. "You're not my mother," Sorun said. "You can't force me to go to school. I'm technically an orphan."

"Oh, truly? In that case that would make you a ward to the government, seeing as you're an orphan without any living relatives or guardians. In which case, *yes* , I can in fact *force* you into school, Sorun."

"... I'm sixteen."

"I don't see how that's relevant," Elias said. "Sonic and the rest of the Freedom Fighters are around the same age and were forced into book learning back when we had an actual school built in Knothole."

"Yeah, I heard that didn't last long," Sorun snarked, angry at losing ground in the battle. "What were they there for, a month? Max? Before there was a robot attack and they all went back to Freedom Fighting?"

"I'm sure they'll all be going straight back to educating themselves once this sordid business with the Doctor is sorted," Elias snarked back, the heat in his voice matching Sorun's. "You, however, are not an adult, and are no longer a Freedom Fighter. So you've no excuse."

Sorun's teeth clacked together. His mind ran a million miles a minute as he attempted to parse together something else to use. "There are many cultures in the world I originate from where the age sixteen signifies adulthood. As the sole human being from the zone from which I originate from you have no say in dictating-"

The king held a hand up. "I'll stop you right there, Sorun. Laws supersede whatever nonsense you were about to feed me," he

informed him. "Cultural differences or not, if you live with us, you follow the same laws as us. I'm afraid it's as simple as that."

Sorun inhaled deeply. "I don't want to."

"..."

"..."

"... Well I'm king and you're not, so there."

Sorun made a loud "tch!" sound and turned his head away. He played the king card. He didn't have anything better than that. "Hypothetically speaking..." he drawled out, turning back to Elias, "what happens if I don't pay taxes? You lock me in the detention center or something?"

Surprisingly he seemed appalled at the notion. "Goodness, no! Why would you even suggest such a thing? Of course we wouldn't imprison you," he said. "We would temporarily repossess your home, though, until you begin the tax payments. Which would effectively leave you homeless."

"I think I'd prefer prison at that point," Sorun mentally groused. "Elias, I don't exactly have the time to go to school to learn how to hold a job that uses my brain and not my unimpressive brawn," he said, deflating in his seat as his defeat began to set in. "What exactly would you suggest I do?"

"That I cannot tell you, Sorun," Elias said. And damn him, but he actually sounded sad and looked sympathetic when he said it. Hard for Sorun to be mad at the guy at that point when he seemed actually sorrowful for his plight. "I did hear mention of my sister searching for something, but I honestly don't know if that search will bear fruit. But chin up!" he said in his best cheery tone at seeing Sorun look so dejected. "You've accomplished more dire tasks than something like this. I'm sure a solution will present itself to you in time."

For all the useless advice Sorun had ever received, the words Elias gave him were up there. Even so, he couldn't find himself blaming him, if only because Sorun couldn't think up anything better than to just sit around and wait for something good to happen. Didn't stop him from feeling terrible.

"Ah-huh, sure, man," Sorun muttered out. "How long until this tax thing becomes a serious problem for me?"

"I wouldn't worry too terribly about it, Sorun. Just, um, try and do something about it. Relatively soon," Elias advised him. "I'm already giving you a lot of leeway as it is."

"Okay but can I get a hard number, 'cause I would feel better if I had a date to work wi-"

"Sorun. Don't worry about it. As long as you're diligent you'll be fine." The reassuring smile Elias gave him didn't feel very reassuring to Sorun, who could only silently stare up at him in mild astonishment. "Now as it happens I've other matters to attend to at the moment, so I'm afraid I'll have to depart here. But do come by the castle sometime if you ever have some free time. I've quite missed our chats."

"Diligent. I don't think I've ever been diligent at anything in my entire life," Sorun thought to himself as he watched Elias leave. It was only after he closed the door behind him did he let out a loud groan and go limp against the couch, his head tilted up at the ceiling. *"Well, now I got this to deal with. Goddamn. Even in another dimension I can't escape the tax man."*

How he wished he would have been able to talk his way out of paying taxes. But like most other things in his life he fucked it up. He spent a long time on that couch, tens of minutes, trying to figure out what he could do to rectify this situation. Everything he thought of pointed to getting a job, at which point he was reminded that didn't work when he tried it.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I ain't innovative. I can't invent. Don't have any kind of marketable talent. How about writing? How much shit can I steal from Earth to sell as books here?" He made a contemplative hum and cupped his chin in thought. The idea had merit. *"Hm... nah. I'm a gamer, not a writer. Don't think that'd work out."*

Sorun's thinking was cut off when, once again, he heard a knock at his door. He groaned again, briefly considering just ignoring it before deciding against it and sitting up off the couch. The last thing he needed was company at the moment, but then again he wanted a distraction to keep him away from the reality of the situation. So, ignoring his internal protests, he dragged himself back to the front door and opened it.

He only opened it halfway before he saw who was on the other side and immediately tried to slam it back closed.

"Hold it, you!" He'd been too slow in closing the door. Yellow-furred fingers grasped onto the door's edge before it closed fully and wrenched the door back open. Sorun's response was to have his arms go completely slack as he looked out at the now very irate-looking cat standing on the other side of his open door. "Just what was that supposed to be!?" Honey yelled out at him.

If there was anything Sorun needed at the moment, a demented cat wasn't one of them. He was starting to regret trying to slam the door on her, too, because her tail was angrily swishing behind her and her hands were planted on her hips. The cross look she was giving him was probably another sign at her anger.

Normally Sorun would have thought to himself that there was too much going wrong in his life right now to deal with Honey's brand of crazy, but he refrained from acting on these thoughts. He may have had a lot of opinions over Honey, but she was good people. In her own way. And like it or not she was a distraction he needed right now.

"Honey, what do you want?" Sorun tiredly asked, sounding like he'd rather be anywhere than there at the moment.

"'What do I want?'" She'd said it in a mocking tone that mimicked Sorun's own tone. "That's quite the thing to say to me. You know how it feels having to hear about all this awful stuff happening to you from other people and you don't even stop by to see me!?"

"... Oh, right, the last time I saw her was before I left for Earth. And came back..." Sorun realized. With so much going on with him he never even thought to go see Honey for any reason. Not very surprising, he figured, seeing as he wasn't even in the mood to visit his friends. Or anyone, for that matter. Didn't stop them from coming to see him. "I've been busy."

"Busy doing what? Being sulky and wallowing in self-pity?"

Sorun let out a slow exhale, and then shook his head while making a bemused chuckle. "Never change, Honey," he said. "I really am sorry. I've... I haven't been well."

"Yeah, so... so I've heard..." Honey trailed off and looked past Sorun's shoulder and into his house. This only lasted for a few moments, after which she looked up and down Sorun's body, ending on his face. Her gaze seemed to linger on Sorun's face the longest, causing some discomfort to the human at being scrutinized so deeply. Honey, by contrast, had made a heavy frown while the ears on top of her head lowered. Finally she sighed and reached her hand forwards and grabbed Sorun's right wrist. "Alright, come on."

"Huh?" Before Sorun even knew what was happening he was being dragged away. "Wait, hold on." Despite his protests, Honey kept pulling him away. "Honey!"

All shouting out her name got Sorun was the cat roughly tugging on his arm so he'd keep up with her pace. Figuring there wasn't much point in resisting against somebody vastly stronger than him, Sorun

heaved out a loud sigh and resigned to his fate as he was dragged off to wherever Honey was taking him.

At least his mind was taken off the taxes. Or it was until he'd saw on their way out there was a mailbox in front of his home practically overflowing with papers. Sorun briefly wondered if he should convert to using a mail slot in his door as he was lead away by Honey to wherever she was dragging him off to.

The destination of his apparent abduction ended in what he assumed to be Honey's new shop. He'd never been to this one, only the one in Knothole that'd been blown up, but from what he could tell it looked largely the same as the original. The sign bearing Honey's name was more updated, a lot more red and gold and the writing was stylized, but otherwise it was still a shop. Even the interior was nearly identical to the original, which Sorun was able to see as Honey dragged him inside and through the shop.

Eventually he was lead into a large back room. Not too dissimilar, he'd realized, to that one room full of the many racks and mannequins full of clothes he'd saw, way back when he first went to Honey for clothes. This room, however, was actually very well-lit, and opposed to mannequins the room just had a few tables and chairs. And boxes. Lots and lots of cardboard boxes, some on the tables and more resting on the ground, with a few clothing sets and paper strips strewn about on the tables next to the boxes. It was such a haphazard, chaotic setup that Sorun could barely process what he was looking at.

"Feels like I just got dragged into the post office from hell," Sorun thought to himself. Honey had finally released his wrist, though Sorun had paid less attention to this and more on the chaotic spread out before him. *"What exactly is all this?"*

"So as you can probably can see, this is the main issue I've been having," Honey explained, talking like Sorun had a single clue what

was going on. "I get it's not the most organized mess, but I'm sure you can sort it out-"

"Whoa whoa whoa, Honey, slow down." Deciding enough was enough, Sorun rose both his palms up to stop that cat as he turned to face her. "What exactly is going on right now? What is this?"

Sighing in an annoyed manner, Honey turned to face Sorun directly. "I'm trying to give you a job, you moron."

"..." It was almost like Sorun's brain short-circuited. He heard the words, but couldn't find the means of processing them. He tried opening his mouth to respond, but all that came out were unintelligible sounds that emphasized Sorun's confusion over the statement he'd just heard. "H-hurh?"

A job? For him? From her of all people? Why now, why seemingly out of *nowhere* ? It seemed too good to be true, which was in part the reason Sorun hadn't leapt in excitement at the simple prospect. He was just so confused over what was happening all he could do was stare at Honey in befuddlement.

Seeing Sorun's reaction, the cat shook her head and looked away from him. "Look, Sally came to me and laid out everything that's been going on with you. About the thing that happened with your home and how you're really struggling because you can't find anything to do in the city." She reached a hand up and began aggressively rubbing at her arm as Sorun continued to silently stare. "I felt bad because I wouldn't be where I am right now without everything you did for me, so... I wanted to help you out like you helped me." She looked back at Sorun. "So I'm giving you a job. And you're going to take it because you need it and I'm not going to see my friend suffer any longer."

It took a few moments for the words to register with Sorun. "We're friends?"

The awkwardness that had been on Honey's face instantly evaporated in place of the anger that overtook her features. She'd actually growled out and swiped her hand at one of the nearby boxes to fling it up to Sorun's face. He'd reflexively batted the empty box away, blinking in surprise at the angry cat in front of him.

"Of course we're friends!" she yelled out at him. "You're one of the only people I know outside of business that gives me the time of day!"

"Uh... I-I mean it's not that bad, is it?"

"Ugh, you don't know what it's like being me." Honey turned around from Sorun and approached one of the nearby tables. She began to fold some of the strewn-about clothes seemingly on automatic as she began speaking. "People see my brand and the clothes I make and the name and they automatically assume the woman behind it all is this incredibly talented individual. A pioneer of the industry with fresh ideas and unprecedented skills who's as cute as a button. And they'd be right," she added, making Sorun roll his eyes. "But then people here come to me personally for clothes and they meet the person behind the business and they all think I'm some sort of loon. Can you believe that?"

"I literally called you crazy to your face," Sorun deadpanned.

"Yeah, but you never mean that," Honey added, waving a hand over her shoulder as Sorun scoffed. "I mean, you could have went anywhere for clothes, but you put up with me. And tolerated me when barely anybody else does. And advertised for me and helped grow my business to world-renowned fame." She finished folding the set of clothes and turned to Sorun. "That really meant a lot to me, you know?"

He was surprised to find that her face looked so heartfelt and sincere. Emotions Sorun realized he'd never seen on Honey before. He also felt embarrassed by her claims and turned his head away

from her. "I only put up with you because you're the only person I know in the whole world that can make me pants."

"Pants of the best quality," she reminded him.

"... Yeah, fine, they're beautiful pants," he admitted, turning back to her. "And I mean, you're... I've heard the word eccentric get tossed around, but you're no Crazy Ricky."

Honey sent him an odd look. "I have no idea who that is."

"He was this homeless guy that lived behind the grocery store back where I'm from. I think he was psychic. We always went to him during the winter and he was able to perfectly predict when we'd have a snow day at school." Sorun reached a hand up to scratch at the back of his head. "Then again he was always going on about how he picked up government radio signals from the fillings in his teeth. So maybe he was just hearing weather broadcasts and was secretly some kind of meteorological savant." A moment passed. "I guess he's dead now." Another moment. "But, uh... point is I've seen crazy. You're not on his level. I don't even think anyone here is on his level." He shook his head. "What I'm trying to say is you're alright. I... don't think you're that bad at all."

In the past Sorun had. There'd been a time he only tolerated her because she provided quality goods he couldn't get anywhere else and dreaded every conversation he had with her. But, overtime, he supposed he'd gotten used to her at one point or another. And in her own way she'd shown she had a caring side to her. So he'd freely say Honey was cool in his books, even if Sorun himself was surprised at him admitting it to himself. He'd even go as far as to say he liked her.

It was odd times he lived in.

"Well, that's nice to hear you say." Honey made a small smile and looked down at her feet as she leaned back against the table with her palms supporting her. "Fact is I don't know a whole lot of people

that would say the same thing. The clothes are one thing; everybody loves those. Me?" She shrugged. "I honestly never really cared. But it's nice having people like you around."

"..." Letting out a resigned sigh, Sorun turned to the left and swept his eyes over the box-filled room they were in. "Alright. So why don't you tell me all about this job of yours?"

Nodding, Honey pushed off the table. "Right. So as you know, I get orders from all over. Different settlements, different continents, I even get requests from Station Square. Problem is I've kind of been getting flooded with requests. Lots and lots of requests." She made a tired laugh as she slumped her shoulders. "I tried raising my prices to cut down on the demand, but that barely made a dent. Between going back and forth from the post office to make my deliveries, sorting out all the request forms and shipping labels and actually packaging my products, I just don't have the time of day to do all that and actually make the clothes." She turned to Sorun. "So I need somebody to do all that boring stuff for me."

"You want me to pack the clothes you make into boxes and bring them to the post office?" Sorun asked with a raised eyebrow. "That's it?"

"And figure out the shipping labels and organize the order slips for me, but you can figure all that out," Honey claimed, waving her hand to the side in a dismissive manner.

It seemed easy, if not a bit mundane. But a job was a job, Sorun supposed, though it still sounded a bit too good to be true. "That doesn't really seem like a lot to do in terms of a job," Sorun pointed out. "Moving boxes back and forth? That's it?"

"Sorun, I'm basically leaving you in charge with my entire distribution. That's pretty important."

Point to her. "And you'd rather leave this with me than anyone else?"

"Why wouldn't I?" she asked him. "You need the job and I like you more than most other people in this town. Besides..." Honey gained a small smirk. "I'll be completely honest with you. Ever since I've been getting all these orders and raised my prices I've had more money than I know what to do with. So I can easily afford to hire somebody like you."

"So grow the business," Sorun suggested. "Open up another place and hire other people to make-"

"Nope, not happening," Honey interrupted him with a shake of her head, surprising Sorun. "I do this because I *love* doing it. It was never for the money. Though the money is nice..." Sorun shook his head and rolled his eyes as Honey looked up towards the ceiling with a dreamy look in her eyes. "Beyond that the only person in the whole world I trust to make my brand is me. And I was really only in it for the fame and because I love doing it. But now that I have all that I don't see why I can't use what I've got to make life for myself easier and help a friend out." She jumped up to sit on one of the tables, legs playfully swinging back in forth in time with her swishing tail as she looked Sorun in the eyes. "So! What do you say?"

All in all she made a lot of pragmatic points. And after hearing her side of it he really couldn't blame her for wanting to shift a lot of the boring stuff in the business off to someone else so she could focus on what amounted to a hobby she made a successful business out of. And it didn't seem like that hard of a job to do. Sort labels and boxes, pack clothes, and bring said boxes to a post office? Being a glorified personal mailman wasn't the most glamorous job Sorun envisioned, but hell, it was an actual job he was in desperate need of. And even more than that his boss was a person he liked.

With that all thought out he really couldn't refuse, could he?

"Well, when you say it like that... I'll take it. For sure," Sorun said. Honey's eyes lit up enough he could have sworn they started to sparkle, and she gave him an open-mouthed smile large enough he

managed to see her teeth and fangs. "Alright, calm down. Sheesh. So do you want me starting now, or-?"

"Nah, no, it's fine." Honey held up a hand to him and shook her head. "We'll start the... what's it called, orientation? Yeah. We'll go over the hours and pay and what you'll actually be doing and all that tomorrow. It's a little late in the day to be doing that right now." She paused, and then blinked in realization as she reached a hand behind her red dress. "Oh, one more thing. I made a hat for you to wear at work."

"... A hat?" Sorun repeated in a questioning tone.

"Well you need something to tell the people at the post office who you are and who you work for when you're delivering stuff. Duh," Honey explained.

"W-why does that matter?"

"Because it's my business and I said so. Ah, here it is!" She held up the hat for Sorun to see. To Sorun's surprise, it was a black cap with gold trimming. He wasn't as surprised to see "Honey" written in the same stylized font Honey used for the sign outside her shop, embroidered in gold on the back of the black cap. "I pitched the hat idea to Sally," Honey continued as she gave him the hat. "She... had a pretty unusual request for the hat. Said you'd get it. I didn't see what was so funny about it, but I went ahead and put it in anyways."

"Hm?" Examining the hat in his hands, Sorun turned it around so he could see its front. "Why, what'd she... oh."

It was hard to miss it considering the letters were embroidered in large block letters on the front of the hat. He only needed a momentary glance to confirm it was "GREAT DELIVERER" sewn into the hat, the words stacked on top of one another. He made a small, sighing laugh at the sight, mostly in amusement at realizing she'd remembered that ridiculous title he'd used for himself on those delivery missions he'd done for her back then.

"Come to think of it, this is only happening because Sally reached out to people on my behalf. And I'm probably only getting this job because I happen to be friends with Honey." He felt a small tug in his chest at the thought. A warm feeling he didn't find entirely too displeasing. *"Maybe... maybe I was wrong in trying to do everything myself after all. Maybe I really should have just gone to my friends for help in the first place. And probably why they all got so pissed I let it get this bad."*

To think he'd actually feel sorry for the things he'd done and for how he'd gone about this entire thing. And there everybody was, pretty much ignoring it and doing their best to help him. He really didn't feel he deserved them.

"Uh... Sorun?" Honey's voice drew him from his musings, causing him to look up at the cat. "I got it was probably an inside joke between you two, but I didn't realize you'd like the hat that much."

He was confused on her meaning until he felt the strain in his facial muscles that signified he was smiling. He made a small laugh at the discovery and looked back down at the hat. "I just find it funny she remembered this silly little title," he said, brushing his thumb over the golden letters. "It was a stupid reference from a really pretentious game. A game that had messages about connecting with other people and helping others hand-in-hand as opposed to going it alone. Maybe I should have paid better attention." He looked up at Honey. "Thanks, Honey. Not just for the hat, but for helping me out with the job. You help me out a lot more than I deserve, so I kind of feel bad-"

"Oh, that's nonsense. You're fine." The cat hopped off the table and clapped Sorun on the shoulder. "I'm gonna head on home. Come back here first thing in the morning, alright?"

"Yeah, Honey. Sure." He saw her flash him one more smile before leaving the room. There'd been more words of gratitude he'd wanted to say to her, but the amount of emotions he was feeling had him too choked up to say much more of anything. He was already fighting to

not let any tears show, because he absolutely refused to let anyone see him in that state. It hadn't stopped his eyes from becoming incredibly glossy as he looked back down at the hat in his hands.

"Maybe I can make life here work out after all."

A/N- Coincidentally I know there's a bunch of tax evasion memes floating around the internet right now, so I found it kinda funny I got to writing this part around the same time. I was really tempted to put a boss title in just for Sorun trying to talk his way out of paying taxes, but decided against it since it woulda been a bit too goofy.

Chapter 70

Recursion Error

Episode 70- Writing letters for beginners

They'd started to fall into a sort of routine as time went on. Or at least enough of a regular routine that Sorun stopped noticing whenever Nicole neglected to knock on his front door and instead just teleported into his home, at which point he'd elected to just begin expecting her.

Really, she didn't understand what the issue with knocking was when it was far more efficient to just instantaneously appear into the home of somebody who always welcomed her unconditionally.

But eventually Sorun had stopped flinching in surprise whenever she teleported into his home, and after trading their pleasantries and greetings they'd more often than not wind up in the same place as almost always: sitting on Sorun's couch and facing a TV as they played away at whatever game they'd agreed upon.

Nicole would freely admit she'd used to have a hard time of understanding the games' appeal until after she'd met Sorun. She'd had a passing interest in them when she'd been first introduced to them, of course, but when she was able to completely master them in a single playthrough at a level nobody else could compete with they quickly lost the appeal. In the same vein of thinking she didn't think a puzzle was very interesting if one already solved and figured out the mechanics behind that puzzle. Fun for a time, but not something that could last.

Of course Sorun happened, and he had possessed that uncanny ability to be so good at those games. Enough to challenge *her* . Enough that he mastered them at relatively the same speed she

could. It was enough that, yes, she did enjoy the games, but only with Sorun. With him the games were stimulating. They were fun.

She tore her attention away from the screen briefly and looked down at Sorun's hands. Pale, practiced fingers were flying over the buttons that, to anybody but her, would have looked like a chaotic showing of mashing buttons when it was really a long series of patterns calculated in split-seconds. It still surprised Nicole how deft Sorun was when it came to these, how much thought and skill he put into them. So much effort that she'd think he was playing like his life depended on it, but when she glanced up at his face, it was set in a relaxed, content expression. Happy, even.

Sometimes Nicole wished Sorun put this much effort into chess, but he didn't like that game. Nor was he particularly good at it... But nobody was perfect, and besides, she liked Sorun as he was currently. She liked he put aside the time to play these games with her and conversed with her about whatever she wanted. Like she was a person.

A real, actual person. It was something that still astonished her, how easy and open he'd been with her since the moment they met. From day one he'd treated her like a living being and not an artificial creation. He'd gone out of his way to say as much to her, back in the digital world. His argument that it didn't matter what she was, just who she was, and after some time she'd found herself grateful for saying these words to her.

Nicole replayed that memory frequently. She did that quite often with a lot of her memories of Sorun.

A sound from the TV drew Nicole's attention back towards it. Normally she would have felt the slightest bit of irritation when she saw she'd lost, but at the moment she couldn't find herself to care all that much. She couldn't place why this was, a fleeting, ephemeral feeling she just couldn't quite grasp, but in the end she didn't find herself caring all that much because it was a nice feeling she only ever got around Sorun.

"Um..." Sorun, by contrast, looked a bit confused as he continually blinked at Nicole's way. She realized she'd been staring at his face for some time now, and tilted her head a bit so she faced further towards the screen. Even so, Nicole kept looking at the side at him. "You, kind of just stopped for a moment there," he pointed out.

"Did I? I'm afraid I was a bit distracted with some of my own thoughts," Nicole idly admitted. "You look better."

"Better" was an understatement. Compared to how he'd been weeks prior Sorun had made a phenomenal improvement. He still looked tired all the time, but he wasn't as lethargic and nonresponsive as he was when he first began living in this home. In fact, he'd been getting progressively livelier ever since he'd taken on that position in that cat Mobian's clothing establishment. His sleeping hours were beginning to normalize and he was eating a healthy amount again. And every day he looked just a little bit less sadder and mentioned Earth less and less in their conversations.

It was a sign he was slowly but surely improving, and for that much, Nicole was grateful. Her own distraught feelings over the human and his wellbeing were fading more and more with each day, and in its place was joy at merely being in his presence and him continuing to act with her the way he did.

"Right..." Still looking somewhat confused at the lynx's claim at being distracted, he sat back in the couch and looked towards the screen while setting his controller down. "So, how have you been?"

She looked back towards him. "Sorun, I should be asking *you* that."

"You know how I am," he argued.

"In that same vein of thinking you know as well as I do there have been no notable events of interest that has arisen. The city is still functioning nominally and the citizens are still peaceful." She *could* have talked about what had been going on in the Freedom Fighters and their missions, but she'd long since learned that discussing such

things brought Sorun stress. She'd decided this information was more harmful than good and endeavored to just never bring it up with him. Fortunately, Sorun never asked or wasn't very curious about what everybody in the Freedom Fighters were doing. "You've been doing well, correct?"

"I mean... I guess," Sorun answered with a half-shrug. "That job Honey gave me has... well, it's been keeping me busy and I'm well-off enough now I don't really have any money worries anymore." He sat back in the couch and ran a hand through his hair. "Everything's been so quiet and meanwhile my life's, I dunno, stable? I'm..." He trailed off, unsure of what to say. "It's..."

"What is it?" Nicole asked, leaning closer to him.

"I don't know. I mean, everything should be fine, right? I have a house to call my own, a job, friends, the whole community here. I don't really have anything to complain about. But something feels... I don't know. Something's missing." He looked over at Nicole, after which Sorun's gaze lingered on her for longer than average. He quickly looked away from Nicole just as she noticed how long he was staring, sighing out and brushing some of his hair over his face. "It's nothing, forget it. What time is it?"

She wanted to ask further about what exactly Sorun felt was missing, but out of concern for worsening his current condition decided against it and answered the question. "It's ten minutes until noon."

"Really? Ah, man." Sorun sighed and began to leave the couch. "I have somewhere to be."

"It was my belief you had the day off from work today," Nicole said as Sorun walked over to the TV to turn it off. "Did something happen?"

"Hm? Ah, no." After shutting the TV and game system off, Sorun turned to face the AI. "The boys decided to go and take me fishing for some reason. I've never really done something like that before, so I figured, you know, why not? Might be neat." He placed his left

hand in his pocket and looked to the side. "Maybe if we actually catch something Antoine can make something out of it. Haven't had fish in... yeesh, I can't even remember."

A fishing trip. It wasn't all that surprising to Nicole; Sonic and co. had been rather adamant in trying to involve Sorun with the lives of his friends and other Mobians more, mostly for his own sake, and seeing as where he was at the moment she couldn't say it wasn't working. For that much she was grateful, even if she did catch Sorun complaining about Sonic every now and then and how... enthusiastic he could be sometimes. They were always half-complaints said more out of jest than anything that she found somewhat amusing, and she'd rather have Sorun's mind focused on trivial matters such as that than anything that would cause him grief.

And yet, still, she felt somewhat envious. Confused at the same time- she knew what the act of fishing was, and couldn't completely understand why they were going out of their way to go through the tedium of catching fish when there was already a stock of food readily available in the city. But it was still something new Sorun got to experience without her since her being was confined to the city. And it meant less time with her.

Eventually, Nicole dismissed these thoughts. Diversifying his time with others was good for Sorun's mental state, and he needed to get out more anyways. And if he was going to be with some of the Freedom Fighters while outside the city she didn't need to worry about his safety.

"I see. Well, I hope you enjoy yourself," Nicole said to him.

"Dunno what's so enjoyable about sitting in a boat with two guys for hours, but yeah, I'll try," he assured her. He took a few steps forwards in front of Nicole, stopping in front of her with an unsure look on his face. Nicole gave him a curious look back, while the pale human had darted his eyes away from hers. He reached his hand up, Nicole looking towards it in interest and, oddly, a sense of

hopefulness she couldn't quite place began to grow in her as he reached for her.

It was promptly lost completely when Sorun's hand froze halfway, followed by him reeling the hand back, followed by him extending his thumb and pinkie finger and lightly shaking his hand back and forth.

"Er, uh... so yeah. Thanks. Um, for the well wishes and coming to see me and... yeah," Sorun said, voice a bit higher and cracking as he continued shaking his hand with the two digits extended.

Nicole, for her part, remained completely perplexed at the gesture, and it showed on her face with the confused expression her mouth was in and the way one of her eyes were half-lidded at him. In a bizarre turn she decided to silently reciprocate and mimic the gesture Sorun was giving her while still maintaining that perplexed expression. And then Sorun immediately turned away and began walking towards the exit of his house at a much faster rate than she normally recorded him walking at.

Moments after Sorun closed the door behind him, Nicole lowered her hand and began to lightly stroke the sleeping blue and black Chao sleeping in her lap as the AI pondered the meaning behind the strange hand gesture Sorun showed her.

Beyond New Mobotropolis' walled perimeter was a river that was relatively close to the city. "Relatively close" may have been an understatement, actually, as it was really only a five minute walk away from the city to reach the river. It was here that, for reasons beyond Sorun's comprehension, Sonic and Antoine decided to take him fishing.

He didn't know why. He couldn't parse together the rhyme or reason behind barely anything Sonic ever did. All he knew was that they planned an impromptu fishing trip and decided to bring Sorun along. And Sorun, with a lack of much better to do, was a fool and said yes to it.

And so, here he was: sitting in a boat, floating along a river surrounded by natures and trees. Two Mobians sitting near him as they fiddled with their fishing poles. Sorun himself was holding his pole up to his face, looking intensely at the hook at the end of his fishing line and the squirming worm impaled on the hook.

"We're in the true man's world now," Sorun sarcastically thought as he looked at the worm. A sad fate, to be sure. To be skewered on the hook to await being consumed by a fish, which would promptly be caught and consumed by Sorun. Someday he'd die and his body would be food for the worms, and the cycle would continue indefinitely. Such was life.

Well, unless they cremated him. He still didn't know how Mobians handled dead bodies or if there was even a plan to dispose of his upon his termination from existence.

"You already made me put the worm on the hook, Sorun. You seriously need me to throw it in the water for you, too?"

Frowning, Sorun looked up at Sonic, who was sitting ahead of him in the small wooden boat they, and by they Sorun really meant Antoine and Sonic as he'd watched, dragged to the river. He'd already cast his line into the water and was giving Sorun a mocking smirk. In response, Sorun made a "tsk" noise and cast his own line in the opposite direction.

"I'm perfectly capable of doing this on my own," Sorun grunted out, scooting closer towards Antoine, who sat right besides him and looked like he was trying very hard to tune out the conversation happening near him.

"'I'm perfectly capable of doing this on my own,' says the guy too squeamish to touch a worm," Sonic said with a roll of his eyes.

"Worms are gross." There was no way he was touching that damn wriggly thing with his bare hands. It came from the ground. He had

standards. "Did you really invite me to this fishing trip just to ridicule me, Sonic?"

"No, I thought, 'hey we need a third guy for the fishing trip and Sorun's a great friend who could use a change of pace. Let's invite him,'" Sonic answered. "Why's everything gotta have this dark reason or ulterior motive with you? I invited a friend to go fishing. It ain't that complicated."

At that point, Antoine snapped. "May we now cease discussing ze ultimate locomotives before your incessant babbling scares ze fish!?" he screeched out.

Both Sonic and Sorun stared towards the coyote in surprise at his outburst. Antoine, suddenly looking very bashful at the looks, made a nervous chuckle and started to focus very intensely at the water. "Pardon moi," he shyly muttered out.

After both teens blinked in surprise at him, they proceeded to focus on their respective spots where their hooks were sunk in the water. Silence reigned out for the most part as they sat in silence, just waiting for a passing fish to swim by and take the bait. Droll, uneventful silence that was already beginning to strain Sorun's patience.

Time continued to pass. Time so small in its length it could barely be perceived. Moments. *Seconds* . For Sorun it felt like he'd been sitting there for eons waiting for a damn fish to bite down on his hook.

Sorun made a quiet sigh. This had to register as some sort of strange, cruel torture. Cruel and unusual punishment. He played fishing minigames in video games. It didn't take nearly this long to catch a fish in 'Red Dead Two'. And he'd been a fishing *god* in that game, if only for the items it brought. Same for 'FF15'. And the 'NieR' games.

"Aw, fuck, I'm never gonna play that remake of 'NieR' they were making," Sorun suddenly realized. *"Damn. I was looking forwards to*

that. Wonder if it even finished before...? Nah, probably not. God dammit..." More torturous moments passed. *"Man, I guess I'll never get to play 'Cyberpunk', either. What a shame. That was shaping up to be the best game of the decade. I wonder if that one came out before Earth got nuked?"* Sorun looked up towards the sky. *"Bet Dave got to play it if it did. I wonder if it shaped up to be the masterpiece it was advertised as? Probably, right? Of course it is, there's no way- fuck, I just realized Keanu Reeves is dead, too."*

Looking past the tragedy of knowing Sorun was the sole human being from his zone left in the entire multiverse left him with the realization there was so much he'd never get to experience ever again. Games, movies, anime and other shows, music, internet in general. It was all massively overshadowed by Sorun's previous life and anybody associated with it being dead along with every single other person asides from himself, but it still held a place in his mind. Like strawberry decorations added onto the cake of sadness that was his life.

A sudden tug on Sorun's pole tore these depressing thoughts away from him. Gripping the pole tightly, the teen pulled it up while also rapidly winding the reel attached to his pole. There was resistance, but surprisingly not as much as Sorun would think there would be. He continued to reel his catch in, both Antoine and Sonic peeking over his shoulder as the hook rose up out of the water- it was a weed, goddamn it.

"Pfft. Nice catch," Sonic snickered out, eyes affixed to the tangle of green weeds hanging off Sorun's hook. The human didn't look nearly as amused as the hedgehog, and with a barely suppressed growl he tore the weeds off his hook and chucked it back into the river. Miraculously, the worm was still hooked onto the hook. "Do me a favor and see if you can catch a salad next for us."

Breathing in deeply, Sorun tried his best to ignore Sonic's jab and threw his line back into the water. Both Sonic and Antoine went back to their own respective lines as well, though by now Sorun couldn't focus on his line. Sonic's words were still burning at Sorun's ego,

and when he looked over his shoulder at the blue Mobian's spiny back, he felt a sudden urge to kick him into the river.

Naturally he tapped on Antoine's shoulder to gain his attention so he might be assisted in this endeavor.

Humming, Antoine looked to the side at Sorun. The human was currently nodding his head towards Sonic, though, based on the confusion the blonde Mobian held, it was clear he didn't know what Sorun was trying to say. Frowning, Sorun turned around halfway and made a kicking gesture towards Sonic while also pointing to the river with his free hand that wasn't holding the pole. Catching his meaning more easily now, Antoine widened his eyes and then profusely began to shake his head.

With him now being confused, Sorun gave Antoine a questioning look. Antoine made a show of using his arms to make a swimming gesture, and then pointed to Sonic. Afterwards, he made a face that looked like it was drowning while also holding his throat with his free hand. It took a few seconds for Sorun to catch the meaning of what he just witnessed, but after he did, he burst out in laughter startling both Mobians.

"Ha! You can't swim!?" Sorun exclaimed. "Seriously!?"

Sonic's shoulders began to shake as his two-handed grip on his fishing pole tightened, all but confirming the assessment for Sorun. As a result, he laughed even harder, causing Sonic to sigh out and hang his head. "Mr. Sonic T. Hedgehog, hero to all on Mobius, can't swim? For real?"

"Oh, and you're such an expert on swimming?" Sonic shot back, voice irritated as he looked over his shoulder at Sorun. He looked genuinely offended, and then surprised when Sorun nodded at him.

"Of course I can swim," Sorun stated with a blank face.

"What!?" Sonic shouted out. "How!? When!? You said you grew up in a city!"

"It's called a community swimming pool, dude," Sorun explained in a flat tone. "Also, pro life tip, never go to a community swimming pool. Like, ever. Place is nasty. And anyways, how do you not know how to swim? It's the easiest thing in the world."

It'd been easy for Sorun to learn, at least. All he'd done was jump in the water and kept doing stuff until he stopped drowning. From what he heard it was a pretty effective way of teaching kids to swim. He was honestly shocked Sonic didn't know how to swim since he was such a nature-loving person. And then double surprised when he realized that swimming likely should have been a standard skill for a Freedom Fighter to have.

For pete's sake, they made Sorun learn how to climb a tree when he was starting out, but swimming was optional apparently?

"Look, me and water don't have the friendliest of relationships, alright?" Sonic snapped his head over his shoulder to glare over in Sorun's direction, though from the amused look Sorun held it wasn't that effective. "I don't see why I need to know how to swim when I'm fast enough to just run over it."

"Yeah, but what if I just kick you in the water? Then what'll you do?"

"..." Sonic's eyes narrowed at Sorun. "You wouldn't dare."

"I'm still debating it." After saying his piece, Sorun turned around to face towards the water where his line was. "Are you guys sure there's even fish in this river?"

Sonic's eyes lingered on Sorun's back for a few moments after he turned back around. He made a unsettled hum, and then turned to his own side of the river. "It's a river. Fish live in rivers. There's totally fish here," he reasoned.

"... But you *did* check, right?"

"Sorun, it's a river, we don't need to check."

"Oui, zis iz ze same river Rotor and some of ze other Mobians in ze city go to catch fish for zemselves," Antoine added. "Zey 'ave a net set up and everyzing."

"Yeah, see, it's fine- wait." Sonic cut himself off and looked back at Antoine. "We put the boat upstream of the net, right?"

A few moments passed. Antoine shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Hm?"

"I asked if we put the boat upstream of the net. We did, right?"

"Hm."

"Ant, that's... that's not an answer."

"It is to me," Sorun sighed out, shoulder and head dropping as his grip on the fishing pole went slack. "Antoine, if you're gonna sit there and tell us we're wasting our time when there's nothing-"

"Zey only put ze net up on certain days and zis iz not one of zem!" Antoine shouted out. "You both truly zink zis little of moi!? Zat I wouldn't check!?"

"Alright, geez, chill. We trust ya." Sonic exhaled through his nose and turned back to the water, the other two doing the same. "Maybe it's just a slow day. It's getting close to winter."

"I'm... not sure that's how fish work, but sure," Sorun agreed. Any excuse to explain away why they were all such poor fishermen.

More silence reigned for an ungodly amount of minutes. Once in a while Sorun's line would tug, but he'd been advised by Sonic that it was just the current moving it or the hook getting caught on a weed or something and that he'd know if a fish really started biting down

on it. He took his word for it, if only because he sounded as impatient and tired as Sorun felt right now. It was bad enough that Sorun was deciding if they should head back after one of them caught a single fish. He couldn't handle hours of this monotony.

Because that's all it was. Tedium. More and more tedium as the minutes stretched into tens of minutes. Maybe even a half hour had passed by now, much to Sorun's horror. And yet, somehow through this torment, whenever he glanced over to the side at Antoine the coyote seemed completely content with everything that was happening. Peaceful, even. How this was Sorun didn't have the faintest idea.

It kind of reminded Sorun of himself in a way, back in the day when he'd been grinding away in 'Warframe' or 'FF14' or some other MMO he'd play back then. Lulled into a dull, peaceful calm. He could admit he could see the appeal in the ability for one to shut their brain off for a while as they committed to a mindless task as a way of relaxing, Sorun was guilty of doing that himself as he ground away in games, but this wasn't the same thing and he didn't see how Antoine managed to reach that state when he was restless in his seat. It couldn't be a Mobian thing, either, because Sorun could practically feel Sonic fidgeting away in the seat behind him.

Maybe it was just a Antoine thing.

"You guys hear that Aly's taking in requests in the newspaper again?" Sonic asked, breaking the unbearable silence that'd been permeating the entire boat.

Antoine made a frustrated sigh. "Oui, my wife iz an avid readair of ze column, but now iz not ze time to be discussing-"

"Forget that, discussion's all we got at this point," Sorun interrupted, desperate to have *something* happen to break up the monotony. "Who's Aly and why should I care about her existence?"

"Eh, nobody really knows who she is. Kinda doubt Aly's even her real name," Sonic said. "All these girls with romance problems send these letters to her in the post office and she somehow gets the newspaper to print her responses in this column. Love and Loss or something like that, prints every Wednesday. And they always use these really flowery and geeky pseudonym names so nobody knows who they are."

"She... runs a romance tabloid...?" Sorun asked in a mixture of shock and disbelief.

A tired, annoyed sigh left Antoine. "I hear eet iz quite popular weeth less fortunate mademoiselles who cannot unravel ze mystery of love. Zey'll write to zis mystery woman telling of zeir woes, and zis Al-y person will write back in ze newspaper responding to ze letters and offering her advice." He shook his head. "Feools, ze lot of zem."

"... Wait," Sonic began, "didn't Bunnie once-?"

"Zat was different, she was dealing weeth ze other me at ze time!"

Rolling his eyes, Sonic continued with, "Yeah, well, according to every girl I know it's gold advice." He blew out a scoff and turned back to the water. "Yeah, right. I'll never understand girls and why they do these weird things, man. Sounds like it'd be way simpler to just talk to whoever they like instead running around in circles writing letters to some mystery newspaper lady."

"Er... right." Sorun contemplatively tapped at his fishing pole in thought. "I've never heard of her before."

Sonic shrugged. "Eh, she stopped writing months and months ago. I always figured it was because there could have only been so many women with relationship issues in Knothole, but now that we're in the new city and everything's calmed down I guess she started getting requests again, 'cause I saw her responding to more letters in dad's newspaper last week."

"It's *just* girls that write to her?"

"I mean, traditionally, yeah, but everybody uses fake names so I guess it wouldn't really matter if a guy did it," Sonic said. "Don't think I know any self-respecting guy that'd go that far, though."

"... What's the tabloid called again exactly?"

"It's called Love and Loss, I think you just write a letter addressed to her name and drop it off at the post-" Sonic suddenly cut himself off, and then, slowly, turned around at Sorun. Sorun, meanwhile, had gone completely still and continued staring at the water. "Why do you want to know?" Sonic asked, sounding suspicious.

A nervous sweat broke out on Sorun's face. "I'm curious, man, conversation topic, we need to talk about something because it's almost been a half hour and not one of us has gotten a single bite out here."

"Ah-huh." Sorun didn't like the smug sound in the hedgehog's voice. "Right. Of cooourse. Because you're so known to be an eager reader of the newspaper."

"Maybe I am. Maybe I'm considering getting a newspaper subscription." He pretty much had to now for research purposes, among other reasons. "I just wanna know what I'm getting into."

When he glanced over his shoulder, Sorun internally winced when he saw that smirk on Sonic's face. That *knowing* smirk. The urge to kick him into the river was rapidly increasing, and he felt his right foot begin to itch.

"I dunno," Sonic began, "sounds a lot like you might actually be interested in- wah!"

The urge won out. Sorun spun around and kicked Sonic in the small of his back. The hedgehog yelled out in surprise and tipped forwards right into the water, dropping his fishing pole and leaving it in the

boat. Not even a second later Sonic popper up out of the water, flailing around with a horrified expression as he reached a hand up to the sky.

"Help! Help, I- urk, hrk!" Some water had flooded into Sonic's mouth while he cried out for help, making his flailing increase. "Heeeelp!"

Antoine looked on towards the struggling hedgehog in alarm. Sorun had a much more calm and neutral expression as he continued fishing on his side of the boat. "Sorun, mon dieu! What have you done!?" he screamed out. "He could drown!"

Not looking concerned in the slightest, Sorun leaned over the boat a bit to look into the water. "Yeah, in that perilous waist-deep water," he dryly remarked. He wasn't cold enough to play on somebody inability to swim to actually put them in danger. He wasn't above it when they could just stand up and walk out of the river. Especially when Sonic wouldn't shut up about the stupid newspaper article.

It was all his fault, really.

"Hm? Oh, hey! Finally!" Easily ignoring Sonic's panicked screaming behind him, Sorun began reeling his fishing pole when he felt the line begin to sharply tug. "Oh-ho, that's it, come to... man, really?"

Well, it was definitely a fish he'd pulled up. It wasn't any bigger than his finger and the worm he was using as bait didn't even fit inside its mouth, but it was still a catch. Even if Sorun was mentally debating with himself whether this was better than zero.

With more disappointment on his face than he'd felt in a while, Sorun held up what could barely be called a fish up to Antoine's face. "You think you can make something out of this?" he asked over the screaming near them. The unimpressed look Antoine gave him back said enough. "Yeah, thought not," Sorun sighed out, unhooking the fish and tossing it back into the river.

"Are you not going to help Soneek up?" Antoine asked him.

"..." Sorun looked over to Sonic. He was still flailing around in the water. "Let's give it, like, five more minutes and if he hasn't realized he can just stand up by then we'll lend a hand."

"... Fair enough."

The next day

The greatest challenge in his life laid before Sorun. One man. One singular piece of paper. A pen he'd stolen from Honey's front desk. All gathered in what was effectively his workspace inside of her shop, e.g. the room full of boxes he'd painstakingly organized so that it was neat and orderly. Here he sat, at a table in the dead-center of the room, the overhead lights beating down on him and reflecting off the yellow wallpaper as he stared at the blank piece of paper staring him in the face, pen in hand.

It was time to write a goddamn letter.

"I'm gonna write the shit out of you." Breathing in deeply, Sorun held the pen up to the sky and thrust its tip down towards the blank page. The tip of the pen neared the paper, the ink almost close enough to stain the white material-

Breathing in deeply, Sorun tore the pen away from the paper before it could make a mark. His heart was racing. Stupid. This was a stupid decision. Why had he decided to do this?

"Right. Because of her," Sorun thought out. He went slack in his chair, slamming the pen down on the table as he stared forlornly at the blank paper staring back at him. It was almost like it was mocking him. *"Nicole..."*

There'd been a time that had stretched on for months where he'd try to deny these feelings on account of him literally *dying* and wanting to save both himself and her from any ensuing heartbreak that would result from pursuing these feelings. He came back, of course, and a

small part of himself went far enough to debate on the merits of staying behind just for her.

He'd manage to convince himself that it was probably a foolish idea to stay behind in a world not his for a girl that potentially didn't even like him back.

But that was the crux of the issue. He was here to stay now with Earth gone. Here to stay with *her* . And while his heart was still heavy with the loss of his home, due to everybody's efforts that weight had been significantly lessened, and the void in his heart made room for these feelings to return. It didn't help how supportive Nicole had been of him all this time. Spending so much time with him, the talks, the house, she'd given him a house of all things, sometimes it was just too much. Any reservations he had over what she was were squashed under all the feelings he felt.

But then the paranoid side of his took over. What if she wasn't interested in a relationship with him? What if she didn't want that kind of thing with anybody? What if she rejected him and he ended up ruining their friendship by asking one single thing? She was his best friend; he didn't want to jeopardize that. But on the other hand Sorun was slowly growing less and less satisfied with what they had right now. He wanted... he wanted something, he wasn't sure what. More of her, he guessed. Something deeper between them.

"Hell, I don't know what I'm thinking. I've never been in a relationship. I don't... what am I doing?" Sorun wondered to himself. *"I-I-I don't know her feelings on this. Should I ask her? No, impossible. Nicole can't know. Unless...? No. Absolutely not."* He sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair. *"What do I do?"*

Sonic inadvertently informing him about this Aly love tabloid person was what jumpstarted this whole thing. They'd been thoughts Sorun had been wrestling with for weeks now, and it seemed like a golden opportunity had presented itself to him. Air out all his questions and worries to a completely anonymous source under a false identity? Why, that amount of complexity was just perfect for him. But he didn't

know what to write. Or if he should even go through with it. What the potential consequences were.

What if somebody found out? God, what if Nicole found out? He'd have to move. Go live somewhere else forever. He'd never be able to face her again.

"... Screw it. It's something as opposed to doing nothing. And nobody could ever find out." Breathing in and out, very, very deeply, Sorun touched the pen down on the paper. *"Alright. Alright, there's nothing to it. I'll just... I'll go for it, and at the end if it turns out this is a horrible idea I'll just burn the letter. Yeah. Yeah, that's a great idea. 'Dear A-'"*

"Whatcha doin'?"

A shrill shriek left Sorun as he twisted his body to the side. He saw Honey leaning over his chair, hands tucked behind her back with an inquisitive look on her face. Sorun almost reacted by jabbing the pen he held towards her nearest eye, but managed to hold the urge off and release a calming breath.

Doing his best to focus and act natural, Sorun faced Honey with the straightest face he could muster. "Nothing. Nothing at all. What are you doing?"

"Checking on you...?" The cat took a quick glance around the room. "You got that delivery from the post office I asked for, right?"

"I left it by the front counter."

"... Oh, that's what that was." She blinked and looked back to Sorun. "So what are you doing now?"

"Nothing, seeing as I already packed all the things you asked me to pack for today and dropped them off at the post office for shipping. And got that thing you asked for." Sorun dragged his chair a bit forwards towards the table and slightly leaned his body across it to

block Honey's view when she looked closer at the table's surface. "I'm not doing anything."

"Thennnn what's that?"

"... A table."

"My table. Move it." A hand was placed on the side of Sorun's head and was used to forcible push him away. Sorun hissed out in protest and attempted to swat at Honey, though this went ignored by the cat as she looked down at the letter Sorun had barely started. "You're... writing a letter?" She released her hold on Sorun and glanced towards him, with the human sending her a heated glare. "Who's A?"

The anger in Sorun's eyes slowly began to turn nervous as he just began to realize how deep he was in it now. "A... ntoine. Yeah. Him."

"That guy with the goofy blonde haircut with the weird accent?"

"Mmhm, yeah, totally, we got a pen pal thing going on," Sorun lied. "He's actually a really good cook. He trades me recipes and I trade him..." He trailed off, not being able to think of anything he'd have of worth that Antoine would actually want. "... Stuff, yeah, point is we trade letters."

Honey didn't look convinced in the slightest. "Didn't you say once it's only a two minute walk from your house to his?"

"Bit less, actually," Sorun admitted, then went rigid when Honey gave him an accusing glare. "It was his wife's idea?"

"Uh-huh." Looking back at the letter, Honey stuck her tongue out from her mouth as she gave the paper a scrutinizing look, with Sorun growing increasingly nervous from besides her. It was only after a few moments of staring at the letter did Honey's form go completely straight as the realization hit her. "Noooo..." She whispered in awe as looked back towards Sorun.

"Shut up."

"I don't believe it."

"Shut up shut up *shut up* ...!"

"You're writing a letter to *her* !?" And now she was laughing. Cackling, really, hard enough that she'd thrown her head back in her mirth. Sorun, past all the embarrassment he was feeling, was contemplating stabbing her with the pen he was still holding. The pen he was fairly certain he was crushing in his grip. "Sorun, you nerd! Only girls write to Aly! It's a girl tabloid! For girls!"

"I was gonna use neutral pronouns so nobody knew a guy writ it!" Sorun yelled out. "Why does it even matter anyways!?"

She didn't answer him, instead choosing to continue laughing. This left Sorun stewing in his seat as he stared at the cackling cat, having slammed his pen down on the table as he angrily crossed his arms and waited for her to finish laughing at him.

It was a good five minutes before she finally calmed down. Sorun stared at Honey the entire duration, burning in anger and embarrassment. Eventually she lowered her head back down from the ceiling with a sigh while wiping a tear away from her eye. "Ahahah... ahhh. Oh, Sorun. Sweet, sweet Sorun."

"If you're done laughing at me can you leave me alone?" Sorun bitterly ground out, elbow propped on the table with his head resting on the fist. "I don't make fun of your life."

"That's because there's nothing to make fun of. Unlike everybody else I'm perfect." She turned around just in time to miss Sorun sputtering at her in outrage. "Ah, I just can't believe it," she continued, putting her hands on her cheeks. "I always kinda pegged you as the clueless romantic but I never imagined you'd go to these kinds of lengths. It's so sad yet precious at the same time." She pulled up a nearby chair and sat in it backwards, arms folded over

the top of its back as she grinned towards Sorun. "So who's lucky girl, mmm? I bet it's the computer girl."

Sorun's breath choked in his throat when Honey guessed correctly. He even felt a bit of fear begin to build. "H-how-?"

"Oh, Amy gossips about you two all the time. She figured out you had a thing for her all the way back when you kept bugging her for that Power Ring to take her to the concert Mina was having."

"I'll stab her." The worst part was he actually remembered a lot from that day, and how the two of them had been tittering away at Sorun while all those bags he'd been carrying for Amy tried to crush him to death. He couldn't believe Amy came to that conclusion, let alone gossiped about it. "She seriously talks about me behind my back?"

"She talks about a lot of people. She's a regular of mine and we're into a lot of the same things, so we talk a lot," Honey answered. "But yeah, she mentions you a lot."

A horrifying thought struck Sorun. "... She hasn't told anyone else about this, has she?"

"I'unno." Honey shrugged. "I mean, probably not. Not with the guys at least."

"I take it back, I'm gonna drop a building down on her one day. This I swear." A growing migraine forced Sorun to reach up and massage his forehead. "Honey, this is really private for me, so can you just leave it alone?" He glanced to the side at the letter. "Fact is I don't know what I'm doing so I need advice, and if Amy figured it out then I literally can't go to anyone about this without them putting the pieces together. I'm kinda strapped for options."

Honey gave him a lame look. "Or you could just ask me."

Sorun mirrored her expression. "You ever even been in a relationship, woman?"

Thinking the question over, Honey looked up while touching a finger to her chin. "Not really. No guy's ever asked me out for some reason," she said, causing him to sigh out. "But clothes have always been my passion, so I'm not too broken up about it."

"A match made in heaven, I'm sure," Sorun dryly remarked. "Look," he continued, picking up the nearly blank letter, "why do you even care?"

"Because I care about you and this is the most exciting thing happening right now," she easily answered. "I know I'm not an expert on the subject, but here's a great idea: talk to her about this."

"Ha ha, no." Shaking his head, Sorun turned around to face the table and picked the pen up. "I... I have reasons, okay? I would, but..." A deep frown settled over Sorun's features as he began tapping the pen on the table. "I'm just trying to cover all my bases here," he settled on. "Wanna get as much info as possible, maybe wait it out a bit more to see what happens. Don't wanna screw something up."

"Sounds like you're just stalling to me."

"Says the woman married to shirts." Sorun waved his hands over his shoulder. "Don't you have a blouse to go make or something? Let me suffer in peace already."

Pouting, Honey stood up from the chair. "It's raiment for a fancy dance a client of mine is going to," she corrected him as she pushed the chair in. "I can tell this is actually stressing you out, so I'll leave you alone. And... for the record I actually do know a couple girls who say Aly's advice did help save their relationships. So it's not the worst idea in the world, this whole thing." She gestured to the table, and at the same time Sorun's ears perked up. "I still think it's hilarious you're going this far, though."

"..." Sorun said nothing, and instead began writing out words on the paper. Rolling her eyes to the ceiling and shaking her head, Honey turned to leave.

"And put that pen back when you're done," she called over her shoulder as she left the room. Sorun watched her leave out of the corner of his eye, scoffing once she left his sight completely and then turned back to the letter.

The next two hours were filled with the sounds of small scratching noises and a light amount of curses as he worked to compile what was most definitely the most awkward letter in Sorun's whole life. Which just so happened to also be the only letter he'd ever written.

The next day

There'd never been a point in Sorun's life he'd ever posted a letter. Mostly on the account he didn't know anybody that lived far enough away from him to warrant sending mail during his life on Earth. He never imagined it'd be this stress-inducing, though.

Bright side it wasn't a love letter he was sending through the mail. Downside was, well, it wasn't very far from one.

"Come on, man, snap out of it. This ain't a love letter. Love has nothing to do with any of this. This is..." Sorun looked down at the sealed envelope in his hand, and then up at the post office in front of him. *"... It's..."*

"Love letter, plea for romantic advice, it's kind of the same thing at the end of the day, ain't it?"

"Not even remotely." Frowning, Sorun turned to the mirror image of himself leaning next to the entrance to the post office. *"This is foolish. I'm not going through with it."*

"Aw, come on, don't puss out now. I had to watch you put this thing together for hours." Sorun pushed off the wall and slinked to Sorun's side. "Look, homie, it's simple." He draped one arm over Sorun's shoulder and gestured to the post office with the other. "Ya go in, ya mail the thing, we go get a newspaper subscription later 'cause we

really need to do that at some point, we read the article when it comes out Wednesday and after that, hey, who knows?"

Sorun batted Sorun's arm off of him. *"I thought you were opposed to a relationship with someone here,"* he thought.

"No, I was opposed to staying here for a *potential* relationship, but seeing as we're stuck here forever with fuck all to do I don't care what we do anymore." Sorun turned away from Sorun and interlocked his fingers behind his head. "Just do it, dude. I'm tired of us fumbling around when you're around her."

"I have time."

"We have nothing *but* time. My plan is for us to be a mailman for forty years until you die with nothing to do in the meantime, so for Christ's sake post the goddamn letter already." Sorun looked back at Sorun. "You know you wanna. Honey's right. You're stallin'."

"..." Sighing, Sorun looked down at the letter. *"I'm just scared."* Scared of making a terrible mistake he couldn't fix. Scared of the unknown. Scared of doing this when he had no idea what he was doing or if this was even the right thing to do. Too much of not knowing anything and too scared to do so much as take a step forwards to fix any of it.

Hanging his shoulders, Sorun turned to face Sorun. "I know, I'm scared about this, too, but compared to living through the days wondering if we were gonna get a lance skewered through our face by a robot I find this a hell of a lot better. I want this too, you know?"

"Mh..."

"Just man the fuck up and post the letter already."

"Tch." When Sorun looked back up, Sorun was gone. All that was left was the post office in front of him. *"I am a man. A man about to write to a girls' column in the newspaper... yeah..."*

Hanging his head and resigning to his fate, Sorun made his way to the post office. One microstep at a time.

Dear Aly,

Well, here I am, writing this thing out. I didn't know how to start this out and spent twenty minutes staring at a blank page before I decided to just go for it. So here I am. Going for it. I've never really done anything like this before, so you'll have to forgive me if this is a little, I dunno, odd? Unconventional? Unorthodox? That's pretty much how everybody treats me anyways, so I wouldn't even be surprised at this point if this is how the letter's perceived, so... yeah, just bear that in mind.

Romance was never really a thing that ever popped up in my life. No one wanted me, I didn't want anybody. Life was simple. I didn't care *enough to even think about it. But then is happened and now everything's all backwards and I don't know what I'm doing. But I should probably start from the beginning, give the context to this whole thing. That whole jazz.*

I'm not from New Mobotropolis, or Knothole, was never really a native anywhere. For lack of any better way to put it I was separated from my home and was forced to relocate here. All I remember from those early days was being in a constant haze of confusion and fear around everything. Unfamiliar surroundings, unfamiliar people, felt like I was in a nightmare every day. I was lashing out at everyone around me because I hated every second there. I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

But then I meet this one person, and they're... they're different from everyone else. In more than one way, but I never paid any mind to that. I actually found it kind of cool, actually, but that's besides the point. We shared a hobby, which was more of something in common than I had in with literally anybody else around me. It felt like a connection, you know? Like I could sit down and hang out with this one person doing the one thing in the world I'm good at that I enjoy

doing, and in those moments everything felt fine, and I felt normal, like I was back home. This friend of mine had some personal issues, though, and because of that there wasn't a lot of times we could hang out, but we tried to make do with the time we had.

Then... I find out I'm dying. Terrible sickness that's entirely incurable. I didn't even know how much time I had left at the time, chalked it up to months, probably, and my reaction was about what you'd expect. Denial, grief, enough anxiety I'm honestly surprised I didn't die of a heart attack at some point, you probably get how it is. I think I acted poorly as a result of it all. There was a time I ran away for a bit as I tried to come to terms to all of it, and when I came back it didn't get any better. There were people that tried supporting me, but for reasons that are my own I never actually told anybody what was happening to me, so when all these people start acting nice and caring around me it just felt patronizing. It wasn't anyone's fault, I get it, they were all just trying to help, but it was still a bad time for me. I just became apathetic to everything. Withdrawn. Distant, going through the motions towards the inevitable. It felt like I was completely isolated from the whole world.

Except for that one person. The one true, actual friend I had in the whole world, who I was only able to get together with for a few minutes, maybe some hours if I was lucky, or sometimes not at all some days, to make it all go away for just a little bit. Looking back I probably clung onto them a bit too much for the support they were unknowingly giving me, which eventually became part of the problem. I was dying and didn't wanna leave behind holes in anybody's hearts, so there was a moment where I tried distancing myself from my friend. Hoped they'd just forget about me so when I died they'd just move on with minimal damage to them. Figured it was the last kindness I could provide with my impending doom on the horizon.

Yeah, that didn't work. They got mad at me for avoiding them and I... well, to put it honestly I missed them too much to go through with it. So I bite the bullet and decide to just go for it and continue going

along with it all 'til the moment I died. I felt bad, more for them than for me, oddly enough, but it's all I could do.

Well, the time comes, and guess what? I don't die. To say I was cured of this disease would be wrong; "survived" would be a more accurate term. Point is I'm not dying anymore, so yay for that. It's around the same time that Knothole got blown up and that cool Sorun guy saved everyone and Nicole made the new city for everyone and everything, so yeah. All's good. Those problems my friend was having were cleared up around the same time, too, so suddenly they can go do whatever they want because they had a lot more freedom to work with now. So overall everything's great. I had a, uh... kind of an adjustment period to work with, but I managed to get through it. And during all that time when I was dying I did manage get closer with those trying to befriend me, if only because going it alone kinda sucks.

I find out later on that my home is gone. Blown up, burned to cinders, Eggmanned or something, I dunno. Everyone there was gone and I was the last one left. This left me in another depressive mood for a bit, and I made some stupid decisions in my grief, but hey, who hasn't? But I had my friends. And that one specific, special friend. Things weren't easy, still aren't, but it's getting better. It's working out.

So where does that leave me? Healthy new life in a new city, new home, new job, a community of supporting friends and a bright future ahead of me. By all rights everything should be golden. And it is. But there's a problem.

I don't know, it just feels like something's missing from my life. And I look at my friend, my one best friend that's been there with me to support me every single day since the whole my-home-got-blown-up thing, and how I feel whenever they're around and the fact that I kinda wish they'd stick around more than they already do. It feels selfish because they've done more to help me than I'd ever be able to repay in a hundred lives over, but a large part of me wants more than what we have currently. I can't explain why *, I just... it's what I want.*

But then I look at them, and I look at myself. There's my best friend: smartest person I know, infinitely more talented than I'll ever be, stronger in every capacity imaginable. Kinder and more generous than me by a large margin. In terms of looks, er... look, I don't mean to sound offensive, but I've always been "different" than everyone else around me and if you asked me if I'd date anybody else I'd say no, but my friend's special in that their looks don't even register with me, and I don't know why. What I'm trying to say is they're perfect. And then there's me: a talentless hack. Kind of a jerk. Don't really have much going for me besides a sense of dry sarcasm that kinda gets on everyone's nerves.

I'm not good enough for them, plain and simple. But I want to go for it all the same. But I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know if I should just go for it because I don't want to mess something up and ruin what we already have between us, I don't know what I'm supposed to do even if we do agree to something, I don't... I'm not romantic, okay? I don't have experience with this, I don't even know if you could call this romance. It's a giant mess is what it is and I'm tired of pretending it's anything else. And I'm also tired of ignoring my feelings. But I'm too scared to act on them.

Thus is the tale of why I wrote this letter to you. I'm sorry if it's a bit longer than most letters you get; admittedly I just heard about you the other day and decided to just go for it because I don't have many options at the moment. So if I could just get some advice, please? Just a smidgen of wisdom on what I'm supposed to do here? I'm completely lost here.

Yours,

Xx_1337G4m3r_xX

"..." Slowly, the letter held in her hands was slowly set down on the desk in front of her. Blue eyes continued to stare at the paper, after which a tiring sigh left their owner.

Under any other circumstances Sally would have put a lot of thought into the letter she'd just read. That was the whole purpose of the service she'd set up, after all. But there was one particular reason she couldn't put her sole focus on that letter, and that was that there was a second letter sitting right next to that one.

Normally this wouldn't have made that much of a difference - she got through all letters sent to her - but there were certain peculiarities that caught her attention when she saw this letter arrive with the second one. Mainly it looked like it was printed as opposed to the handwritten letters she always received. The letters were too uniform to be anything but typed and printed and the paper was neat. And as it was she didn't know many people with a working printer.

"I swear, if this is the reason why Nicole asked me if I was still doing the Dear Aly thing the other day..." Sally thought to herself as she picked up the letter and began reading.

Dear Aly,

Greetings. I am writing to you in hopes of gaining insight into a matter that has proven to be particularly elusive for me.

The prospect of emotions has always been a peculiar case for me. To put it simply, due to certain factors outside of my control I was somewhat stunted in my intellectual understanding of the subject. I've many friends who I've lived alongside for years now that have helped me to understand just what it all means, and one friend in particular has been of great help to me in many areas. Him specifically is the reason I find myself writing this letter.

I'm not so uninformed as to not understand the concept of love; I'm not some gormless machine. I hold great fondness for all those that live around me in the city, and I truly do hold love for the friends that have stood by me all these years. It took much effort on my part to understand just what these feelings meant exactly, but I'm glad I've made the effort.

Strictly speaking, however, this is a platonic love I hold for those around me. It's romantic love I find myself being inadequate in understanding.

Of course I've seen numerous examples from couples in the city, and even a close friend of mine has a spouse. I understand the function of a pairing - the propagation of offspring and continuation of genetic material of the parents -, but it's the emotional aspect of the act that always fascinated me. Though, try as I might, I could never understand it. How two individuals could be drawn so close together as to pledge so much trust in one another and live so closely and intimately. I didn't know if there was a criteria to follow or if there was some natural, instinctive drive that I just lacked for one reason or another. I tried analyzing those around me and how they came about pairing off with others, but these results were... inconclusive, and sporadic, and so chaotic I had to wonder if I'd done something wrong.

But then there's him.

As you can probably imagine the aforementioned circumstances surrounding the reason for my stunted education of emotions has caused some to look at me oddly. This isn't usually the case with many, and I'm fortunate enough that my friends accept me for who I am regardless of such things. Even so, I'm aware there is some unconscious bias among them, though I cannot fault them for this.

There is, however, an exception in the case of one of my friends. A very dear friend of mine. That is not to say the rest of my friends do not treat me as an equal or a person, but he is special. From the very first moment we met he treated me normally, and on occasion has been very vocal on the subject to me, for which I've been thankful for. Beyond that we share many likes and enjoy each others' company. Enough that I've found myself spending more time with him than anyone else and have been longing to spend longer with him. As much as he'll deny it he's a kind and considerate individual who often puts others before himself. Sometimes to a worrying

degree, though fortunately he's lately been slowing down and taking things easy, which I've been grateful for.

He's also prone to making... very questionable decisions and is, on occasion, a source of consternation for me and many of my friends, though like me he is the victim of irregular circumstances and I can often overlook a majority of his shortcomings and bad decisions. I've often been told by one of my friends that somebody whose flaws are very evident is more trustworthy than someone seemingly without flaws, so I suppose, in this respect, my friend being this way is a fortunate thing.

Ironically, despite the fact I've known him the shortest time compared to all my other friends, I find myself longing for his company more than any of the others'. He goes very far out of his way for my sake, another endearing aspect of his, and I usually do the same for him despite the fact he doesn't expect me to. I'd once thought that us being somewhat "irregular", as it is, amongst all of our peers and friends was what originally drew us together, but his continued companionship and acts of kindness towards me, an affection he does not display towards anybody else, has caused me to develop feelings towards him I hold towards no one else, even those I hold dearest to me.

I... adore him. Sincerely. I cannot explain why, as try as I might these are feelings I cannot find myself comprehending. It's a vexatious thing, not knowing why I feel these things or how to properly describe and process them, but I simply do. He's always been there to help me experience life as it's meant to be lived since we've met. It's because of all this I desire to attempt to pursue what would be called a romantic relationship between us.

Therein lies the problem, as I've no practical experience in undertaking such a task. As much as I've tried to correlate the causes of others starting successful relationship, the why of it all still eludes me. More than that I've personally had a friend of mine as dear as the one I've mention suffer through a very traumatic breakup of their own. I do not wish the same to become of us, but do not

know how to avoid such a thing. I do not know how to initiate this sort of relationship, or even if he possesses the same feelings that I do. I worry of possible negative repercussions that would result of me simply asking, but am at a loss for what else to do.

Another issue is that I simply don't know if now would be the ideal time to attempt such a thing. My friend as recently suffered through many personal tragedies in his life and is in a vulnerable state at the moment. He's improved by a substantial margin over time and has been doing well enough for the most part currently, though I cannot say for certain if he has made a full recovery. I've tried to be there for his sake, and I believe my presence did, in fact, aid his recovery, but I do not want to rush into something during a time where he might not be ready. I do not even know if I am ready.

As such, I require your input on the matter due to you being very prominent in this field. Do I be blunt and confront him directly? Should I wait until I am more certain? Should something be done to subtly hint towards him that I desire a relationship, or would that be too underhanded of me? These are all questions I cannot answer for myself, and so I plead you to give me whatever advice you see fit. Thank you in advance for your time in aiding me with this.

Signed,

"These names..." Looking between the two letters, each in one of Sally's hands, the chipmunk found herself making a flat, unimpressed expression at the two pieces of paper. *"Sorun, I'm not surprised. I expected better from Nicole."* She breathed out and put the papers back down. *"What to do, what to do..."*

Any other day she would have been ecstatic for her friend finally figuring out love for herself, but this was a bit of a tenuous situation. Not because of Sorun; she was actually somewhat glad it was him as opposed to anybody else. Amy constantly gossiped to her and some of the other girls how much time they spent together and how back in the day Sorun was near-relentless in his pursuit of Power

Rings just to spend more time with Nicole. Even Sonic on occasion told Sally personally he suspected something was going on between the two of them.

Besides all that, the letters she just read pretty much all but confirmed those theories.

No, it was tenuous in that Sally felt like she was dealing with children that didn't know what they were doing. Children, except they were grownups, one was more intelligent than most adults she knew by default, and the other was... Sorun, who was definitely somewhere above a child. More than that they both seemed to have legitimately concerns about one another and were playing this extremely cautiously.

"Maybe a bit too cautious," Sally muttered to herself. *"Or maybe not. I don't know. I'd agree that Sorun isn't in a good place for this kind of thing right now, but he has been pretty normal as of late. Something like this might even be good for him. Considering both their feelings really all that needs to happen is one of them saying something."*

If this were a simpler world than she could have just walked right up to Nicole and given her Sorun's letter and be done with it, but that would be a betrayal of their trust. They'd both used poorly-made pseudonyms for a reason, and for one reason or another they wanted their problems to stay anonymous. Fine with Sally, as far as she was concerned. There was more than one way at tackling the issue. If they wanted Aly's advice, they'd get it.

"Geez, how'd I end up in the middle of all this?"

Wednesday morning

"What kind of rainbow-hippie, granola-eating bullshit is this?"

Sorun had nearly torn the arms off of the local mailman that morning when he came to deliver the paper. The teen had been huddled up

by a nearby window, watching the small walkway that lead to his house in preparation of the man. He hadn't even reached the newly-installed mail slot in Sorun's door before he'd flung it wide, tore the paper from his hands, and slammed the door back in his face.

Most of the paper had been discarded onto the floor as he jumped onto his couch. Useless news and countless words he had no interest in. There was only one single thing he needed, and it was a specific column he'd written to recently. To his glee, this strange Aly person actually responded to his letter, among others. He'd had to take some deep breaths and got up off the couch to pace for minutes just to work up the nerve to read it. Eventually he'd found his way back to the couch and began to slowly read her response, word by word at an agonizing pace.

A pace that soon began to increase the further Sorun got into the letter.

Dear Xx_1337G4m3r_xX (Wow! What a name!)

(Sorun couldn't help but scowl at what he felt was sarcasm written in that compliment)

I'm sorry to hear about everything that's been going on in your life, but I'm happy that you seem to be on the mend and doing better! Mental wellness with oneself is an important aspect of daily life, not just relationships, so it's good to hear you're taking steps to get past all your hardships. Keep it up and don't give up!

It sounds to me like you've been dancing around your feelings for your friend and have been taking the wait-and-see approach to your problem. Playing the cautious game is all well and good for establishing trust with one another and to see where you are, but from how you make it sound the two of you are already extremely close if your friend would go as far as to help support you for days on end in a time of need. There's such a thing as waiting TOO long, and

if you let an opportunity slip through your fingers you may find yourself wishing you'd acted sooner.

With that said, love isn't something to be rushed into. It's a slow process that takes time to establish, but no matter how slow a process is it still needs a starting point. And, of course, like any good relationship, communication is key. Don't let something like the fear of rejection turn you away from what could potentially blossom into something beautiful. The worse they could say to you is simply "no", so in that respect you really have nothing to lose by trying.

Bottom line, follow your heart and go for gold. You might even be surprised to find one of the reasons that friend spends so much time with you could be because they feel the same towards you. You'll never know until you act, so get to it! Y ou might be looking at a game over otherwise if you do nothing.

Signed,

Aly

Sorun stared right at the newspaper, never feeling more incredulous than he felt at that very moment. While he continued staring at the paper Sorun poked his head over Sorun's shoulder to stare down at it with him.

"Aw, that's cute. Look," he said, pointing to the column, "she used a bunch of gaming euphemisms just for you. You think she figured out what that stupid gamertag name you made up means?"

"No way. Nobody could have cracked the code," Sorun denied with a shake of his head. *"It's impossible. 'Sides, she doesn't even know us."*

"Yeah, I guess," Sorun agreed. "Still, this article-"

"It's flim flam." Anger creasing over his features, Sorun crushed the newspaper article in his hand out of spite. *"It's a bunch of boiler plate, generic dating advice I coulda gotten off the back of a cereal box. 'Stay true to your feelings and just talk and be open with-' I mean, come on! Anybody could have told me that!"* His scowl deepened. *"And I don't like how she kept tossing around the L-word, too. Nobody ever said anything about love. This isn't love. It's some other thing."*

Leaning back on the couch and propping his feet up on the cushions, Sorun said, "Well, whaddya expect from some no-name romantic adviser who's probably never gotten a real taste of romance in her entire life?" He looked up at the ceiling. "On the other hand the advice she *did* give is so practical and simplistic I have to wonder why we're not going for it."

"Because that would involve talking about my feelings to Nicole. Which is a no-no." Unfurling the newspaper, Sorun looked deeper into the article, towards one of the other letters she'd responded to. A sneer crossed his features when he read another lengthy one like his. *"I mean, listen to what she said about this one weird-sounding girl that wrote to her. And I mean really weird. She signed her name in binary. What kinda geek signs in binary?"*

"Mm, yeah. What's the name?"

"I dunno, we can't read binary." His blue eyes scrolled down to the response letter Aly sent her. *"It's practically the same goddamn thing. 'It can be a very scary experience to first start out a relationship,' blah blah blah, 'lots of people, males especially in some cases, can be rather adverse to opening up to others, even those they trust, so it can be up to us to get the ball rolling on these things,' there really is nothing new under the sun, I freakin' swear, 'gaining your potential partner's attention through special acts such as gift giving can often be a big hint you want to deepen the relationship, but if all else fails, just be upfront with your feelings-' this is all ludicrous."*

"Okay, but what's actually *wrong* with the advice? Like, what's the big issue with what you're reading? It actually seems like pretty solid advice."

"It is solid, and that's what pisses me off." Sorun threw the crumpled paper to the floor and slumped back in the couch, opposite of the other Sorun. *"It's actually more than solid. She's right, and I'm mad it took some random column writer to tell me what the right course of action was."*

"... I mean she's kinda an expert on the subject-"

Sorun rose his head up to glare at Sorun. *"You were just saying a minute ago how she was a know-it-all that didn't know anything!"*

Sorun shrugged. "I was trying to be nice and stay on your side but even you admitted all the points she raised were valid points." The explanation caused Sorun to sigh and relax back into the couch. "What are we actually doing here?" Sorun asked him.

"I don't know." No matter how right the words on that paper were on how he should go about this, and they were very correct, it didn't change the fact he was too paranoid of something going incredibly wrong to act on his feelings. The worst she could say was no? Maybe, but what if that wasn't true? What if he made things irrevocably worse by even implying he wanted a relationship? He didn't want to ruin things when it was something Nicole potentially didn't even want.

Then again, the letter had some merit. Waiting to long was, Sorun would admit, something he was also worried over. It was already gnawing at his nerves how long this had taken; he didn't want to wait so long something couldn't happen because he was too much of a coward to take that first step. In the grand scheme of things it may very well be as simple as him flat-out stating to her his feelings and desires. A few sentences that wouldn't even take a full minute to get out.

But that was a path that either lead to heaven or hell, and he didn't know which way the road was winding. And he also couldn't see how fast the road was crumbling the longer he took. If it even was. He was practically blind in that sense.

"... Maybe we should wait longer."

Sorun slapped his own face. "And thus nothing was learned," he mumbled into his palm. "Dude, come on, we've been over this. Take the first napkin already."

"A bit *longer,"* Sorun reiterated. *"Just to... step back, look where we're at with each other. Figure out what I'm actually supposed to say."* He looked to the side. *"And, you know, on the off chance that... well, maybe she feels the same after all and she could just-"*

"Sounds like hopeful thinking," Sorun said. "And laziness."

"Perhaps. But I'm beyond caring at this point." Sorun rose up off the couch and began to pick up the discarded pieces of paper. *"Bit longer,"* he promised himself. *"That's all. I'll... I'll deal with it when the time's right."*

"You keep telling yourself that."

Sorun didn't find himself liking that response. He frowned at it, and turned around to look at Sorun who should have still been on the couch. But when he did turn around the couch was completely vacant, and Sorun found himself completely alone in the room, surrounded by newspaper pages. He made a low sigh and bent down to continue cleaning the paper off the floor.

A/N- Sometimes I imagine Sally sees Sorun like that one Invincible meme that's been floating around recently. Sorun's bleeding out and lying on the rock and Sally's crouching down next to him pointing at her head and yelling, "Think, Sorun, think!" Like, not seriously, but it's a funny image to think of.

It's a real mixed bag of good and bad for the time Sorun got taken away from Earth. On one hand he never got to see the SE edition of DMC5 and playable Vergil (which didn't really add that much new stuff to his kit compared to the other games, but still), but he also didn't have to see the heartbreaking travesty that was Cyberpunk, so hey.

There's a real issue I have with the format this site uses for text files. When I was making the letters I tried to structure it differently, use indented paragraphs instead of spacing out the paragraphs like normal and use spaces to space out the names so they're on the right side. But then I save it all and it autoconfigures so that the extra spaces used for indenting are erased so I gotta go back and separate the paragraphs anyway, and forget putting the names on the right side of the screen using spaces.

WHY ISN'T THERE AN ALIGN RIGHT BUTTON!? WHY!?

Foibles aside, I tried. Didn't work, we got this instead, moving on.

So I don't really do arcs, because the last time I did arcs I gave them overly-pretentious names I regret making to this day, but if I did still do that I'd consider the chapter Sorun began living in his new home in the city to now to be a kind of intermission arc of sorts. For those worried about it there's one more chapter after this one, and after that the story's plot'll start picking up again as we move on.

Chapter 71

Recursion Error

Episode 71- The best gift ever

Winter on Mobius was about the same that it was on Earth: cold. Which was surprising to Sorun, because he'd half expected winter to entail deadly frost storms so severe they'd tear his skin off if he didn't huddle safely in his home. Or weather so cold he'd instantly freeze solid and die in about thirty-two milliseconds if he was caught exposed.

But no. Winter was about as normal as winter on Earth was. Freezing weather, cloudy skies, and snow. That was about the sight that greeted Sorun as he stepped out of his home. It was such a normal sight that he wasn't even feeling all that annoyed by the cold and snow around him.

"Well, seven-odd months on this planet. Had to see winter eventually," Sorun reasoned to himself. He tugged on the black turtleneck shirt he wore beneath the navy blue vest - he'd finally been able to afford more clothes, thank goodness - and trudged on out from his home's walkway and onto the sidewalk. Hands covered in black, cotton gloves were tucked into his pockets as he calmly walked down the sidewalk. He nodded at one Mobian, one of his neighbors if he recalled, that waved at him as he passed by. Another thing he'd started doing: being more acknowledging towards people now that things in his life had calmed down and he didn't feel like he was dying on the inside. Well, at least not as much as he used to.

Life had been a significant improvement for Sorun. Things were stable, and quite honestly he didn't have much to worry about anymore. The Freedom Fighters' crusade against Eggman was still an ongoing thing, but from what he'd heard things there had quieted

down. Again. Sorun wasn't privy to many details since he wasn't one anymore, and he didn't particularly care enough to search those details out. They had their things going on, and he had his. Admittedly he didn't have *much* of anything going on these days, but maybe that was an upside. Calm and quiet had its own appeal.

Things with Nicole were... well, the exact same. To Sorun's credit he did try saying something to her every time she visited. Of course he always failed, but he felt confident he'd be able to get something out. One of these days. Most likely.

Well, at any rate things were going great.

"I guess the seasons here don't align with Earth's since we're only getting winter now. If this was still Earth it would have passed already." Sorun found himself going all the way to the park. The sight that greeted him was a small field of pure white as opposed to the green that normally greeted him whenever he came here. Nicole even went through the effort of removing the leaves off of all the trees to give it that authentic winter feel. *"Few more months and it'll have been a whole year since comin' here. Crazy to think how much has changed."*

From fighting robots to the death and gaining poisonous powers he stole from a video game character to this. Domestic life. Wasn't the worst fate in the world, he supposed. Didn't replace his life on Earth, but the peace was still nice. He still longed for that Chaos Emerald they held in the castle vault if only because he wanted Yamato back, but people were still adamant on keeping that from him. He scoffed every time, but conceded that their reasons valid.

It was a very begrudging concession.

He felt the slight, cold wind blowing through his hair, though he didn't lift a hand to do anything about it. More content to just stare out into the white field. And it was because of all that white Sorun was barely able to perceive the object rapidly sailing towards him. A spherical, white object that spun through the air heading right towards Sorun's

chest, comprised entirely of snow. In laymen's terms, a snowball. One Sorun almost hadn't caught flying right towards him, and then tried to dodge out of the way.

Unfortunately the snowball came too fast and he ended up getting nailed in the chest regardless, resulting in him falling onto his back right into the snow. This resulted in Sorun up staring at the gray skies for a whole five seconds before he took a deep breath.

"Someone's gonna die." He rose his upper half straight upwards and stared ahead towards where he'd seen the snowball come from. The blue, spike-backed Mobian in the distance was the only sight he needed to see. *"He specifically shall die."*

"Ha! Gotcha, Sorun!" Sonic crowed out from the other side of the snowy field.

"Tch..." Brushing the loose snow off from his vest, Sorun slowly stood up to his feet while scooping up a handful of snow for himself. "We'll just see..." He muttered out, balling the snow in his hands as he shot an indignant glare out towards the hedgehog. Without even a word of warning he'd thrown the snowball out towards Sonic.

Aside from it not being particularly the best throw, the frozen projectile was easily dodged by Sonic, who'd sidestepped it in a burst of super speed. The irritation spreading through Sorun was magnified tenfold when he sent a cocky smirk over in Sorun's direction.

"How am I supposed to hit somebody who can run faster than sound...?"

These thoughts, and the slow realization that Sorun may have been out of his depth here, were abruptly cut off when a hail of snowballs were sent towards Sorun's way. Snowballs thrown by a hedgehog who'd gathered up the snow to form them and then throw them so fast that Sorun's eyes hadn't even been able to keep up with the movements. Movements that, to him, looked like little more than

blurry shapes moving around followed by dozens of snowballs heading towards him. He may very well have been buried alive if something hadn't tackled him down to the snowy floor.

He'd actually heard the snowballs whistle overhead when he'd been thrown to the ground. When Sorun looked up, he saw a yellow body staring down at him with large, blue eyes. And for some reason he had thick, black lines drawn on his cheek fur. It only added to the confusion Sorun was feeling.

"Er, Sorun?" Tails voiced out, looking and sounding equally confused. "What are you doing in the middle of the battlefield?"

"The what? Huh?" He reached up towards Tails' face. "The heck's on your face?"

The hand was swatted away before Sorun could touch one of the lines. "Hey, quit it! You'll smear it- look out!"

Before Sorun could inquire any further he was dragged upwards by the young fox and thrown against a nearby... snow wall. A small, chest-high barrier comprised completely out of snow. The second they'd both taken cover behind it dozens of snowballs sailed overhead, with Sorun hearing some thump against the other side of the barrier they were behind.

Sorun was just about to ask what the hell was going on when he took a closer look at their surroundings. He hadn't noticed it before, since everything around them was white and made of snow, but there were all sorts of makeshift snow structures around them. Barriers for cover, bunkers, the hell, there were even trenches dug into the ground. The place really did look like a warzone.

"Jesus, how hard has it been snowing? And how the hell'd they set this all up so quick?" Sorun thought to himself as he turned to Tails. "So did I just walk into the snowbattle of the ages, or what?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Taking a brief moment to peek over their cover, Tails crouched back down and looked to Sorun with a smile. "We're all having a snowball fight. Hey, you wanna join in?"

Did he? If he was being honest, kind of. If only because he was off today and didn't have anything else planned. And dare Sorun say it, but it almost sounded fun. Something he was in short supply of whenever Nicole wasn't around.

"Hey, I hear you!" Sonic yelled out from the other side of the field. "Sorun can't join you! It'll make the teams uneven!"

"You have super speed, you count for five people on your own!" Sorun yelled back over the cover. The response he earned from this was another snowball flying over them. He turned back to Tails and asked, "Can I throw a snowball at Sonic's face if I join you?"

"... I guess?"

Good enough for him. "I'm in, let's go."

"Day two-hundred and eighty six. It's been a long tour here in these ice-lined trenches. The enemy continues to pelt us with mortar fire every single night. Sleep escapes me between the constant bombardment, my bunk shaking, and the constant snow debris falling on my face. Every day I fear that one snowball that will be the one to break the camel's back and collapse the trenches on top of all of us when we least expect it.

"There's no hope for any of us. All entrances and exits are cut off by enemy fire and to try and leave is folly. Amy's already been lost to the no-man's land, claimed by an icy barrage from which there could be no recovery from. The last I saw of her was when Tails was dragging her frozen form off somewhere. I fear the same fate awaits us all and that we're struggling in vain to eke out what is simply the inevitable. Moral is at an all-time low. Hope is nonexistent. I can

already hear the trumpets blaring as the darkness encroaches upon us.

"This may very well be my last letter to be sent out back home. I can only hope my dearest receives my final-"

"Sorun, what are you doing?"

Sorun looked away from the message he was carving into the snow wall. Ahead of him he saw Sally giving him an odd look. Justified, maybe, considering he'd been muttering under his breath while writing on a snow wall with his finger, but he'd had important reasons for doing that. Mainly him trying to get into the mood.

The two of them were holed up in a dugout carved into the side of one of the snow trenches. Sorun still struggled to understand how they all managed to construct all of this in a mere morning just for a snowball fight, but he hadn't really cared enough to look too far into it. Too nice a distraction to detract his attention. Would have been nicer if he'd manage to fully roleplay a war-torn soldier, but Sally had to go and ruin that.

"I don't have my war games anymore, Sally. Just let me have this," Sorun said to her.

"Your war... what?" She shook her head and then ducked her body out from the square indent in the trench wall. "Whatever, come on."

"Sure." He ducked out of the dugout along with her and followed her towards the other side of the trench. "I'm surprised you're not wearing any winter clothes or anything," Sorun continued when they reached the trench wall. "Still, uh... still just going with boots and the vest and nothing else, huh?"

When Sorun looked to his left at Sally, he saw her giving him a pointed look. "Fur," was the one-worded explanation she gave him.

"You know, you use that excuse a lot." Sorun turned away from her to look up past the trench and into no-man's land. "'Why no winter stuff?' Fur. 'How come nobody wears pants?' Fur. 'How come I don't wear a shirt?' Wouldn't you know it, the answer's fur."

"Why do you always seem to fixate on me not wearing a shirt?" Sally asked him. "You don't do that with anybody else."

Well there was an awkward answer he didn't wanna give. "I'm usually too busy complaining about the pants thing," he evasively answered.

"If you say so." Sounding like she didn't altogether really understand, she looked ahead towards the seemingly-vacant battlefield along with Sorun. "I'm more surprised you're just wearing what you normally wear out here," she voiced upon seeing nothing.

"I got a new shirt."

"Yeah, but I would have expected a jacket or something."

Sorun scoffed at that. "I'm from Michigan, Sally. Place is practically a frozen wasteland during the winter. I'm used to it. Everybody there was. There were people where I'm from that went out in t-shirts and shorts during the winter." Admittedly he was one of those people on occasion, too, when he was too lazy to throw much else on. Living through one brutal winter after another had a way of making one hardy to cold weather.

"I thought you came from a place called Detroit?" When Sorun turned his head back to the left, he caught Sally giving him a questioning look. "The city you said you grew up in," she clarified.

"Yeah, Detroit was in Michigan," he explained.

Her confusion didn't go away. "But... you said that was in a place called America-"

"America was the country."

"It's not the same thing?"

"Not really." That was the problem with living in a post-post apocalyptic world. Things like states weren't even a concept. There were the countries, the settlements inside those countries, and in the rare cases of the republic they lived in or the U.F. across the ocean on the Overlander side of the world or over in Station Square, a government. For better or worse the world never seemed to grow much more complex than that. "Anyways, don't worry about it," Sorun continued. "Snowfights were a whole thing back where I'm from back when there wasn't school because half the building was buried in snow."

"Oh, really?" Sally leaned her shoulder against the trench, arms crossed and still maintaining that lighthearted, challenging look. "So what did that entail that we can use here?"

"Well, that's the problem." Sorun turned back out to the pure white no-man's land. "Nobody on the enemy opposition wears pants, nullifying my ability to snow-pants people. So that's seventy-five percent of my strategy gone right there." When he turned back to Sally she'd gone back to giving him an odd, puzzled look. "So I'll leave the strategery side of things to you."

"Stop saying strategery. It's not a word."

"Ahhhh, but think about it, Sally. It might be a word where I'm from." Sorun turned back to the white field. "You know how much stuff I can get away with by claiming it's common practice back on Earth?"

"... You haven't actually been doing that, have you?"

"No, because I just came up with the idea now and you all know me too well for me to use it effectively anymore." He could probably find *some* way of using that excuse and making a lie up if he really needed to, but Sorun couldn't think of any situation he could get

himself into that would warrant such a lie. More than that he plain wasn't interested in putting in that kind of effort. "More to the point, what are the actual rules we're playing with here?"

There was a moment of silence before Sally responded. "What do you- we've been doing this for twenty minutes!" she shouted into his ear, making him wince in annoyance. "I thought you already had an idea!"

"And that's on you for assuming things about me, so are we using a point-based system or-" Sorun cut himself off when he saw something in the distance, near the edge of the snow-laden field they were all fighting in. "Oh, hold that thought, Sally, I just thought up something *nutty* ."

It was a hill. An unusually large hill of snow, practically a small mountain. Sorun couldn't even figure out how something like that managed to form in the park, but it did give him an idea. A devilish idea.

"Does the trench extend all the way to that giant hill over there?" Sorun asked.

"Thereabouts, yeah." Sally answered. "Why? What're you thinking?"

"I'm thinking a childhood of Saturday morning cartoons is about to pay off."

The Snowball Effect was a common enough metaphor that even people on Mobius used it. On Earth it was even more commonplace. But the metaphor itself had to come from somewhere, and as it happened Sorun happened to know the metaphor's origin. That is, it came from a literal snowball that rolled downhill, collecting snow and growing bigger.

Well that was pretty much Sorun's idea in essence.

"Sorun, you can't be serious."

Sally didn't have as much faith in it as he did.

"Sh-sh-sh, relax, relax, it's gonna work." Sorun waved his hand behind him at Sally, who shook her head and leaned up against the large ball of snow sitting besides her. Sorun, in turn, was looking down from the top of the hill towards the far side of the snow field, in a trench on the opposite side of the one he and Sally left. He saw them down there. The enemy. The shock of cobalt blue that was Sonic's fur and spines contrasted sharply enough with the white snow that he was easy to see. Antoine and Bunnie slightly less so, but he could still see the three of them all grouped up in that trench. Plotting. Blissfully unaware of what was about to befall them.

It'd been easy enough for Sorun and Sally to get to the top of this hill. Their yellow and pink comrades were keeping the enemy pinned by chucking snowballs at their position, giving them the opening they needed. Sally had been extremely skeptical of the concept as a whole, even as she helped Sorun roll the giant thing together. Sorun tried assuring her it was a sound plan, but even now she wasn't very convinced.

"They're all lined up like dominoes." Sorun stepped away from the edge and turned to Sally and the snowball. "Alright. Help me push this thing over."

"This is a bit extreme, isn't it?" Sally didn't budge from her spot on the snowball, and was still looking hard at Sorun's face. "This was all just supposed to be in good fun."

"Sally, if I don't walk away from this having nailed Sonic in the face with a snowball, I'll have failed as a man."

"... What does *any* of that have to do with what I just said?"

"It's for my own personal enjoyment." Sorun walked behind the snowball, with Sally turning her head to maintain eye contact with

him. "And I mean, come on, the guy's so fast that it's literally impossible for any of us to hit him anyways. Besides. He takes missiles to the face. He'll prolly walk away from this alright."

"I'm not worried about hurting him, I just don't want this to seem underhanded- you know what, fine." She shrugged her body off the snowball and stepped to the side. "Do what you want, but I'm not helping you push the thing."

"You're really gonna rag on me about cheating?" Rolling his eyes, Sorun began pushing the snowball forwards as the chipmunk watched. "I think you're too harsh. This isn't cheating. It's... creative winning." He looked over his shoulder at her as he continued pushing. "Besides, if you really thought that you wouldn't have helped me make this thing."

Sally shook her head. "I didn't say it was cheating. I just don't like playing dirty."

"Even against a guy fast enough to dodge *bullets* , let alone a snowball?"

"Yes, because it's *Sonic* . It's a *game* , Sorun."

"Yeah. And I win games." The snowball was pushed to the edge of the hill. Sorun halted it right there, and then turned around, crossed his arms, and leaned his back against it to face Sally. "Little fact about Earthlings, Sally. Nobody over there ever had enhanced physical abilities or overly-advanced technology or Chaos powers. When it comes to che- creative winning I'm not special in that regard. Everybody does it. Why do you have to get on my case about it?" He knew Sally had an overly large honor bone on her, most Mobians did, but hers was especially apparent. Sorun didn't know if it was because she was a literal princess or if that was just how she was. Both, probably. And while he could appreciate that, he appreciated winning more.

Honestly, it was the same reason she never let him use a gun, negative symbolism aside. He understood the reason behind it, and in the end Summoned Swords and the other powers had negated their need anyways. And he supposed it was an endearing quality of hers, in some respect.

"And yet," Sally said as a challenging smirk began forming on her lips, "never once do you ever cheat when you play your games with Nicole."

"That's different," Sorun defended, quickly finding his eyes darting away from the Mobian in front of him. "Those are fair games. The fairness is what makes it fun. Fighting Sonic isn't fair." His eyes narrowed as the grip on his elbows tightened. "It's never fair with him."

He hadn't played it fair when he challenged Sorun to that foot race.

"I don't think you're giving him enough credit," Sally said. "Speaking of which, how have you and Nicole been doing?"

"... Fine?" With genuine confusion written over his face, Sorun looked back up towards Sally. "Why are you- oops."

When he'd looked up Sorun had inadvertently leaned back a bit harder on his shoulder. This had the effect of nudging the snowball just enough over the hill's edge to tip it over. It rolled over with barely a sound reaching Sorun's ears as both he and Sally approached the edge to watch it roll down. At one point Sally had affixed Sorun with a deadpan stare, though the human remained looking completely unapologetic as he watched the snowball roll downhill.

Predictably, the snowball rapidly began to increase in size as it rolled further and further down the hill. From where Sorun was standing it was quite obvious, even from the large distance separating them, that Antoine and Bunnie saw the snowball approaching them. Sorun had snickered out loud at realizing he could see their eyes from here due to how wide they'd opened them. Sonic so far hadn't seen it

coming, as his back was turned to the snowball. To further Sorun's amusement Bunnie had grabbed Antoine and then extended her mechanical legs far enough that she'd simply walked the two of them out of danger.

As the snowball neared, Sorun took delight in seeing that Sonic's back was still turned to the snowball. He seemed to watch the panicked couple depart out of confusion, and by then he'd either had the sense to turn around or just plainly heard the snowball rolling towards him. He'd turned around right when the snowball was mere *inches* away from hitting him, and by then Sorun had figured it was all but certain he'd be hit.

Except it wasn't. The moment Sonic saw the snowball his form was replaced by a blue speed line in his place. The snowball rolled past his previous position and sunk right into the trench he'd occupied previously, collapsing the structure entirely. Sorun felt his arms go limp and his back hunch forwards as he stared at the wreck and the noticeable lack of a buried hedgehog, while Sally seemed nonplussed at the whole situation.

"Wow, kinda a low blow, don't you think, Sorun?" Sonic's voice came at the same time Sorun heard him stop besides him. He looked to his left to see the Mobian standing next to him, all smug and smiling as he looked at the human from the sides of his eyes. "I'll grant you that it was a neat trick, but c'mon. You really thought you'd hit me with that?" He closed his eyes and had the gall to turn his nose up at Sorun. "Doesn't matter how big you make it. I'm just too fast-"

A snowball impacted Sonic in the face mid-sentence. He spluttered out in surprise and fell onto his backside, right into the snow. He shook the loose, white material off from his face, and glared up at Sorun who was tossing a second snowball up and down in his hand.

"Yeah, all that speed doesn't do you much good when your eyes are closed, huh?" the human snidely asked. "My actual plan was for you to dodge the snowball so you'd drop your guard while gloating in front of me."

Sonic's eyes narrowed disbelievingly at Sorun. "Was it really?"

"Pfft. Not a chance. You think I'm good enough a planner to think that far ahead?" He tossed the second snowball at Sonic. Predictably, he'd dodged and stood back up to his full height before the snowball even hit the ground. "We still technically win since I destroyed your entrenchment, though."

"That's not really how it works," Sonic grumbled as he looked to the side and downwards, towards the collapsed trench. "But yeah, you got a point. Don't really feel like digging that thing out again, so I'll call it here." He turned back to Sorun and Sally. "So what do you guys wanna do now?"

"..." Sorun and Sally turned their heads at each other. Sorun shrugged, causing Sally to roll her eyes and turn back to Sonic. "How about..."

"My greatest work yet. A masterpiece. Utterly stunning."

Words simply weren't enough to describe what laid before Sorun. A creation of his own making. Practically a wonder of the world in its construction, in its magnificence. He nearly shed a tear looking at the sculpture that sat in front of him. Or it may have been the sunlight reflecting off all the white around him.

It was a snow sculpture that stood just a head shorter than himself. A cylindrical body with a perfectly spherical head. Two large circles were carved into the head by his finger to simulate eyes, with no other features being added. Twin sticks were implanted into it for arms.

As far as Sorun was concerned it was a thing of beauty only one other thing in this world could compare to, but she wasn't around right now so he'd have to settle for admiring this.

"Hey, Sorun, you finished...?" The question trailed off as Sorun heard a crunching set of footsteps stop next to him. He turned around to see Sonic stopped next to Sorun, mouth frozen open in confusion as he gazed at the marvelous sculpture in near Sorun. "The heck is that?" he asked.

Sorun nearly bristled at the sign of disrespect. "It's a snow replica of a stubby machine from 'Automata'," Sorun answered.

"... Half of those words mean nothing to me."

"It was a game lauded for its creative gameplay mechanics and thought-provoking narrative. One of the best in its generation," Sorun succinctly answered, just a bit of pride detected in his voice. "And some very 'thought provoking' androids with very 'thought provoking' features."

"Ahh, I'm beginning to see." Sonic crossed his arms, a lopsided smirk on his mouth when he caught Sorun's meaning. "You know, I'm really starting to think you have a thing for robots, Sorun."

"What, just because one of my favorite games was full of hot android women? Blame the creator. Guy had weird taste." Sorun turned his head to the snow-stubby. "I mean, great taste, but weird, too," he continued. *"Then again Yoko Taro always had- and I just realized he's dead, too, goddammit."*

"Ah-huh. Suuuure..." The smirk Sonic had grew. "That's totally the reason."

Frowning, Sorun turned to Sonic, saying, "I don't know what you're insinuating, but you'd have to see 2B to know what I'm talking about, Sonic. Then you'd understand."

Scoffing, Sonic nodded his head to the snow-stubby. "If she looks anything like the ball-on-a-can you made, then I think I'll pass."

"It's *art* , you philistine," Sorun hissed out.

"It's lazy!" Sonic argued. He uncrossed his arms and stomped towards the snow-stubby as a very heated Sorun watched from the side. "It's a snow *man* competition, Sorun, not a... snowcan!"

"Alright, Michelangelo, then what's your big art piece?" At Sorun's question Sonic pointed his whole arm out to the side, towards the center of the snowfield. Sorun followed the arm's direction, seeing the others nearby working on their own snowmen. Some... very basic and bog standard-looking snowmen, three balls for a body and everything. He noted there was one snowman that was radically different, and then found himself wincing when he realized it was a replica of Sonic. Right down to the spines on the back of its head. "Very narcissistic of you, Sonic."

"Huh?" Sonic turned around and squinted towards where Sorun was looking. "Oh, no, that's Amy's."

"Oh." Should have figured that one, Sorun had felt. "Then yours is... the plainest-looking snowman I've ever seen right next to it?"

Somehow it looked even more ordinary than the ones the rest were making. Even worse was that Sonic only put in enough effort that it had two snowballs for a body. Barbarian hadn't even given it arms. Or a face.

"It's a work in progress," Sonic claimed. "And anyway, I gotta get back to it. Good luck with this thing."

Sorun huffed and crossed his arms as he heard Sonic stomp away and back towards that inferior thing he called a snowman. So what if his looked so simplistic? It had character. As far as Sorun was concerned that's all that really mattered, and at least he decided to do something different as opposed to stacking oversized snowballs on top of one-another.

"Erm... hello, Sorun. What is that supposed to be?"

"Urk!" Sorun heavily flinched and felt his anger begin to rapidly drain when he heard the familiar voice speak out to him. When he looked back, he saw Nicole standing behind him. There were hints of green lights around her that were rapidly fading away, a sign of her just now teleporting to his position, though her focus was mainly on the snow-stubby besides Sorun. "It's, um... contemporary art," he provided.

"I see..." She didn't look overly convinced, making Sorun's heart sink a bit. "It's... shapely. Both the body and head." She turned to him, and there was no hiding Sorun's despair when he saw the obviously forced smile. "I assume the correct word to use here is 'cute'?"

If it were anybody else he would have snapped at them for being so patronizing. But it was Nicole, so instead he just sighed out loudly and swiped his hand to the side. The spherical head fell off from the cylindrical body and collided with the ground, destroying the head completely and rending it little more than cold, white fluff.

And thus the world grew that much dimmer.

"It was more a placeholder for a larger project idea," Sorun lied as he turned back to Nicole. "What brings you here?"

"Ah, right." The lynx turned to the side a bit, towards where the others and their snowmen were. "The new year is coming up, and the others usually gather to celebrate the occasion at this time of year. It's a holiday of sorts. Since things with the Freedom Fighters has been incredibly hectic and this was the only predictable time they all had to spend in the city they decided to celebrate earlier this year than normal." She turned back to Sorun, smiling a bit. "I suspect they somewhat lost track of time. Sally told me to remind them all in case such a thing happened."

"Oh. Early New Year's party, huh?" As far as holidays went that was probably the first one Sorun had even heard of. He didn't know what Mobian holidays were like. Or even what they were to begin with. He doubted things like Christmas managed to survive the literal

apocalypse that engulfed the world thousands of years ago. Maybe it survived in Station Square, and *maybe* it was something the Overlanders still had. He doubted Mobians had an equivalent. Or maybe this *was* the equivalent for them.

Well, it sounded nice enough. Sucked that they had to do it early since this was the only foreseeable "day off" they all had, but he could understand the logic. Couldn't fault them for working around their responsibilities.

"Yeah, Sally wanted to do a snowman building contest. I think at this point it's less a competition and more them just making whatever they want for the fun of it." Which is what he'd been doing until it was revealed to him nobody here had real taste in art. Ignorant savages. "I kind of lost the motivation to continue when *some people* , Sonic, I mean Sonic, couldn't appreciate the finer things."

"Fine. Yes. Of course." Nicole's green eyes had glanced down at the destroyed stubby head, and then looked back up at Sorun. "Well, perhaps I could join in. I still owe you that statue, do I not?"

For reasons other than the cold Sorun's face began to redden. "Huh-what?"

"It would only take me a few moments with the nanites." Even as she began to talk swirls of snow mixed in with green light began to swirl around her open palm. "It wouldn't be too difficult at all to make a perfect replica-"

"Ababa! It's fine!" Sorun shouted out, holding his palms up to Nicole. He really had been kidding back then with the statue; he wasn't nearly vain enough to have such a thing made in his image. He'd be too embarrassed. Especially if Nicole made it and people saw. "I really don't need... oh."

She made the statue. Granted it was only a few inches tall and easily fit into her palm, but a miniature statue was still a statue. A little mini-Sorun made of snow and standing on a pedestal also made of snow.

Sorun found himself laughing out in relief and the sight of it, glad it wasn't something as noticeable as a ten-meter statue or something ridiculous.

And it was a pretty good-looking statue, too.

"I believe this is sufficient," Nicole said, gently handing off the statue to Sorun. "I would have made something bigger, but I know you're somewhat sensitive to such things and didn't want to cause any embarrassment on your part."

"T-that's not true," Sorun denied, eyes darting down to the statue in his hand. Even though it had only been in his gloved hand for a few moments it was already beginning to deform. "It'll only last a few minutes before melting."

"Yes, well, most things in life are temporary." After speaking, Nicole looked back down at her hand. There was some leftover snow on her palm from the quickly-melting statue she'd made. "It's... cold," she observed.

Sorun looked up from the statue. "The snow?" He saw her staring at the snow on her hand, causing him to blink. "Yeah, it's... it's snow. Cold is kind of its defining feature."

"I realize this." She grasped the loose snow and began rolling it between her fingers. It spilled out between her fingers, causing her to shake the remaining material off. "It's been somewhat of a chore ensuring the city isn't too overburdened with snow. There's automatic measures in place I created to prevent flooding and the like, but the winter weather is providing its own challenge. I have to continually de-ice the sidewalks to ensure nobody falls on accident."

"Oh, right. I guess this would be your first winter without being stuck in that box, huh?" Sorun realized. He bent down and scooped up a handful of snow, rolled it into a snowball, and tossed it to Nicole. "You don't sound too impressed."

Nicole shook her head as she caught the snowball. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that," she denied, looking down and examining the snowball. She ran her hand over the ball to feel its texture, though she'd evidently pressed down too hard as the snowball completely crumbled in her hands. "The sensation of cold is a unique feeling," she admitted, "but I prefer nanites to snow. They're easier to shape and mold and don't melt. Still, though..."

She looked off to the side, towards the snow-covered field. The even blanket of white covering the ground and the artificial trees scattered around. Her smile broadened at the sight of it, after which she turned back to Sorun.

"... It's rather pretty to look at," she finished. While Sorun had gotten lost staring at her smile, Nicole's eyes had turned back to the headless snow-stubby next to him. And then the smile instantly dropped when she saw the sticks it had for arms. "Sorun. Did you snap branches off of the artificial trees to make those arms?"

The statue in Sorun's hand chose that time to fall off its pedestal and into the snow. At the same time Sorun had nervously gulped and darted his eyes away from Nicole when she sent him an accusing glare. "No," he lied.

"Sorun, I have to manually reattach those. They don't grow like organic trees."

"Oh, come on, it's two branches," he whined out. "It can't be that much of a bother."

Worryingly, her glare hardened. "Yes, because I have so many other pertinent matters to deal with. Between continually de-icing the ground to keep the populace safe to maintaining the city's systems and keeping an eye on meteorological reports to properly prepare the city in the event of potential storms. What's repairing trees you vandalized added to the list of tasks I must perform, Sorun?"

If it wasn't for the shame he felt Sorun would have been impressed with how admonishing Nicole sounded. There wasn't a hint of sarcasm to be found in her voice. And yet, somehow, he still felt like he'd been yelled at by his mother for doing something bad. Only somehow it felt worse. "I... I'm sorry?"

"We're all meeting at Antoine and Bunnie's domicile. Please be present with everyone else." Nicole turned her back to Sorun while the human began blinking rapidly in surprise. "I'm going to inform the others now."

With that, she'd teleported a short distance away to the others. Sorun visibly deflated at her departing words, and then made a sad, frustrated sigh as he pocketed his hands and turned around himself. Right in front of him laid the headless snow-stubby he'd been so proud of minutes prior.

He made a small grunt and gave it a solid kick, reducing the thing to powder in nearly an instant. The snow-stubby was already nearly forgotten by the time Sorun left the pile behind to depart the park. The memory of Nicole scolding him was less-easily forgotten.

The nice thing about hanging around in somebody else's house was that he didn't have to clean up after people. Granted, whenever people *did* visit his house they were often very good about not leaving a mess.

Except for the dishes. Nobody ever did those.

But here in Antoine's house it was nice for Sorun to relax and not have to worry about doing a chore because of somebody else for once. It also gave him a scope for how barren his house was compared to Antoine's, 'cause he and Bunnie decorated the house so much Sorun didn't even know if there was any house beneath it all. Lots of furniture, rugs and carpets, ornamental knickknacks and photos, tables. Creative-looking throw pillows. A plant!

And then there was Sorun's place, which was probably the most dismal house in the whole city now that he thought about it. He figured maybe he should do something about that one day. Maybe. If he ever felt like it. Sometime this year. Or next year, technically.

Then again, with all these decorations it was rather cramped accommodations, especially for eight people as opposed to the normal two. And then Rotor had come to celebrate with everyone as well, and with his size he practically counted for two and a half people.

Wasn't a lot of room for noise to travel, either, so the whole house was full of the talking and laughter of everyone present. Enough white noise that in another life Sorun probably would have been irritated at it all, but in this setting, with these people, it was different. Comforting, in a way. Much like the cup of hot chocolate he had in his hand.

"Rotor, my first ever experience with hot chocolate isn't for the faint of heart," Sorun had warned the purple Mobian sitting next to him on Antoine's couch as he swirled the mug around in his hands. "It's a daring story that leaves lesser men weak in the knees."

The walrus looked more exhausted than excited. "Why can't you just be normal, man? I asked how you were doing and now you're about to go on a rant on how hot chocolate traumatized you as a kid."

"It wasn't that serious," Sorun rebuked, looking up into the walrus' eyes. He noted how tired and baggy they seemed. "Politics really seem to be wearing you down," he noted.

"Eh, it ain't that bad," he denied. "Long hours of sitting in the same chair. I fully recommend it."

"... Can't tell if you're being serious." Sorun looked back down into the cup. "Anyways, when I was a kid I figured hot chocolate was literal chocolate melted in a liquid form, not, you know, cocoa powder mixed with water and milk and stuff. I mean, come on, it was in the

name. So I took a bunch of chocolate bars, broke them up, put them in a mug and threw it into the microwave. Set it on full blast thinking I'd get a cup of melted chocolate so I could see what all the fuss was about." His expression darkened. "What I got was a charred rock of burnt chocolate surrounded by a pool of molten chocolate. I didn't even know you could burn chocolate until that day. Suffice it to say I was kind of turned off on the whole idea of hot chocolate ever since then." He took a drink of the hot chocolate. "But this is alright."

"Wow, Sorun, that's... that's something." Sounding half-asleep, Rotor turned his head off towards further into the living room, where he saw Sally and Tails talking about something. "Nice catching up with you and all, but I'm gonna go socialize with the others."

"Alright, man. Take care." At the same time he felt the couch decompress Sorun looked down into the cup of dark liquid in his hand. *"I seriously gotta ask what Antoine puts in this stuff to make it so good. Guy's, like, some kinda chef savant."*

When he felt the couch compress next to him again as somebody sat down next to him, he didn't even need to look up from his cup to see who it was. Mostly because he saw hints of the purple wrapping dress Nicole always wore. He waited a few moments for her to say something, but when no sound came out he decided to start speaking.

"So how are you finding things?" he asked, looking up and to the left at her. She looked happy enough, which made Sorun happy. And he figured that warranted another celebratory drink of the hot chocolate.

"Things are fine," she answered him. "You don't seem to be enjoying yourself as much, though."

Was that how it looked? "Nah, I am. Just, you know, on the inside," he assured her. "Christmas was never really my thing. Or, uh, Christmas-equivalent. Or whatever this is."

"I... am unfamiliar with the term." Nicole tilted her head a bit to the side. "Is this a holiday from your zone?"

"Mhm, yeah. It was, um... hm..."

How was he supposed to go about explaining Christmas? A time-honored tradition celebrating love, friendship, and family through the act of meaningful gifts and lots of food. Sorun didn't really know how to go about explaining that. Hell, he didn't even know the history of Christmas. Or why it was even called Christmas. He felt like something in the name should have made it a bit obvious, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was.

"... Eh, it was a holiday everybody used as an excuse to get free stuff," he settled on, taking another drink. "Lots of get-togethers and celebrating and Christmas specials about Santa Claus."

"Santa Claus?"

"An evil and vile man who would commit millions of acts of home intrusion once a night every year."

"That's appalling!" Nicole exclaimed. "And... also statistically impossible. How did he accomplish such a feat?"

"Time manipulation? I dunno." Sorun shrugged. "But nah, he'd break into people's homes to leave gifts for good children. Unless you were bad." Sorun's face soured and he turned his face away from Nicole. "Guess I was never 'good enough', 'cause he never visited me. My mom tried getting gifts every Christmas claiming they were from Santa, but I knew. I always knew." Fat bastard didn't even have the decency to leave Sorun any coal. Like he wasn't even worth visiting.

Well, now he was in another world and sacrificed his life sort-of to help save said world, so who was the good boy now?

"Ah, I... believe I see." When Sorun looked back at Nicole he saw that her smile was just a tad bit more forced. "How long did you say

this Mr. Claus was running this strange business?"

Sorun shrugged. "Few hundred years or somethin', I dunno. Long time." He took another drink. *"He's prolly dead now like everyone else over there."*

The smile became significantly more forced while Nicole reached over to give Sorun a few comforting pats on his shoulder. "Were there any other holiday traditions your people celebrated?" she asked.

Looking up in thought, Sorun answered with, "Not really. Everybody kind of did their own thing. There was this one thing called Secret Santa I heard about and wanted to do, but I was never able to get enough people to do it properly."

Nicole smile grew much more genuine as interest flashed in her eyes. "And what did this entail?"

"You got a group of friends together and wrote your names down on a bunch of paper things. You put the names in a hat to jumble them up and everybody picks out a random name. Whoever's name you picked you have to get a gift, and nobody knows who's getting what from who until everybody gathers back around to give each other the gifts." He took another drink of the hot chocolate. "Always sounded fun, but like I said, was never able to get enough people to do it proper."

He didn't get a response from Nicole. What he did get was the lynx thoughtfully looking at him before getting up off of and leaving the couch to go talk with Sally, based on how she was heading directly towards her. Sorun had thought it a bit strange, her leaving without a word like that, but then shrugged it off and looked back down into his cup.

To his dismay, he found that it was empty.

"Mh." Frowning a bit, he reached over and placed the empty mug down on the lamp table next to the couch. On top of the cloth coaster Antoine had *very heavily* insisted they use so they didn't "ruin the furniture". An explanation that caused Bunnie visible exhaustion throughout the entire discussion. Sorun also couldn't have helped but notice it was mostly directed towards Sonic.

Well, he'd asked nicely, so Sorun had gone out of his way to get a coaster.

Even so, it was a very relaxing environment Sorun found himself in. Overly relaxing, even, because he was starting to feel drowsy from it all. Surrounded by friends he implicitly trusted. Their voices going through the air. The strange warmth of it all mixed with the actual warmth from the heating system. It was nice. Cozy. Sorun liked it.

He didn't know when he'd accidentally dozed off, just that he found it much easier than he likely should have. The overwhelming amount of comfort and safety he felt was likely a contributing factor. He didn't mind too much in the end, even if it did mean a little less time socializing with the others. It was still a nice feeling regardless until somebody decided to shake him awake.

"Sorun... Sorun?"

"Mhf? Huh?" The feeling of somebody gently rocking his shoulder had been what woke him up. He'd been forced to blink his eyes a few times to clear out the blurriness, after which he saw Sally standing in front of him. And she had an upturned hat in her hand for some reason. "Ah, sorry, I wasn't out for long, was I?" Sorun mumbled out as he sat up straighter in the couch.

Fortunately, Sally shook her head. "No, only a few minutes," she answered. "So... you want in on this?"

"In on what?" When his vision cleared further, Sorun looked past Sally's shoulder. Oddly enough he saw that everyone with the exception of her and himself were sitting in a circle on the floor, all

looking towards the two of them. He blinked at the sight, and then focused back on Sally. "Wha's goin' on?"

"Well... it was Nicole's idea," Sally explained. "She said you had this funny Earth custom for the holidays and wanted to help you feel more included since it's your first New Year's here. And it sounded fun, so we decided to go with it."

"O-oh. Really?" He glanced past Sally's shoulder again, and caught Nicole staring right at him from the circle of Mobians she was sitting around with. The faintest hint of red dusted against his face as he averted his eyes from both her and Sally. "That was nice of you all," Sorun mumbled out. "You really didn't have to-"

"Oh, it's nothing! It sounded really fun actually!" Sally assured him. "In fact, Sonic overheard the idea and wanted to do it just because it sounded interesting."

The statement surprised Sorun somewhat, and when he glanced back at the circle, he caught the blue hedgehog giving him a thumbs-up and a smile from where he sat. Sorun blinked a bit in surprise as a response, and then quickly rose up out of the couch.

"Alright, alright. I'm in. Kind of obligated to since it was my idea anyways," Sorun muttered as he approached the circle. Despite how he sounded, mostly due to embarrassment, he actually was a bit excited. He'd been genuine when he'd told Nicole he'd always wanted to do something like this but never had the opportunity to, even back on Earth. It was nice of them to do something like this for him.

When he finally made it to the circle, he saw that Sally had beat him and taken the only vacant spot next to Nicole. He huffed out a bit and sat across from them, in the empty space right next to Sonic, who for some reason wouldn't quit grinning. "Why didn't you tell us your zone had fun holiday stuff like this, Sorun?" he asked as the human sat down next to him. "Every year it's the same gift-giving shtick."

"It's nice to know you think getting friends presents is getting old," Rotor sarcastically called out from the side of the circle.

"Hey, I didn't mean it like that," Sonic denied, holding up his palms in defense. "It's a fresh idea, that's all I'm sayin'."

"Sure, Sonic." This came from Sally, who'd rolled her eyes while holding out the hat to Sorun. The black-haired human had already written his name out on a paper slip provided to him by Antoine, who was sitting on Sorun's other side. He'd deposited it in the hat, prompting Sally to pull it back to herself and look down into it. "Well, that's everyone's names," she announced. "So we just pull out a random name and get that person a gift, right, Sorun?"

"Mhm, yeah," he confirmed with a nod. "And it's important you keep it secret 'til we give the gifts. That's what makes it a 'Secret' Santa."

"Huh. Alright, seems simple enough." Sally reached into the bag and pulled out a name. She regarded it for a few seconds, and then passed off the hat to the person next to her without showing much reaction. Amy's reaction to her name hadn't been nearly as subdued as Sally's seeing as she'd made an outraged cry and continued to sulk even after the hat was passed along.

"Who's name she'd get to make her react like that?" Sorun wondered.

Sonic snorted. "Can tell ya who's name she *didn't* get." He nudged Sorun with his elbow. "Hey, you're up."

And so he was. The hat had been passed to Sorun with around half of the names still inside of it. He'd pursed his lips and looked up while his hand rifled around inside of the hat.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon..." There was really only one name he was hoping to pull. He needed some surreptitious way of providing Nicole with a gift without seeming too obvious, and this presented him the perfect opportunity. Odds weren't the greatest, but considering

everything else he'd pulled off in life, this seemed far easier. *"And,"* his thoughts continued as he pulled up a name, *"we got..."*

Antoine

"God fucking dammit." With a look that could have killed he less handed off and more thrusted the hat into Sonic's midsection. Based on the amusement on the hedgehog's face he seemed to catch Sorun's dissatisfaction. *"Ugh, he's one of those people that writes in a font so fancy you can barely even read it,"* Sorun observed as he stared down at the name. *"Well, whatever, roll the dice and come up snake eyes. Or whatever the saying is."*

Disappointing, immensely so, but he'd follow the rules and get him a gift. To not do so would ruin the whole fun of the game, and he wasn't about to tarnish a game of his own design technically. His standards were too high to do such a thing.

"So do you guys want to come back tomorrow for this?" Sally's voice drew back Sorun's attention, causing him to look up. The hat finally got passed to Nicole, who'd gotten the last name. She must have liked her name, too, from the way her ears were standing straight up, Sorun had saw. "Give us all a day to get something together for anyone?"

"If we're gonna do that, can we go a bit early?" Tails asked. "My parents wanted to do a special dinner tomorrow to celebrate the new year," he explained.

"Yeah, same here," Sonic said.

"Sure, I don't see why not. Now..."

"Wonder what I'm supposed to get him?" Sorun thought to himself, the surrounding conversations mainly being tuned out from his ears as he stared down at the name. *"Something that appeals to something he likes, I guess. So what does he like? Swords? Can't get him that. Cooking? I feel like a guy as good at food as him*

already has everything he could ever need, and I don't know where I'd ever get some kinda rare, exotic spice or something like that. Or even if I could afford it." He made a hum as he pocketed the paper slip. *"He loves his wife, but I dunno what- wait. Oh-ho-ho, yeah, that's perfect. And I know just the girl to make it."*

A small smirk formed across Sorun's face as the perfect idea came to him. Maybe the holiday wasn't ruined after all.

"I'd just like to put it out there that this thing is an abomination."

The passive insult flew right over Sorun's head, who was lying on a table with one leg over the other, hands behind his head as he looked up at the ceiling. He'd lazily turned his head to the side, where he saw a yellow cat in a red dress hard at work at a sewing machine.

"I can't believe you'd go and insult some of your own work like that," he said. "I'm shocked."

"It's because I'm making it it's as good as an abomination," Honey shot back. "Honesty, I don't know what possessed you to give someone a gift like this. It's more a weapon than a gift."

"Hmph. And where's your gift to me, huh?" Sorun asked her, head facing back towards the ceiling. "I thought this was a festive time."

"Your *gift* is me putting a priority on this stupid thing in front of all my other clients." There was a hint of ire in Honey's voice. "You know how busy I am this time of year?"

"Well, no, mostly because I would have thought this was your first year after becoming a world-wide name." There was a small, indignant growl from Honey, prompting Sorun to continue. "'Sides, I'm paying you for this, aren't I?"

"You're so lucky I let you keep that discount." The sewing machine quieted down, and then turned off completely. Sorun sat up at the sound and swung his legs off the table as Honey approached him, holding out the thing she just made like it was some kind of contagious biohazard. "Here, take it before I throw up and give it character."

Rolling his eyes, Sorun took the item and held it up to examine it. He nodded in satisfaction, and then proceeded to fold it up. "You're the best, Honey," he said. "So, uh, 'bout my gift-"

"You can let me watch in amusement as you fail to giftwrap that sorry excuse for a gift and we'll call it even."

The folding was interrupted midway as Sorun clenched his hands reflexively. "I tape your boxes shut, don't I?" he asked, voice a bit slower and more cautious. "I could be great at wrapping gifts and you'd never know it."

A large, cheshire grin, the grin Honey always wore when she knew she was right about something, grew on her face. "So are you?"

At hearing that, Sorun sighed. Sighed knowing she was, in fact, right and he couldn't wrap a gift to save his life since he'd never done such a thing before. And after trying to prove it to her he could and failing miserably he'd have to ask her for help. Which, he supposed, was its own reward. For her. "You plan this in advance or was it just a spur-of-the-moment thing?"

"I wasn't gonna 'til you had the cheek to ask me for a gift." She sauntered past Sorun, her tail brushing over his face in the process. He sputtered out and swatted it aside, eliciting a small giggle from the cat. "Alright, hurry up. I wanna see you fail miserably at this and then overcharge you for wrapping paper."

Sorun had to really wonder to himself if it was really worth going so far just for a gift.

The next day

Well, in the end it turned out Sorun's Secret Santa idea had gone, all things considered, extremely well. There'd been a lot of light laughter and happy surprises throughout the entire thing, enough that everybody seemed to enjoy themselves. Even Sorun, oddly enough, had felt happy over the sight.

It was enough to make him forget his disappointment over not having pulled Nicole's name so he had a solid excuse to give her a gift.

Tails and Rotor had drawn each other's names and had made some technical doodads Sorun wasn't able to identify. Sonic, the lucky bastard who'd drawn Nicole's name, hadn't known what to give her and instead offered a service of using the friction of his super speed to de-ice the sidewalks for the next month to give her a break from doing it. She'd been grateful for the offer, and Sorun silently figured it was nice enough to pass. Amy'd gotten Sally's name and made her a batch of cookies, Antoine had gotten Amy and had given her a book of some sorts that she'd seem appreciative over when she'd read the cover, and Bunnie had went and knit Sonic socks.

He at least tried to appear appreciative over the socks.

"Boy, uh... yeah, these are great!" In Sonic's defense he sounded genuine, but he'd failed to pull it together in that the smile he wore as he held up the blue socks stylized to look somewhat like him looked marginally fake. Sorun, who sat besides Sonic as everyone chose to sit in the same places in the circle as the day before, couldn't find himself blaming the hedgehog too much on the gift.

When Bunnie shot Sonic a small glare, Sorun had felt a bit of sympathy go through him at Sonic's expense. "Sugah-hog, ya don't seem very appreciative. Why, it's almost as if-"

"Whaaa!? Nah, no way, this is the most genuine I've been in my entire life!" Sonic denied, the thing that was supposed to be a smile

growing brighter as he held the socks up. "I'm gonna put 'em on first thing in the morning tomorrow! Promise!"

"Knowing you they're just gonna end up being lost under your bed like the rest of your socks," Sorun said, drawing Sonic's glare towards him. "What? Am I wrong?"

"I'll have you know that my mom's really been on my case about leaving clothes around everywhere 'cause *someone* that bunked with me for a few months had to go and set an example of cleanliness." Sonic turned away from Sorun and began rolling his new socks up. "My home life's ruined 'cause of you."

"Yes, I showed you the world of clean rooms. What a monster I am," Sorun deadpanned. There were grins and snickers from the others all around, making Sonic's shoulders sag and his small ears flatten against his head. "Well, in any event, I think mine's next."

Everybody turned towards him in interest as Sorun pulled out the thin box wrapped in pink gift paper that'd been sitting at his side. He held it up to examine it for a moment, and then looked to Antoine, who blinked in surprise. For some odd reason Sally seemed even more surprised than Antoine, which Sorun caught as he handed the coyote the gift.

"What's with that look? There's only two people left. It was a fifty-fifty chance of who it was," Sorun said to the chipmunk after giving Antoine the box.

"Yeah, but, you... you made it pink," Sally said. "I sort of figured... eh, never mind."

There was significant confusion on Sorun's part as he failed to catch her meaning. "You figured what?" He'd only gotten pink because it'd been the cheapest wrapping paper Honey had at the time. Even then he was sure she gouged him for it just for giggles.

"It's nothing." Quickly clearing her throat, Sally quickly gained her composure and turned to Antoine. "So! Antoine, what did Sorun get you?"

"We are discovering zis very mystery at ze moment..." Antoine mumbled out as he began... he wasn't tearing into it at all, he was carefully removing the tape and unfolding the paper wrapping the gift. "Mon dieu, Sorun, zis style of wrapping iz superb! I had no idea you possessed such talent in ze field!"

"Uh... yeah, totally." Sorun was too mystified by the act of how Antoine unwrapped gifts to even try and sound genuine. Fortunately, the coyote was too distracted by the gift he'd just opened to pay attention. *"What kind of psychopath opens a gift like that?"*

With the wrapping paper and box carefully set aside in such a meticulous manner that Sorun felt sick seeing it, Antoine held up the gift he'd been given to examine. He seemed incredibly puzzled by it at first, and then turned it over to the other side. "What..." he asked, "iz it excacataly?"

On the surface, it looked little more than a pink sweater. The names "Antoine" and "Bunnie" were skillfully sewn into the sweater overtop one another, with a white, silk-sewn heart separating the two names. The sweater itself, however, was far wider than Antoine was, and even more bizarrely there were two neck holes on top of the sweater.

"It's a two-person sweater," Sorun explained upon seeing Antoine's befuddlement. "It's designed so that both you and Bunnie can wear it. At the same time." He shrugged. "I dunno, seemed like a good gift to get a couple."

He knew it was supposed to technically be an Antoine gift and not a Antoine-plus-Bunnie gift, but at that point Sorun felt it was nitpicking and didn't matter all that much. Besides, horrible-looking sweaters were a tradition where he was from. It only seemed fitting he get Antoine one, especially since he'd had no other ideas at the time.

Utter genius, as far as Sorun was concerned.

"Aw, it's adorable!" Bunnie's reaction towards the sweater compared to Antoine's initial reaction was night and day. She'd snatched the sweater right out of her husband's hands as was positively gushing at it, to the point that Sorun practically saw hearts in the rabbit's eyes. "Look, hon! It's somethin' we can both wear on those nights when yer complainin' it's too cold or some nonsense like that!"

Antoine wasn't even looking towards his wife or the sweater, intent instead on giving Sorun a strange look. A what-have-you-done-to-me look that Sorun was somewhat acquainted with, but still found some amusement in it regardless. In some ways it made it worth all the hassles Sorun went through to get the thing.

"Oui, eet iz... a very magnifique gift," Antoine ground out.

"You sound about as enthusiastic as Sonic did about the socks," Sorun noted with a raised eyebrow.

"I am certainly not holding any ill will for you at ze moment for what you have done, Sorun."

Bunnie tore her attention away from the sweater to frown at her husband. "Hush, you." She lightly swatted him behind his head, making him wince slightly and hold the spot his wife hit. Meanwhile, Bunnie turned her head to Sorun. "He don't mean what he said, Sorun. It's a lovely gift." She rather harshly elbowed Antoine's midsection. " *Ain't it* , darlin'?"

"Would you quit assaulting moi!?" After clearing his throat with one hand while nursing his sore side with the other, Antoine took a deep breath before saying to Sorun, "Oui. Eet iz. Merci, mon ami."

"I'm really not feeling the love here." Despite his feelings Sorun chose not to say this, figuring the satisfaction of seeing the entire exchange was more than worth it. "Well," he announced, clapping his hands together, "that does it for everyone, right?"

"Actually, there's one more gift to give." Sorun's head snapped to the person sitting completely opposite of him in the circle when he heard the person's voice. Nicole's voice, to be specific. And she was staring directly at Sorun. "I believe, seeing as I'm last, that it's fairly obvious whose gift this is."

Just to make sure, Sorun began to mentally count off names in his head while simultaneously looking down to finger-count off his hands. In a short amount of time he'd come to a startling conclusion, and then just to make sure he'd restarted the count to make sure he hadn't made a mistake. He only made it through halfway the second count before Sonic cleared his throat.

"Uh, Sorun, buddy?" he called out. "You're the only one who hasn't gotten something, dude, come on."

"... Right. Of course." Clearing his throat, Sorun looked up from his hands. Nicole was already holding a box out towards him. It was wrapped in paper colored with green and purple stripes. "Thank you, Nicole," he shyly muttered as he gently took the offered box from her. She folded her hands back into her lap and patiently awaited as Sorun began to open the gift.

He wasn't so much of a neat freak like Antoine that'd he'd meticulously deconstructed the very essence of the wrapping paper, but since it was Nicole's gift Sorun had still taken great care in tearing the paper in such a way that it came off as a single, torn strip held together by the tape. He'd quickly wadded it up and placed it to his side as the stared down at the small, modest box he held in his hands. Gingerly, and with hands slightly shaking, he opened the lid of the box to peer down inside of it.

It was with a equal mixture of surprise and confusion he found the same game controller he always used when playing on the game console at home. A bit... sleeker in appearance than he was accustomed to, however. He picked it up out of the box to give it an appraising look, and then shifted his gaze to Nicole with a questioning look in his eyes.

The AI, at seeing the look he was giving her, decided to elaborate on it. "I notice you always complain about the cord connecting the controller to the console, so I took the liberty of taking it while you weren't looking to modify it somewhat," she explained. "It's wireless and should sync up well enough with the console. I went ahead with retrofitting the second one as well, and even fixed the stick drift issue on the one so you can't use it as an excuse whenever I beat you even though I know you learned to compensate for it."

"Oh." Well, as far as gifts went, it was probably the most thoughtful thing Sorun could think of. He always hated the wires on the controllers because he'd lived in a world of wireless game pads, but now that he had this it felt... it felt a bit closer to home. Sorun had nearly felt his heart stop when Nicole explained just what it was he was holding, and when he looked back up at her he was nearly speechless. Nearly. "Oh my god, Nicole, I love y- THIS CONTROLLER. I-it's, it's really good, yeah, extremely thoughtful of you, thank you, love it, we can try it out later, yeah."

And now he was quite literally biting his tongue because he'd nearly said something that would have damned him. A slip of the tongue he couldn't help but make because he'd been so stunned by how thoughtful a gift Nicole had given him. It seemed he managed to catch himself in time, though, because Nicole and a majority of everybody else around were giving him puzzled looks. Except for Sonic, who was sniggering away at something from besides Sorun. What it was he didn't know, nor did Sorun care. Mostly because he was feeling an intense amount of heat rise in his face and he suddenly couldn't stand sitting here anymore.

"Well! It's, uh, it's been fun, guys, real great. We should do it again next year." Quicker than he thought possible Sorun shot up to his feet from his sitting position, controller and its box safely tucked under his arm. "We should probably end it here, though, 'cause Tails had that dinner thing he said he had to go to, yeah?" His head snapped towards the sitting fox. "Yeah!?"

Flinching back a bit from the sudden outburst, Tails hesitantly nodded. "Y-yeah, I guess I should be going pretty soon-"

"You heard the man!" With acute awareness that all eyes were on Sorun, he began to step around the circle of Mobians. "Antoine, Bunnie, thanks for hosting us, it's been real great, guys, but there's something at home I need to go attend to so yeah, we should all do this again sometime, bye!"

"Er, uh, bye-?" That had been Sally, who tried to say goodbye to Sorun on behalf of everyone else, but by then Sorun had already bolted out from the home's front door and rapidly closed it behind him, just short of slamming the thing. And then he'd collapsed against the door, loudly exhaling to try and calm his heart that was beating so rapidly it was almost uncomfortable. The sudden, biting chill he'd exited out into didn't even register with Sorun due to all the heat he was feeling. It took nearly a minute for him to release a slow, calming exhale as he thumped the back of his head against the door he was against.

"Smooth," he thought to himself, peeling his body off from the doorway. The gift had been too much. Both in that it probably took more effort to modify the thing than Sorun was worth spending over, and that he'd felt like he had a heart attack while holding the thing. Even just carrying it under his arm felt like he was carrying a hundred-pound weight. All because it came from her. Nicole's gift to him.

A gift so incredibly sweet he had absolutely no way of ever topping it. How the hell was he supposed to reciprocate something this thoughtful? He loved the gift, he'd been sincere in that assertion, but still... she really didn't make it easy for him.

"Sorun?"

Once more Sorun nearly felt his heart stop when he heard Nicole's voice sound off right next to him. He'd been startled enough to jump up a few inches right as the AI finished materializing right next to

him, though he was quick to regain his composure while trying not to look *too* flustered. He imagined he probably didn't too good a job in this aspect.

"M-mm, yeah?" he asked, blinking rapidly a few times at her. "You leaving just now?"

"The others are preparing to leave, yes. I'm just the first one out," she confirmed. "Mainly because I wanted to make sure you were alright. You reacted rather oddly in there." Nicole looked down to the gift tucked under his arm. "Was the gift not-?"

"No! It's great," Sorun assured her, and he noticed some part of Nicole's composure relaxed the smallest bit. "I... I just didn't expect you to get me something, you know, so thoughtful. Everybody else just got clothes and cookies and stuff, so I didn't expect something, you know, so high-quality." He swallowed the lump in his throat and turned away from her. "You really didn't have to go through so much trouble for me."

"It truly wasn't that difficult to splice the parts needed into the controller and reconfigure it for proper use. Especially with the nanites. I managed it in a single night while you were sleeping," she said. "Truly, it's harmful to think you regard my abilities so little, Sorun."

Instantly panicking on the inside, Sorun's head snapped back to her. "I didn't mean-!" he tried to explain in a quiet voice, though he trailed off when he saw the smile on Nicole face.

"Merely teasing," she said, causing Sorun to pout. "But back to my previous point. You sincerely were acting odd, Sorun." She took a step closer to him. "Are you sure you're alright?"

The small amount of concern Sorun heard in her voice only caused Sorun's heartrate to spike even further. "I, um... I was just flustered a bit. Is all. I'm not used to this kind of thing." His eyes traveled down Nicole's body when he found the will to look back at her. Oddly

enough, he saw she was holding one more wrapped gift under her arm. A slightly larger box wrapped with blue wrapping paper. "What's that?" he asked her.

Nicole looked down to what Sorun was looking at. She remained completely still for a moment, and then looked back up to Sorun's face. For some reason *she* looked nervous now. "Well... it's your gift."

"..." It took a few seconds for Sorun's brain to process the sentence. Even then, he was sure he misheard. "But you already got me a gift."

"Right, about that..." Nicole reached under her arm to grip the present with both hands. "In truth, I'd been preparing this gift for you in advance, in preparation of the holiday. I'd already wanted to give this to you, but then you sprung that gift-giving event on us all..." Nicole glanced back at the house. "It was undoubtedly fun, but I'd drawn your name and didn't want to... well, this seemed too personal. So I decided to give you two gifts instead." She held the box out to him. "Here."

"I could have just given her something in private outside of the Secret Santa thing? What the hell, of course I could have. Idiot." Admittedly he wouldn't have had the excuse it would have provided, but still... a large part of Sorun was beginning to feel awful. One amazing gift was bad enough. But two? And one that Nicole was planning in advance at that? *"Christ, and I didn't even get her anything... why the... why the hell is she doing so much for me...?"*

Of course he'd still taken the blue-wrapped gift from her, albeit with extreme reluctance. Nicole had taken the box containing the controller from him while Sorun, with borderline reverence, opened the gift up. He hadn't gone as far as to tear it, instead just unfolding one side of the gift and allowing the cardboard box inside of it to slip out. He flattened the paper against the box and then opened it up so he could peer at the contents inside of it.

When Sorun saw what was inside of the box, he'd nearly dropped it out of shock. No, he'd nearly fallen over entirely when he saw what was inside of it. Something that *should* have been impossible to exist in reality, but there it was, folded up neatly right there in the box. A coat. A blue coat. An extremely familiar, tri-tailed blue coat. A coat that Sorun inherently recognized, down to the light, thorny, helical patterns running down each side of the coat's breasts and arms to even the shade of blue it held.

"How did... where in the world *did she get Vergil's coat from...?"* Utterly confused and baffled, he looked up from the folded coat up to Nicole, who was staring at Sorun expectantly. "How is this possible?" he whispered out in awe, still in disbelief over the thing he was holding. "I... I don't understand..."

Whether it be his reaction to the coat, or Sorun's sheer disbelief over it, Nicole seemed amused by how Sorun was acting. "Your digital avatar constructed that exact coat for yourself. Back during our adventure in the digital world," she explained, making Sorun's eyes widen in realization. "You kept thumbing and looking it over the entire time there and expressed a great amount of fondness for it. You even seemed disappointed when you learned you couldn't bring it to the real world. So I committed the design to memory for later use." She glanced down at the coat. "Before you ask, I went to that tailor you work for and told her you'd likely be wearing this from now on regardless of how she thought you should dress. Fortunately, she saw no issue with it." Nicole frowned. "She also had numerous opinions of my own attire. I dismissed them all."

In spite of everything Sorun managed to grow the smallest smirk. It still wavered heavily as he stared down at the blue coat and the raw amount of nostalgia he felt looking at it. "You really didn't have to... you... you really made this for me...?"

"It's made from my nanites. It has a self-repair feature. And self-cleaning. I... wanted to make something that would last," she explained at seeing Sorun's wide-eyed look.

"But wouldn't that mean..." He reached his hand forwards and lifted the coat up. For all intents and purposes it felt like a coat. The softest coat he'd ever felt in his entire life to boot. "This is a part of you?"

"I suppose, technically. You could look at it like that. It's an insignificant amount I donated towards making it."

It was becoming too much for Sorun. A coat was one thing, a coat *this significant* was another, but she'd even went and poured her nanites into it? He knew how precious those things were to Nicole. They were an extension of her very being. That she was giving some to Sorun to keep as a *coat* of all things was... he didn't know what he'd done to garner that kind of trust. What he'd done that she'd go so far for him for what amounted to a Christmas gift.

"Nicole, this is too much. It's really too much," Sorun mumbled out. "I-I can't take something like... I didn't even get you anything."

"I don't want you worrying about that." Nicole looked off to the side, a bit shyly. "You already saw how much difficulty Sonic had finding something for me. There's nothing materialistic I want for to begin with." She looked back to Sorun, a smile appearing. "I wanted to show you how appreciative I've been for the companionship you've given me. That's what I really want. So please, take the coat. I made it for you after all."

Wordless, and with great hesitancy, Sorun removed the coat that may as well have been more valuable than his own life from the box and gave it and the wrapping paper to Nicole. He unfurled it completely and held it out to examine it, noting, with shock, just how accurate it was. Down to every last detail he could remember, just like how it'd been in the virtual world. He slipped the blue coat on, pulling his hands through the long sleeves and pulling it snug against him while leaving it open.

It was a coat so comfortable Sorun could barely even notice he was wearing it. Somehow he wasn't too surprised at the fact.

"It's... warm..."

"... I really don't have the words, Nicole." Sorun looked down at the coat, and then back up at her. "It's perfect, so I can't... I can't really give any better praise than perfect." He looked back down. "You don't know how much this thing means to me..."

It was a reminder of home. A connection. A symbol of a significant part of his life that didn't exist anymore. Something he didn't have anymore when he'd lost all his possessions he'd originally brought to this world. But the coat felt different. A piece of Earth he could carry around with him now wherever he went. And... a piece of Nicole, too. He wasn't so sure how he was supposed to feel about that. About any of this.

What had he done to deserve so great a gift?

A sudden weight pressing against Sorun's torso halted all his thoughts. His mind was nothing more than a complete blank playing white noise and static when he saw Nicole and the hug she'd wrapped him in. He didn't even know how long she'd maintained it, as the ability to keep track of time had momentarily escaped him as he stared in muted silence, arms completely slack at his sides. He just knew that eventually, in a time that could have been seconds or hours, she pulled away and still had that smile on.

"Thank you for spending New Year's with all of us, Sorun. It was fun. I'm glad I could share my first time experiencing it in a body with you and the rest of our friends." She took a few steps back and glanced down at the items in her hands. "I'll dispose of the leftovers and drop the controller off at your home when I can. Maybe we could try them out then?"

"Y-yeah..." Sorun numbly mumbled out, still barely able to process any of what was happening. "Yeah, I... sure. We can do that."

"That's excellent to hear, Sorun. You're a truly wonderful friend." Parts of Nicole's body began to dissipate into green pixels. "I'm sorry

to say, but there's some matters I need to attend to now." She managed one last wave. "I'll see you later, Sorun."

She left before Sorun could even open his mouth to try and say anything. Even if he had, the words never even formed in his head. There was a strong gust of frigid wind that blew past him, blowing his three coattails far behind him, though he hadn't even felt the cold. He was too distracted raising his hand up to his chest, around where his heart was.

"It's... still warm..."

A/N- I don't care what the comic lore says or doesn't say, it doesn't make sense that Mobians would celebrate Christmas. It's a bombed-out post-apocalyptic setting thousands of years in the future after the fall and erasure of human culture, it shouldn't exist. For the Station Square humans, probably, the Overlanders *maybe* , but I don't see why Mobians should have it when they should be using a new culture unique to them. I'm willing to waive things like everybody speaking the same language since English is the universal language everybody uses for zany comic reasons, but I'm drawing a line in the sand at Christmas.

Chapter 72

Recursion Error

Episode 72- It combines

Rubrum hated lots of things. A given with everything he'd been through, and still had to go through on a daily basis. Sources of catharsis were few and far between since he was entirely focused on the task at hand. The slaughter of a race of brain-tentacled, genocidal aliens and insane god tyrants from other dimensions helped ease the edge off a *bit* . Not entirely, but on the occasions he had to kill something he genuinely disliked it was a welcome distraction. Not overly so, since nothing really posed a challenge to him anymore, but he'd take what he could get.

But he couldn't fight a dusty, empty canyon. Well, he *could* , but it wasn't worth the hassle. And yet, it was so tempting because he was finding that he hated being in this place more and more.

"Never did like deserts," he muttered to himself as he walked along. The place was a canyon so wide it may as well have been a crater, but that didn't make it any less dusty. A small whirlwind had unfortunately crossed Rubrum's path as he continued walking, causing him to sputter out and cough as it passed him. "Pth! Fuckin' fuck, sand in my mouth. Ugh."

To come so far only to be inconvenienced by things as banal as sand. Some things really did never change.

He'd come to this canyon for one reason and one reason solely, and he strongly suspected he was in the right place due to what he'd stumbled across when he made it to the canyon walls: ruins. Clay and stone huts along cave entrances in the canyon wall, crumbling and ancient-looking. Areas that once upon a time may have been

paved streets or roads people walked down. Shapes and symbols carved into the canyon wall eroded by time and were little more than unintelligible shapes at this point.

All of it was meaningless to Rubrum, but it at least showed him that he was in the right place. Now all he had to do was find the guy he was looking for and it should be simple from there.

"Certainly isn't the classiest of places," he remarked, stepping around some of the ruined structures while approaching one of the cave mouths. "Why do these wackos always gotta find the weirdest places to make their labs? Havin' me search around like some kinda archeologist just to find one guy, I swear..."

The conditions inside the cave were extremely low light. Winding, too, as there were so many alternating pathways that he would assume it'd be easy to get lost in the cave system, though fortunately he'd managed to find a recent-looking set of footprints and decided to just follow those. Cave writings and drawings were drawn onto the cave walls that largely went ignored by Rubrum as he continued following the path of footprints deeper into the cave. A journey that took him deeper and deeper into the cave, causing light to slowly recede more and more the further he went.

Just when he was almost completely encapsulated by darkness there was a change in the form of metal sconces bolted to the cave walls. Lit sconces as well, alight with, much to his amusement given Rubrum's snort at the sight, green fire. And rather conveniently the footprints he'd been following lead down the same way as the green-lit torches lining the wall.

"He's got the green shit, huh?" He made a small bit of laughter as he tucked his hands into his pockets and began following the torches. "Man, he's really trying to sell this evil scientist thing."

More walking down the lit cave path made Rubrum accidentally stumble onto something interesting: a square piece of stone that had been jutting out of the ground. He'd accidentally stepped on it,

causing the stone to sink into the ground. He heard quiet clicking and clunking sounds following this, causing Rubrum to make a light humming sound and look ahead. He'd done so just in time to see the large scythe rushing towards him.

"Awoop." Lazily, he'd sidestepped the scythe as it swung past him, its point swinging up high enough to embed itself halfway in the cave's ceiling. Hands still casually tucked in his pockets, Rubrum's hidden gaze followed the shaft of the scythe to its end, which he saw connected to some sort of spring-like contraption bolted to the cave ceiling. "Guy's got traps, too? What a nerd."

The scythe hadn't been the only trap Rubrum had run into while traveling further down the cave. From pitfalls to darts that fired from the walls, all of which were easily avoided by him. Some of the traps looked so old he had to wonder if the guy he was looking for was the one to place them all, or if they'd always been in these ruins and he'd just refurbished them to keep out outsiders. Then again, he knew enough about him. A trap door that lead to a floor full of spikes wasn't exactly out of the mad scientist's purview. Bit crude for him, maybe, but it got the job done in most cases. Not in Rubrum's, fortunately enough.

After what seemed like an eternity the cave tunnel finally reached an end. A small, spherical cavern that was well-lit with artificial lighting. Various pieces of scientific machinery and instruments littered the rock room all around, making the place look more like some scientist's den than a cave. Most of this went largely ignored by Rubrum, who'd only regarded the environment with a cursory glance before he focused in on the individual on the other side of the room, his back turned to Rubrum as he examined some kind of readout on one of the machines: a white-furred echidna wearing a black cape.

"Man, finally." He should have felt glad he finally got to stop searching around the world just to find this one echidna, but Rubrum was still so irritated with the journey getting here and all the traps he'd had to avoid on the way that he felt a bit cross. He did his best

to stow these feelings away as he rose his right hand out from his pocket to make a wave. "Hey, doc-"

In a show of speed that was marginally impressive by Rubrum's standards, the echidna whirled around and extended his hand towards Rubrum. A bolt of black lightning shot out from his fingers, which was dodged by Rubrum when he'd tilted his head just far enough that the bolt missed him and harmlessly impacted the cave wall behind him. He turned his head around towards the now-smoking spot on the wall, and then back around to the echidna professor who was staring straight at him.

"You blast everyone that comes and visits you?" he asked, and then stuck his thumb out behind him towards the darkened entrance he'd just come in from. "I mean, jeez, you know how many traps I had to avoid just to get here? A guy'd think you don't even want any visitors. The fire jet was a nice touch, though, not gonna lie."

Amber irises settled in black eyes regarded Rubrum with caution and confusion. The curiosity on the echidna's face was plain to see, alongside the quickly-fading hostility. His mouth containing sharpened teeth pursed into a thin line as he slowly lowered his hand that ceased emitting black sparks of energy. "I'm afraid I can't take credit for their construction," he said in an even tone. "That honor belongs to the ones that came before me."

"Really? Huh."

"Yes. Really." The neutral expression the white echidna wore was rapidly transitioning into a frown the longer he stared at Rubrum. "Who are you? Why have you come here?"

"Came for you," Rubrum easily answered, turning around towards a nearby shelf built into the cave wall. "I need a favor."

"A favor...?" the echidna repeated, watching as Rubrum stepped over to the shelf to examine the myriad of objects and artifacts settled on the shelf. "Do you even know who I am?"

There was a hum from Rubrum. "Not a lot of albino echidna in the world that go by the name Dr. Finitevus who have a reputation of almost destroying the world. Not to mention Albion, though I heard the few survivors and the echidna Enerjak teleported there from Angel Island are making something decent of the place. Good for them, I guess." His red-hooded head turned backwards to look at Finitevus. "I had a time and a half trying to find you. What are you doing poking around dusty old ruins, anyways?"

"Is it so wrong to want to explore my kind's history and culture? This ancient place was once a home for echidna, long ago," he answered, voice still cautious but now somewhat relaxed. "People being people, things didn't work out. You'd be shocked by the amount of sordid history between the species' conception and them raising that blasted island into the sky."

"I don't think I'd be overly surprised." Rubrum turned back to the collection of artifacts and ran a hand over a dusty piece. "Garbage species like yours always seems to get tripped up by life."

There was a loud scoff from Finitevus, followed by him narrowing his eyes condescendingly at Rubrum's back. "To think I expected more from a human. I was lead to believe your kind was more benevolent towards Mobians than Overlanders."

"I meant the echidna specifically when I said that," Rubrum corrected. "I mean, shit, the territorial wars, experimenting on subspecies of Mobians and irrevocably damaging their gene pools enough to regress them into mindless beasts, the messed up Guardian grooming thing the Brotherhood did, leader of Albion trying to ice Knuckles outta paranoia that one time, Neo-Walkers, Dark Legion, Enerjak, *you.* Your kind's entire history is a literal cavalcade of fuckups, and more often than not you end up dragging the others species into your problems because you can't get your own shit together. I'm not sayin' every Mobian in history's been squeaky clean, but goddamn, no other Mobian species has *nearly* the amount of issues echidna do."

"And I suppose your kind has a sterling record in comparison to ours?"

"Hm. Not nearly." Rubrum didn't turn around to meet the echidna's unflinching look. "You called me a human. Not Overlander?"

"Overlanders typically possess four fingers. You've five on your hands," he observed.

"The four-finger thing doesn't apply to all Overlanders. Mutant freaks that they are," Rubrum countered. "But," he continued, finally turned his concealed form around to Finitevus, "you're not wrong. I'm Rubrum."

"... Curious name." A small hum left the white echidna's throat as he thought the name over. His dark eyes glanced down at the floor, though they seemed puzzled even after they looked back up at his hood. "I'm unfamiliar with it."

"It's from a deader-than-dead language. Don't worry so much about it."

The half-explanation didn't do much to assuage the obvious curiosity Finitevus held. "Truly, now..." he mumbled out. "You're a long way from Station Square."

The echidna's darkened eyes widened a bit when a small laugh left the human's hooded head. "Don't think about it too much," he recommended as he approached a nearby wooden box sitting on the ground. "We've other things to discuss first."

"Oh, but you likely already know so much about me seeing as I'm evidently 'famous' due to my exploits." Grinning a bit, a sly, twisted grin that even put Rubrum off a bit, Finitevus decided to sit down on the ledge of a raised section of cave flooring so he was eye-level with a sitting Rubrum. The curiosity was on full-blown display at this point, the scientist almost looking entertained with what was happening as he continued speaking. "We've just met, and you have

me at the disadvantage of only giving me a name to work with. Take some pity on me."

"You're givin' me too much credit here." Rubrum's red-covered body hunched forwards a bit on the crate he sat on as he clasped his hands together. "I don't exactly have your whole bibliography on hand." He unclasped his hands and pointed his fingers at Finitevus. "The most I know is you're an evil scientist dude that wants to destroy the world for incredibly ambiguous evil-man reasons."

"That's what those short-sighted fools in the Chaotix and all those associated with them would claim. I wouldn't expect that pack of juveniles to understand my motivations," Finitevus stated with an eye roll. "It's not complete destruction I seek. It's a reset. You said it yourself how... unfortunate echidna history has been. The miserable state of this world is a result of a history so complex and intertwined with money-grubbing fools, power-hungry imbeciles, or simple idiots of significant importance that turned the tide of history down unfortunate avenues at the expense of everyone to follow." He held a finger up to Rubrum. "One. One single individual. Dr. Robotnik, if you need an example. It only takes one person to make a mess of things for everyone else, and history is littered with hundreds more examples. Starting needless conflict and inciting endless cycles of hatred and retaliation that spirals so far out of control over such a long stretch of history that nobody can make sense of it all. My kind has suffered this. Every Mobian species. The humans, the Overlanders, all indigenous life on this planet." He deeply sighed. "The world's only in the state that it's in because the original humans decided to dissect a visiting alien diplomat, and they rained gene bombs on the planet in retaliation."

"With the benefit of hindsight, it was... admittedly a pretty lousy move on the humans' part," Rubrum conceded. "But I know what it's like to see loved ones die because of an honest mistake somebody made."

Finitevus scoffed. "There was nothing honest about any of these mistakes. Ignorant fools with too much influence. All of them. Everyone." He shook his head. "The current state of affairs is

unsalvageable. I merely wish to start back from zero and usher the people of this world into a new age. One free of the poisonous mistakes of those past."

Crossing his arms, Rubrum kicked his legs forwards and leaned back on the crate. "So you think there's no hope for saving this world, so you'd rather just wipe the slate clean and try to start over?" He nodded his head at Finitevus. "'Cause you're so qualified to create a utopia on the ashes of what you would call a failed world."

One of Finitevus' eyes twitched. "This world *is* failed. An experiment gone terribly awry. I'm the only qualified one since I'm the only one that sees sense."

"And instead of plotting world destruction, you're here." Rubrum spread his arm around at the cave around them. "Living in a cave and playing historian."

"Perhaps I'm a fool for trying to piece together a puzzle that can't be solved because the pieces were lost to time. Who can say?" Resting his head against his fist, Finitevus sighed and glanced off to the side. "My schemes were thrown eschew due to meddling echidna and a human who I'd love to get under an operating table, but... alas. I hear he perished in a battle against Dr. Robotnik."

"He resurrected." Finitevus' head snapped to Rubrum's in surprise. "Neo-Walkers gave him the revive treatment. More out of pity than anything else, I think."

Understanding crossed the echidna's features, and his mouth thinned out a bit. "They would do that," he muttered out. "Well, perhaps that's an avenue to pursue at a later date."

"For your own health I wouldn't recommend that course of action."

The tone that sentence had been said in was icier than the otherwise nonchalant tone Rubrum had been adopting thus far. Finitevus had looked surprised at the sudden tone shift in the human he'd been

talking to, and, instinctually, he felt some of his fur stand up when he saw power so condensed it was like red steam wafting off Rubrum's body with arcs of red electricity periodically arcing in the red clouds. Like a small, raging storm he'd conjured through sheer will alone.

But it wasn't his appearance, or the tone shift that caused Finitevus to go quiet. It was the power he felt flowing through the air. Raw Chaos energy so condensed it felt suffocating to the echidna, as if the pressure in the room was squeezing down on and compressing his body. He'd tried pushing out his own Chaos energy to counteract it, but the black arcs of lightning that sparked around his form did nothing to mitigate Rubrum's presence over his.

Despite all that, Finitevus managed a smirk. "Touched a nerve, have I?" he taunted out.

For a few moments Rubrum remained silent, completely motionless as his hooded face stared at Finitevus. And then he made a loud sigh, causing the red energy around him to instantly dissipate. With it left the overbearing pressure Finitevus had been subject to, causing him to inhale a breath much louder than he would have preferred. He grit his sharpened teeth as a result, though he still let the black energy retreat back into his own body.

"Sorry about that. Slips sometimes," Rubrum apologized. "Ehhh, I don't know why I'm getting so bent outta shape. Not like you'll ever make good on that threat." The passing remark caused Finitevus to visibly grow a bit irritated. "Maybe we should get to the reason I came here to begin with," Rubrum suggested.

"Yes. Perhaps we should," Finitevus agreed. "For what reason do you have for intruding into my laboratory?"

"Well, simply put, I came to tell you that you're in luck!" The sudden light tone the human adopted caused Finitevus to rear his head back in surprise. "As it happens, our goals at the moment align. I need to cause a worldwide apocalypse."

Before Finitevus could respond, Rubrum turned his right palm up towards the ceiling. A cloud of red cubes materialized and freely floated around his hand for a moment, making Finitevus squint over the strange curiosity and foreign energy he felt from the cubes, but his interest turned to complete shock when, after a red flash of light, appeared a sealed jar in Rubrum's hand. A jar containing a floating mass of black and purple shapes that he instantly recognized, even felt, at a momentary glance.

"That's...!" Finitevus cut himself off, perturbed at the wonder he heard in his own voice. Rubrum set the jar down next to him as he cleared his throat to regain his composure. "Where did you acquire the hex I used on the Master Emerald?" He demanded, blackened eyes boring straight into Rubrum's hood shadow.

"When Sorun used the Yamato to separate the hex from the Master Emerald, the hex had to go somewhere," Rubrum answered. The echidna's gaze sharpened at the use of the other human's name. "I simply collected it."

"You just... happened to be around to collect it. And happen to know precisely what occurred that day." At Rubrum's nod, Finitevus made an uneasy hum. "And what exactly do you intend to do with it?"

"Aw, that's simple. I need you to reactivate it so we can get Enerjak back."

Finitevus blinked. He blinked again, and looked down at the jar. After a third blink he looked back to Rubrum. "That's an impossible task, Rubrum," he said. "The only capable candidate for accepting Enerjak's power is Knuckles, who, as I'm sure you're well aware of, is the current Guardian to the Master Emerald. It took me months to affix that hex to the Master Emerald due to their indirect connection, and I no longer have free access to it due to recent events."

"Which is why we're gonna circumvent all that bullshit using this."

Once again Rubrum moved his right hand, this time moving it up. Chaos energy, pure and undiluted, gathered around his hand and formed a shape. In a fiery burst of Chaos energy, an object was formed in his grip. A metal claymore sword with a blade nearly as long as Rubrum himself. Finitevus found himself looking up and down the blade in wonder, pausing at the unnerving sight of the hilt stylized as a screaming skull with curved horns poking out from the eyeholes. The crossguard shaped like ribs and the metal ribcage that ran a bit down from the screaming skull and into the blade.

"That sword..." Face completely set in fascination, Finitevus watched as Rubrum spun the sword around and stabbed its notched tip into the ground, his hand still holding the metal hilt tipped with a pommel resembling a spiky crown. He noted there was another skull on the opposite side of the first, this one without horns and with its mouth closed. "It feels very much like the one Sorun wielded. Yamato, I believe you called it."

"I'm not too surprised seeing as it's its twin brother," Rubrum explained. "This is the Rebellion, the polar opposite of the Yamato. It has the ability to combine things. Though this function is... rather limited in its capacity compared to Yamato's, seeing as I have to stab whatever I want to combine." He lifted the sword up and tossed it on the ground in front of Finitevus. The echidna watched, perplexed, as the completely metal sword clattered on the tone ground in front of him. "I need you to activate and attach the hex to the sword. Do that, and I can use its power to combine Knuckles and the hex," Rubrum said. "It'll also involve me brutally stabbing a giant sword through Knuckles' chest, but he should regenerate once he becomes Enerjak again, so eh."

"Hmmm..." Humming in intrigue, Finitevus bent down to pick up the blade. He faltered a bit at feeling its weight, but managed to heft it up. He'd only been able to examine it for a few moments before a bolt of red electricity shot out from the blade and shocked the hand holding it. The echidna shouted out in pain and reflexively dropped

the sword back onto the ground, making Rubrum chuckle, garnering more ire from Finitevus.

"Careful. He bites people he doesn't like," he warned.

"Tch. It appears so." The echidna's dark eyes traveled back up to Rubrum. "I would like to know where exactly you and Sorun acquired blades that radiate enough Chaos energy to rival Chaos Emeralds. I would know if such things existed."

So many questions buzzed through his mind. What the blades were, where they came from, what civilization had the technological finesse to manipulate such a vast amount of Chaos energy. What the extent of the blades' powers was, the forging process, was a Chaos Emerald involved in their construction? There must have been; the amount of energy he felt merely being *near* the blade said enough.

Even the human sitting across from him elicited so many question in the echidna's scientific mind. He was powerful, that much was certain. More than Finitevus would like to admit. Sorun had possessed power, too, not nearly as much as Rubrum had, but it'd still been a... worryingly surprising amount.

Alas, Rubrum wasn't intent on answering any of these. "Trade secret," he said, causing Finitevus' mood to dim even further. "Well, how about it? Can you do it?"

"..." Another look down at the blade. "Directly fusing the hex into Knuckles would undoubtedly do the trick. There's still the power concern, though. Another reason I needed to utilize the Master Emerald was so Knuckles could have access to an inexhaustible supply of Chaos energy to maintain his Enerjak form."

Rubrum waved the concern off with a literal handwave. "So I'll pin him to the Master Emerald while I'm at it and combine a big dose of Chaos energy into him. Simple."

"But why go through all this?" Finitevus questioned him, wanting to get to the heart of the matter. "I understand my own reasons. He's the means from which I must destroy the world to remake it. But what's your stake in this? Why is some stranger, a human at that, who is overflowing with so much Chaos energy desire to beckon Enerjak back into the world?"

"Why indeed? It's a fairly convoluted answer," Rubrum said. "I think I managed to puzzle out the reason myself. This part of it at least."

There was a momentary pause where Finitevus gave Rubrum an odd glare. "I don't follow," he said. "You... don't know?"

"Sometimes I have no idea why I'm doing the things I do. In this case I sorta do, since I know all the steps ahead and have a ton of context behind it all. So it's reasonable enough to figure out." Rubrum hunched forwards and clasped his hands back together. "The only thing I'm a hundred percent certain on is I have to do it all. I know what happens if I don't. It's not a very pleasant alternative - for anybody. But that's not why I'm here." He leaned back and placed his steepled hands in his lap. "The truth is this world is slated to be destroyed by a time anomaly."

The statement hung in the air between the two of them for the larger part of a whole minute. Rubrum had remained completely still through the whole time, silently watching Finitevus to gauge his reaction. The echidna, by contrast, reared his head back and widened his eyes in shock at the proclamation, even scoffing a bit while shaking his head in disbelief. But there hadn't been so much as a hint of deceit behind Rubrum's words, making a deep frown appear over the scientist's face.

"You can't be serious," he stated. "A time anomaly? Of what variety?"

"That I couldn't tell you. Don't even know what it is. Time anomaly, time singularity, big-ass time storm, I don't... it's a bad thing, and it *will* destroy the world, i.e. the whole Prime Zone, not just Mobius. I

know how it came to be, though," he added. "It's Sonic's fault this thing exists in the first place."

"That blue irregularity?" Finitevus asked. "How does he fit into this?"

"That guy's an anomaly in of himself. For good reason, but that's a whole 'nother topic," Rubrum began. "Back in his early days of Freedom Fighting Sonic got up to a lot of things. Did crazy stuff with Power Rings and Chaos Emeralds, back when they were numerous and uncombined. Broke down dimensional barriers with his sheer speed and natural Chaos abilities alone, traveled to and from the Cosmic Interstate like he was walking down the damn street, hell, I heard he and Knuckles destroyed a whole zone when they fought once." He sighed and rolled his head up to the ceiling. "That shit's got consequences. As it is now the time anomaly is harmless, but in twenty-five years' time it's gonna be a problem. A *serious problem* . Fortunately in the future they catch the problem and manage to do something about it. Unfortunately they decided to use a prototype time machine Doc Eggman never got around to finishing to do it, and when Sonic went in it the dumbass cut himself out of time. Good news is it fixed the time anomaly. Bad news is Sonic nullified his existence up to the point in time he used the machine, creating an alternate timeline that supplanted the original one we currently inhabit." Rubrum took in a deep breath, and then straightened his body to directly face Finitevus. "I need to stop that."

Finitevus, who'd grown cautiously still throughout the whole explanation, slowly asked, "The time anomaly, or Sonic's meddling with time?"

"Both," he answered. "The main issue is Sorun. The alternate timeline changed history itself, rewrote everybody, every *thing* in this zone, to fit into the new timeline. The problem is Sorun isn't a natural denizen of Mobius Prime, so when this goes down and Sonic inadvertently creates a new timeline in twenty-five years, Sorun's existence is going to be erased. Completely. I can't let that happen. So I need to obliterate that alternate timeline and stop the time anomaly so this timeline can remain as it is indefinitely."

"He's not a natural denizen of this zone?" The tone Finitevus used to repeat this statement sounded intrigued. "I had suspicions. Nothing ever pointed the inhabitants of Station Square to be overly attuned with the forces of Chaos. I presume things are different in his zone?" he asked. "Just what was it?"

Oddly, a deep sigh left Rubrum at the question. "As near as I can tell, a cosmic mistake. I don't think that zone was ever supposed to exist. Through some cosmic fluke or fumble it does." He glanced off to the side. "Sorun's from there. He's a special breed of human. A species that naturally lack Chaos Force links, affording them the ability to manifest unique abilities with a given supply of Chaos energy at the cost of their health." Finitevus' eyes practically twinkled in interest, while Rubrum's voice grew quiet. "But something happened, and everything over there's dead now. Sorun's the last of his kind."

"That's... a pity. Truly." Finitevus cleared his throat when Rubrum's hooded head looked back at him. "But why does he matter so much?"

"He matters to me. He's my reason." Rubrum paused, and then let out a harsh sigh. "My world practically revolves around him at this point. It's my job to get him from point A, to point B, to point C, all the way to goddamn Z, and to make sure he doesn't die in the process. Well, too much, at least. Guy woulda died a hundred times over when he was a Freedom Fighter if I didn't intervene somewhere in the background. But that ain't important." He shook his hooded head. "My problem stems from the fact that getting Sorun to the next point is... kinda tricky. You see, Sorun possesses the means of fixing all this timey-wimey business."

Visible confusion on Finitevus' part. "I don't follow..."

"Look, I already laid out all the groundwork and everything, I just gotta get the dude there and it'll solve itself. I can't do it the natural way and just wait twenty-five years because he won't survive the transition into the new timeline, so I need to expedite the process. In the form of a time capsule. A time capsule inundated with infinite

amounts of Chaos energy, energy that's naturally resistant to the effects of time. A capsule large enough that someone Sorun's size could be fit into it. The Master Emerald, I'm talking about the Master Emerald," Rubrum elaborated. "I get him in there, he stays frozen in there 'til twenty five-years later when Sonic fucks up and creates an alternate timeline. Shock of the transition should get the Master Emerald to spit Sorun out into the new timeline, bing-bang-boom, problem solved. Only way he's getting in there is if people connected to the Master Emerald who know how to use it, like the current Guardian and his father, put him in there. Only way they'll even consider doing that is if Sorun's on the verge of death from using the seven Chaos Emeralds again and they all happen to already be near the thing at the time. The only scenario Sorun would even consider killing himself using the Emeralds again is if a big enough threat comes along that forces his hand. *Hence* ... I need to artificially create a doomsday scenario using Enerjak." After finishing the last word, Rubrum deeply inhaled and then slowly exhaled. "Anyway that's it in a nutshell."

"This is lunacy," Finitevus spat out. "Insanity. Complete and utter madness. How could such a plan ever be conceived!?"

"I don't know, man, it's on the list. I just follow the list." Rubrum's shoulders sagged, and then adopted a new tone Finitevus had heard for the first time since the two met: exhaustion, which gave the white echidna pause. "This is the shit I've been dealing with for so long, and I don't... I don't know how the *fuck* He came up with this all. How many times He must have... it doesn't matter." He breathed out a tired sigh. "Just help me with this."

"I don't-" Finitevus began, sounding hesitant, though Rubrum cut him off quickly with a raised hand.

"You have a vested interest in this too, Finitevus," Rubrum claimed, and then lowered his hand back down. "Who do you think took over saving the world in the new timeline if Sonic wasn't there? Without him around there was nobody to contend with Shadow for strongest being on the planet, and the lack of his sunny disposition made

alternate-timeline Shadow a very unchill Shadow. Same kind of Shadow that tried blowing the world up in revenge for his dead friend, if I recall," he added. "But this one didn't do that. Oh no, he just took over the whole world to spread his own brand of 'peace' along the lands. And all the bad people making the world a bad place?" Rubrum laughed out. "Oh, he ain't no Freedom Fighter that takes half-measures. King Shadow wiped the board with all the world's creeps and any government that opposed him, permanently. I'm talking public executions or shoving a Chaos Spear through people's hearts. Eggman, G.U.N., that Iron Bitch and her dominion 'cross the ocean, Mogul, Naugus, and you, my friend-!" he pointed at Finitevus, "- get killed. All of you. All so he could run a unified world under his sole regime."

"Sounds rather peaceful to me."

"Sure, if you're alright with turbo-fascism under a literally immortal being that killed his way to world power." The red-clothed human leaned back on the crate he sat on. "Listen, you're missin' the point. It's lose-lose for you. Either the time anomaly destroys you along with the rest of the world in twenty-five years or King Shadow kills alternate you in the alternate timeline. Help me with Enerjak and I can prevent all that."

Throughout their entire exchange Finitevus had grown increasingly skeptical to Rubrum's words. Passing scoffs and eyerolls, an increasingly lax form, more disinterest in his eyes. Mainly, though, disbelief. Sheer disbelief bordering on actual outrage that was slowly appearing on the echidna's face. By the time Rubrum finished speaking, he looked ready to blow up.

"I don't believe a word of this," he claimed. "It's insanity, all of it. Talks of future perils, decades into the future at that, alternate timelines, there's no scientific or even historical precedent to any of this. Do you even have any proof to these wild claims?"

Rubrum shrugged. "Other than my word? Nah."

"Then you'll have to forgive me for not trusting the word of a stranger I just met," Finitevus snidely remarked. "How could you possibly, *possibly* know any of this? Not even the Neo-Walkers have the kind of foresight required to predict these ridiculous claims. I'll admit you're powerful, that's plain enough to feel, but I just don't see how you could know this. So answer me: how? Do? You? Know?"

There was a sound of Rubrum heavily inhaling through his nose, followed by a deep, heavy sigh. He placed his right hand on his knee and hunched forwards, glancing down at the ground a bit before making a small, mirthless laugh, shaking his head, and looking back up. "That answer's heavy, doc," he said. "Let's just say I have a crazy amount of insight and leave it at that. The truth itself ain't pretty; it's the kind of thing that drives people insane. Already told it to one guy and robbed his will to live." Both of Rubrum's hands placed themselves on the crate, after which he pushed himself up into a standing position. "But it's whatever. Believe the crazy guy that says he knows the future, don't believe him, doesn't really matter. At the end of the day you want to bring back Enerjak just as much as I do regardless, so it's all the same to you." He nodded to the sword lying between them. "I'm leaving Rebellion with you for a bit so you can implant the hex on it. Don't make it too complicated, stick it on with celestial duct tape or whatever, I just need it to physically be on the sword when I stab Knuckles with it." A pause. "Sooo... yeah. That's it. Bye."

After saying his parting, Rubrum stood still and silently watched Finitevus in case he had any final words for Rubrum. But the echidna said nothing, instead intent on looking back and forth between the sword lying at his feet and the nearby jar with the hex floating in it. His eye ridges were creased in concentration, his face set in deep contemplation, and Rubrum shrugged figuring the conversation was over with right there. He turned to leave, but only made it a couple steps before Finitevus' voice called out to him.

"Why would you tell me such a convoluted lie like the one you just said if you knew I just wanted Enerjak?"

"I wonder...?" Rubrum mused, refraining from pointing out that Finitevus had been the one to ask his reasons to begin with. "I dunno. It's nice to vent. I don't really have many people to talk to, and out of everybody I've met since taking on this fucked up gig, you're... really the only tolerable one." His hooded head turned back to Finitevus. "Oh, 'fore I forget, how much time you need with the hex?"

"... I would think a day should suffice, perhaps less. Come back tomorrow at the same time and we'll have it sorted out." With that, Finitevus looked back down at the jar containing the hex. A wicked grin spread over his face, showing off his sharpened teeth. "We'll begin the real work right after."

"'Kay, then. Seeya." Shrugging, Rubrum shoved his hands into his pockets and turned right around to exit through the cave entrance. He couldn't hold in the sputter of amused laughter that escaped past his lips when he heard the dark chuckling of the white echidna that he was walking away from.

"I saw that evil li'l grin he had on. What a cliché guy. He must think he's still gonna have control of Enerjak with his hex. Man, he's really gonna hate what happens next." A grin of his own grew on Rubrum's face as his form disappeared into the darkness of the caves. *"These suckers just never learn."*

Chapter 73

A/N- Shifted some dialogue and details last chapter around a bit because I wasn't satisfied with some things. Not my smoothest performance, but oh well.

Recursion Error

Episode 73- Countdown to doomsday (it's today)

It was a very unappealing thing. That black, wriggling shape embedded onto the Rebellion's metal blade. Like an ever-shifting drawing somebody had put on his sword. Or an ugly tattoo. Wasn't permanent, at least. If everything went to plan it wouldn't even last the next hour, and after that it wasn't his problem anymore. But it was still *his* sword, and he didn't like cosmetic things like this marring its surface.

It was a necessary evil, though. Story of his life...

With a sigh, he lowered the sword and leaned back against the rock he was sitting against. The lush vista of Angel Island was the sight that greeted him, though he paid all the greenery and distant mountains no mind as he slung his free arm over his bent knee. Behind the rock he was sitting against was the open ceiling that lead into the chamber where the Master Emerald rested on its altar. According to his list Knuckles was due to show up here alone for some reason, so it was just a matter of waiting.

For some reason Finitevus wanted to tag along, too, which is why Rubrum saw the white-furred echidna sitting next to him under the cover of the rock when he looked to his left. Rubrum could only guess why he chose to do this, to oversee this personally, maybe, but whatever the case it made Rubrum's life easier so he paid it little

mind. The Mobian seemed really excited, a grin stretched to each corner of his mouth and his hands rubbing together in a diabolical manner. Rubrum would have scoffed at the sight, but he held out in lieu of being polite. He would have preferred not to say anything at all and just wait for Knuckles, but then Finitevus decided to speak.

"I'm admittedly beginning to grow restless. The anticipation... it's palpable." He'd actually licked his lips after finishing that sentence, earning an odd, unseen look from Rubrum. "Are you sure this is the most efficient means of going about this?"

"Wanna catch Knuckles alone with this. Would rather not have his father or the Chaotix see me. Or that ant," Rubrum answered. "And anyways, he only has so many haunts on this island. Just be patient."

"Hmph. I suppose so." A sigh left Finitevus, and he began to restlessly drum his bandaged fingers along the ground. "You're certainly putting a lot of stock into this Sorun boy."

"I guess so, yeah."

"I still don't believe a single word of that story you told me back at the lab, but humor me, if only to pass the time," Finitevus requested. When Rubrum silently nodded, he continued. "You claim you're doing this with the intent to have Sorun fight Enerjak using the power of all seven Chaos Emeralds. I severely doubt even with all seven he'd stand a chance against a god."

"I already said my intent's just to get Sorun to the future alternate timeline. Everything else's secondary." There was a short pause. "But I wouldn't count Sorun out if I were you."

"Right, of course." Looking entirely unconvinced, Finitevus rolled his head to the side to look at Rubrum. "You realize I won't be sparing you in the coming purge."

A bitter laugh left Rubrum. "After all I've done to help you? I'm hurt." He glanced up at the sky. "But, eh, I'm not too worried about it."

"Is that so?"

"It is, in fact, so." He held up Rebellion. "Surprised you managed to jury-rig this hex of yours so quickly."

"Considering you and the Master Emerald are doing the bulk of the work, all I needed to do was attach it to your sword," Finitevus explained, a hint of pride found in his voice. "Honestly I only needed a few minutes with it."

"And I'm sure the rest of your time was spent trying to look at Rebellion. But I bet ya didn't glean anything from it." The frustrated, momentary scowl he caught from Finitevus said enough for Rubrum. "So you didn't actually look at the hex too closely?"

Finitevus hesitated before responding. "No," he said, a bit slowly. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Mm, nothing." From the edges of his hearing Rubrum finally caught what he'd been listening for: distant footsteps, somewhere below them. Somebody had entered the chamber. Finitevus seemed to hear it, too, as his head cocked over his shoulder to look at the rock separating them from the chamber's open ceiling. "Look sharp, target's here," Rubrum said, transitioning into a crouch and standing up a bit to peek over the rock. Finitevus did the same.

Knuckles was there alright. Just standing there in the middle of the chamber, looking up the altar stairs and at the Master Emerald itself. As his back was to them Rubrum couldn't catch his expression, nor could he even glean what he was doing there to begin with. He seemed relaxd, though, from his body language.

"What's he even doing?" Rubrum whispered out.

"Who knows? Meditating, perhaps? I've long since ceased trying to understand how these backwater people think," Finitevus harshly whispered out. "What's your plan?"

"... Stab him?" Rubrum glanced to the side at Finitevus. "What do you mean, what's my plan? I'm gonna stab the motherfucker, it don't get more simple'n that."

"Then hurry up! Now, while we have the chance!"

"Pushy..." Rubrum skirted around the edge of the rock and stepped to the edge of the hole that lead into the Master Emerald's chamber. He took a slow, quiet breath, and then dropped into the room.

His feet silently impacted the ground upon landing, quietly enough that Knuckles didn't stir from the spot he stood at just ahead of Rubrum. The red-clothed human didn't make a single sound as he brought Rebellion to bear, hidden eyes intently focused on the echidna's back.

His grip tightened around the sword's handle. For just a moment he wavered, and the end of the sword's blade quavered a bit as a result. But then it went completely still after Rubrum shook his head. *"Alright, game face."*

And then, without a further thought, he sprinted ahead towards the echidna in a burst of supernatural speed, the tip of the claymore aimed out in front of him.

"AND HERE COMES THE GIANT SWORD!"

The midway point of this sentence being yelled out by Rubrum was the exact same moment the blade plunged through Knuckles' back and burst out through the red-furred Mobian's chest. Crimson blood sprayed out from both sides of the wound, while the echidna himself made a strangled, almost silent gasping sound. From the pain and shock of having a sword plunged through him or the sheer surprise, Rubrum couldn't decipher, nor could he see the echidna's reaction

due to being behind him. He did see his head tilt down towards the sword impaling him, and shakily, his arms tried to reach up to grab at the sword.

Before he could even touch the blade, though, Rubrum began moving, and also held the sword low in a reversed grip as he stomped towards the altar's steps. The blade, and the echidna impaled onto it, were dragged along the ground, with Knuckles making pained whining and grunting sounds as his arms, nearly robbed of all strength and completely limp, tried to grab at the ground. Rubrum did his best to push all the noises he was making out of his head as he stepped onto the altar stairs.

"Echidna, echidna, echidna... always so much trouble..." Rubrum muttered out. He stomped up each and every step, dragging the blade along them and causing it, and the echidna attached, to bounce along the steps. Knuckles' movements were growing weaker by the second, and a wide line of blood was trailed behind them. "I don't understand it. I don't understand how things can go so *wrong* ..."

He stopped at the top of the altar, right in front of the Master Emerald. Rubrum just barely managed to make out his own reflection on its green surface, shaking his head at the sight while gripping the sword's handle with both hands.

"Don't take it personal." He rose the sword over his head, glad that his hood blocked the sight of the bloody echidna gasping in pain and gurgling on blood struggling on his sword. Lacking anything else to say, he thrust the sword downwards at the Emerald. The blade pierced right through the green crystal, with Rubrum pushing it enough that the blade sunk entirely into the Master Emerald all the way up to Knuckles, who was pinned in place between the gem itself and the sword's rib-like crossguard. His lower half was completely immobile, and though his arms weren't in a good position to maneuver around in any significant way, they were still moving some. And he was still making that sound. That pained gasping noise that was a few octaves short of pained crying.

Breathing out harshly and gritting his teeth at the sound, Rubrum gripped the back of Knuckles' head hard enough that he felt bone fracture under his fingers. He brought the head backwards, and then rammed it forwards right into the surface of the Master Emerald. His muzzle was completely flattened, and there was a sickening *crunch!* sound as his face was shattered against the Emerald accompanying a wide splash of blood where his face impacted the gem. The whimpering cries went completely silent, and Knuckles' struggling movements were reduced to mere twitches.

Soundlessly, after a second of looking at the blood-spattered Master Emerald and the broken echidna pinned to it, Rubrum took hold of the Rebellion's handle with both hands. Red lightning began arcing along the entire blade, causing the Mobian body impaled to it to begin violently convulsing. The swirling, shapeless black hex stenciled onto the blade, buried somewhere in the Master Emerald, dissolved into a gaseous substance and moved up the blade's length. The dark cloud made it to Knuckles' body, and then began to seep in and disappear through his skin and into his body.

And then, the Master Emerald began to react. Harsh bolts of green lightning arced around the massive gem in response to the red lightning around the blade. There was a loud, white flash, the result of a golden bolt of lightning beaming out from the Emerald itself and traveling all the way up and into the sky. Electric energy was flowing into Knuckles' body, enough to envelop him in a golden aura and intense enough that Rubrum was actually able to see his skeleton through his skin. This continued for only a few moments, until Rubrum felt satisfied with what he'd done. And with that, he'd pulled the blade out of the Emerald and flicked it to the side, throwing Knuckles' body right off the sword.

The lightning ended in an instant. The continuous bolt of golden lightning disappeared, and the sparks around the Master Emerald ceased. Knuckles' body bounced down the altar's steps, and then impacted onto the ground floor the altar rested on. Rubrum, bloodied

sword in hand, turned to face his body, remaining completely silent at the sight of the still echidna at the bottom of the bloodied steps.

Soon enough there was a change. Golden bolts of lightning began to randomly shoot off from his body. His wounds, both the gaping wound in his torso and his flattened, caved-in face, began to slowly close and regenerate. His movements were becoming less twitchy and more articulated as golden pieces of armor and blue cloth slowly began to appear over his form. By that point, Rubrum had seen enough. So he'd leapt upwards, right through the top of the chamber and back onto the ledge he'd dropped down from to begin with.

His work was done. Enerjak was coming back.

"Well, it's Sorun's problem now," Rubrum thought to himself as he began walking away. He passed Finitevus along the way, choosing to stop when he heard the made chuckles of the white echidna next to him. *"Right. Him. One more detail."*

"You did it. You actually managed to do it," Finitevus said, somewhat in awe as he looked past the rock he was huddled behind. "I can feel Enerjak's energy gathering from here alone!"

Rubrum looked behind his shoulder. He saw bolts of golden lightning arcing out from the Master Emerald's chamber. The skies themselves began to darken as black storm clouds rapidly began to gather above them, blocking out the sun.

"Yep," Rubrum agreed in a bland tone, dispelling Rebellion and placing his hands in his pockets. He turned around to leave, took a single step, and then stopped again. "Oh, almost forgot to mention one thing. I modified your hex a bit."

The intense, manic jubilation that was on Finitevus' face all but instantly melted away when he heard that sentence leave Rubrum. In it's place was shocked surprise and quickly growing anger, shown by the intensely heavy scowl that grew on his features. "What?" he

hissed out, turning his head to Rubrum's back. "What did you just say?"

"I modified your hex," he repeated, turning to look at the echidna. "Before I gave it to you, I changed it."

"You did WHAT!?" he snarled out, rising to his feet. "You had no right!"

Rubrum shrugged. "Mm, sure, I mean, I guess, but..." he trailed off, voice laconic and lacking all energy as he looked to the side. "Well, what did you expect? I made it clear I wasn't doing this for you. 'S your fault for getting so excited you didn't even check the damn thing."

It wasn't his fault the scientist had been so short-sighted when a clear path to his goal was given to him on a silver platter. The fact Rubrum had been banking on that didn't even factor into it. And he didn't feel all that guilty for playing him.

"What have you done!?" Finitevus rushed forwards and grabbed Rubrum's red cloak, and then began to intensely shake him. Rubrum didn't react in the slightest. "You fool, what did you do!?"

"I separated out the part of the hex that let you control Enerjak," Rubrum explained in a simple tone, causing Finitevus to freeze completely. "He has free will now."

The black eyes Finitevus had widened dramatically, and the yellow irises shrunk down to a quarter of their size. "You've done what?" he whispered out, so in shock his hands fell away from Rubrum's clothes. "That's... you utter imbecile..." He stumbled back a bit, nearly shaking as he looked down at the ground. "He'll destroy everything. Without my guidance that mad thing will bring this whole world to ruin!" His head snapped up to Rubrum's hood, outraged and fearful. "Don't you realize there will be absolutely nothing left to rebuild in his wake if he's allowed free!?"

"Kind of the idea." The statement had been neutral, casual, even, when Rubrum said it. It had the effect of stunning Finitevus on the spot, as even he couldn't comprehend how the being in front of him was treating total world destruction so lightly. "Better go get Sorun. The Yamato is your only hope of killing that thing. Oh, speaking of which."

Before Finitevus could get another word in edgewise, Rubrum's right hand shot out of his pocket and went straight for his throat. The scientist had seen the incoming hand, just barely, but had been unable to do anything before the hand clamped around his throat. He gagged out and flailed at the hand holding him as he was lifted up off the ground, his feet unconsciously kicking away as the human held him up.

"Sorry, but I gotta take your memories of me out. Sorun literally can't do this without you, but I can't have you go and tell him there's some guy walking around with the Rebellion. A bit too early for that stunning revelation," Rubrum icily stated. "I never do this and just stay out of sight since people getting random bouts of amnesia would be hella suspicious, and I have zero practice doing this. Was always paranoid I'd give someone brain damage or something if I tried." He unpocketed his left hand, and a panicked, struggling Finitevus could only watch as red energy gathered around it. "But this one's on the list, so I'll make an exception. I'll try not to mess around with your head too much, but, uh... I'm new at this, so sorry in advance if I wipe out any childhood memories or something like that."

The overhead sounds of yellow lightning bolts striking a darkening sky was just loud enough to drown out Finitevus' subsequent screaming.

Chapter 74

Recursion Error

Episode 74- The world just got a lot emptier

The sky was wrong.

For two days it'd been like this: perpetual overcast. Heavy overcast. Dark storm clouds that completely blanketed the sky, like there was about to be some terrible, torrential downpour. But the rain never came. The sky just remained darkened by all the clouds.

It was eerie. Unnatural, even, and Sorun could tell most of the citizens in New Mobotropolis felt the same way. He oft heard whisperers about growing concerns regarding the storm clouds as he walked around the city, and in all honesty, he shared those concerns. It wasn't even snowing anymore because of the clouds, or raining for that matter, either.

Clearly something was wrong. Nobody knew what, though, but Sorun knew that the Freedom Fighters had endeavored to get down to the bottom of... whatever was happening. Whether it be some weird, new scheme from Dr. Robotnik or something else entirely.

But, that was their problem. Sorun wasn't involved in that life anymore and had his own to live, but even so, it didn't stop him from stressing about the clouds for no other reason than he kept getting eerie feelings whenever he looked up. It unnerved him, that dark sky. Like something horrible was set to happen but wasn't happening yet. A dread-filled anticipation that weighed heavy not just on him, but everybody else in town.

He almost wished something *did* happen just so that the feeling would go away.

Where he was now was, simply put, walking around the city to help clear his head and take his mind off of things. No work today; evidently Honey wasn't even immune to the dreary atmosphere that had befell the city, and for the time being the shop was closed. That left Sorun with more free time than he knew what to do with, so he'd taken to walking around to try and take his mind off things.

It wasn't working.

"If it was just some weird weather thing that happens sometimes that'd be one thing, but everyone else is freaked out, too," he muttered out to the Chao floating next to his head. "There's just... I dunno, something wrong. Can't put my finger on what, though. It's weird."

"Chao." Virgil nodded his horned head in agreement. Even Chao and some of the other animals were being affected by this strange storm that had overtaken the sky. Hell, Sorun was pretty sure he'd heard Sonic's pet dog barking and freaking out when he'd walked by his family's home at one point. He knew from Earth customs that animals reacting like that were a bad sign, which had him on edge. Even Virgil had been a bit stiff as well, looking just as guarded as Sorun felt. Eyes narrowed and shoulders hunched, so tense that he was liable to snap.

Sorun's lips thinned. He didn't like any of this. He didn't like this feeling, nor not knowing what any of this meant.

A heavy breeze blew past him, blowing back the three coattails on his blue coat as he let a low breath out. "I wonder how far it goes out," he said, looking up at the sky again. "This thing stretches out to the horizon in every direction. That must mean it's pretty big, right?"

Virgil nodded. "Chao."

"Yeah, but it can't be that big, though. Can it?" When he looked down at his pet Chao, he caught him shaking his head. "Yeah, I don't know, either," he admitted as the two continued moving forwards.

"Guess we'll just have to wait for Sonic and the rest to sort it out. Whatever *it* is."

They were sure taking their time to fix the problem, though. They'd been gone for around ten hours.

Up ahead he saw a curious sight. A small rabbit child and her own, unevolved pet Chao staring up at the sky. Even from here he could see the looks of discontent on their faces, and honestly, he couldn't blame them. It also made Sorun feel a bit bad, knowing even the children were being off put by whatever this storm was. Part of him wanted to do *something* to help, but he didn't know what to do. He was fairly certain nobody did. He could still at least try talking with her.

"Hey, Cream," Sorun softly greeted, he and Virgil stopping right behind the child. She and Cheese turned around to look at them, and while it seemed the sight of the two of them improved their mood a bit, it was a marginal shift at best. "What are you two doing?"

"Oh, hello Mr. Sorun. Hello, Virgil." Despite the polite demeanor the young Mobian held Sorun still found himself sighing a bit and darting his eyes away from her. Made him feel old whenever she put the mister part in front of his name. "We were out playing, but... well, we don't... we don't really feel like playing at the moment..."

"'Cause of the sky, right?" he guessed. When she nodded, he made another sigh and looked at her. "Yeah, it's... strange, I know. I think everybody's kind of unnerved by it."

"Is Mr. Sonic and the rest of the Freedom Fighters doing something about it?"

Sorun scratched the back of his head. "Well, from what I overheard from Nicole they picked up some really weird energy readings of some kind from Angel Island, so they went to investi..." He trailed off when he saw Cream looking a little lost, so he reiterated with,

"They... noticed something was weird so they all went to check it out. That was a while ago, though."

"Oh, I see..." Her ears lowered against her head a bit. "What does it mean that they're taking so long?"

"Probably nothing. The island moves around, well, the whole world, so they could be anywhere right now." Left unsaid was that Sorun knew how fast the Freedom Fighter Special went, and regardless of how far away the island was this wasn't something that should be taking ten hours. But then again, there was always something up with that island. It was debatable if this was even related to the darkened sky.

He ended up thinking back to Nicole. She hadn't told Sorun much about what was going on, and she seemed to be in the dark just as much as everyone else, but she'd noted that the weather phenomenon was extremely odd, and that her instruments weren't working properly in identifying it. That went a long way towards proving whatever this storm was wasn't natural, and he could tell it worried her somewhat. Worried him too, really, as it meant there was something potentially bad going on. And the fact she was worried wasn't helping his mood any.

"Mr. Sorun?" Cream's voice brought Sorun back to reality, causing him to look back down at the rabbit. "You stopped talking for a bit."

"Oh. Er, sorry. I was thinking about somebody." He began to rapidly scratch the back of his head while glancing away. "Hey, maybe you and Cheese should head on home back to your mother. Not that, uh, there's anything dangerous going on or anything," he added as to not make the child scared. "I just, uh... your mother might be worried about you two. You should go home."

Before anything else could be said, a peculiar sound interrupted the conversation: a strange, warbling sound. One that was somewhat familiar to Sorun's ears. Both he, the small Mobian, and the two Chao turned towards the source, the latter three opening their eyes

wide at what looked like a large, golden ring facing the ground hovering in the air in front of them, while Sorun had narrowed his eyes at the familiar ring.

He had half a mind to walk right up to the thing before somebody fell through it and onto the ground. And unfortunately for Sorun, it was a form he recognized. A stark-white echidna wrapped in white bandages, a black cape, and that strange golden symbol on his forehead. He was covered in scrapes and cuts and a few other small wounds on his person, and seemed to be hissing out in pain while trying and failing to stand up.

"Oh, how awful!" Cream exclaimed, holding her hands to her mouth is shock. "That man looks hurt! We need to help him!"

Sorun had the opposite thought. He wanted to stomp the echidna's head in. Cream's presence made Sorun hesitate, but he still felt his boot anxiously twist on the artificial concrete he stood on.

While Sorun mentally debated with himself if he should murder in front of a child, something happened. A great wall of white-gold light appeared without warning on the horizon. A wall so tall it breached the clouds and so wide Sorun couldn't see where it began and ended. He'd had to squint it was so blinding, and because of that and its sheer size he wasn't able to see that the wall was coming closer and closer to the city.

The wall of light closing in on them had been what had caused Finitevus' dark eyes to snap wide open. His head snapped right up, after which his head spun towards the incoming wall of light so fast it nearly twisted off his shoulders. He gasped, loudly and fearfully, and then turned his head towards the group of four staring at the wall. Specifically at Sorun.

"Get down, you fool!" Before Sorun could react to the voice he was pushed down by the very speaker. Finitevus had practically tackled Sorun to the ground and, while straddling the fallen human's form, lifted his hand up. Bolts of black lightning poured out from the center

of his palm and surrounded the two of them, trapping them in a dome made of the black energy. The two Chao and Cream looked at the two of them in shock, but before anybody could do anything the wall of light washed over the entire city.

Sorun was forced to close his eyes fully, groaning out a bit at the intensity of the light hitting him. Finitevus was in a similar state, making grunts of exertion while golden cracks appeared in the invisible spaces between the black lightning making up the dome surrounding them. In just a few seconds, however, the wall passed them through to the other side of the city, and then passed the city completely as it moved on to the rest of the land. The dome dissipated immediately after, with a seemingly exhausted Finitevus sliding right off of Sorun and falling back onto the ground. Sorun himself sat right up, panting heavily and looking around wildly until his eyes fell on the echidna's form. He almost sprung forwards right there in an attempt to try and choke the life out of him in fear of Cream's safety.

But then something halted him. A lot of somethings. There were... things, floating up and out of the city. Glowing spheres, about the size of sports balls. Glowing intensely, seemingly made of pure energy and ranging from a wide variety of colors of every shade and type. Hundreds of the things lifting up from all around the city and into the sky.

"W-what the... what is this...?" More light at the corner of his eyes drew Sorun's attention to the side. He felt his throat seize up when he saw Cream, lying face-down on the ground and completely motionless. Another glowing sphere, a tannish-brownish colored one, was floating above her body and rapidly ascending to the sky like the rest, though Sorun paid this no mind as he scrambled towards the child. "Hey, hey Cream!"

Fear and panic overtook him as he knelt by the rabbit's form. She hadn't moved a bit in response to his voice. She wasn't moving at all. His unthinking reaction had been to grab her by the shoulders to try

and flip her onto her back to try and assess her better, but he hadn't been able to do it. He'd only gotten halfway before he saw her face.

In a word, she looked horrifying. Face frozen in a gaunt expression, with her mouth lolling open due to gravity in something that looked like a silent scream. And her eyes- they were purely white, no pupils or irises in sight. Completely hollow, like she was some kind of husk. Or dead.

"What the *fuck* !?" Sorun screamed, dropping the child's face back onto the ground and jumping back in shock. His breathing began to become heavier when he looked around and saw their Chao on the ground. Both Cheese and Virgil had the same hollow expressions and white eyes Cream had. All three were completely unmoving, not even breathing.

A cough by his side made Sorun's head whip right towards the source. He saw Finitevus, kneeling on all fours while clutching a hand to his forehead. Immediately the confused, frightened emotions he was feeling were converted into blind anger, and without even thinking he'd bolted back to his feet and ran right over to the echidna, only to then kick him in the stomach.

"What have you done!?" Sorun screamed out at him. Finitevus gasped out in pain and fell onto his side from the kick, but Sorun didn't relent and kicked him again. "What the FUCK DID YOU DO!?"

By around the third kick Sorun heard a new noise: the soft thumping of something dropping to the ground. After the fourth kick to the echidna, he turned around to see what the noise came from, and then immediately froze when he saw it. Something had dropped in from the ring-shaped portal Finitevus had come through. What it was, though, Sorun didn't have the faintest clue.

It was an outline. An outline of *something* . A mass of golden threads of energy arranged into the vague shape of some androgynous, bipedal figure. Completely featureless and half-made of gaps due to being made of the aforementioned golden energy threads, like he

was watching a walking nervous system and nothing else. The one exception he saw was something in what Sorun saw as its chest: one of those energy spheres he'd seen fly into the sky before, a purple one.

"What the hell is actually going on...?" Sorun thought to himself, too stunned by the sight to form words. He wasn't able to think any further before the golden *thing* began shambling towards him, like some thoughtless drunk. It'd only gotten a few steps in before a bolt of black lightning shot past Sorun and impacted it. A distorted screeching sound came from its head that looked little more than a tangle of gold yarn, after which it was thrown back.

Rapidly blinking, Sorun turned his head to the side. He caught Finitevus standing next to him, hand outstretched towards the golden thing. Panting heavily, his eyes turned towards Sorun. "If you'd stop attacking me for a moment, I'd say I've come to help," he managed to mutter out.

"I severely fucking doubt it." Distorted, warbling sounds came from the golden tangle thing as it began to stand up. Finitevus blasted it with black lightning again, and though it went down again it didn't seem to become any less active. "Hell is that thing?"

"Talk later," Finitevus replied. "Your sword. Use it. My own powers can't affect it."

"Don't have it."

Eyes widening, Finitevus snapped his head to Sorun. "What do you mean you don't have it!?" he nearly screamed out.

"Jesus, how out of the loop are you?" As Sorun stood there watching the golden thing amble back up, a split-second decision ran through his mind. One that, had he more time to consider it, he would never have made with a rational mind. But the sight of a lifeless child near him and whatever this dangerous-looking thing was overwrote these thoughts, causing him to speak without thinking. "There's a vault

somewhere in the castle at the center of the city. There's a Chaos Emerald inside of it. I need that."

"Are you quite serious!?" Finitevus snapped. "You want me to rummage around a castle while-?"

"You have any better options!?" Sorun snapped back, clear anger and panic in his tone.

"Gch..." Gritting his teeth, Finitevus outstretched his hand. The portal-shaped ring he'd dropped in from shrunk closed, and then disappeared entirely. With that done, he'd reached into his cape and pulled out another golden ring. "I'll return with the Emerald, then. Stall it until then."

"Stall it? What do you mean stall it? I can't stall-" Sorun's words were cut off when Finitevus threw the ring in front of him. It hovered in the air and expanded into a larger portal, from which a swirling mass of green energy took up residence inside the ring's hollow. Without another word Finitevus dived right into the ring, after which it closed and disappeared behind him.

That was all the time Sorun had to take it all in before the golden thing began ambling towards him once more. The human remained rooted to the spot, conflicting thoughts and instincts flying through his system as he tried to make sense of just what was happening while perceiving the threat in front of him. His legs twitched with the desire to run away while the rest of him twitched as he tried to figure out what to do.

Alas, he'd been too slow, as before Sorun could come to a final decision the monster was upon him. So, right before it rose up a vaguely hand-looking shape to swipe at him, he did what his body naturally told him to do: he shoved it.

It... was surprisingly effective.

The golden thread monster fell down. Simple as that. Sorun had blinked down at it in bewilderment, slightly in awe that it even worked, but then it had risen up to its feet and charged at the human again. Sorun, feeling a bit more confident, reached up and grabbed the back of its head right before its outstretched arms managed to grab him. He stepped to the side while shoving it away at the same time by pushing its head away, causing it to stumble past him before falling down due to the added forwards momentum.

Unabated, the glowing monster rose up and charged Sorun again. And like before, he'd sidestepped it and shoved it away using the exact same move. It worked just the same as before.

"Christ, it's like shoving zombies away in 'Dying Light'. It just doesn't learn and you can do it forever." Indeed, that's exactly what Sorun was doing. And now that he'd calmed down somewhat due to not feeling so threatened by the thing, he realized that the threatening energy zombie was, by some margin, a bit slow. Slow and dumb enough that Sorun was able to keep it at bay by simply shoving it over and over.

He'd be laughing if it weren't for the seemingly lifeless child and Chao nearby.

After what was probably minutes of what basically amounted to Sorun bullying a magic-looking zombie, another ring-based portal opened up. Sorun turned to look at it, spotting Finitevus walking out just as the portal disappeared behind it. He saw in his right hand was sitting the blue Chaos Emerald that'd been kept away from Sorun for so long. He'd slumped his shoulders at the sight, fully expecting the echidna to proceed to do something nefarious with the object while Sorun stood by and watched.

This was mainly why Sorun was so astonished when Finitevus tossed the Emerald towards him. He was so shocked he nearly dropped the gem when his hands shot up to reflexively catch it. Barely even a second after he made contact the gem shifted into the

Yamato, with Sorun becoming instantly relaxed at feeling the familiar weight settle in his hands.

"Kill it, but *do not* harm the sphere in its center," Finitevus warned as Sorun stared down at the sheathed katana in his hands. "You'll regret it if you do."

"Um... sure..." He looked up from the sword and at the golden thread monster. It was just now stumbling back to its feet, turning to Sorun and getting ready to charge again. Blinking once, he pulled Yamato from its sheath, blue energy roiling over its edge. A blue line appeared on the monster's waist after he swung, fading away after a moment to reveal a clean cut rending the monster completely in half.

There was a scream from it. A loud, modulating scream that sounded less like a person and more like a computer dying. Sorun winced at the sound, watching as the entire thing exploded in a small shower of gold light. What was left in the aftermath was the purple, spherical object which proceeded to float up into the air, just like all the other ones had done.

"..." Sorun watched the sphere travel up into the sky, and looked down at Finitevus, who'd watched along with Sorun. "You wanna tell me what that was?" he asked.

"Namely put, a soul," Finitevus lamely provided. "Specifically I believe that one belonged to the chameleon companion Knuckles carried around with him."

"You mean Espio? What? *What* ?" Shocked, Sorun looked back up at the sphere. It'd traveled so far up that it was already almost out of sight. "That was his soul!?"

"I'm not entirely certain, but given the evidence it's a reasonable enough presump-" The echidna was cut off when the tip of the Yamato was pointed at his throat. "Perhaps now would not be the best time for scientific conjuncture," he said, raising his hands up.

"You don't say." The reply from Sorun was dry and hollow. The raw panic he'd felt from earlier was beginning to settle and be replaced by cold anger on top of all the confusion he felt, and it was only his desire for answers that stopped him from impaling the echidna right there. "If you don't start talking right now you're going up there with him."

"I really don't think threats are the way to go about th-"

"There is a dead child five fucking feet away from us." The sword was pressed deep enough to Finitevus' throat that a drop of blood began to roll down his throat. Sorun's own facial features became extremely strained as the hand gripping his sword began to shake. "If you make one more goddamn joke or scientific observation in the face of that then I don't care what you have to say, you die regardless."

Finitevus' features flattened, but even so his eyes became wary. "She isn't dead. At least not all the way."

Sorun exhaled loudly through his nose. He examined the echidna's face for a few moment and, not detecting any hint of a lie, lowered the sword by a centimeter. "Speak."

"I would if you would quit threatening me and demanding I explain everything."

"Sorun!"

Had that panicked voice come a second later, Sorun didn't know if he would have actually plunged his sword into Finitevus' throat right there or not. He certainly felt like he would have, but hearing Nicole's voice made him drop the sword away from and *nearly* forget about the echidna as he turned to the side. She'd appeared right besides them, looking more distressed than Sorun had ever seen her before. Even seeing her in the aftermath of the Knothole bombing paled in comparison to the frightened, mortified look on her face.

"Uh..." Sorun's arms dropped limply at his sides, with the Yamato's tip scraping against the ground. He didn't know what he was supposed to say to her here, with a... he didn't even know what to call it, a huskified child and a pair of Chao near him with Sorun himself having pointing a sword at an evil echidna. "Nicole, I don't know- I-" He looked at Cream's body. "I don't know, she-"

"Sorun, it's everyone."

He felt his mouth go dry, and then turned to face Nicole again. She looked so distressed she couldn't even meet his gaze, though what he could see looked almost grief-stricken. Particularly her eyes, wide and horrified. "W-what?" Sorun stammered out, hardly believing what he just heard.

"The entire city," she quietly clarified. "Everyone- everybody just became lifeless like that in an instant, and I can't figure out... Sorun, what is *happening* ?"

She looked at him with a sad expression he'd seldom ever seen on Nicole's face, one that was silently pleading for help, but Sorun didn't have the words. He hadn't even known the *entire city* was in the same state Cream and the two Chao were seemingly in, and now he was reeling from the information. Too much at once and too many implications behind it that made Sorun sick and stumble on his feet. He almost collapsed right there and then from the news.

Everybody in the whole city was like the other three? Every single person except for Sorun himself, Nicole, and Finitevus? Everyone?

"I, I don't, what, I-I..."

"Perhaps," came the smooth, masculine voice from behind Sorun, causing him to whirl back around at Finitevus as he began speaking, "we should consider getting the young one somewhere to examine her proper. And then we can talk about the current situation and what to do about it."

While Sorun was stuck staring dumbly at the echidna, hand tightly gripping the handle of his sword, Nicole, after some visible hesitation, made a small nod. "I'll... I'll take Cream to the hospital," she offered, stepping over to the rabbit's body and bending down to pick her up. "I'm familiar with all the equipment there, so I'll examine her."

Sorun shot her a surprised look. "You're familiar with hospital equipment?"

Having scooped up the child's body in her arms, Nicole stood back up only to give Sorun a flat expression. "Sorun, I *made* all the hospital equipment."

"Oh, right..." Despite everything, Sorun managed a small, embarrassed grin that was microscopic in size. So small it was imperceptible. But it was a tiny moment of levity in a quickly-worsening situation that he was extremely grateful for. "Yeah, go. We'll catch up."

Nicole nodded, and without another word she and the rabbit she was carrying disappeared via teleport. Sorun stared after the spot they'd left in, and then immediately faced back towards Finitevus, who seemed neutral towards the whole exchange. The invisible grin was replaced by an intense frown as Sorun stared at the echidna, who met his gaze with an unflinching look. After a few seconds, Sorun nodded his head in the direction of the hospital.

"Alright, come on. Let's go," he said, turning around to leave.

"Glady." Finitevus fell in behind Sorun and began walking in the same direction as him. "You know, it was hard to notice past all your stuttering, but I can't help but point out that you weren't nearly as vulgar with the construct as you are with me."

"I don't swear around people I like," Sorun said.

"Oh? And after all I've done to help, I don't warrant even an inkling of trust? Is that what you mean to say?"

Sorun inhaled deeply, hands shaking as he resisted the urge to stab Finitevus with his katana. It was an urge he just barely managed to reign in. "Talking like a shifty motherfucker the way you do ain't really helpin' your case," he said, willing himself to place the sword in the scabbard he carried in his left hand. "And trust and liking are two entirely separate things. Figured someone with your supposed oh-mighty intellect would know that already."

"I never boast of my intelligence over oth-" When Sorun's head turned around to look at Finitevus, he cut himself off with a small chuckle at the incredulous stare Sorun shot him. "Fair enough, guilty as charged," he admitted. "Considering you tried to kill me in the past I would say I'm extending a generous amount of trust to you."

"That'd be way more noble of you if you didn't try killing me, too. And talked about dissecting me. And used a crazy god to possess my friend in a poor attempt at taking over the world."

"You shot swords at me mid-sentence."

An action Sorun still didn't regret trying. "... Mf, touché." He turned back forwards. "How about we go to the hospital to discuss what's going on and go from there. That work for you, Fin?"

There was a disgruntled sigh from behind him. "I'd be more satisfied if you used my name correctly."

"Maybe I will if I start actually respecting you." And if Sorun remembered how to actually say his name properly, which he didn't, but seeing as he doubted they'd ever come to any kind of amicable relationship he doubted there was a need to stress about that.

Frankly speaking, Sorun didn't trust him at all, period. But he seemed to be the only person that knew what was happening, and, asides from Nicole, was the only person around at all. So he'd keep

him at sword's length for now, hear his words, decide how much of them to believe and go from there. Worst case Nicole would be nearby in case something happened, and between her near-omniscience and near-omnipotence while in the city and his Yamato he doubted Finitevus posed too much of a threat.

Problems for later, though. Right now he had to figure out what seemed to suck the life out of the whole city.

They'd situated themselves in one of the upper levels of the hospital. At the end of a narrow hallway, sitting in chairs facing each other with a windowed wall at Sorun's left side. He'd looked through it periodically to look out into the town, wincing at all the bodies he saw in the streets. Bodies that, if he didn't know any better, were all dead. Hell, maybe they were dead. He didn't know precisely what the deal was yet with any of this.

And then he'd look away from the window and ahead at Finitevus. He'd availed himself to some of the medical supplies the hospital had to patch up the wounds he'd suffered, but beyond that Sorun had an opportunity to get a good look at the guy's face. He looked... tired wasn't the right word. Defeated, maybe. He tried acting it off but there was a noticeable lack of energy in some of his movements that Sorun caught. Not hard to recognize when he'd been the same way himself more times than he cared to mention.

Through it all, though, Finitevus had given Sorun the rundown on what was happening. And with every sentence that passed he found it harder and harder keeping the sword he carried sheathed.

"Hahhh... Alright. Lemme get this straight." Sorun had began rubbing at his forehead in an unsuccessful attempt at relieving his stress while the white echidna watched on. "Your dumb ass tried bringing back Enerjak. Again. But you screwed up and now he's loose without your control."

"It was hardly my fault," the scientist denied, crossing his arms and turning his nose up. "I'd... enlisted the help of someone. A... a man. A man that dressed in red. He helped me usher Enerjak back into the world through the Guardian." An intense scowl marred his face as his head lowered. "But he betrayed me. Tampered with the hex I used, made it so I couldn't exert control over Enerjak. Now he's free to run wild and do as he pleases using his omnipotent abilities and I'm powerless to stop it."

"A man in red..." Sorun mumbled out. *"Just like the one Shadow talked about. The one that hurt Rouge and somehow knew about my condition. The same one?"* It had to be. There couldn't be that many mysterious, enigmatic people that dressed up in red. Even on Mobius. "What was his name?" Sorun asked. "What did he look like? Did you at least catch his species?"

"I... don't remember."

Disbelief immediately flashed over Sorun's face. "You don't remember?" he echoed. "What kind of shit scientist are you that you don't remember important details like that?"

Finitevus grit his teeth at that remark, seemingly incensed by the human's words. "He took my memories," he hissed out. "Of him. Specifically of him. I don't know why, but there were... there were certain details he didn't want... why didn't he want...?" He sighed out and rose a hand up to his forehead, while Sorun had calmed down at the sight. "I only remember he helped me with the hex and then tampered with it behind my back. He took enough memories so that I remember he was there and what he did, but a majority of the words we shared and the details escape me. I can't even recall *how* he tampered with my hex. It shouldn't have been possible."

"Why would he do that...?" Sorun wondered, mostly to himself. If he had that ability, why not use it on Rouge? Why go through so much effort to keep his existence hidden if he allowed the knowledge he existed to be out? Were there limits to the ability? Or was it intentional? Who even was he?

"Someone who wants to wreck the world, probably. Except... according to Rouge, he gave us that last Emerald. Did he just want to kill me? But if he had it why wait so late to give it to me? Is there some other angle here? Something I'm not seeing? How'd he even know about me to begin with...?" Sorun sighed and rubbed at his eyes. *"I don't know. Does it even matter? We have more important things to worry about."*

Mysterious man in red could wait. Mad golden god was the current problem. One Sorun had severe fears and doubts over given their last encounter.

"Fine, so... red guy double-crosses you, and Enerjak is back but not under your control," Sorun summarized. "What happened then?"

"I fled. Clearly," Finitevus scoffed out. "I highly doubted Enerjak would have taken kindly to my attempts to control him in the past. I wanted to take measures in eliminating him due to the threat he poses against the world," he explained. "I was aware his father had a weapon capable of defeating him at the cost of the host's life. I sought him out for aid, but... it seemed the weapon had been sabotaged. The red man's interference, perhaps. It was a moot point anyways, as Enerjak... caught up with his host's father and small companion, as it were, along with the Chaotix team." He made an unsettled hum. "It wasn't a long fight. I can't even say it was a fight. He'd... simply used his power to extract those glowing spheres from their bodies, and they lifelessly fell to the ground right after."

"You... said those were souls," Sorun slowly said, causing Finitevus to nod. "What the hell, he can just do that?"

"He's quite literally omnipotent. You've seen his feats in the past," the scientist reminded him, causing Sorun to nod. "The fact he has free access to the Master Emerald, thereby an unlimited source of energy, doesn't help matters. Chaos energy, after all, is-"

"Energy shaped by the heart, yadda yadda, heard the speech," Sorun muttered. "So the sky's all him?"

"Whether it's a natural effect of all the Chaos energy he's passively emitting into the atmosphere or his will is unclear to me, but yes," Finitevus confirmed. "Many interested parties came to Angel Island to intercept the energy his mere existence is exuding, all with predictable outcomes. That black-and-red hybrid hedgehog I've heard about and his Overlander military consorts, scouts from Dr. Robotnik in the form of the Dark Legion members that foolishly joined him, even your own Freedom Fighters... as you can imagine, they all swiftly met the same fate as the Chaotix. Not a one managed to evade him."

Sorun was silent at that. He'd figured that was the most likely outcome of what happened, but he didn't want to believe it. Didn't want to believe that all of his friends had their souls sucked out of them and they were all little more than lifeless husks now, and who knew what Enerjak did with the bodies, let alone what was going on with the souls. He felt like throwing up out of fear and worry alone for them. He ended up just slumping forwards while cradling his head in his hand.

"What the actual fuck..." he thought to himself. *"Everybody's... everyone's gone? Just like that? What am I... what's gonna happen now? Guys..."* He breathed out a shaky sigh and sat up in his seat, face gaunt and nearly as lifeless as the husks outside. Finitevus had the decency not to comment. "Fuck. Fuck, man, I... goddammit." He ran a hand over his haggard face. "Alright, so what happened with you?"

"I spent a long time using my Warp Rings just evading him as I searched for a solution. He... created those strange constructs you saw. Raw Chaos energy weaved into forms and guided by the souls he placed in them," he explained. "I gave up and came here. You saw an injured person in need of help and immediately began kicking him despite the fact he saved you from the fate that befell everyone else. The rest you know."

"Right, that..." Awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck, Sorun turned his head to the side. "Thanks, by the way," he mumbled. "For

warning me about the core. I would have went for it if you hadn't said anything, and... I figured if I used Yamato to destroy that it would have killed Espio if that soul ball really was his."

"Hh..." Finitevus dipped his eyes downwards. "I merely figured you'd be less inclined to help if I let you murder one of your friends. Don't go forgiving me yet."

"We're a long fucking way from forgiveness seeing as this is all mostly your fault," Sorun snapped, turning back to him. "Why are you even here? What do you want?"

"My control over Enerjak was what kept his... tendencies in check," Finitevus said, not flinching at the glare Sorun sent him. "You see the results of an unchained Enerjak. I can't say much towards his motives - I simply don't know - but I see the results. You may find this hard to believe, but a world of soulless husks is a far cry from the world I envisioned. The problem needs to be rectified." He pointed downwards, to Sorun's left side. " *That* is the only thing in the world that can rectify the situation."

Sorun glanced down at his left hand. He immediately understood what the echidna was referring to when he saw the Yamato, and then let out a dry chuckle. "You want my sword," he said. "You need the Yamato to deal with Enerjak."

"It has a proven history of being effective against him," Finitevus coolly replied. "Unless you know of some *other* artifact we can use to solve this problem?"

"... Not one as good as this, no," Sorun admitted. "So-"

He was interrupted when Nicole teleported into the space between the two of them. Finitevus had jumped up a bit, not expecting the sudden appearance of the lynx. Sorun hadn't outwardly reacted at all, though he did feel his heavily-beating heart become a bit more at ease at seeing her, letting him relax just the barest amount.

"I've... finished my examination of Cream, you two," she said. "Please follow me."

Wordlessly, they obeyed and stood up to follow her as she lead them down further into the hospital. They were lead into a room separated by a pane of glass. On the other side Sorun saw Cream lying on a medical bed. Still lifeless, still possessing those horrible white eyes. He felt sick just looking at her, and sicker knowing everybody else was the same way. Sally, Antoine and Bunnie, Shadow, the whole city, *everyone* . There was so much worry in him he could barely stand.

"As far as I can tell she's alive," Nicole said, bringing a smidgeon of hope into Sorun, "but there's no brain activity whatsoever. Even her vitals are... odd," she informed them. "They're not reading her as dead, but... they're not active, either. Medically it doesn't make any sense at all. It's as if she's in some form of stasis, but the fact there's zero activity whatsoever-"

"Logic often flounders about a bit in the face of Chaos energy. It's a tricky science." Both Nicole and Sorun turned to the side, where they saw Finitevus with his arms crossed leaning back against a nearby medical cabinet. "I'm familiar with this affliction. It's ancient echidna magic. Forbidden arts, mainly due to how easy it is to fumble. As I said, tricky business, by evidently for Enerjak it's mere child's play." He faced towards Cream. "In order for him to keep the souls he extracts, the body needs to be kept alive- preserved by Chaos energy. If the body dies, then the soul is released into the beyond, and not even he can do anything to stop that. So the souls are tangentially linked to the vessels despite being partially separated."

"That would explain how the body continues to live despite cessation of all metabolic processes..." Nicole said. "If that's the case, then I doubt we need to worry about the bodies, erm... expiring, if they're being kept preserved."

Finitevus nodded. "Precisely my thoughts," he agreed. "Enerjak's energy is most likely even keeping them safe from exposure as well;

even he would be hard-pressed to take care of billions of bodies. Simpler to have them remain where they are and ensure they remain intact."

"Wait, billions?" Sorun turned back to Finitevus. "You mean that wave-"

"Angel Island is nowhere even close to here. In fact, it's on the other side of the world currently," he informed them, making Sorun pale and Nicole blanch. "I have little doubt Enerjak has extracted the soul of every single living being on this entire planet. He certainly has the capability to do so. The only exceptions would be us three: Sorun and I due to me being in a position to take preventative measures to save us, and you, I imagine, due to being an artificial creation." He looked closer at Nicole, and then leaned forwards. "You truly are quite fascinating, by the way. No soul, but so lifelike. And despite being artificial, I... sense just the barest hint of Chaos energy from you. Whoever created you certainly took some creative liberties, hm...?"

"Hey, hey, how about we stay on topic?" Sorun had seen the way Nicole had reacted to the way Finitevus was almost leering at her, that slightly disturbed look that made her take a step back, and he reflexively felt his hand tighten around Yamato as a result. "So the whole world?" he asked when Finitevus looked back at him. "The whole world's like this? It's just us three?"

"Apparently," he confirmed.

"Well then..." Sorun sighed out and rubbed at his forehead again. In terms of bad news, he was barely even able to imagine the scope of what he just heard. It gave him a headache trying and he did his best to forget the information as he asked, "Are they aware? The souls, are they... do all the people even know what's going on?"

Finitevus hummed. Sorun and Nicole had both given him hopeful looks as he turned towards Cream to briefly glance over the body. "It's extremely doubtful," he said. "Considering that... 'drone' Enerjak

created could do little more than stumble about like some inebriated fool and attack in a very instinctual matter despite being driven by stolen souls, I can't see it. And I would know since I had to dodge fifty of those things up on the island." He looked back at the pair. "It might have to do with the fact that the souls and the bodies are not entirely separated. Not alive, not dead, in this in-between state purely so Enerjak can do with the souls as he pleases. I imagine from their perspective it's much like being asleep. Personality quirks and habits of the such that have been imprinted in their very being over a lifetime, yes, but those are mere echoes in the souls. For all intents and purposes it appears the actual *people* are not with us."

"Alright, great, don't have to worry about a whole planet full of traumatized people that got their souls ripped out," Sorun thought. Small mercy, but it was something. "But we can save them, right?" he pressed. "If we got all the souls back from Enerjak and just put them back in the bodies? That fixes it, doesn't it?"

"In theory, I suppose."

Once he heard that, Sorun whirled right around and began to briskly walk out of the examination room. His right hand began reaching for the katana's handle as his eyes narrowed forwards, though he'd only made it a few steps into the hallway before a voice stopped him.

"And where do you think you're going, hmm?" Finitevus drawled out, sounding almost bored.

"To get everyone's souls back. Where else?" Sorun answered, refusing to turn around.

He heard a scoff behind him. "You'll lose," the echidna replied in a flat voice. "I don't care how strong that sword is. That alone is not enough."

"I only need one hit," Sorun argued, sounding frustrated. His left grip on the sword began to grow so tight his knuckles turned white and

his teeth began to grind together. "I just need one hit with Yamato to separate Knuckles and Enerjak, and then-"

"And you really think you'll get that hit?" Finitevus countered. "You've fought him before. He knows exactly what you and that sword can do. He's a god with omnipotent abilities that can wipe you away with a mere glance, so if you truly think you're going to be able to march right on up to Angel Island and get a clean win with nothing but that gimmicky sword-"

"Well, what else am I supposed to do!?" Sorun shouted out, turning right back around towards the room. Nicole, who'd mainly been standing off to the side and kept quiet, flinched back at Sorun's raised voice and retreated to the nearby wall, while Finitevus remained undeterred even as Sorun stomped back into the room. "We're the only three people left in the world! You're not gonna do anything, she can't do anything-" he nodded to Nicole, "- since she's constrained to the city, I'm the one with the magic sword so I'm going!"

"... So your plan?" Finitevus asked. "I trust with such enthusiasm you *do* have one, yes?"

The amount of pressure being exerted from Sorun biting down on his own teeth was enough that they threatened to crack. His knuckles began popping from how hardly he was squeezing the sword. There was physical pain in both his mouth and hand from this, but despite that Sorun wasn't able to stop due to the sheer amount of rage and grief he felt over knowing the *whole world* was just like the seemingly lifeless rabbit child he was looking at. He couldn't bear it. It was too much, and he wanted to fix it. Fix everyone and make sure Enerjak could never do something like this again.

He wanted so badly just to get everyone back, but deep inside he knew Finitevus was right. He couldn't fight a god with *just* Yamato. The katana was needed, but on its own it wasn't enough. As much as he hated the thought, he knew the echidna was right. He'd die within a second if he tried fighting Enerjak as-is. But there was such

an intense *need* Sorun felt to fix this and bring everybody back that he was so tempted to ignore the danger and go fight him regardless.

"I... I don't want to lose another world..."

"Sorun..." Nicole's voice managed to bring Sorun back down to earth. He'd automatically relaxed his grip on the sword upon hearing her and instantly turned towards the lynx, who was giving him a concerned look. "I... I think it would be best if we stepped back and took some time to examine the situation properly."

"N-Nicole, come on, you can't be serious..."

"I know it sounds cruel, but technically speaking there's no real danger of us taking our time with this," she explained in a calm voice. "I know you want to save everyone. I do, too. But running off without even so much as a plan isn't going to help anybody."

"Spoken like a true machine." This remark had earned Finitevus glares from both Sorun and Nicole. He ignored them both and idly glanced out the one window in the examination room. "In other news, we've other issues at the moment. Case in point..."

He nodded his head towards the window. Sorun, who by now had managed to almost fully relax his grip and jaw, stepped out towards the window to see what the echidna was referring to. He understood immediately when he looked outside: there were more of those golden, thread-like beings with the souls in their centers stalking around the city. Sorun managed to count dozens of the things from a cursory glance alone. They weren't going directly towards the hospital, fortunately enough. It looked more like they were just stumbling around randomly, as if they were looking for something.

"More of those drones. Sent here looking for me most likely," Finitevus said. "I'd advise against attacking them. It'll just draw more attention here and risk the souls inhabiting them, or worse, Enerjak himself. Better to evade them entirely and let them think the city's empty to buy us some breathing room."

The hand slowly moving towards Yamato's handle relaxed and fell back to Sorun's side. He'd been meaning to go out there and cut them all down, but Finitevus' logic managed to convince him and stay his hand. He still didn't like the idea of hiding out in a hospital, though. Too macabre, and the other huskified bodies lying around the building didn't make him feel easier. He'd had to step over Dr. Quack's body and a dozen patients just to get to this floor.

"I can take us somewhere safer." As if she were reading his mind, Nicole had spoken up and said something that gained the attention of the other two. "I had figured it wouldn't be safe for any of us to be out in the open, so I've been instructing the city's nanites to construct a new structure in the meantime. It just now finished construction," she informed them.

"Nan... what now?" Finitevus blinked and looked over to Sorun for help. "Do you know what she's talking about?"

"Yeah."

"... Are you going to illuminate to me what that is?"

"You're a smart guy. You can figure it out on your own."

"You two, please," Nicole sighed out in a pleading voice. "I made a shelter underground that should be safe for us to inhabit for the time being. I even went through the trouble of relocating myself to a backup server there, just in case. We should be fine to transport there now." She gave them both pointed looks. "So once again I would ask that you *please* stop bickering when we all need to cooperate with one another."

Sorun and Finitevus glanced at each other. Both scoffed and turned their eyes away from the other, with Finitevus muttering, "It truly is the end of days when a machine is the one speaking the most sense."

"We're gonna get along great, Finton, I can just tell."

"..." The echidna's dark eyes darted towards Sorun. He grit his teeth and growled a bit under his breath, and then looked back at Nicole. "Just take us to this bunker already."

Without another word, the three of them were engulfed in a flash of green light. The disorientation of the light combined with the momentary feeling of weightlessness had only affected Sorun for less than a second before he immediately felt he was in a different place once the light faded and his feet was back on the ground. Darker lighting, slightly colder, the lack of the clean disinfectant smell of the hospital.

When he looked around, he saw that Finitevus hadn't been too far off when he called this place a bunker. A rather spacious one with low lighting: a central room empty save for some chairs and a few pieces of furniture. A small kitchen off the ways. A room a bit further in that was empty except for a large, circular device in the ground that had a glowing green, grid-like pattern on top of it. A few more doors here and there that obviously went to various rooms.

As far as impromptu bunkers went it was an extremely impressive one, but by now Sorun stopped being fazed by the things Nicole could do with the nanites. What was a single bunker when she'd constructed the entire city in under a half an hour once she'd gotten the plans together, really?

"So this is to be our little base of operations, hm?" Finitevus mused. He hummed and took a quick glance around, and though he tried to hide it Sorun saw there was a small glint of surprise in his eyes. "It's... admittedly well above adequate. Yes, I think this will do us very nicely."

Any other time Sorun would have imagined Nicole would have put on a bashful smile mixed with a bit of pride. He was saddened to see there wasn't even a hint of joy on her face. A given, considering everything happening, but to see her look so dour only went to sour his own mood even further.

"It wasn't much effort on my part," she blankly replied. "We should be able to monitor the situation above from here. And, hopefully, figure out what to do."

Sorun breathed heavily through his nose. It was a start in a hopeless situation, he supposed. "So," he said, turning around to the two, "where do we start first?"

Chapter 75

Recursion Error

Episode 75- Suicide speedrun

It had been a few days into what Sorun had called, lacking any better way of labeling the situation, the Soul Apocalypse. A really dumb name he hoped to never verbally utter.

All that time had been consolidated in the underground shelter Nicole had built. Those golden thread things, the drones as Finitevus called them, stopped appearing in the city after the first day, likely having moved on, but the three of them had all elected to stay in the shelter regardless for safety's sake. Safety or not, though, the experience of living here was hell.

He hadn't been able to sleep much. Almost not at all. Between the knowledge of what was happening and his intense worry for everybody, how could he? It was the only thing he could think of. He couldn't get Cream's lifeless, ghoulish expression out of his mind and he couldn't help putting that same expression on all his friends knowing they were all the same way, and all it did was make Sorun feel worse. Helpless. Weak. Powerless.

The other two inhabitants with him weren't helping matters much. They'd all come together to fill each other in on details to try and pool all their information together and come up with an answer for fixing this, but the longer this went on the more Sorun thought it was all for naught. Nearly every single day he heard Nicole and Finitevus arguing about something or other; they were spitballing possible solutions and they couldn't agree on anything. Or come up with anything viable.

He could still here them arguing all the way from here. In that room with the weird green dias thing, some thing used for monitoring the city, Sorun couldn't retain the information when Nicole briefly explained what it was. And meanwhile all he could do was sit down in a chair in the next room while blankly staring down at the floor.

"Why did it turn out like this? I thought things would finally be different. I'd be done with the fighting. With the worrying. I just wanted to live in peace again." He slumped so far in the chair Sorun's body threatened to tumble right out of it. *"I just wanted a peaceful life for me and everyone else. That's all I wanted. But something like this always happens. Why did I think things would finally be different? Just because it was all starting to finally work out for me?*

"Why did I bother coming back to life when it was only going to go this way...?"

The nearby shouting ceased. He saw Finitevus stomp out of the room in a huff, leaving Nicole alone in there to continue monitoring an empty city. He stopped in front of Sorun, and when he glanced up at his face he saw he was looking about as bad as Sorun felt. Impressive, really, considering the last time Sorun felt this bad he was on the verge of dying.

"I'm going to the lab if you want to assist me further in my studies." That was all the albino echidna offered him before turning around and walking towards a nearby door. He'd opened the door and walked through it, not even bothering to close the door behind him. Sorun stared after the door for a bit, and then looked over at Nicole, still focusing on the green dias. He wanted to talk with her, but quite honestly he didn't have anything to say to her and didn't want to disturb her. So Sorun sighed, left the chair, and then walked over towards the door Finitevus had entered.

In what anybody else would see as a very questionable choice Sorun decided to let Finitevus run some experiments on him.

The Mobian had seemed surprised that Sorun even agreed to it when he'd brought it up. Nicole had been vehemently against it - she'd built Finitevus a small lab to help them fix the problem afflicting the world, not prod at Sorun - but, either not to incur her anger any further or maybe just to give Sorun a break since he was consensually agreeing to be experimented on, he promised to only perform non-invasive examinations and do some bloodwork. And, in fairness to him, he hadn't broken that promise. It creeped Sorun out how giddy he was over having the opportunity to examine him like a lab rat, but he kept his word and maintained the boundaries. A point to his integrity, Sorun supposed. Surprisingly there was some in there.

Sorun himself wasn't so sure why he'd agreed to let Finitevus run his experiments. He hadn't thought on it at all and just automatically agreed to it. Maybe to have something to do to pass the time and take his mind off things, because it wasn't like Sorun had anything better to do than think, or maybe he was curious about what the echidna would find regarding his unique biology by this world's standards. He didn't know. He just said yes. He knew Nicole wasn't at all comfortable with it, and he was all but certain she had a camera in that room somewhere monitoring them just in case, but since Finitevus kept to his word she didn't do anything to stop it. Then again, maybe he only kept his word because he knew there was no of getting out of it if he was caught lying. Not like he could afford to lose his only allies in the world.

Sorun didn't know. Sorun didn't care. He didn't care about much at the moment.

The echidna himself mystified Sorun to no end. He'd hated him at first- genuinely hated him. Hated him for everything he'd done and being responsible for Enerjak. Fantasized about sticking Yamato in his throat while he slept at night, almost did at one point. But spending some days in close proximity to Finitevus gave Sorun some perspective. They were in the same boat, essentially. And he had his own reasons, sure, but in a way he was trying to fix this

terrible mistake he made. For better or worse the three of them were in this together whether they liked it or not, so Sorun tried looking past everything he disliked about Finitevus - admittedly a long list - and tried looking at the man himself.

He was... charming, in some way. Oddly very respectful and polite despite having a history of being a lying snake and a maniac. Sorun had noticed he'd become much more amicable towards the human when he volunteered to testing, so maybe that'd went towards getting on his good side. But they'd spent some time alone together, in silence mostly with some small talk here and there, but through all that Sorun came to the startling realization that Finitevus was actually pleasant to be around. Considering who he was it seemed bizarre, but in a strange turn Sorun found he didn't all that much mind the echidna's company.

That's what confused him so much. How somebody so tolerable could do so many terrible things. Why had he facilitated Albion's destruction? What was his fixation on Enerjak? Why did he desire world destruction so much? Now that Sorun had gotten to know him somewhat he couldn't see any of these qualities in him. So he couldn't figure out what would drive Finitevus to these lengths.

There had to be some good in there, somewhere. There couldn't *not* be. He only showed shreds of remorse for what he'd done, but shreds or not it was still remorse. Even if Finitevus tried hiding it.

"Why are you so fascinated with me, doctor?" This was the first question Sorun decided to ask to start his line of questioning. He was sitting on an examination table while Finitevus was sitting nearby in front of a microscope, looking at more of Sorun's blood. There must have been something interesting in his blood, because it almost seemed like he couldn't tear himself away from it.

With his back to him, Finitevus said, "You're interesting. The entire concept of your zone is interesting." He lifted his eyes away from the microscope and turned to Sorun. "You shouldn't exist. That whole zone shouldn't. And yet, somehow, it does. Chaos energy is the

source of all life, of *everything* . Not just living creatures, but materials as well. Matter itself, energy, it all leads back to Chaos energy." He pointed at Sorun. "But you have none. No link, no inherent Chaos energy stores of your own. The fact you're able to manipulate the energies with such finesse is more a side-effect of this phenomenon than anything else, though I've yet to crack exactly *why* this is." He turned back to the microscope. "But, as you know, this comes at the caveat that your species' biology never adapted to Chaos energy due to your lack of exposure."

"Then I die, been there," Sorun muttered. Not really any grand revelations in that statement; he'd know this already. "No theories on why my zone exists? I've heard it isn't even connected to the... what did Tails call it, the-the something highway? I still don't know what that is." He shook his head. "He said it's not even connected to that. That it's... really far away from the rest of the multiverse."

"I'm not so surprised. You'd *have* to be separated from the rest of the multiverse to escape the Chaos Force's influence, but I still don't know how your zone came to be. The formations of zones in general is unknown, so it's anybody's guess. A far-flung piece of debris made at the beginning of creation that developed into its own universe, perhaps. An accident. With so little evidence all I could offer is conjecture." He fiddled with a knob on the microscope. "Your biology is rather unique, as well. I've seldom had a chance to examine Overlanders and the Station Square humans, but you're nothing like them."

"Really?" Sorun drawled out. "Wouldn't have figured. The Overlanders 'cause of the gene bomb's tampering, I could guess, but the Station Square guys? I figured it was because we were separated by thousands of years of evolution. And the fact I'm from another universe."

"Contributing factors, yes. That and they're all inbred."

Sorun paused. "Inbred?" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

Finitevus sighed. "Generally speaking you need a population size of around five-hundred subjects to maintain a diverse enough gene pool to maintain a species in perpetuity. That city was made when a human airship crashed into a mountain and the passengers decided to expand a city inside of said mountain using the plane's technology. How many humans do you think were in that plane at the time?" A dawning expression crossed Sorun's expression, while Finitevus continued looking in the microscope. "I'd wager there were two-hundred and fifty humans at the least to four-hundred at most," he continued. "Just enough that they've eked it out this far, but on a genetic level they're all damaged to varying degrees. Mingling with the Overlanders may fix that in time, but I'm not a geneticist. I don't know for sure."

"Figures. They did look... slightly off when I saw them," Sorun quietly admitted. "Thought it was just the evolution thing, but... man." He looked to the side. "I dunno, back then I figured I could connect to people of my own kind, but I never felt anything with the Station Square people. I felt even less with the Overlanders. The gene bombs made them evolve weirdly." He made a soured face. "The weird anime hair some of them had was one thing, but some of them only had four fingers."

"Devolution."

"Hm?" Making a curious sound, Sorun leaned a bit forwards on the table towards Finitevus. "What do you mean?"

"The gene bombs were meant to render all organic life on this planet down to their base components. This was true for everything except the lucky humans that escaped that fate but were still exposed to its effects. Because the Xorda's technology utilized Chaos energy life survived and gave birth to Mobians, but the fact remains those bombs aren't meant to evolve life. They devolve life." He made a scoff. "The genetic mutations and degradation that gave birth to Overlanders is arguably worse than the inbreeding of the Station Square inhabitants."

"A devolution of the human species, huh...?" Well, it was new information. Knowing they were what humans would look like if they evolved backwards made Sorun feel a bit of sympathy and sadness towards them. Maybe even a bit sideways given the mutations caused from the bombs. It just sounded unfortunate to him. "Is that why they always kept fighting Mobians?" he asked. "I haven't really interacted with many."

"Hard to say. They're certainly more aggressive than normal humans, at least from a purely statistical view. I've heard Station Square has been quite accommodating of Mobian culture, whereas relations between Mobians and Overlanders are still significantly strained. On the other hand, the mutations were certainly beneficial: from an objective standpoint my observations have proven Overlanders have a superior physical ability to humans, and rarer subjects greater intelligence. You only need to look at Dr. Robotnik for that. But there's many things that are affected by their damaged DNA and the mutations. Some benign, like the diverse hair pigmentations normal humans lack and their number of digits, more inhibiting factors like metabolism or height, things of that nature."

"Yeah, Snively always was pretty short. Shorter than me, even, which was... kinda weird, really," Sorun admitted. And empowering, in a way.

Finitevus hummed. "That's nothing to say of how they were mentally affected." He paused. "I'm not quite sure if it's a result of the gene bombs' meddling or just a natural progression of culture. Take Mobians. You've lived among them for some time. They're... *caring* ." The echidna clenched his teeth and shook his head. "Nonviolent, generous, overly protective. Not incapable of violence, as you've clearly seen, but it's just not in their nature. Adaptability and survival instincts are the only reason violence even exists in the world of Mobians and how they managed to survive wars with the Overlanders." He turned a knob on the microscope again. "But with Overlanders, it's almost the complete opposite. Like the genetic tampering the gene bombs afflicted on them heightened the worst in

humanity. Aggression and a desire for conflict. I haven't seen much, if any, pieces of human history in my travels, so perhaps you could enlighten me seeing as you're the only 'pure' human in this world? You're more an expert on human nature than I am, after all."

Sorun bit his lower lip in response. He turned away from the echidna, thinking long and hard about his words before he spoke. "Humanity's a mixed bag full of the best and worst. In my world we did amazing things, and we also did... well, unspeakable things," he said. "There are things in human history I've refrained from ever mentioning to everybody here because those concepts and ideas simply don't *exist* in this world. Or if they did the gene bombs wiped them out. I don't want to seed any ideas to anyone so I keep it all to myself. I know things that would probably give a Mobian a nervous breakdown by simply speaking it."

He'd be hard-pressed to be so knowledgeable of so many forms of fiction and media without having seen the worst in humanity. Or human history, for that matter. He'd be damned if he ever mentioned even a fraction of 'Berserk' to anybody here, art that it was besides. Real-world examples like the Holocaust, Unit 731 and third-world countries strapping explosives to children to throw at the enemy would be taken to his grave if he could help it. Countless horrible example he knew about just from sitting in a history classroom or browsing the internet.

Some things were just better left unsaid. In a world where these concepts didn't exist, he didn't need to say them and risk making a reality of them. More than that he didn't want to hurt anybody by mentioning these things. And for all the bad, there was an equal if not greater amount of good in humanity he could always say to keep curious questions satiated. Enough that he never even had to think about mentioning the bad.

They didn't need to know. None of that was for Mobian ears.

"But still, I don't want to believe Overlanders are automatically bad just because of a bunch of bad mutations," Sorun said. "It... does

upset me, what happened to them. They're not humans anymore, simple as that. Nothing but offshoots. Even so you can't say a whole species is bad just because of, I don't even know, genetic mental disposition or whatever you want to call it. There's no way." He waved a hand. "Plus I've heard of good Overlanders that cooperated with Mobians. That, uh... what was his name, Nate Morgan. Yeah. I heard everyone liked him. And this one girl I heard about, Hope-something. Heard she lived in Knothole for a bit before going over to G.U.N. and everybody seemed to have a high opinion of her."

"That's a product of free will, Sorun. Sapient beings aren't so set in personality they rigidly conform to baser instincts and inclinations. Influenced, perhaps, but not forced," Finitevus argued. "You think every single Mobian is so frustratingly altruistic?"

"Considering echidna exist? Nah."

A low sigh from Finitevus. "Besides echidna," he muttered out. "History is rife with many abhorrent Mobians. I'm sure you've met a few yourself."

The image of a band of jackals, one specific one with mismatched eyes, came to Sorun's mind. "I've met a few, yeah," he admitted. "They're not all great. Most are, though."

"Most in the Republic. You've not travelled much outside of the continent," Finitevus reminded him. "But, these are all outliers. The fact is there's a noticeable pattern in Overlander and Mobian behavior. Whether it's a result of morphological changes induced by the gene bombs or simply the development of culture is a question that lacks enough concrete evidence to substantiate."

"I'm... just not so sure," Sorun hesitantly stated. He didn't like basing behavior off of raw data alone. Just sounded wrong to him. Then again... few exceptions aside, he couldn't deny most Mobians he met were so overly friendly, to an almost startling degree. And he didn't hear many good things about Overlanders. With all that he just didn't know what to think on the matter. "What about you, F? Why aren't

you a goody-goody Mobian like everyone else?" he asked in an effort of shifting the conversation.

Finitevus didn't respond at first. He simply moved away from the microscope, and then spun his chair around to face Sorun. He looked at the human for a long few moments before speaking. "I used to be normal," he said. "And then Knuckles happened."

"Oh, come on," Sorun sighed out, "what did he do?"

"I studied him. Back when the Guardian had so much power he was compared to a living Chaos Emerald. I was a scientist in Albion, you see. The ruler there commissioned many of my experiments in response to Knuckles' presence when he briefly visited. She wouldn't admit it, but she feared him. What he was capable of. His potential." Black sparks of electricity flew around his fingers. "To make a long story short, there was an accident from one of my machines. I was changed into this pale form you see before you, and my mind had... opened, as it were. I was given a new perspective and found the way of things is wrong. I sought to correct it."

"By blowing up Albion? By trying to end the world?" Sorun scoffed out, expression incredulous. "Are you serious?"

Finitevus' features thinned. "I can hardly be held accountable for what happened to m-"

"No, uh-uh, we're not going there." Actual anger flared over Sorun's features, and his posture had gone rigid. "So your experiment blew up in your face - literally - and you became this. That's not an excuse. I refuse to believe you got the white fur and black lightning powers and automatically became evil like evil is some kind of tangible substance you can just inject into somebody."

"You wouldn't know," Finitevus denied with a hint of annoyance in his voice. "You weren't afflicted like I was."

"But really, man? Even so, you went this far? You didn't have a friend or family or anything like that on Albion?"

"... I've a tainted soul, Sorun." There wasn't any emotion in Finitevus' voice when he said this. He'd said it with the same attitude as if talking about the weather, making Sorun blink in surprise. "Call it what you want. I don't regret my actions. They were my choices to make, and I made them." He turned his head to the side. "Why does it matter?"

"Just tryin' to figure you out. We don't really have much else to talk about down here," Sorun said. "You wanna believe you got corrupted by evil black energy, then sure, go for it. Blame it for your mistakes." He turned the opposite direction Finitevus turned in. "Power doesn't harm people. Tempt people, bring out the worst in them, maybe, but what it brings out is something that was always there. You got a bit of power that let you do things you couldn't do before and ran with it."

A low, breathy noise left Finitevus. His darkened eyes darted to Sorun, after which he tsked and looked back away. He'd made an expression Sorun couldn't place. "Maybe so. Maybe all those echidna on Albion who labeled me a corrupted abomination were simply looking for an easy answer to what I was. Not that I was a visionary, but just another threat that needed to be removed. Like Knuckles was." He glanced back at Sorun. "You're rather insightful for one without a soul."

"..." Sorun gave Finitevus an odd look. He'd played it off as a weird joke at first, but when he saw Finitevus giving him a genuine stare, he realized he was being serious. Confusion and denial set into Sorun, and when he thought on that statement only more confusion settled in him. "What do you mean I don't have a soul?"

Finitevus didn't say anything. Instead, he stood up out of the chair and walked to Sorun. Black energy arced over his fingers as he held his hand just over Sorun's chest, his yellow irises looking down and scrutinizing some invisible thing Sorun couldn't see. After a few

moments, the lightning ceased and he lowered his bandaged hand to his side.

"It's as I say. You've no soul," he said, looking back up at a shocked Sorun. "You're like that machine out there. Nicole. Just a machine made of meat."

"And just how do you figure that?" Sorun demanded. "How could I not have a soul? I walked around as a ghost once when I died. I had the whole out of body experience. Sounds pretty soulful to me." It didn't make any sense. Of course he had a soul. He had to if he'd been a ghost one time, right? Wasn't that how it worked?

A contemplative hum from Finitevus. "Well... saying you don't have a soul is a bit inaccurate," he amended. "You have *something* there. Some spark of life that drives you. But it's so tiny and insignificant it could hardly be called a soul." He looked down in thought, even going as far as to grab his chin. "It's honestly no surprise you don't have a Chaos Force link with such a weak thing. It couldn't possibly sustain a link. I doubt it could even survive outside your body, unlike anything else whose spirit would be kept intact through their Chaos Force link." He made another, more contemplative hum. Deeper and more drawn out. "Perhaps that's it. Your entire species must possess atrophied souls due to your lack of Chaos Force links to strengthen them. All that's left is this... small, flickering thing I see inside you."

"But that's..." Sorun's mind began whirling. Calmed down a bit knowing there was "something" in there and he wasn't completely empty, but still reeling a bit from the information. "I was still aware when I died. I was a ghost, I-!"

"Your body still possessed the Chaos Emeralds, did it not?" Finitevus interrupted, silencing Sorun. "Your spirit form even retained the abilities. Your kind can form artificial links to the Chaos Force by using an external supply of Chaos energy. It's not unreasonable to think that absorbing those seven Emeralds turned your spark of life into something resembling a true soul. A pseudo-soul in the same vein of thought as your pseudo-link. This same phenomenon is likely

what allowed you to exist as a spirit tangentially connected to your Chaos-infused body post-mortem." He made a thoughtful hum. "It's not too dissimilar to what Enerjak has done to everyone, now that I think of it."

"But I wasn't... oh. The regeneration." Something clicked inside of Sorun as he realized an important detail. "One of my abilities back then granted me a regenerative body. Even after dying it kept me intact. I heard everybody was freaking out about my body not decaying."

"The regeneration must have preserved it," Finitevus agreed with a nod. A small, amused laugh left him. "You're... rather fortunate so many unlikely circumstances all happened at once to produce this result."

"Lucky. Right." Sorun's thoughts turned back to the void he'd wound up in after dying. He'd only been able to leave that place because of the Yamato. Because he'd still had his powers then. Would he have even wound up there if he didn't have any of the Emeralds when he died? "None of this makes any sense. How could any of this be possible?"

" *Anything* is possible with Chaos energy," Finitevus said in a serious tone. "Even the AI has a spark like you do. Whether it's from her very unique construction or constant contact with Chaos energy. A third factor I'm unaware of. A combination of factors. I'm unsure. I just know she has one."

"Good for her..." He wasn't sure how to take the fact he didn't have soul like everyone else. Or that he did have a soul, just not a "soul" soul. What the distinction even was outside of him not having a Chaos Force link, or if there were any other distinctions. "You know how many religions and philosophies humans spent centuries on Earth pondering that you're shattering right now?"

Dryly chuckling, Finitevus walked to the side a bit and hopped up on the examination table to sit besides Sorun. "Me and convention were

never on friendly terms," he said. "So what will you do, now that you know?"

"I dunno. Does it even matter? Not like it changes anything." He made it this far just fine, after all. All of humanity did. "End of the day it's not much more than an interesting factoid for all it's worth."

"I'm glad you see it like that. Maybe you'll stop questioning why I make the decisions I do."

Sorun frowned a bit. "You're still on that? It was that upsetting?" He turned his head at Finitevus. "How does that even- I don't- you know what, fine."

He turned to his other side, and then looked down at the glowing object resting right next to him. He grabbed the blue Chaos Emerald, watching as it turned into the Yamato, and then smoothly drew the sword out from the sheath. He cut a cross into the air, after which a portal was opened in front of them. Finitevus didn't say a single word through the entire process, merely observing in fascination.

"Take a walk with me, Fimvim," Sorun said, sliding off the table and gesturing towards the portal.

Finitevus eyed the portal with some suspicion. "Why?" he questioned.

"Just wanna talk. That's all."

"We were talking just fine here. I don't see why we need to go somewhere else."

"Look, I've been cooped up in this bunker for days, I just wanted to get some air, alright?" Sorun snapped. "Nicole said she hasn't seen any of the drones for a while, and a few minutes outside ain't gonna kill our cover. Just come on."

"... A few minutes," he agreed with some reluctance. He hopped off the table and began walking towards the portal. "No more than that. We come back right after."

"Sure, sure." Eyes still on the echidna's back, Sorun followed Finitevus in through the portal he made. Not even a few steps in and the portal closed behind the pair, leaving the small lab they'd just left completely empty.

Close enough to the border of New Mobotropolis that the wall surrounding the city was easily within sight, a portal opened. From this portal, near a small pile of rocks in an area heavily-populated by trees, emerged an odd-colored echidna and a human in a blue coat carrying a sword, which he used to close the blue portal they'd just walked out of. The sword was slowly sheathed back into its scabbard as the black-haired human turned to look at the echida, who was giving him an inpatient stare.

"Why here of all places?" Finitevus asked him. "I would have thought you'd just take us above the bunker. Why outside the city?"

"Didn't want Nicole listening in on us."

The answer brought some surprise to Finitevus' face. "Truly?" he quietly remarked. "For what purpose?"

"We'll get there," Sorun promised him. Sword still clutched in his left hand, he leaned his back against the gathering of rocks and crossed his arms. "Before that, I need to know. I've been trying to get a read on you these past few days, and I can't figure you out. From everything I've seen you're a normal-enough guy. Maybe a bit more into the... grittier aspects of science than what's mentally healthy, but we all have our quirks." He looked straight into Finitevus' darkened eyes. "So I want to know. Why'd you do it? Why'd you bring back Enerjak? What do you have against the world so bad you want it gone?"

"I told you why. Back when we first met," Finitevus replied in a plain tone. "Do you not remember?"

Sorun looked down in thought. "You said the world was too corrupt. That it was so far gone it was better to just destroy it all and start over."

"They say the point of history is to learn from past mistakes so the future may not repeat it. Being a bit of a historian myself it's a saying I take to heart," Finitevus told him. "Do you know how many mistakes in the past have been repeated, time and time again? Even if I were to just narrow it down to my own people's history, do you realize how many examples exist?"

A loud scoff came from Sorun. "You couldn't pay me to try and understand your people's history it's so complicated."

"That's my point exactly. Generations of Guardians passing on the mantle to their children in some twisted dynasty to fight the Dark Legion and their twisted infatuation with technology and cybernetic enhancements. Conflicting ideals on how to lead the species forwards and how to treat the other Mobian races and other useless dreck. Over and over, with a history so convoluted and winding you couldn't track down where it all began and why it got so out of hand if you tried. The world's full of these examples, the humans, the Overlanders, the Mobians, everyone." Finitevus began pacing, and Sorun found himself blinking in surprise when he saw genuine frustration cross the echidna's face. "From Robotnik's coup to the Xorda irreversibly changing this world to the Ixis wizards of old to the Great War between the Mobians and Overlanders." He stopped and whipped his head harshly towards Sorun. "Do you want to know how that even began?"

Sorun shrugged. "Sure." Nobody'd ever told him, now that he thought about it. It'd be nice knowing what started a full-blown war between species.

"The first contact initiated between the two species was between the prince of the now-former Kingdom of Acorn and an Overlander boy who met by chance in a forest, many generations ago. The Overlander had a gun and the two idiots were playing around with it." Finitevus' features wrinkled in anger. "It was all fun and games until the Overlander boy tried shooting a bird Mobini, and that witless Mobian threw himself into the line of fire to save it."

"Oh, you're fucking kidding." Sorun slapped his own face in disbelief, barely repressing a loud sigh. "A race war happened because of a disregard for *gun safety* ...?"

"Not directly. More a spark than anything," Finitevus said with a sigh. "It permanently strained relationships, to be sure. Generations of mistrust and small skirmishes lead to the Great War. It was an event so impactful the kingdom had made anti-gun laws to make sure there was never a repeat of the incident. Last I heard, however, was that it was dropped in favor of the conflict with Robotnik."

"Sally was always skittish around guns for some reason..." Sorun added. *"I remember asking and she just said it was because the Overlanders used them so much. Guess that was technically the truth, but still... eh, then again, we hadn't known each other that long. Guess it kinda makes sense she wouldn't want to talk about an ancestor of hers getting blasted over something stupid like that."* Blowing air past his lips, Sorun shook his head. He felt like kicking something over what he heard, and the worst part was he completely believed it. He'd heard of kids doing things even stupider than that. Kids playing with guns wasn't even that uncommon where he was from. Even still... "That's... that's just-"

"Moronic?" Finitevus finished, causing Sorun to nod. "It is, and almost nobody cares enough to remember the reason why the two races mistrust each other so greatly. They just remember they're supposed to because of all the conflicts, or because they're different, and time has done nothing to help matters. Should I even mention the bloodthirsty Mobians who held high positions in the kingdom who executed captured Overlander scouts to initiate the Great War? So

much life was lost because some muscle-bound fool decided to kill off POWs." Finitevus shuffled over to Sorun's position and sat his back against the rock Sorun was leaning against. "The world's full of countless examples like this," he muttered. "Too many to count. Too much time between too many examples to recount. It all repeats, over and over, like a never-ending cycle that causes everyone nothing but misery and suffering." He looked ahead towards the city, and then up at the darkened sky. "I just wanted to put an end to it all. Bring it back to zero and make a fresh start without all the complexities."

"I see." Humming, Sorun looked up into the sky along with Finitevus. "You wanted to be Senator Armstrong."

"..." Finitevus blinked once. An expression of complete and utter confusion crossed his features, and after making an unsettled sound he looked down and at Sorun's face. "Excuse me? Who?"

"He was a character in a video game back home I really liked," Sorun elaborated, only furthering the echidna's confusion. "I'll tell you about him, if you like."

Looking back out to the city, Finitevus sighed, threw his hand up briefly, and looked back to Sorun. "You already have us out here. May as well."

"Alright, cool. Bear in mind this story comes from a world of fiction, but its messages for the most part are rooted in reality so don't worry about it." The human cleared his throat. "Our story takes place on the planet Earth. Home to lots and lots of countries with varying amounts of influential power. Imagine here, but all the land and territories were conquered by organized governments.

"As you can imagine, at one point all these countries had armies. Due to certain events that involved an Illuminati of rogue AIs and clones, it's not important to the story don't think too hard on it-" Finitevus made an awkward, puzzled noise while Sorun continued, "-

countries didn't have much in the way of armies anymore. They'd all been outsourced to PMCs. Private military corporations."

"I'm... not familiar with the term," Finitevus admitted. He'd bowed his head a bit to concentrate on listening to the story, though had looked to Sorun in question at hearing the term.

Sorun made a clicking sound with his tongue. "Yeah, I guess the concept of corporations doesn't really exist in this world," he realized. "They were... businesses, essentially. Massive businesses with more capital and influence than some countries. They had their employees like all other businesses, only these employees were soldiers who fought and killed. But they had normal employees, too: marketers and PR people and R&D researchers and the such. It was still a business; they had advertisements and the like, sponsorship deals, anything you'd see in a normal business. Just, you know, with murder attached. Instead of using their own armies countries would simply hire these corporations to fight their wars for them. But, well... these wars weren't exactly 'wars', per se. Both the corporations and the countries that hired them all manipulated the flow of warfare, its intensity and frequency, so all the conflict could last indefinitely. The only people that really suffered were the soldiers, their families, and villagers who had their homes blown up in all the conflicts. For everybody else, from the people behind it all to the ordinary citizens just living their lives in the countries not ravaged by war, it was all about profiting off the war economy."

"I don't understand," Finitevus said. "How could war be profitable?"

"... Well, this part takes its roots in reality in my world. From what I've seen it's not a concept that exists here," Sorun began. "A movie I watched once summarized the concept to buying bandages and bullets. Imagine everything you need to fight a war: medical supplies, food, weapons, ammunition, vehicles, spare parts, every conceivable resource you need to outfit an army. In this case, PMC. The PMCs need to buy all these 'bandages and bullets' from somewhere. So they buy them in bulk from the industrial sector of whatever country they're based in. *Those* companies profit from the war due to the

demand for the goods they supply being heightened by the war, and all those funds get funneled back into the general economy of that country. More jobs are created to meet the demand. More money's being made and spent on products and taxes. The economy grows and the country becomes stronger because the PMCs are fighting a war somewhere. And then those funds get poured right back into hiring more PMCs, which eventually generates even more money. The war economy," he explained. "On the other side of the coin is the technology. Technology develops fastest in times of war, and with all the countries in the world of this story depending on the global war economy new technology was always being developed to maintain having technological edges in the field. These same technologies get leaked to the public sector for various things, automobile industry, entertainment, medical, whatever, it's all more sources of revenue while improving quality of life. This went so far that the PMCs in this story had soldiers with full-blown cybernetic bodies, mechs, ID-locked guns, the works. They were all more advanced than any country's actual military forces."

"And people just went along with it? Joined these PMCs knowing they were fueling a war economy?"

"Well, it's not like they advertised all the fighting was nonsense, but even if they did nobody would have cared. The benefits were too great. Lost an arm or a leg and can't afford a cybernetic prosthetic? Sign up with us, we'll outfit you with cybernetic replacements way better than your meat limbs and after five years or x-amount of missions of service we'll let you keep your new limbs. Need money to move your family out of a war-torn country into a nice one not caught up in all the violence? Sign up with a PMC. There were always people desperate enough for one such thing or another, and considering PMC technology was more advanced than military technology it was actually considered safer joining up with a PMC than the army, and with more fringe benefits to boot. Not really any wonder militaries were so weakened when average people had more incentive to join PMCs since they provided what they needed in exchange for service. Patriotism falls short when you need to feed

your daughter and can't work because you only have one arm or a terminal illness cybernetics could fix. The catch... is that the war economy and all this conflict and violence creates more desperate people eager to sign up for PMCs. So they always have more bodies to commit to more war to grow the war economy." Sorun glanced at Finitevus. "Like you said, it's a cycle.

"In walks the hero of our story, Senator Steven Armstrong, who sees his great country of America weakened by its dependence of the war economy. Apparently a permanent war economy isn't the most sustainable thing- good for short term, bad long term, and because of that it was causing a gridlock on the private economy. War's expensive, go figure. America was in a recession, a dead end, and meanwhile the war economy was still killing untold numbers of soldiers and civilians all for profiting a failing system. But they can't get off the war economy; it's hurting them at this point, but at the same time they're too dependent on the system to stop. So he sees the state of everything, the war economy, people blindly killing for a paycheck instead of killing for what they believed in, how the system supported this, how the individual citizen had no voice anymore and had become a part of a collective consciousness of thoughtless worker drones, and goes, 'This isn't okay. We shouldn't be doing this.' He endeavors to change the status quo by exploiting the war economy to become president of what was one of the most influential countries in the world, all so, once he amassed all that power, he could nuke the entire system from the inside-out and destroy the war economy itself to cease all dependence on it. His plan for accomplishing this was very reasonable in that he was going to harvest thousands of Mexican street orphans for their brains, put them in VR training to turn them into child soldiers, and then put their brains in cyborg bodies provided by the PMC he happened to be the head of so he had bodies ready to fight after inciting a war between America and another country called Pakistan so he could leech public support and votes off using the sudden boom in the war economy he artificially created."

Thus far Finitevus had been following Sorun's story with enough understanding. Slowly, though, his face was growing more and more exhausted and disbelieving the longer the story went on. "I'm convinced your brain is damaged."

"Hey, I didn't write the story," Sorun defended with an eye-roll. "Look, what I'm trying to say is that you're both the same. Armstrong saw a system that profited off what was essentially a human meat grinder by perpetuating forever-war, a system that lead the country into a recession, so he wanted to stop it. You saw a world stuck in a cycle of hatred and violence because this world's history is genuinely so confusing nobody can make sense of it so they can only look at the short-term past without learning anything, thereby repeating past mistakes. You wanted to change that." Sorun made a small sigh. "And you both were too extreme about it. Armstrong wanted to use orphans as child soldiers and create a completely anarchist society out of America using Darwinian ideals to purge the weak so the strong could have a future of freedom. You wanted to use an ancient echidna god to kill off most the world to 'wipe the slate clean and burn it all down.' I'm quoting Armstrong on that." He affixed Finitevus with a serious stare. "These are both very naughty things you shouldn't do."

"And why is that?" Finitevus snapped out. "Why does it matter how 'bad' something is if it ultimately creates good?"

"Because it undermines the whole fucking point!" Sorun yelled out. "You're gonna kill people to save people? Okay, sure, but why do the lives of the people that died matter less than the ones that live? Because there's more? Killing millions is alright if it saves billions? Why are those billions any better than the millions?" He made a loud scoff. "Lives are priceless. You can't value them, can't quantify them. I just don't see the point in killing so many people to save people."

"Maybe in the case of your insane senator. But I'm different," Finitevus claimed. "I wanted to make a future that would last for the whole planet. What's the current world population compared to a world that will last indefinitely?"

Annoyance and frustration flashed over Sorun's face. "Aright, let's humor it," he offered. "Let's pretend you did it. You won. Your plan with Enerjak went off without the hitch and you're the leader of a world wiped clean of history. You lead the surviving population into a utopia and die with a smile knowing all is right with the world now. BAM!" He loudly clapped Yamato's scabbard, startling Finitevus some. "Hundred years pass. Some guy in power screws it up. He gets too greedy and becomes corrupt, or he's some psychopath looking to wreck the system and is in a position to do so, or maybe it's just a guy trying to do his best but it's just not good enough so he makes some bad decisions. Something bad happens and things spiral out of control. These eventually generate circumstances that create more individuals that'll unsettle the world more and more, and eventually guess what, F, we're back at square one." Sorun tapped the side of his head. "It's the Chaos Effect, F. Doesn't matter how good a job you do making world peace, doesn't even matter if you pull it off. Hundred years from then, two-hundred, maybe more, maybe less, someone somewhere is gonna screw it up, and then more people screw it up. And then people bring it back, everything's fine, and then it's on and off over and over and over, and that convoluted history you're trying to erase? It'll come crawling right back." He sighed and shook his head. "Might as well call it Chaos Theory, too. It's why I can't be bothered doing things to help most of the time. I mean worldwide threats like Enerjak that threaten literally everyone? Yeah, that's one thing. Eggman? Sure, he's gotta go. Anything below that is just... I don't know. It all goes down to what you care about and what position you're in to do anything. I retired from Freedom Fighting for a lot of reasons, that among them." He glanced down at Yamato. "Well, *tried* to," he whispered.

Finitevus didn't respond to him. When Sorun glanced back over at him, he saw the echidna looking down. Seemingly deep in thought from the way his eye ridges were so creased, and Sorun could have swore he heard him muttering to himself. Looks of denial and reluctant realization flashed over his face too quick for Sorun to catch, like he was going through too many thoughts to keep up with. Eventually, he'd let out a long, drawn out sigh and hung his head so

low his dreadlocks covered his face. Sorun was getting ready to ask if he was alright until he spoke again.

"And what do you think is going to happen to this world when it's already on a collision course? Hm, Sorun?" Finitevus mumbled out. "What happens then?"

"That's the nihilistic doomer in you talking," Sorun said, causing Finitevus to raise his head up a bit to look at him. "Yeah, when maniacs like you go around resurrecting evil gods or Eggman starts shit with his robots or some other wacko in the world does something it goes bad. But, eh... I dunno." He looked towards the city. "I've been around these guys for a while now, and they always seem to find a way to bring it back. Gives me, I don't know, hope?" He shrugged. "Honestly, when you look back on everything that's happened in this world and where they ended up before this Enerjak thing it's pretty amazing. I really do think they can make something of the world. And if not, well... nothing beautiful lasts. Wouldn't be beautiful otherwise."

A mirthless, bitter chuckle left Finitevus. "Makes no sense."

"Take it for whatever you want. 'S just my opinion. But just because things are bad doesn't mean you have to give up and wipe it all out to start over." Sorun looked at Finitevus. "That's what you did, isn't it? Give up on this world and try to make something new?" After a few seconds of silence, he continued. "I decided to give this world a chance. That means a lot seeing as I'm not even from here. For all the good, and the bad, and there's a lot of it on either side... I think it's worth giving it a chance. So stop trying to be a dumbass."

"As eloquent as ever," Finitevus snidely replied. He sat up to his full height and faced Sorun so their eyes met. "You really think I should stop and give this rotten world a chance? Because, what, it's pointless to do otherwise?"

"Well, if you want a pragmatic reason, people like me or the Freedom Fighters or whoever else will keep beating your ass in if

you keep trying. But yeah. Basically."

Finitevus rolled his eyes, but otherwise said nothing. His lips thinned in concentration as more deep thought ran through his mind. Finally, he asked, "Can we get to the reason why you brought us out here?"

"Right to the point, huh?" He'd honestly hoped to put it off longer, but Sorun supposed there was no getting around it. So, with a sigh, he looked back up at the darkened sky. He'd tried to speak out, but the first time he tried his words got caught up in his throat, so he had to wait a full minute to gather up his nerves. Once he did, he finally spoke again. "I'm thinking about killing myself."

The echidna sitting next to him looked confused at first, like he assumed he'd heard wrong. He soon realized he hadn't, after which his black eyed widened a dramatic enough amount his yellow irises were barely seen in them. He seemed to silently stammer before he found his voice. "I-I... hadn't thought you'd seen the situation as so hopeless."

Sorun looked back down at Finitevus and gave him an annoyed glare. "Not in that way, dammit," he mumbled. "Look, I've been thinking about what you said. About me not being strong enough to take on Enerjak." He rose Yamato up. "This is the only thing we got that can stop him and free everyone. I'm the only one that can use it, but I don't have the power to get close. I *can* get that power through the Emeralds, but, well... my ability to 'borrow' their power without me absorbing them fully requires me to maintain contact with them. I can hold one as Yamato and I got enough room in my torso for one more- yeah, I surgically inserted one into myself once, deal with it," Sorun snapped at seeing the perturbed expression Finitevus grew.

"You're... not one to take half-measures, it seems," he commented in a blank voice.

"Clearly not," Sorun dryly remarked. "Anyways, that's a max of two I can carry in. Three if I one-hand Yamato and one-hand an Emerald. Even then I'm running the risk of dropping the Yamato or the gem,

and then I lose that power. Doesn't help they barely fit in my hand and have a slippery, glossy surface." He shook his head. "Nah, just doesn't work. It's too risky, especially going up against that guy. I can't risk losing powers just 'cause I had an item taken away from me. I can't just divide my focus between fighting an omnipotent god and holding onto shit in the middle of the fight. So I need to absorb them," he said, his voice growing quieter. "So I've been doing risk assessment, you know, trying to gauge the minimum amount of powers I would need to feasibly pull this off while leaving me with as much life as possible. Ideally I'd just absorb Yamato and only lose twelve years, but the sword alone ain't gonna be enough. In another world where I never used Quicksilver against him and I could have just ended it with Yamato and a surprise timestop, maybe I could have gone at it with just two. But he's seen that trick before, so... yeah."

Slowly, Finitevus nodded. "Makes enough sense. So what conclusion did you come to?" he asked.

"Yeah, well, that's the thing. The more Emeralds I absorb, the greater the chance I have at winning but the less life I get left with. And, to make it worse, I got the whole world riding on all this. My friends, the whole town over there, rest of the world, everyone." Sorun's shoulders slumped a bit and he made a sigh. "I can't gamble with lives. Don't wanna. Not theirs. So I'm cashing out and going all in. With all seven I'd have the greatest possible shot at succeeding, but..."

"But you'd die right after," Finitevus finished, understanding forming on his face. "It's certainly the safest route possible. Are you sure you want to do it this way?"

"Hell no, I don't. But their lives are more important than mine. So I'm going in with everything," Sorun affirmed. "I can't tell Nicole this. She'll fight against me on this. Might even try and stop me. But I can't gather all seven Chaos Emeralds alone."

"So you need my help."

"I... need your help, Finite-bus. Yeah."

A stiff breeze blew in between the two. Finitevus looked owlishly at Sorun at the mispronunciation, and then slowly narrowed his eyes at him. "You're not saying my name wrong to annoy me, are you? You genuinely don't know how to pronounce it."

Sorun didn't even try hiding it and remained stone-faced. "In my defense I have literally never heard your name before and am fairly certain you made it up."

"I did not!" he hissed out in denial. "It's Finitevus! Fin-it-evus!"

"... You see, that sounds made up."

"Gah, why do I bother!?" Growling out in anger Finitevus shot up to his feet and walked a few steps away from the rocks they sat against. "I don't even know why I should bother helping some dullard who doesn't even have the decency to remember someone's name."

"... 'Cause the world's fucked if you don't?" Sorun tried as he stood up after Finitevus. "And hey, come on, dullard? I know I'm not the brightest guy and can't do math, but seriously?"

Finitevus crossed his bandaged arms and turned away in a huff. "Just because you're able to recite mind-boggling, insane stories from your world doesn't make you a genius. Mad, maybe. Suicidal most definitely with this plan of yours." He glanced over his shoulder at Sorun, his eye staring at him and half-lidded. "You're... admittedly rather thought-provoking with your words, however. I'm surprised you're so capable."

"Arguing video game stories and the philosophies behind them is, like, one of the only things in this world that I'm actually good at. Nobody ever wants to talk about that stuff with me, though. Well, 'cept Nicole. I told her about the factions in 'New Vegas' and we had a whole five-hour argument about which faction was the best one. I

still can't believe she's a Mr. House supporter. The Independent route is obviously way better."

The microscopic amount of respect Finitevus held in his eye fell away along with his arms. After which, a frown formed on his mouth. "You had a lot of free time back on your world, didn't you?"

"Man, gimme a break." Sorun moved to stand besides Finitevus, with the both of them looking out towards the city. "As grim and macabre as it sounds, I really do need your help committing suicide here. So are you in or not?"

"To paraphrase you, the world is doomed if I don't," Finitevus admitted. "I have to say, though. Not many would be willing to throw their lives away like you."

"Well, it's not like I haven't been here before." Sorun placed his free hand inside his pocket while absentmindedly turning Yamato over and over with his left. "I never told anyone this 'cause I didn't want anyone to worry even more than they already were, but after I found out Earth was gone I didn't... really want to live anymore. Didn't care about anything, didn't see a point anymore. But, ah... those friends of mine are so stubborn. They managed to bring me back and, after a while, I really thought I could live a peaceful life here." He held Yamato up to look at it. "But things like this keep happening, so I guess that was nothing but a pipe dream. And I owe them all more than I could ever pay back anyways. May as well pay it back with my own life."

Finitevus hummed, but otherwise said nothing at first. The two continued looking at the city before the echidna spoke up with, "Do you perchance have any idea of how we're to gather the other six Emeralds?"

"Not really, no," Sorun said. "That's kind of bad seeing as the whole plan hinges on them, huh?"

There was a groan besides him. "You're hopeless without me," Finitevus said with a shake of his head. "If only there was someone you knew with a vastly superior intellect who may actually have a solution to our predicament."

Hearing the smugness in his voice, Sorun rolled his eyes and said, "Just spill."

"What do you know of A.D.A.M.?"

"Him?" Sorun looked down in thought for a moment as he searched through his memories. "Yeah, uhhh... evil AI guy Eggman created, went rogue. Was responsible for creating the nanite city to begin with if I recall. Don't know much more than that other than something happened and he died when Sonic stopped him." He pursed his lips. "I vaguely remember something about a turtle, but I don't remember."

"Irrelevant," Finitevus said with a hand wave. "He was responsible for fusing all of the universe's Chaos Emeralds together into the seven that now exist today."

"... Oh, yeah, I think I heard that," Sorun realized. "He used some kind of tower thing, didn't he?"

"Yes. I'm unsure of its exact construction, but he'd built a device that somehow managed to reach across every corner of the universe to gather hundreds of thousands of Chaos Emeralds, every single one in existence, to fuse them all." They both glanced at each other, with Sorun blinking at the small smirk growing on Finitevus' mouth. "Those designs are more than likely still within the city's database, seeing as it was constructed from nanites to begin with."

"What does that- oh, I getcha," Sorun realized with widening eyes. "You wanna build that tower again to... magnetize all the Emeralds in the world to one specific spot."

Finitevus nodded. "Essentially," he said. "Scouring the entire globe while dodging Enerjak just isn't feasible for us. This is simpler and

will take far less time."

Sorun found himself agreeing with Finitevus. It'd surely take a hell of a lot longer looking for the things one at a time. If they had a way of bringing them all together at once, that'd save them a world's worth of time. Less risk, too, with Enerjak out there. Sorun certainly couldn't think of a better idea.

"The only problem," Finitevus continued, "is convincing that AI of yours to fork over the plans so we can build it." He gave Sorun a questioning look. "Do you think she will?"

Sorun winced. "If she finds out I'm trying to kill myself here? Probably not," he said. "But... she knows I can use them without absorbing them." He paused for a few seconds to think. "I'll spin something up," he decided. "Omit some truths, all that. I don't like it, but we need that tower and she's the only one that can give it to us."

He didn't like lying to Nicole. Not one bit. He'd told himself he was done with lying the first time around with the Emeralds. By now his only hope was that she'd forgive him down the line since this was for the entire world, but... well, he wasn't too sure if that would pan out.

Good thing by then he'd be too dead to find out.

"Well. It's a plan, then." Finitevus, looking pleased and even a bit surprised at Sorun, nodded at him and turned around. "Well, then. Let's be off back to the bunker. We've work to do."

"Mhm." While Finitevus had walked off, Sorun stayed put where he was, brows creased in thought. After a few moments of thought he turned around, calling out, "Hey, F."

Finitevus, who was holding an inactive Warp Ring, stopped just before he tossed it to look at Sorun. "Yes?"

"You know, I've put a lot of thought into it. I'm not gonna lie to you. I don't know if I'll be able to beat Enerjak even with all seven

Emeralds." Slowly, Finitevus pocketed the small, golden ring and stared towards Sorun in silence, prompting the human to continue. "I mean, you said it yourself. Guy's omnipotent. He killed off the whole world with a single thought. After seeing that I'm just not confident the seven Emeralds alone are gonna cut it." He turned around to face the city once more. "I need more power."

The powers granted to him by the seven Chaos Emeralds were fantastic, there was no denying that. They weren't on the same level as a literal god, though. Not even close. Wasn't like he could even surprise him since Enerjak likely had all of Knuckles' memories, who knew of Sorun's powers. Wings that could punch people and a superior body fell short of a guy with enough power to disintegrate things by simply looking at them.

It wasn't enough. He needed more. Something to tip him over the edge to give him a good shot at taking Enerjak out once and for all.

"Hmm..." Making a contemplative hum, Finitevus asked, "I suppose I see the logic in that. Did you have something in mind?"

"... One thing, yeah. An idea. Rotor told me about something once and I wanna try it out," Sorun said. "First, let me ask you something. That vault you found the Chaos Emerald in... I know the Republic keeps an emergency stockpile Power Rings from the Lake of Rings there in case something ever happened to the power. Did you happen to see them?"

"As it happened, yes," Finitevus confirmed. "There were a number of them there. Why?"

"Some point down the line I need you to grab some for me."

"If you think it will help, then certainly. How many did you need exactly?"

"Oh... I think fifty will be enough to get the job done."

Chapter 76

Recursion Error

Episode 76- Retirement from evil

It was a strange thing, planning to die for the second time. Oddly enough it didn't feel like the first time to Sorun. That first time that had been a crash course of grief and anxiety that slowly burned into grim acceptance that he did everything in his power to ignore. The same thing that had kept him up at night and had given him so much stress he was surprised his hair didn't turn white before getting Devil's Body during the mission with Shadow.

But now, he didn't know. He didn't feel much of anything. Or more accurately it felt like he'd moved right onto acceptance the second time around now that he'd come to terms he'd have to go through with dying again. He wasn't too sure on how it worked. To be sure it still saddened him to hell and back, and there weren't many opportunities for distractions seeing as he was spending days cramped inside of this bunker with two other people.

Well, it wasn't like there was anything he could do about it. Except maybe make sure he actually took the person he was aiming to kill with him this time. He already had a few ideas on how he could go about that.

Holding in a sigh, Sorun looked ahead at the lynx that was staring down into the green dias in front of her. He honestly didn't know what she was trying to glean off of it. And for as bad as he felt over this whole thing, he felt worse for Nicole's sake since she was going through the same thing, sans planning on dying. But that was his problem. And she didn't deserve to be going through this.

She didn't even notice him approach and stop right next to her, with his own body leaning over the green-surfaced piece of machinery from besides her. She finally did take notice when Sorun nudged her shoulder a bit, causing Nicole to start in surprise and glance over at him.

"You've really been staring at this map-thing intently for a while now," Sorun pointed out to her. "You wouldn't have happened to found the solution to this little predicament in here, have you?"

If Nicole was amused by any amount at the remark, she didn't show it at all. "I've been monitoring the entire city to ensure more of those... creatures Enerjak fabricated don't enter. Fortunately, it seems they've moved on. We'll have to assume they think the city is empty," she said. "Beyond that I've been monitoring everybody. Our prediction-"

"Finitevus' prediction," Sorun corrected.

Nicole frowned a bit. "... His prediction, yes, that their bodies are being preserved holds merit." She paused and looked down at the green dias. "You've spent quite an amount of time with him."

Sorun looked down into the green screen along with her. Images and words spread about in the grid-like surface that meant nothing to him filled his vision. "You sound surprised."

"I *am* surprised. It's his fault this is happening, Sorun. His actions caused all this, and you... you're letting him poke and prod you like some lab animal." She sounded upset and confused at the same time. Sorun figured it was fair enough, given everything that was happening.

"... I mean, it's not nearly as bad as you're making it sound," Sorun defended. "It's just some light examinations. That's all. I was just curious about some things about myself. Besides, you're there to make sure he doesn't do anything drastic. Don't pretend you're not spying on us all the time in that examination room."

"I'm almost certain that fact alone is why he kept his word not to do anything too invasive to you." Not even bothering to deny it, Nicole looked back up to Sorun with confusion written over her face. "But it goes beyond that. You're cordial with him."

"You're mad at me for being polite...?" Sorun incredulously stated, flipping his hand up in disbelief. "What does that even mean?"

"I'm not mad at you being polite, I'm just baffled by it. You're arguably more polite with him than you ever were with Sonic."

She had a point there. "... Yeah, but come on, I'm almost never polite with Sonic." When Nicole didn't respond Sorun let out a sigh and rubbed at his face. "What do you want from me, Nicole? It's not like I've forgiven the guy or anything like that, 'cause you're right, this is all his fault. But we kind of need him to fix all this and I didn't see how getting on his case about it would make things any better. Plus, he's... well, believe it or not he's a pretty good conversationalist. Bit confused about things, but his heart's in... well I wouldn't say the right place, but I'm pretty sure he has one, I think." He shot Nicole and accusing stare. "And you haven't exactly been the biggest conversationalist this last week."

At first Sorun thought he'd gone a bit far and caused Nicole to become offended at him over his words. But then a few seconds had passed and he realized he'd stunned her into silence, after which he realized she looked more hurt than offended. He'd made to speak up and apologize, but Nicole had already started speaking before he had the chance.

"Sorun, I'm sorry, but I didn't find it an appropriate time to talk with everything going on."

The human gave her an odd look. "N... Nicole, all our friends had their souls ripped out of them. There's never been a more appropriate time to talk." He knew he was going stir crazy from all of this, so seeing as Nicole had been so focused on this he couldn't imagine how well she was holding up. Not good, Sorun would wager.

He didn't think anybody would hold up well in this situation, and if they were, they were a psychopath of some type. Not even Finitevus was weathering this without a care, as well as he did hiding it.

"... Maybe you're right," Nicole quietly admitted. She folded her hands on the dias and looked down, not at the screen but to just avoid Sorun's eyes. "It's just horrible. All of this. Nobody deserves this, and I can't help but keep thinking about everybody. I keep trying to figure out how it is we're supposed to save them all, but no matter what I try I just can't envision us doing anything to help." She looked up to his eyes, and it hurt Sorun somewhere inside when he saw that hopeless, distraught expression on her face. "What are we supposed to do if we're not able to save everyone, Sorun?"

She tried to keep her voice even, and for all Sorun knew she was doing it for his sake, but even he could tell she was, at some level, terrified. Hell, he was, too, but the cold acceptance that once again he was winding up in the grave somehow helped to hide that. More... natural than Nicole trying to suppress it, maybe. Sorun wasn't so sure. He *was* sure that he didn't like seeing Nicole like this, and figured, if nothing else, he could try and put her at ease with the little assurance he could provide.

"We're going to save them," he promised her. There's wasn't much power behind the statement, nor a lack thereof. It was like he was stating a simple fact more than anything, like he knew for certain they would save everyone's souls, which gave Nicole pause. "It's not a matter of if. We will."

Nicole shook her head. "You don't know-"

"Nicole." He grabbed Nicole's shoulders so she was forced to look at Sorun's face. "We're gonna save 'em, alright? I promise."

A dangerous thing, promising something like that. For sure. Maybe even foolish. But Sorun didn't care so much, as it did seem to visibly calm Nicole down some, which was really all Sorun was aiming for. "I wish I could share your confidence, Sorun. I just hope it's well-

placed." She reached up to remove Sorun's hands from her shoulders, with her own hands lingering over his for a long moment before slowly grasping them to move them off.

"Well, it's not like we're working with nothing here. We got that whole thing with the tower going, yeah?" Sorun asked her.

"Yes. The tower." Nicole looked a bit unsettled at the mention of it. "I understand the desire to want to keep the Chaos Emeralds out from Enerjak's reach, Sorun, but I struggle to see what you plan to do with them. And I honestly can't see how they could give him more of an advantage than he already has..."

"I don't have any plans for them," Sorun lied. "I just feel like we should have them around just in case we do come up with a plan or we need them in an emergency." He leaned his lower back against the metal dias while kicking his feet out. "Besides, they can't hurt me anymore, remember? There's no risk keeping them around just in case."

That was the whole basis when he'd convinced her to give Finitevus the plans for the tower used to attract all the Chaos Emeralds. Excuses like "we might need them" and "just in case" and other half-truths Sorun cooked up under the pretense that it was something they could do that could be construed as progress as opposed to doing nothing. In defense for Sorun it actually was doing something, even if he weren't planning on killing himself with them. Which was probably the only reason Nicole decided to go ahead with it.

She'd been reluctant with the idea, though. Extremely so. Nicole hadn't given a reason for *why* she was so reluctant, but in the end she'd still given them on the basis it was doing something productive. So Sorun didn't know, maybe she just wasn't too thrilled with the idea of giving Finitevus the plans for that kind of thing. Sorun was pretty sure she just didn't like him.

"I... just struggle to see why you want all of them together..." Nicole slowly stated, looking at Sorun past her bangs of black hair.

Sorun shrugged. "Just in case we need them is all. Besides, the less power Enerjak has the better. He's already got the Master Emerald."

"I realize this, but-"

"And I suppose you have a better idea?"

That hadn't been Sorun's voice. From how quickly Nicole's demeanor shifted to a hostile and perturbed one Sorun didn't even need to be familiar with the voice to know it was Finitevus'. They'd both turned towards the entrance of the room to see the albino echidna enter, steeping over to the dias to lean over it besides Nicole, opposite of the side Sorun was on.

"Hello, Finitevus." Sorun found himself wincing and turning away from the two. He couldn't think of a time where Nicole had ever given a more icy-sounding greeting to anybody, ever. "No, as a matter of fact I do not at present possess any viable plans for furthering our goals outside of acquiring the remaining six Chaos Emeralds. Which I recall correctly is the exact same amount you possess."

There was a barely-suppressed scoff from Finitevus that Sorun managed to catch. "I *do* have some, you just refuse to see them through."

"Proposing that I use my nanites to construct an atomic bomb to plant on Angel Island is not a solution."

"I fail to see how." Finitevus thrust his hand forwards. "You make the bomb, and then either Sorun or I deposit it on the island using a portal. None of us would be harmed in the detonation."

"Nobody except the bodies of all our friends who still remain on the island," Nicole coldly responded.

" *And* Enerjak's host," he reminded her. "You have to remember that, without a host, he cannot exist in this world."

Sorun didn't so much as make a sound in response, though he did walk away from the pair to lean against the nearest wall. As much as he loved the irony behind the idea of killing a functional god with an atom bomb, he had to agree with Nicole in that it would kill their friends, assuming their bodies were even still on the island. Which they had to. He wasn't okay with sacrificing their lives to save the world.

"I am not going to put anyone's lives in jeopardy," Nicole said in a tone that left little room for argument, "and I *will not* weaponize the nanites under any circumstance."

She'd turned to face Finitevus directly. If he was intimidated at all by the glare she was surely giving him that Sorun couldn't see from this angle, he didn't show it. In fact, he looked completely nonplussed.

"Why not?" he asked in a tired voice. "Machines capable of quite possibly any function imaginable, and instead of choosing to do anything substantial with them you insist on letting them go to waste-
"

"I hardly see how using my nanites to provide a home for everybody constitutes as a waste-"

"Yes, I'm sure all those soulless husks up above are quite grateful to you for using those precious machines to provide shelter for them instead of using them to help regain their souls back."

When Sorun saw Nicole's hands began to clench, he chose that moment to step in. "May I remind you that *you* are responsible-!" Nicole had began before Sorun intervened.

"Hey, guys, remember the part where we're supposed to be working together?" He'd poked his body in-between the pair of them by leaning in, though he'd chosen to face Finitevus while giving him a very pointed glare. "And quit antagonizing her, man, seriously."

"I'm merely stating facts." When Sorun's glare didn't waver, he rolled his eyes and held his hands up. "Fine, have it your way."

Satisfied, Sorun turned the other way towards Nicole. And then immediately began regretting it when he saw her practically fuming in Finitevus' direction. Sorun's knee-jerk reaction was to avoid that entirely and turn back to Finitevus, asking, "So how's the tower going?"

Seemingly eager to begin talking about something to be productive, the white-furred echidna began speaking on the subject. "I went over the designs and the science behind how it works. From all appearances it seems completely sound, and we know from practice it works. It shouldn't be too difficult at all to simply construct the machine and flip the 'on' switch." He made a unsettled hum. "I'm worried about the power requirements, though. Now that I've seen its inner workings it shouldn't be difficult at all to reconfigure its settings so it doesn't strain itself reaching out across the entire known universe in search of Emeralds. But even if we shrink its search radius to a point that it's solely relegated to planet Mobius we're still factoring in more power than we could possibly provide."

"Couldn't we just use the Chaos Emerald we already have?" Sorun asked.

Finitevus sent Sorun a flat look. "The same Emerald that will be attracted along with the rest of them, thereby removing its utility as a power source?"

"..." It did sound like a silly suggestion when put like that. "What if we used the same power source A.D.A.M. used back then?"

"The power source last time around was live Mobians powered in Super forms. Even if your moral code allowed for that we aren't exactly flush with warm bodies at the moment."

He decided to quit while he was ahead. "Nicole, your thoughts," Sorun said, a bit too quickly for his liking.

The anger on the lynx's face fortunately subsided a bit. "It's okay, Sorun, you're doing your best," she assured him, even offering a small smile at his expense. It'd disappeared completely when she looked back to Finitevus. "Is there any way to mitigate the power consumption?"

Finitevus shook his head. "Not from what I could see," he said. "If we had some way of pinpointing the Chaos Emeralds' position, then *maybe* . If we had such a method, however, we would hardly require this tower to begin with in the first place."

Sorun's head popped up. He blinked once upon realizing something, and then turned to address Finitevus who had noticed Sorun's reaction. "Okay, hypothetically speaking, say there was somewhere in the world a kind of radar device that could detect Chaos Emeralds. Would that help?"

"I'm assuming this isn't as hypothetical as you're making it out to be," Finitevus said. "If so the answer is yes, that would be considerably helpful in limiting the tower's power draw."

"It... *may* not be hypothetical."

Finitevus sighed and rubbed at his nose. "Goodness' sake, Sorun, which is it?"

"Don't take that tone with him." Sorun felt a pair of hands grab his shoulders from behind and pull him away from Finitevus, closer to where Nicole was. He'd blinked in surprise at the action and didn't make a single move as Nicole continued speaking. "But Sorun, I think I know what you're referring to. Whatever did you do with that device that Tails made for you?"

"Chucked it." Shrugging her hands off his shoulders, Sorun made to move towards the room's exit. "Dunno where it is, but I know where to go to go get it." He looked back at Nicole. "Ya know?"

"I... know?" She tilted her head and gave him an odd look, not looking at all like she knew.

Sorun turned to Finitevus. "She knows," he assured him, adding in no small part to the confusion on the echidna's face. "Flint 'n' Paste, need your help with this. C'mon." He exited the room before he could get a response from either of the other two, leaving both of them staring out after him as he departed. It was barely after Sorun left that Finitevus shook his head and looked back to the lynx, though he couldn't not find the words to articulate his thoughts. Nicole was in a similar stupor, and when it became obvious neither had words Finitevus loudly sighed out in frustration and trudged out of the room after Sorun.

Knothole ruins

"Ah... what a shit place full of shit memories."

As far as the ruins of a town that was bombed out went, it was about what Sorun expected to see. Nothing but a giant, ashen field of burnt tree stumps and destroyed, unrecognizable houses further damaged by the elements and time. Half-covered in snow, too, which made it all the more apocalyptic-looking. Considering what happened here it wasn't that far off the mark.

If Sorun could have things his way he'd never come back to this place ever again for all the bad memories he had here, but they needed the Chaos Emerald locator radar thing Tails made for him once. And as far as Sorun remembered the last he saw of it he'd thrown it... somewhere in there. He didn't remember where exactly. But they needed it, and Finitevus was an extra set of hands. So here the two of them were, on a mission to dig through burnt, old ruins to find a piece of technology that, for all they knew, probably didn't even work because it'd been sitting out in the rain for months.

Surprisingly Sorun had worked with less in life.

"No fond memories of Knothole?" Finitevus, who stood besides Sorun as they looked out into the ruins, remarked. "I would have thought you'd be as fond of this place as New Mobotropolis."

"Don't get me wrong, Knothole had its charm and all, but, eh... Nicole's city has a lot more going for it," Sorun said. "And this place was where I first showed up in this world, right after the old HQ." His demeanor flattened. "A kid threw a rock at my face."

Finitevus' eyes widened a bit in surprise, and he glanced over at Sorun. "That's surprising to hear."

"Yeah, and he even called me a human. I don't know if he was just confused about the difference between humans and Overlanders or what, never bothered following up on that, but he sent me an apology card later on so it's whatever. Everybody over in the Republic is cool with me." He cleared his throat and gestured out to the destroyed Knothole. "Anyways, uh... yeah, here we are."

"Yes. So we are." Finitevus faced back out towards the ruins. "So let me get this straight. You, at one point in time, possessed a piece of technology capable of locating Chaos Emeralds. An incredibly valuable piece of technology that is capable of locating objects of undefinable power, making it quite possibly one of the most important devices on the planet. And instead of keeping it safeguarded somewhere you threw it away."

Sorun took in a deep inhale, feeling a mixture of sheepishness and frustration. At both himself and the echidna besides him who sounded very ridiculing at the moment. "The town just got bombed out and everybody got kidnapped. I was a little bit more worried about everybody's safety than a stupid radar."

"But you truly had to *throw it* ?"

"I had a sword in one hand, Nicole's handheld in another, cut me some slack, man, my hands were full at the time and I didn't feel like going into a possible fight carrying a bunch of junk."

"... You really have a thing against holding things while fighting, don't you?"

Sorun made a low sigh and lowered his head. "Just... come on," he said, walking further into the ruins with Finitevus following closely behind. "I threw it around here somewhere, so just, I dunno, start digging around for it. It's a little metal box thing with a screen."

"Why, with such a detailed description I have no doubt we'll find it in no time."

Eyes narrowing, Sorun glanced over his shoulder at Finitevus, who'd already crouched down and began sifting through pieces of rubble and snow. "Yeah..." he muttered out, turning his back to the echidna. He looked down at the blue gem he held in his hand, and after a moment's concentration a pair of blue, spectral winged arms appeared over his back. They reached forwards and began tossing away more debris as Sorun began looking around in the snow-covered, ashen ground.

The two of them had been at it like this for a solid twenty minutes, shifting around pieces of burnt detritus in search of the radar. So far, no such luck. Nothing but more and more reminders of what this place once was to Sorun that quickly sent his mood into a downturned spiral the longer he was here. Knowing everybody who once lived here were all well and fine helped mitigate his feelings, but knowing these bombed-out homes were once, well, *homes* still set him on edge. He'd lived in one of these homes for a time.

After a while the silence started to get to Sorun. Maybe it was just him being uncomfortable about being here, but he couldn't take it for much longer. His frustration showed in how the Bringer Claws were inadvertently clawing at the ground and leaving deep grooves when he tried moving things away in search of the radar, and by now he was hoping for anything to take his mind off things. Fortunately, he did have one question to get the ball rolling that he could ask.

"Hey, I wanted to know. Who is Enerjak, anyways?" Sorun asked as he tossed away what was either once upon a time a wall or someone's door. Hard to tell from how warped, burnt, and rotted the wood was. "I know he's a god and all, but where'd he come from? Why does he need a host to exist here? Exactly who is he?"

"That would require a very in-depth lesson on echidna history," Finitevus replied, followed by the sound of him tossing something heavy away.

Sorun visibly recoiled. "The condensed version, if you would," he politely requested.

"He was brought about in an event that happened quite some time ago. Long enough that history forgot it, at any rate. Even Albion's archives were incomplete on the subject; I had to go searching through many ancient ruins just to get a concise picture," the echidna began. "Most of this is conjecture from fragmented legends I had to piece together. He was a scientist. Both he and his wife Aurora-La from what I know. They studied Chaos energy and the Chaos Force, and something happened between them and the Ancient Walkers that caused them to ascend into the Chaos Force." When he looked over at Sorun, he saw the human stiffen up completely. The Bringer Claws, on the other hand, had reflexively closed around pieces of debris with enough force to crush them into dust. "I assume from what I heard about you and the Neo-Walkers you know of Aurora-La."

"We've met. She just goes by Aurora these days," Sorun confirmed. "Tch. Figures that's her grand origin scheme for how she became some mystic sky echidna. Uplifted by more magic sky people." How glamorous of a story for her, considering barely anybody on this planet had those. Sorun barely wondered anymore why her ego was so self-centered if that was how she came to be.

"I take it from your tone you're not too fond of her."

"I kicked her teeth in."

A short, amused huff left Finitevus. "Well, I've never met her in person, so I couldn't say much about her personality."

"Oh, I can. She manipulated me and put me in a situation where I was destined to die. I had to beat her within an inch of her life until she got the idea through her head that she owed me a second life since she all but took my first." Left unsaid was how Sorun had been a willing participant through the end of it, but the fact remained there was a principle to consider. She'd still done what she'd done on him for all the wrong reasons, regardless of what Sorun's thoughts on it were. He wasn't losing sleep over what he did. She'd grown the teeth back, anyways. "I remember her making me promise not to ever use a Chaos Emerald to get Yamato back," he continued. "Chaos-sensitive people are real nervous around it for some reason."

"It is... unusually powerful. I get tingles merely being around it," Finitevus informed him. He glanced towards Sorun and made a small hum. "I can't help but notice you still manifest the sword despite that promise. Why is that?"

"'Cause fuck her, that's why. I don't care what she thinks." It felt like every time he held or used Yamato it was a big middle finger up to the sky at Aurora, which made it all the better for Sorun every time he got to hold it. Petty revenge, maybe, but as far as he was concerned it was a statement. Something that said "I can do whatever I want and you can't do anything to stop me". And Sorun felt a small bit of victory every time he got to make that statement. Knowing she was probably steaming up there in her golden clouds every time he made the sword made it all the better. "How about Enerjak?" Sorun pressed.

There was a pause as Finitevus thought his answer through. "For whatever reason he didn't take to the process of becoming ascended as well as Aurora," he answered. "He wound up in the sorry state you know him as. A corrupted spirit. So malevolent the Ancient Walkers fragmented his spirit and banished him to the Chaos Force. I suspect him needing an echidna host is due to the fact he was himself an echidna before undergoing his transformation."

"And he needs special echidna to possess, right?" Sorun asked. "Because he keeps going for Knuckles every time he pulls this. I know he's special 'cause his dad did some stuff to him that made him more powerful than normal echidna."

"You'd be correct, yes," Finitevus confirmed. "I suspect any normal echidna would probably be disintegrated from the sheer power brought on by Enerjak's possession, such is the strength of his Chaos Force link. It would take one with an abnormally strong link of their own to house him in their body. Fortunately the Guardian's father didn't have many qualms on experimenting on his own kin." He made a small grunt. "There were other potential candidates, but Knuckles was always the more viable one due to his unique makeup."

Sorun rolled his eyes. "Yeah, 'cause this is a real fortunate position we're in," he muttered out. He tossed a large piece of debris away, but much to his dismay he didn't see the radar when he searched around the ground. "He's not even aware, is he? When I talked to him that one time he thought he was Knuckles. Did going through what he did shred his personality so much he can't even differentiate between himself and his hosts?"

"I don't think his memories survived the process. At least, not completely. He's... more an influencing force," Finitevus explained. "Bits and pieces of personality that infect the host's psyche, warping and altering them. Inhibitions are lost as their wills and desires blends with whatever remains of Enerjak's; they essentially become a gestalt consciousness. And seeing the results of his work I somewhat doubt he was an upstanding member of my species."

"Well, he married Aurora. I'm pretty sure that automatically qualifies him as an awful person," Sorun reasoned. The fact anybody would marry that thing somewhat repulsed him. But, if nothing else, it was another reason to kill Enerjak - another middle finger to Aurora. Killing something that used to be her husband. One last act of spite before he died for real this time. *"Ah, but what if she considers it a mercy killing? Since he's not really what he used to be and he's*

stuck as a weird spirit thing?" Sorun thought as he scratched his chin. *"Guess I'd actually be doing her a favor then... Well, I'm still killing Enerjak regardless, so I guess it don't matter that much."*

"It's my turn to ask something." The sudden shift caused Sorun to lift his head up in surprise. He was caught off-guard by the statement, enough that he turned around to see Finitevus looking at him from the corner of his eyes behind those crooked spectacles of his as he tossed more debris away in search of the radar. "What exactly is the function of that sword?" he asked him. "Is it truly *just* to separate things?"

Not seeing the harm in indulging him, Sorun answered with, "It's more the concept of separation itself. The idea of it." Sorun tossed away a blown-apart folding chair, wincing a bit when he realized that it was likely one of the chairs they'd used at Antoine and Bunnie's wedding. The wedding he'd missed. The wedding that was ruined when Knothole got blown up. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. I just struggle to grasp how the idea of separation gives the sword the ability to create portals."

"It's... complicated," Sorun said. "If I had a piece of paper it'd be easier to explain. It's basically bridging point A and point B together by folding space so they overlap and then using Yamato to cut open the two points. By doing this two locations regardless of distance are joined together, thus negating the space between them."

"I see," Finitevus hummed out, sounding just as interested as when Sorun first let him draw some blood out to examine. Sorun remembered him looking so excited he looked like he could have started drooling at any moment, though for both their sakes he'd kept himself in check. "It's very similar to how my Warp Rings function, though they're a bit more elegant in their design in that they don't require brute-forcing their way through space-time to connect two points of space."

"Oh, yeah. Right. You use those weird ring things to get around." The Warp Rings, as Finitevus called them. Let him make portals to wherever he wanted from what Sorun saw. The little rings that were remarkably similar to Power Rings in their appearance. "Eh, well, I don't care how inelegant Yamato's method of making portals is as long as it works."

"I suppose," he said, though from his tone Sorun didn't think Finitevus agreed all that much. He sounded almost judging, actually. Like he was sneering at something inferior. "How did you solve the problem of positioning the portals? I remember encountering some difficulty with that with my own Warp Rings."

Sorun pursed his lips in thought. "I don't know, I mean... they just kind of go wherever I want them to go. I think of a place and it just makes the portal." He threw an overly large burnt piece of wood over his shoulder before continuing. "Only works for places I've been, though. Need the coordinates to make a portal to somewhere I've never been."

Finitevus made an "ah" of comprehension. "That must be rather bothersome, then. Remembering all those numbers."

"Nah, don't need to remember them," Sorun corrected with a shake of his head. "Just need to see them."

"That's..." Pausing, Finitevus glanced over his shoulder and at Sorun. "Truly?"

"Yeah, I don't know how it works. Maybe it pulls it from my subconscious or something, who knows?" Sorun shrugged. Some part of him always did find it somewhat strange, but he wasn't in the habit of asking the exact scientific workings of magic swords. It was a gift he didn't need to look too far into. "If it works I don't question it."

"Hmph." Satisfied, Finitevus returned to his own sifting. "I'm surprised you were able to even come up with such a thing."

Well, technically he hadn't since Yamato making portals came straight from the games Sorun took it from, but to be fair he'd still had to put the legwork in to figure out the mechanics behind it. "Well, I *did* have to check out a quantum physics book," he said.

Finitevus paused. He stood up straight, dropping a piece of debris in something akin to shock as he turned to fully face Sorun. The human, on the other hand, had gone back to digging through the rubble with his Bringer Claws. "You comprehend quantum physics?" he incredulously stated.

Sorun snorted. "Pfft. No," he denied. "Just the part that lets me make portals. Took me forever just to find that part of the book and I quit reading after that." Even then most of the logic came out from a movie he'd seen that used a visual aid, the same one he'd given Sonic and Sally when he demonstrated it.

Shaking his head, Finitevus turned back around and crouched down to grab at more debris. "You surprise me more every day, human," he said aloud. "Here I took you for an unacademic dullard who'd never cracked a book open in their life."

"Aw, that's not being fair. I can be smart when I'm motivated enough," Sorun said. "I'm just not usually very motivated. Like, almost never. It's easier to just leave the heavy thinking for other people."

"With how much work pertaining to this tower you've foisted onto me I can see that," Finitevus remarked. Sorun had made a scoff in response but otherwise didn't comment on the jab. "You know, with somebody with as much potential in manipulating the forces of Chaos as you possess you could benefit at least *trying* to understand the sciences. I saw the way your face glazed over in a lack of comprehension when the AI first gave us those tower plans."

Sorun bit his tongue at the scathing remark that threatened to escape his mouth. To call what he saw "plans" would have been a great oversimplification. Everything on those blueprints from the

designs to the technical jargon had meant absolutely nothing to him, and he'd been more than happy to let Finitevus examine them on his own. His pride certainly had taken a hit on that, something Finitevus saw fit to capitalize on.

"Sorun, I am being serious," Finitevus said. "I know you don't have a link of your own, but because of that the amount of fidelity you have with Chaos energies is far above anything else I've ever seen. You're wasting your talents remaining in ignorance."

"Yeah, well, I don't exactly have much time left to study up now, do I?"

Finitevus didn't have a response for this. The words had left Sorun's mouth a bit more colder than the scientist was accustomed to, and the meaning behind them hadn't been lost on him, either. He'd sighed under his breath and refrained from continuing that avenue of thought, choosing instead to backtrack a bit.

"Still, I genuinely do think you have potential. What were you even doing before all this happened?"

"I worked as a postage boy for this crazy cat lady I worked for," Sorun honestly answered. "Had a cool hat and everything."

"And you don't think such a thing was beneath you?"

"Not really," the dark-haired human quickly answered. "What do you want from me? I'm not a scholar. I played video games for a majority of my life. I was content with what I had and didn't want to go any further than that," he explained. "Not everybody wants to push their mental limits. Living here, with that job, with all my friends and everything I had was enough. Told you once that all I wanted was a simple life like that." He made a tsking sound. "'Sides, with as many dumb decisions you've made I'm pretty sure your intelligence averages out to the same level I'm on, so what's it matter?"

Finitevus' face wrinkled in offense. "I have a PhD."

"And I graduated from middle school. What's your point?"

There was an extremely sharp inhale from Finitevus as he stood up straight. A piece of wood was clenched in his hands and, out of frustration, his bandaged fingers began to involuntarily squeeze it so hard it splintered under his grasp. After a few seconds he took a calming breath, relaxing his hold and causing some of the red that appeared on his face in anger to fade. "Let it go, it's not worth it, he's dying soon anyways," he muttered under his breath.

"What was that?" Sorun called out from behind him.

"I asked if you found it yet!" Finitevus shouted back, dropping the splintered piece of wood. "In case it wasn't obvious I'm not too keen on spending all day and night digging through ruins."

"And here I thought that was all you did in your spare time. Oh, hello..."

It was finally when Sorun had moved a particularly large burnt board of wood that he found it. The same small, metal box Tails had given him all that time ago. Half-submerged in the soil and what little ash remained from the bombing day that hadn't been washed away by the elements yet. He bent down and dragged it out from the ground, and then used his Bringer Claw to wipe off any excess soil and ash as he examined it.

Structurally speaking it seemed intact for the most part. He fiddled around with the switch on its side and found, much to his surprise, it actually did turn on, though the images on the display were significantly more dim than he remembered them being and they were flickering on and off. He frowned at the sight, and then turned around towards Finitevus.

"Hey, F!" he called out. "I found it!"

"About time." Finitevus abandoned the debris he'd been holding at the time and met with Sorun as the two walked towards each other.

Automatically Sorun had tossed the device to the echidna, who'd deftly caught it and began examining it while making a sound of interest. "It's slightly damaged. Nothing I won't be able to fix back at base provided Nicole makes me the proper tools," he said. His lips thinned. "The range of this radar is much shorter than I imagined it'd be from your description."

Sorun flinched. He'd nearly forgotten the range hadn't been the best on that thing. Not terrible by any means, but still. "Yeah, it's only around a thousand-mile radius," he said. "That's not gonna be a problem, is it?"

"Hmmm... maybe not," Finitevus denied with a shake of his head. "The fact it's still somewhat functional after all this time and that it actually works if that blip I'm seeing in your hand says anything is a testament to the craftsmanship. You said that fox boy constructed this? The one with two tails?"

"Miles, yeah."

"Hmph. He's not half-bad," Finitevus admitted. The casual appraisal had been enough to catch Sorun off-guard, and he nearly commented on it until he began speaking further. "The fact the range is so limited shows a clear lack of understanding when it comes to Chaos energies, but I can't fault a child not even into his teens for such shoddy workmanship. Honestly, it's a miracle he got the thing working at all."

"Yeah, there it is," Sorun internally sighed while rubbing at his forehead. "So we're good?"

The white echidna nodded. "After some repair work, a few tune-ups and upgrades, it should be as simple as integrating it into the tower's construction. The modification itself should take short work, and with how fast those nanites work the tower itself should be constructed before the day is out tomorrow." He looked up at Sorun. "If all goes well we should be finished before three days have passed. Perhaps even sooner. You'll have to go once we gain all seven Emeralds; I

doubt Enerjak will sit idly by if all seven Chaos Emeralds are suddenly gathered in one place."

"I... I figured as much, yeah." The news was a bit of a blow to Sorun - that it was coming that soon. He'd expected as much, but even already having died once didn't do much to prepare him for dying in less than a week now. It'd certainly brought his mood down to a level it hadn't been at in a while. A level Sorun never figured he'd feel again, and yet here he was.

It seemed that Finitevus picked up on the sudden mood Sorun was in, as his expression fell slightly and he'd made a small grimace as he turned his head to the side. "I... wanted you to know that I've been thinking a lot about everything you've said to me," he said, making Sorun give him a curious look. "How this universe and everything in it is chaotic and how making something perfect in it is an effort in futility."

"That's... not exactly what I was going for, but sure, I guess that's sorta right," Sorun said. "Where's this going?"

"The truth is, Sorun, you confound me. When I first saw you I'd figured you for another thoughtless do-gooder like the Chaotix and the Freedom Fighters and all the rest who just happened to have enough power to make an actual difference. But over the course of this entire ordeal we've spoken at length, and... well, quite honestly you're the furthest thing from a do-gooder. You're nothing like them," he said. "Too pragmatic, too open-minded, too much of a thinker in areas most of the people you live around would never dare to delve into. I see so much potential in you, and you waste it doing nothing while withering away at domestic life. I was honestly frustrated knowing you chose to do nothing and just let those Freedom Fighters do everything, but... perhaps, in spite of all that, you're right."

The echidna took a few steps forwards and looked up from the device in his hands and out towards the horizon. Sorun, keeping

quiet and rooted to the spot, followed his back with his eyes as the echidna stopped and continued speaking out.

"I've come to realize how much time I've wasted in pursuit of impossible goals. Reshaping the world into a new and perfect order is an act of futility in the grand scheme of things, when centuries after the fact events far outside of my control will just bring everything I tried to help the world escape from come back to reality. As we've both said, it's... cycles. Chaos Theory. Ironic that one who studies Chaos such as myself was blind to that truth." Finitevus made a rueful laugh while readjusting his glasses. "I facilitated the destruction of Albion and was indirectly responsible for the deaths of most of the citizens there I'd spent my entire life growing up around for what? Revenge for them ousting me as some tragic freak born from an accident? As the first step in some inane plan to reshape the world? I experimented on and banished members of the Brotherhood of Guardians to an empty zone to die in isolation just to further my own ends, even after they gave me their trust. What good have all my machinations with Enerjak truly done?"

"Hmph." Sorun glanced over the echidna's shoulder and at the same horizon he was staring at. "I'm glad it took the whole world's population losing their souls to get you to see sense."

"I'm not blind to the mistakes I've made, Sorun. I was wrong. I'm not nearly prideful enough not to admit it." He turned around towards Sorun, his darkened eyes meeting with Sorun's own. To the pale human's surprise, a forlorn expression had overtaken Finitevus' features. "Perhaps you were right about my newfound powers being an outlet for frustrations and desires I'd always harbored, and I'd just accepted the flimsy excuse of 'corruption' everyone on Albion labeled me with out of nothing more than convenience, perhaps even denial. I want to correct my mistakes and live the way you do."

"You're choosing the most horrible role model possible to base life decisions on," Sorun said in a flat tone. "For real. There are so many better examples. Why me of all people?"

He was self-aware enough to know he was a lazy bastard. Anti-social to the point he was polite with people but didn't really go out of his way to be nice to random strangers since he was always too nervous and shy, and he was barely any better with his friends. Fairly selfish, too. In Sorun's own opinion he was a terrible person who was always amazed people chose to remain friends with him, so he couldn't comprehend why somebody would want to be like him.

"I don't exactly have many options. Most everybody treats me with distrust."

"Because you have straight-up betrayed almost everyone who has ever trusted you," Sorun pointed out, remembering the first Enerjak incident and what Knuckles' father, Locke, had said about him.

"... This is true, yes," the doctor admitted. "I was practically floored when you volunteered for me to run tests on you. I'd hardly been serious and figured I'd lose nothing by asking even though you were likely to say no. But you defied all belief, we learned of each other, and... I grew to understand that you live the way you do even though you're capable of so much, all because it's simply what you wanted." He made a sigh, removed one of his hands from the device he held, and looked down at his bandaged palm. "Without all these lofty goals of world destruction I've abandoned, what's left for me? A disgraced doctor nobody trusts? What should I do? What do I want?" Black bolts of electricity arced over his fingers. "Digging through the world's past had always been little more than a hobby of mine to pursue on my off-time, but... now I'm not so sure. Ever since I became this it was all I ever truly enjoyed doing. Even if it's a waste of my abilities, it's my choice and my life, is it not? I can do whatever I want. So why not just live however I see fit? And perhaps one day when I've tired of playing the archeologist I can pursue my past scientific interests." He looked back up at Sorun. "It just seems... simpler. Easier. That's why you live the way you do, is it not?"

Sorun quickly exhaled and gave Finitevus a shrug. "Hell if I know, man. If you want my two cents I think you're reaching way too far to

understand a guy who's just lazy and doesn't wanna risk his life doing stupid stuff, but hey, if it works for you."

"Maybe I am looking too far into it," Finitevus admitted. "It doesn't matter. I've made up my mind. No more worrying about the entire world or things outside of my control. I think, once this is all over, I want to try my hand at living for myself for a change."

"Well... good for you, I suppose." Sorun pocketed his right hand, with the left one still holding the blue Chaos Emerald. It'd shifted into the Yamato as the Bringer Claws disappeared from his shoulders and back. "Long as you stop experimenting on people and sending people to pocket dimensions to die." There was a pause. "The fuck, you actually did that?"

"Yes, I did." Based on his tone Finitevus didn't sound too particularly sorry over it. "But that's another thing I've learned from you. Hurting others just isn't worth it when it brings so much unwanted attention towards me. I've made more enemies for life with all I've done than I'm comfortable with. Honestly, it's more trouble than it's worth."

"True enough," Sorun sighed out. Maybe he should have been more disturbed hearing about what he'd done to the Brotherhood, especially considering they were all relatives of Knuckles', but thinking on it Sorun didn't know them at all, whereas he knew Finitevus. He couldn't find it in himself to feel anything towards them and decided to just nod at Finitevus. "So that's it? No more of the evil schemes, nothing? Just a life of screwing around and doing whatever?"

"If we're successful and I have the opportunity. We'll just have to see." A brief gust of wind blew between the two of them. "Where does that leave us, Sorun?" Finitevus asked him, giving the human a serious look. "What are we to each other?"

At hearing that, Sorun took in a deep breath and tilted his head up to the sky. He thought long and hard on the question, and then tilted his head down at Finitevus to meet his gaze. "I won't lie to you, doctor. I

genuinely considered stabbing you in the back and killing you once you finished helping us with all this." The revelation didn't bring any surprise to the echidna's face, though Sorun did notice his grip on the device had tightened somewhat. "I just figured you were another maniac like Eggman running around that was too dangerous to live. With all that's happened I didn't wanna leave the world with one more dangerous psycho in it and figured I'd take you out before I went to make sure this never happened again. Beyond that you technically killed me since you started all this, so... yeah, fuck you." He left out a heavy breath, removed his hand from his pocket, and then looked down at his feet as he rubbed the back of his head. "Ah, but... I just don't have it in me anymore. With everything you've said, I just don't feel like killing you would actually solve anything. Just don't see the point. Call me a fool for trusting you; I don't much care. We may not be friends, but we still got to know each other. I think that counts for *something* ." He shook his head. "I'm not sure. I just don't feel like killing you. I'd even go as far as to say I... didn't mind being around you that much." He looked up at Finitevus' eyes, with Sorun's own glare hardening. "This isn't forgiveness, just to be clear. But at the end of the day you and I both know you don't give a damn about my opinion in that matter. So I guess you'll have to figure out how to forgive yourself."

"... It matters more than you'd think." Sorun blinked in surprise when he heard Finitevus say that, followed by the echidna turning back around towards the horizon. "Considering you're the only person in the world who will talk to me normally."

Sorun didn't have any words for that. He just sighed instead, and then walked forwards so that he was now standing at the echidna's side. What was probably whole minutes passed as they silently stared out towards the distance, each one thinking on the other's words. Sorun himself didn't know what was going on in the echidna's thoughts, but he knew his own opinions on him were conflicted.

All things considered, he'd killed Sorun. It was his fault Enerjak had done what he'd done because he'd been the one to summon him.

Indirectly responsible, maybe, but the fault still lied with him. By all rights Sorun should have hated him, but all said and done, he didn't. He couldn't find it in himself to sympathize with all the doctor's victims, because at the end of the day he just didn't care. Sorun wasn't so sure why. Because he hadn't known them? Because Finitevus was willingly acknowledging he'd done wrong and would stop? Because they both knew each other now and had *some* kind of bond? He didn't know.

Maybe it was because, deep down, Sorun really didn't want to kill Finitevus. Didn't want to add anymore pain in the world and actually did believe Finitevus' words promising self change. He didn't even know if it was the right thing to do, letting him walk away without any consequences, but then again maybe living with all he'd done was punishment enough. If he even cared. Either way Sorun wasn't in a place to say. And at the end of the day, he didn't much care.

"... We should be getting back, shouldn't we?" Finitevus voiced. Dragged from his thoughts, Sorun looked tot he side at the echidna, spotting his yellow irises looking right at him. "We've work to finish, after all."

"Yeah." Yamato was already pulled from its scabbard in preparation to cut a cross in front of them. "Yeah, I know."

As the portal was formed in front of them, a small, almost inaudible snort left Finitevus. "You were truly going to kill me?"

"Single long-distance cut to remove your head while your back was turned was the plan," Sorun said in a quiet, honest voice. "Woulda been quick. Not really one to prolong suffering."

"Hm." Closing his eyes, Finitevus began stepping towards the portal. "Betrayal doesn't feel very pleasant from this end," he said. Sorun began following closely behind him.

"No, I imagine it doesn't."

A/N- I liken the way Sorun's kind of cool with Finitevus despite all the diabolical stuff he did to people to be like the way Gon from HXH is friends with genuine serial murderers who he knows have killed people but doesn't really care because said killers helped him out some so he likes them. I'm not even talking about Killua, I'm talking about people like the hair-eating guy they met during the Greed Island arc. Dude was an actual psychopath that tried killing Gon and at the end it was all smiles and waves because he helped out with their training.

There's something not right with Gon.

Chapter 77

Recursion Error

Episode 77- Go for gold

When it was all said and done the act of constructing the tower meant to be used to attract all the Chaos Emeralds in the world to bring them all into one spot had gone without a hitch. It'd been constructed right in the middle of New Mobotropolis without interruption, and it had even been activated without a single issue whatsoever.

It hadn't even been that impressive of a showing, either. It'd been the exact opposite of what Sorun saw whenever he saw the seven Emeralds fly off into the distance whenever they were used. They'd simply flew in from the horizon from varying directions, gathered around and floated in a circle around the tip of the tower, and when it had been shut off all seven gems simply fell down to the ground without any fanfare whatsoever. Sorun was pretty sure it hadn't even taken five minutes, not that he'd been bothered to count.

Sorun couldn't even remember the last time something went so perfectly right.

What was supposed to happen then was that they were to store the seven Emeralds away for that hypothetical "in case we need them" scenario they'd kept talking back and forth about. By a stroke of luck Nicole had trusted Sorun with that process, and his method for doing that had just been to give the Emeralds to Finitevus. And as Sorun stood there in the makeshift lab made for Finitevus in the underground bunker, hands crossed with his back leaning against the examination table, he was wondering what was taking the albino echidna so long to complete that other task he'd asked him to perform.

Just when he was wondering that, the telltale opening of a portal made from a Warp Ring opened up in the lab. Finitevus walked straight through, the portal shrinking into nonexistence behind him as he stopped in front of Sorun. Shortly after stopping he'd thrown a backpack towards the human, who'd caught it with one hand and then proceeded to look down through its opening.

Inside Sorun saw seven shining, glowing jewels of various colors and fifty rings shining a golden luster, all piled into the backpack. Enough rings and gems that the backpack itself was practically bulging and threatening to split apart at the seams, but thankfully, it remained intact. Sorun nodded at the sight, breathing out a quiet breath, and then looked up to Finitevus.

"You got these pretty quick," he complimented. "Not bad for an old guy."

"'Old'?" Finitevus repeated, sounding affronted. "I'm not even in my mid-thirties yet."

"Yeah. Old."

Whether or not Finitevus took that for Sorun kidding around or if he was being genuine wasn't made clear from the way he raised an eye ridge at Sorun while giving him an annoyed look. "You're either blind or terrible at insults. I happen to look rather young for my age. Do I truly look that old to you?"

"I... can't really tell with Mobians," Sorun admitted after a long moment under Finitevus' scrutiny. "I think it's the fur. Hides the age. I'm not so sure, though." He often made that mistake a lot, confusing some Mobians for being much older or younger than they actually were. Wasn't his fault; unless they had white hair it was almost impossible for him to tell. And in cased like Finitevus who had naturally white fur it made it all the more difficult.

It had to be the fur. That was the only explanation, because he never had this problem with humans. Either that or Mobians just aged

really well, and at this point he wouldn't be surprised about either explanation.

Finitevus seemed much less concerned with Sorun's lack of comprehending Mobian age, discarding the matter entirely with a shake of his head. "Moving on, I acquired your fifty Power Rings, as requested," he said, gesturing to the dark olive-colored backpack Sorun held in his hand. "I admit I'm quite confused on why you wanted them, though. The seven Chaos Emeralds are obvious enough for the powers they give you, but why the rings?"

"As I said, I need an edge against Enerjak. Just gonna get myself killed if I try going against him with only the seven Emeralds," Sorun muttered, his gaze turning back down into the backpack. "I was told through a friend of mine once that Sonic had this Super form. In fact, you mentioned something like this once."

"Yes, when A.D.A.M. originally used the... wait." Behind his spectacles, Finitevus narrowed his eyes at Sorun. "You can't possibly be meaning to-"

"Seven Emeralds and fifty rings. That's the formula," Sorun interrupted. "That's what Rotor told me Sonic needed to turn into Super Sonic. I'm gonna do the same thing."

It was the only method he could think of when he kept wondering to himself what he could do to gain more power. No matter what he tried thinking of, he couldn't find an answer. The Emeralds were the only way he'd ever gotten any kind of power, but somewhere deep inside he knew it wasn't enough. Whether it be fear of Enerjak or lack of self-confidence, he just didn't feel the seven powers he'd gotten from them would be enough.

A Super form, on the other hand, might be enough. He wasn't certain if it would be, if it would even work or what powers he'd get if he managed to pull it off, but it was something. More power, which he sorely needed at the moment. It'd no doubt be a host a fair amount of unpredictability that Sorun was have to adapt to on the fly,

something he wasn't very keen on doing while fighting a literal god, but desperate times called for stupid decisions in his experience.

Finitevus didn't seem very convinced by Sorun's logic. "Sorun, not just any Mobian can attain an ascended form by channeling so much Chaos energy from an outside source. Most would die trying," he explained in a grave voice. "Sonic is-"

"Sonic is special? He always is," Sorun bitterly stated, sharply turning his head to the side. "Sonic this, Sonic that, he always gets to be so *special* when it comes to Chaos energy and his powers." Heavy resentment dripped into his tone. "Well, if he can do it, then so can I. You said it yourself I have perfect control over Chaos energy."

"You *do not* have perfect control," Finitevus denied. "If you did, you could create whatever powers you wish from the Emeralds. I said you had a higher amount of fidelity manipulating the energies than anybody else, but perfect it is not." He shook his head. "Beyond that you can do all that because you *have no link* ! I've seen that blue hedgehog, albeit at a distance; his Chaos link is among the strongest of all Mobians. That's the only reason he's one of the few individuals alive who can handle going into that form!" He gestured to the backpack. "We already know your lack of a link makes it so absorbing Chaos energy harms you. If you attempt to ascend into that for you could very well-"

"Die?" Sorun asked, immediately silencing Finitevus. "That's already going to happen when I absorb the seven Emeralds. It can't do any more damage. Shorten what little time I'll have left, maybe, but that's it."

"... You don't even know if it will work. Or what it will do to you," Finitevus weakly argued, dropping his hand. "But," he continued with a resigned sigh, "I... I suppose you don't have much choice in the matter. And you're dead-set on this already, aren't you?"

"I told you I was going all-in." Sorun reached down and zipped the top of the backpack closed. He slung one of the straps over his shoulder, and then pushed off the examination table and turned to directly face Finitevus. "This is the end for me," he said to him. "After today I'm gone."

The mood in the entire room had grown somber. Sorun's overall posture had gone slack, his head bowed down with his face uncharacteristically blank. Finitevus had gone still at the sight, face tight and breathing out while darting his eyes away from Sorun's, which were still looking right at him.

"Where will you go?" Sorun asked him. "Once this is over?"

"There were still some ancient echidna ruins I'd been examining before this mess began, back in Downunda. I think I'll return back to there," Finitevus answered. Sorun vaguely recalled that continent, the one that used to be Australia. He still struggled not to reflexively sneer at its new name whenever he heard it. "That's assuming you're successful. I'll give it twenty-four hours after I leave. If everyone's souls haven't been returned by then I'll... assume you failed in stopping Enerjak. If that's the case... I'm not so sure," he sighed out. "I may just use a Warp Ring to transport myself to a different zone entirely to escape all this."

"... You can do that?" Sorun asked, the surprise in his voice masking his solemn mood. "Go to whole other universes?"

"It's not something I *want* to do. I belong to this zone, after all, but if you fail then it won't matter. But yes, I know how to use the Warp Rings to traverse to other zones." A bit of surprise flashed over the echidna's features. "I'm somewhat shocked you didn't know of this. I had assumed you just knew since the portals your Yamato creates runs on mostly the same principle."

"That so...?" Sorun's eyes traveled down to the backpack strap slung over his shoulder. "Travel to other zones, huh? Well, if there was another time, then maybe." He looked back at Finitevus. "So that's

your plan? Hope I win and pick back up where you left off, bug out if I lose?"

"Essentially," he confirmed with a small nod. "You don't sound so approving."

"It's unnecessary to make those precautions. I *am* winning this fight," Sorun claimed. "That bastard'll keep everyone's souls hostage forever if I don't win them back. I will not let that future come to pass, no matter what happens. I refuse." Sorun looked over his shoulder. "Not to mention me losing would mean Nicole would have to suffer being alone in this world. It's not happening. None of it."

He wouldn't have it. No matter what happened. Every single thought inside of Sorun's head kept screaming at him to ensure that, no matter what, he'd die knowing Enerjak would never, *ever* be a threat to anybody ever again and he'd rescue everyone's souls so this world didn't become a graveyard full of husks. By now it was the only thing he could reasonably focus on, and the longer he stood there with the solution strapped on his back the more restless he got. It was a feeling so urgent it had even overridden the knowledge he'd die doing this in his mind.

So no. Losing wasn't an option. It felt like he'd never find peace even if he died if he failed doing this.

"And how exactly do you plan on putting Enerjak down for good?" Finitevus questioned him. "In case you've forgotten, he's a nigh-immortal spirit even without a host to sustain him in the corporeal realm."

"I have an idea about that. Should work. In theory," Sorun said.

"In *theory* ?" Finitevus' tone was incredulous.

"It's a solid theory with a proven foundation," the human defended. "I already know Yamato can wound his true, spiritual form or whatever you want to call it. I just need to get creative is all." He turned

towards the lab's exit, one hand resting on the strap over his shoulder. He let out a short breath, and then looked over his shoulder and at Finitevus. "Just get out of here," Sorun said. "... Maybe never come back to this city, 'cause Nicole might... yeah, just don't come back."

Finitevus opened his mouth to respond to that, but then closed it. He watched as Sorun approached the door leading out of the room, shook his head, and then turned around. "Sorun," he called out, almost quiet enough the teen hadn't heard him. He still had, though, and stopped just short of the door. "I'm sorry."

"..." Sorun's head dipped down towards his feet. "... Word of advice. Stay away from that red guy," he said. "Never did figure out who he was, but you should know I've heard of him from someone else. He knew things about me nobody should have known." He reached out and took hold of the doorknob. "Don't know what it all means, but the guy's bad news. Just thought you should know."

"After what he did I hardly need for you to tell me that." Finitevus had transitioned to looking at a Warp Ring held between his fingers. He'd yet to throw and activate it, simply thumbing at it as he hesitated before speaking. "I meant it when I said I'm sor-"

"Just... just go, Finitevus."

Finitevus clamped his mouth shut. He glanced over his shoulder to look at Sorun's back one more time, and then sighed out loud and threw the Warp Ring in front of him. It hovered in the air and grew into a swirling portal that he stepped through without any hesitation.

Sorun had heard the portal close behind him, with the human himself not making a single sound as he turned the doorknob and opened the door. He felt in part maybe he should have given some goodbye, but a large majority of him just wasn't in the mood for it. Words would have probably been wasted on him, anyways.

The fact he'd said sorry had given Sorun a bit of pause, however. Were circumstances different he may have pondered the meaning behind those words, but now wasn't the time. It hadn't even been a full hour since all the seven Chaos Emeralds were gathered in one spot, and Sorun didn't want to risk all that attention bringing Enerjak to the city and having something happen to it. So he had to leave now, before he had any second thoughts and before something could happen to ruin it all.

In all honesty he should have just formed a portal to Angel Island using Yamato in the lab the moment Finitevus left, but for some reason his feet had automatically walked him out and into the bunker's central room. There was an urge Sorun acknowledged in the back of his mind for wanting to see Nicole one last time before he left, and despite the urgency he'd felt he'd still allowed his feet to walk him out of the lab. When he'd reached the center room, though, he wasn't able to spot her despite looking around. Not in there or the nearby kitchen or even in the room with the green dias.

Better for that, maybe. He wasn't even sure if he could handle seeing her one more time or how he would explain why he had a backpack full of Chaos Emeralds and was leaving. With *her* he would have preferred a proper goodbye, but he wasn't too keen on waiting around. So, upon seeing no sign of Nicole, he reached behind him, unzipped the backpack, and rooted around inside of it until he felt a Chaos Emerald. He pulled it out, scoffing under his breath when he discovered he pulled the blue one out, and then tossed it up into the air.

"We just can't seem to separate from one another," he half-amusedly thought. He caught the Emerald, with the gem bursting in a shower of blue particles and reshaping into the Yamato in the same instant his hand made contact. He swiftly pulled the sword out from its scabbard and cut a cross into the air, which quickly folded inwards to form a portal. He'd made the move to re-sheath the sword, but a voice from behind him had halted Sorun's movements before the tip of the blade even reached the scabbard's opening.

"Sorun."

There was a moment where Sorun had completely frozen when he heard that voice behind him. Trepidation and fear and dread and a sense of longing all crashing together at once that completely locked his muscles in place. Uncertainty that plagued his mind as he wondered what to do. Once the moment passed he let out a shallow breath while letting his right arm go limp with the sword still held in it. He'd taken a deep breath to prepare himself, and then turned around so he could fully face the speaker.

He'd almost been deceived at first that, just maybe, there was a possibility that Nicole was none the wiser about what was going on. She'd been standing behind Sorun in her normal, relaxed pose with her hands folded over her lap, seemingly completely at ease, so he'd assumed that all was well. But then he'd looked up at her face and realized no, not all was well. Not the sad expression her mouth was in. Not the way her green eyes, so sharp and critical, was looking between him, the sword, the backpack, and the portal.

"Hello, Nicole," Sorun greeted. His voice was quiet and betrayed almost no emotion. He found it surprisingly easy to keep calm, whether it be from the person standing in front of him or knowing how the day would end. "It's a nice day, isn't it?"

"Sorun, what is this?"

"Then again," he continued, "I suppose there hasn't been a single nice day since Enerjak came back. What with the clouds and all."

" *Sorun* , what do you think you are doing?"

The impatient tone Nicole had taken didn't even make Sorun flinch. "What does it look like, Nicole?" he asked her. "You're the smartest person I know. You can figure it out."

"I think I 'figured it out' the moment I noticed all the Chaos Emeralds were missing. You didn't even wait a day." Her eyes darted away

from Sorun, towards the open door leading to the empty lab. "Where did Dr. Finitevus go?"

"Left to go do his own thing," Sorun answered. "This whole thing is pretty much done, so I can't really blame the guy for bugging out now."

"Over," Nicole repeated, quietly and under her breath. Her head slowly turned back towards Sorun, and after taking one look at the backpack he wore she looked right into Sorun's eyes. "Sorun, no. No, you can't-"

"If you give me one," Sorun interrupted, making Nicole pause, "just one single, viable plan we could use to save everybody and stop Enerjak, even if it has the slimmest of margins of succeeding, I will close this portal right now and give you back the Chaos Emeralds. But if you can't even give me that, Nicole, then I don't see what other choice I have."

"Choice?" The calm, even expression Nicole had been wearing thus far began to waver. The sad downturn her mouth was in began breaking down further as she took a step towards Sorun. "You can't speak like- Sorun, of course you have a choice!" she loudly argued. "There's nothing forcing you-!"

"I've already lost one world."

That single sentence had made Nicole pause mid-step. Her eyes had widened and her ears slowly began to lower down and fold against her head, while Sorun's head dropped so he didn't have to look at her eyes.

"It still hurts, knowing everything there is gone. Billions of people, gone. Thousands of years of culture and history, gone. Everyone there I knew, my entire life, everything I ever surrounded myself with, gone. It's like such a large part of me died along with that world when I found out, and for such a long time I didn't even know if it was worth living anymore." His grip on the Yamato loosened enough that

its tip scraped against the floor. "All I had left was this world, and at the beginning of all this, when I first came here, I *hated* everything. I hated all the people. The world itself. How... how normal logic just doesn't exist here, how alien everything was. I didn't feel like I belonged. I was more worried about making it back and leaving all this behind even if it meant everyone died in the process." His grip on the sword tightened, and he rose it up so Sorun could examine his reflection on the flat side of the blade. He made a morose sound at the sight. "Whether it be from my arm getting twisted so much it practically flew off or just me changing my mind, I... decided differently. I was such a broken mess after we found out about Earth, but everybody... everybody kept helping me. Things got better, I... I started to like living here. It finally felt like I had a place here. Then all this happened."

To call the life he'd been beginning to make here a replacement for the one on Earth would not only be a disservice to him, it would be completely inaccurate. Wrong. *Nothing* on Mobius would ever replace what he'd had on Earth. Even still, he'd grown to appreciate things more and more, even if everything was different. Living a cozy life here had been nice. The friends had been nice. The community was more decent that he could have ever hoped for.

No. Not a replacement. Life here was just a necessary alternative with the death of the original. But still an acceptable one, if only because the people here he'd surrounded himself with made it such an appealing life for Sorun to live. They made it worth it. But without them, he was back to having nothing. Because of Enerjak he had nothing, all over again.

Sorun looked behind his shoulder, towards the portal that was behind his back. He lowered the sword back down, softly exhaling at the same time while looking back at Nicole.

"I don't want to lose another home," he told her. "I can't do it again. Just can't. So I'm going."

"... You'll die." Nicole had spoken so quietly Sorun had barely even heard her. Her ears were completely flattened against her head, which was bowed down far enough that her hair was concealing her features. "If you take in all that power you will die again."

Sorun turned and took a single step towards the portal. "Doesn't matter-"

"Do not say your life does not matter!"

In the next moment Nicole was right in front of Sorun, grasping his right forearm and halting his movement. It'd been so fast he wasn't even sure if she'd ran or had just teleported right in front of him. He'd wanted to respond, but then he'd seen her face. The way her ears had gone from being against her head to being flared out behind it, like she was incredibly upset. Her expression was anguished enough that her teeth and fangs were visible to Sorun, and it was clear to see how glossy her eyes were.

"Why do you talk about yourself like you don't matter!?" Nicole yelled, her voice full of hurt. "We all helped you because we *care* about you! You're not... you're not something that can just be discarded! Do you really think nobody would care if you died again!? Do you think *I wouldn't* !?"

"..." Sorun didn't know what to say to her. All he could do was look at her with a sad, bordering-on-apathetic stare. Whether it was from that silent stare or her own rant, Nicole's own expression became somewhat subdued as her eyes slowly dropped ahead. And then, before Sorun could do anything else, she'd pulled on the arm hard enough that their bodies were pressed together.

"Don't do it, Sorun. Please don't do it..." Her voice had gone as shaky as her body as she slowly wrapped her trembling arms around him. "I don't want you to die again. Please, just don't."

"I..." Sorun began, hesitating as his mind raced on making a decision on what to do. "I don't know how else we're supposed to-"

"We'll find another way," Nicole said, shaking her head. "Just don't go. I'll think of something, some way we can save everyone without you dying."

"You don't sound very convincing." That'd been Sorun's one attempt to bring some humor into the situation. All it did was make Nicole look worse and pull him closer. "Nicole. I'm going."

Her grip on him tightened. "No. Don't. I won't let you."

He hadn't taken that claim seriously. Just as Nicole being desperate and her just saying anything to get him to stay. But he'd heard that sound - like sifting sand against shards of glass - and took a quick glance around. His eyes widened a bit when he saw sections of the walls and ceiling distending and morphing into small bulges.

At seeing that, Sorun realized that Nicole was more serious than he thought. It was, oddly enough, extremely touching that she valued him enough she'd go that far to save him, enough that his heart skipped a beat. But he'd already made up his mind, and one way or another he was going through that portal to save the world. So he'd made a decision in that moment and decided to commit to it before he'd regret it.

"... My mind's made up." He lifted his left hand holding the scabbard and held it against Nicole's back. "It'll be fine," Sorun murmured out into her ear as he leaned closer. "I'm gonna go fix this and get everyone back, okay? Just don't wait up for me."

"No, no you're not, none of this is okay-"

Sorun tilted his head kissed the top of Nicole's head.

It hadn't been much. By all rights it was the most chaste kiss imaginable, though it had been enough to cause Nicole to freeze up entirely while her eyes had widened as much as her body allowed them. Sorun himself wasn't wholly sure why he'd done it. To catch her off guard was the main reason, a desired result which seemed

much more effective than he thought it would be. And he would acknowledge that, somewhere in the back of his mind, seeing as he didn't even have an hour of life left now was as good a time as any to say "fuck it" and show some affection for the girl he liked. The lack of future consequences made the decision all the more appealing.

In the end, he wasn't so sure how Nicole was going to take it after this. And he didn't have time to contemplate this seeing as she'd completely frozen up as a result of the kiss, after which Sorun placed his hands closed around their respective items on her shoulders-

"Goodbye, Nicole."

- and then promptly shoved her away from him as hard as he could.

Evidently the lynx hadn't expected it, as she'd stumbled back very far away from Sorun with surprise and anguish appearing on her face. Sorun'd hadn't even thought twice and leapt right towards the portal, jumping in and spinning around only once he'd crossed the edge of the portal's threshold. He'd seen that Nicole had already regained her footing and was reaching out towards the portal. Her and the dozen or so pairs of metallic hands literally growing out from the walls, ceiling, and floor, all reaching out in the same direction she was and towards him.

"SORU-!"

Nicole's final cry for his name was cut off when Sorun swiped Yamato in front of him and cut the portal off completely. He landed through the other side on his back, eliciting a small grunt from him due to landing on the filled backpack he wore. The darkened sky painted with black clouds filled his sight, and Sorun found his limbs going limp as he chose to just lie there on the grass, staring upwards as he thought about what he'd just done.

He kissed Nicole. And oddly enough... somehow he didn't feel as happy as he thought he would. There was a warm spot in his heart he could barely feel, but it was hard to perceive past all the sadness.

The fact he was slated to die soon was likely to blame. Strangely, in spite of this, he couldn't feel himself regretting what he'd just done. It was probably the only reason he felt the barest of smiles form on his lips.

At the very least he'd die with one less regret.

"Man. What a dick move. Worth it." His small smile disappearing with a groan, Sorun sat straight up. The Yamato was inserted back into its scabbard, and then used as a crutch to help Sorun up to his feet. *"Alright, let's get it done."*

Finally getting up to his full height, Sorun chose to turn around. A number of tropical-looking trees surrounded him at all sides, and right in front of him was the mouth to a cave. The entrance to the chamber containing the Master Emerald on Angel Island, if he hadn't screwed up in making the portal. Seeing as he recognized it from the first time he was lead here by Knuckles' father, Sorun felt he'd come to the right place. Assuming Enerjak was in there with the Master Emerald it should just be as simple as walking in and finishing it.

... Hopefully he was in there, at the very least. Sorun didn't know where else he would be if not near the Master Emerald in what Knuckles considered to be his home.

"I mean, he should be in there. There aren't many other placed he could... nah, he's in there. Gotta be," Sorun rationalized to himself as he began walking towards the entrance. *"According to Finitevus this all started here, after all. Where else would a god-tyrant be if not sitting on the most powerful object in the whole world? Classic final boss dungeon."*

"Hey, can we take two seconds so I can be the voice of reason here?"

With a barely-suppressed sigh of frustration, Sorun stopped just shy of the mouth of the cave entrance. He turned to his right, seeing his own mirror image, blue coat and all, leaning against the entrance

with his arms crossed and eyes boring straight into Sorun's own. He looked to be frowning just as heavily as Sorun was.

"I'm not arguing this with you," Sorun said to Sorun. "We're going in there and we're killing ourselves with Enerjak, end of story."

"I just want to make sure you realize what all that entails," Sorun said back to him. "We get *one* redo. One. And we already used it." His blue-eyed gaze hardened. "We die again, that's it. No do-over, no reset, nothin'."

"Yeah, I was there when the concept of extra lives was explained. You don't think-?"

" *You're not thinking* , that's the thing." Sorun appeared right in front of Sorun, holding that same dead-serious stare. Sorun didn't so much as flinch as a response, though he did remain rooted to the spot as he listened to him. "You heard Finitevus. Our soul isn't like the souls everything else here have." He walked a short distance behind Sorun, who turned his head to continue looking at him. "Because we're so *different* we don't get to go to the afterlife like everyone else," Sorun said, pacing a short distance while throwing his arm to the side. "No, 'cause we don't have a Chaos Force link, remember? Our soul lacks the substance theirs does."

His eyebrows creasing, Sorun turned his head away from the pacing Sorun. "I know where this is heading. And I won't hear it."

"But you already know it." This was whispered into Sorun's ear by Sorun, who'd appeared right behind him. "That first time we ended up as a ghost was a fluke 'cause of the Chaos Emeralds. What happens when we die without 'em?"

Sorun shrugged Sorun away. "We don't know-"

"Yeah, that's the thing, ain't it!? We don't know!" Sorun shouted. "When the seven Emeralds get used up they shoot off to who the hell knows where. Seen it happen with the portal machine, and if

what the stories say is true it happened to Sonic whenever he went Super. Forget we don't even know if this whole 'going Super' thing is gonna work, if it does have you put any thought into what happens afterwards?" Sorun asked Sorun. "'Cause it's a time-limited transformation. And the Emeralds fly away after they're used. Follow the logic."

Shaking his head, Sorun turned his head back to Sorun. "We don't know I'll lose the seven Chaos Emeralds once the form wears off. For all we know they'll stay in us and we'll be left with the seven normal powers," he argued. "Then we die and it's back to being a ghost."

"Sure, yeah, maybe that happens, or maybe we lose the Emeralds like Sonic does after he goes Super," Sorun said. "Look, we don't know, and because it took us literally dying to get them out the first time I'll say it's probably safe to say we'll keep them. But you need to realize what happens to us on the off chance they do go away."

The mirror image stepped closer to Sorun. Enough that their faces were centimeters apart, each wearing equally grim expressions, with their hair moving in complete sync as a gust of wind blew past them.

"If we die while not connected to any Chaos Emeralds, then that's it. You heard Finitevus when he said our soul can't survive outside a body in its normal state," Sorun said in a grave tone. "We'll be erased. Completely. No afterlife, no walking around as a ghost, not even that black void. We'll just be gone. No different from deleting a save file. We won't exist anymore in any capacity whatsoever."

The possibility was one that had been niggling in the back of Sorun's mind. Frankly speaking there were a lot of unknowns when it came to the Super form. What would happen to him, what happened once it wore off, if he could even do it. But the possibility of dying without the Emeralds, of being erased completely this time around, did cross his mind. It even caused him to hesitate somewhat as he considered the full ramifications. The idea of just not existing anymore; a complete cessation of awareness forever. Something so

incomprehensible he was honestly terrified of the possibility. But, in the end, he'd still spun back around towards the cave entrance.

"What difference does it make? I don't know how it'll end, but the path to get there is still the same," Sorun stated as he began walking towards the cave. "Enerjak has to be stopped, and we're going to die in the process. I don't care at this point what happens after. It doesn't matter."

Whether he ended up back to being a ghost or just being deleted from reality, he just didn't care. All that mattered was that Enerjak died and everyone else got to live. That's all that mattered to him. He was fine with whatever happened afterwards as long as he got that result. Unknowable, bleak fate of becoming nothing be damned.

Sorun watched as Sorun walked off into the cave. He stood there silently staring at his back for a full ten seconds, and then sighed and began jogging to catch up to him. "Alright, fine, guess we're doing this," he said, catching up to Sorun and matching his pace so he walked besides him.

A humorless, bemused grin graced Sorun's lips as he glanced besides himself at Sorun. "Just like that?" he asked. "I would have figured you'd be more resistant to this."

All that Sorun offered was a shrug. "Not like we have any reason to live if this all keeps continuing," he said. "All of our reasons had their souls sucked out." He paused. "Well, almost all."

His heart heavy with grief, Sorun gave an agreeing nod. "Yeah." He blinked, and when he opened his eyes he was left walking alone in the cave. "Yeah, I guess."

A/N- Ironically Sorun probably emotionally abuses Nicole more than any other character in the whole story (I mean it's not like it's intentional, but just look at the moves this guy keeps pulling).

Chapter 78

A/N- Yeah, I know, this one took a while. Some chapters are easier to make than others.

Recursion Error

Episode 78- The king of blocking

Every single step further into the cave became harder and harder. Like the weight of Sorun's feet was increasing every time he made a bit of progress forwards. Breathing was becoming a bit of an issue, too. Not to a point it was detrimental to him, but it was hard not to notice how uneven the breaths had gone.

When he saw the faint, green light up ahead, it only got worse. The weight of his steps and his breathing. Anxiety that had Sorun second-guessing himself and wondering if this was really the right course of action. He only needed to divert his thoughts to the others and what had happened with the word to find the will to keep moving forwards, but it was a reminder he was having to rely on more and more with each passing second. He honestly had to wonder if he'd even make it into the chamber.

By some miracle, he had. He was somewhat wishing he hadn't, but he'd made it. It was the exact same as he remembered it: large, circular rock cavern with an open ceiling that revealed the darkened sky. Completely empty, save for steps in the back leading up a large, stone altar, atop which sat the Master Emerald. And there, sitting right on top of it, one leg over the other, head resting on his fist, and looking *bored* of all things, was him. Enerjak. Knuckles' body, adorning that regal, golden helmet with the white eye lenses that only revealed his mouth. More elegant-looking golden armor that draped his whole form. The blue bits of clothing he remembered him

having was gone, bits of black and red cloth replacing whatever was exposed that the golden armor didn't cover.

Somehow, despite the fact he looked so casual sitting up there on top of the giant Chaos Emerald, Sorun felt threatened by merely being in his presence. Like it was suffocating just being in the same room as him. He soldiered on, though, somehow managing to continue his even stroll right into the room as he continued looking up at the god.

"Hey, Enerjak," Sorun glibly called out, sounding about as casual as Enerjak looked despite how frightened he felt, "your soul-sucking days are... over..." His footsteps slowed to a complete halt when Sorun made it to the center of the room. "Wha... what the...?"

It was only from here that he saw the bodies. Almost everybody in this world that he knew. Everybody in the Freedom Fighters, the Chaotix, he even saw Shadow and Rouge up there. All strung up on the walls around the Master Emerald, arms outstretched and bound to the cave wall along with their feet with what looked like stone shackles that grew right out of the wall. They all had the same expression Cream had. White, vacant eyes. Gaunt expressions, mouths hanging open.

All of his friends, reduced to nothing but lifeless husks. Like corpses strung up all around the single person responsible for all of this, who was looking on without a care in the world.

Sorun, in response to seeing this sight, had made a choking sound and gripped his face with his right hand. A single laugh, devoid of all joy and sounding like he was on the verge of breaking down, left him. He didn't know if there was some proper emotion to convey at such a horrifying sight. What he did feel was an incomprehensible torrent of emotions whirling through him. He didn't even know what to think, other than to hold his face and let out that quiet laughing that sounded like it was bordering on crying.

When his hand dropped away and he looked up at Enerjak, Sorun's mouth was formed into a shaking, broken smile. In contrast to this was a single tear rolling down his face. That incomprehensible torrent of so many emotions mixed together, of shock and horror and grief, just wouldn't cease and only worsened the longer he looked at those bodies. It was all he could do to make that face and keep himself standing straight. "You... really need to work on your interior designing, you know..."

A moment passed as Enerjak regarded him. In the second moment, his form straightened up a bit, and his head left his closed fist, as if he was suddenly intrigued by something. "Sorun...?" he confusedly called out, in a voice that somehow was Knuckles' but sounded nothing like him. Like the *way* he said the words were wrong. "You remained on Mobius...?"

It was Sorun's turn to look confused. "Sonic or the rest really never told you guys what happened?" He reached up to wipe the errant tear away from his face. The longer he looked at all his friends' bodies strung up on the wall, the more that intense, ineffable horror he felt faded, quickly being replaced by growing anger. "Well, whatever," he grunted out, harshly flicking the tear onto the ground. "Yeah. I stuck around."

"Really now..." The tone Enerjak used was one mixed with intrigue and amusement. Like all that Sorun amounted to for him was an interesting thing to pass the time and nothing more. Even the way he tilted his head and gave him that lopsided smirk he wore did nothing but aggravate Sorun. "I have to wonder why your soul wasn't collected with the rest when I willed it. Well, it's no matter."

The moment that final syllable left his mouth he was in front of Sorun. There'd been no movement on his part, not even a flash or any other visual cue to indicate he'd teleported. He'd just gone from sitting on the Emerald to standing right in front of Sorun in that brief of an instant. In response, Sorun's breath choked in his throat, and his grip on the Yamato, his only comfort in this nightmare, tightened. A very heavy sense of dread and fear swam through his whole body

at seeing the golden-garbed echidna in front of him, and he found he wasn't able to move his feet.

"It was good seeing you again, Sorun, but I don't really want you around." His grin widened as Enerjak extended his open right hand onto Sorun's chest. "Just give it over and I'll put you up on the wall with the others. There's an open spot next to Sally that you'd be perfect for."

Sorun stared down at the hand resting on his chest, breathing heavily and trembling slightly as he watched, too afraid to do anything. He expected his whole world to go dark any moment now, for him to lose all sensation or to collapse, but, surprisingly, nothing happened. As the seconds ticked by he found his breathing began to normalize, and when he saw Enerjak give a small frown all the confidence he'd immediately lost when Enerjak appeared in front of him began to slowly return.

"... Where is it?" Enerjak asked, sounding less intrigued and more confused now. "Your soul, I can't... why can't I find it?" he muttered, more to himself than Sorun. His frown tightened and his fingers seemed to strain, but nothing happened. "I can't... it's so faint I'm not even sure if it's you I'm feeling or the energy of those I already have within me. It's like trying to grasp a single molecule..." His helmeted eyes turned to Sorun. "Do you even *have* a soul?"

"Th-that's... the big question, ain't it...?" Sorun hadn't meant to stutter when he said that. What should have been a cheeky remark came out more as a frightened question. He was sure he looked equally as foolish as he sounded with the cold sweat he'd broken out in and the way he was still trembling. He mentally cursed himself in shame when Enerjak made an amused "hmph" sound, smirking at him in contempt.

"Well, you always were an odd one. Somehow I'm not surprised." He pulled his hand away from Sorun's chest, letting the human take in the breath he didn't even know he'd been holding. "Well, whether you truly are soulless or it's just that pathetic I can't even see it, it

doesn't matter too much. Maybe it's fortunate you happened by after all." He turned around and began to walk towards the altar's steps. "Maybe you could give me some feedback? The only other person I can think to ask is Finitevus, and I still haven't caught that rat yet."

"Feedback...?" Sorun repeated in a quiet, disbelieving voice. "You-you want to know what I think about all this...?"

"But of course. An outside perspective would be refreshing." Enerjak's foot touched down on the altar's first step. "I mean, you were always such a card, so I figured you'd have something memorable to say."

"What exactly am I supposed to say?" As he watched Enerjak ascend the steps, Sorun found that his voice returned to him as his anger began resurfacing. "You stole the souls of every single living thing on this planet! What, were you expecting praise from me!?"

A sigh left Enerjak, and he stopped ascending the steps halfway up. "Don't you think it's so interesting I was able to do all this with a mere thought and wave of my hand? Not even that insane man Eggman could do all this. Oh, he wanted to, and he certainly put the effort in. Even came close a few times. But I just find it... well, comical, really, how easy it was for me to do it." He turned around, lowering himself and sitting down on the steps as he looked down at Sorun. "But what else could one expect from the great Enerjak?" He leaned forwards a bit, resting his chin on the back of his hand. "But really, I genuinely am curious. I haven't had anybody else to talk to in days, after all."

"There aren't words for what I'm feeling about all this," Sorun said. "What do you even want me to say? Something creative? What, you think I have some deep, provocative thought over the fact you stole every soul in the whole world!?" he yelled at him. "What kind of messed up logic are you even using that made you think this was such a good idea!?"

Enerjak frowned a bit. "You know, if I really wanted to just explain the 'why' of it, I could just bring one of the others back and tell them.

Seeing as your existence is hindering on how amusing this conversation is I'd switch up the subject."

"Well, that's just too bad. I'm not giving you what you want."

The frown lessened. "What cheek. From an amoeba like you of all things. Fine. I suppose you've earned an answer for getting this far." His head tilted up towards the open ceiling that revealed the darkened sky. "The fact of the matter is this world suffers a shortage of capable leaders."

"Oh, don't you dare start on this path..." Sorun angrily ground out. "Let me guess, 'cause I already see where this is going. 'I'm all-powerful, I'm all-knowing, I'm the only person in the whole world who's qualified to lead civilization into a golden age because I'm some random narcissist with godly power.'"

"It's not narcissism. It's fact," Enerjak snapped, looking back down at Sorun. "This world is in ruin because of the decisions everybody who had any amount of control made."

"It's not even that apocalyptic of a world!" Sorun yelled out. "It's post-post-apocalyptic if anything! It isn't... I mean it's not *great* out there, but it's pretty far from bad!"

"Is that really how you see it? My entire species-"

"Oh my god, *shut up* about the echidna," Sorun said in an exasperated tone. "I get it. You guys had the whole civil war because half of you want to be insane evil cyborgs. A lot of your kind died because of that and a whole lot of other reasons. Have you ever thought and stopped to think that there's other people on the planet with their own problems?"

"Fine, then why don't we talk about *other* people?" Enerjak challenged. "An insane madman that brought the entire world to heel using machinery, killing who knows how many along the way? A violent species dependent on technology that waged brutal war

against Mobians, who only managed to survive because one of their own helped the Mobians before betraying them. An entire republic of complacent Mobians relegated to a single, technology-fueled-"

"This is the technology thing all over again!" Sorun interrupted. "Just because you don't like it-"

Golden bolts of electricity arced out of Enerjak's body and struck the stairs around him. A deep grimace settled over the echidna's features at the same time, causing Sorun to go completely silent as Enerjak rose up into a standing position.

"Technology... is a sin," he plainly stated as the golden arcs settled. "Every unfortunate circumstance that has ever plagued this world has been a result of an abuse of technology and inept leaders. Weapons of mass destruction. Tools of conflict. Machines of war. Metal that corrupts flesh. I simply wish to create a world devoid of these problems." He turned around and began to ascend the steps leading up to the Master Emerald. "A world rid of technology's corruptive influence. A unified world without war. A peaceful world rid of unnecessary deaths. It will be a perfect world. A utopia." He stopped right in front of the Master Emerald, and then turned around to look back down at Sorun. "I'm the only one capable of turning this world into a paradise."

The look Sorun gave him was beyond skeptical. "You? Make a paradise? Out of all this?" A thrust his open hand out to the bodies hung up on the wall. "How does hanging up all our friends' soulless bodies up on the wall like you're some kind of sick trophy collector fix anything!? What were you even thinking!?"

"It's their fault to begin with. All of them." Enerjak's features thinned as he turned to the motionless Mobians hung on the wall. "I gave them, all of them, everything I had before I was Enerjak, and when I finally presented a solution to fixing it all what did they do? Oppose me? Try to take away my power?" He made a sneer in contempt at them. "Some 'friends'. What 'loved ones' they all turned out to be. Because of a mere disagreement they tried to strip me of my power

and deprive the world of its one and only savior." He turned his head back to Sorun. "They betrayed me. They all did. It's only out of respect for what they *used* to mean to me that I allow them to be reminders to me for why I do this. And I have plans for them regardless."

The anger inside of Sorun became scalding the longer he listened. It was all he could do to maintain enough control not to rip Yamato out from its scabbard and try cutting Enerjak right now, but through it all he managed to stay his hand. "And just what exactly do you plan on doing?" Sorun asked. "You really think you're the one to fix this whole world? How?"

"Because I'm Enerjak. What other reason could there possibly be?" he scoffed out. "I can provide everything needed without the use of technology. I can tend to the needs of those that require healing with a mere thought. Modern 'conveniences' will be unnecessary in a completely peaceful world under my watch. Information and history can all be dictated by me. What use is there of history in a never-changing utopia, and what is there to know outside of what is needed to exist in my world? And on the off chance any seditious ideas or persons arise it can simply be stomped out and eliminated with my power."

"You would honestly set this world back in the dark ages?" Sorun asked, voice in a mixture of disbelief and anger. "You'd abolish all technology and keep the world in ignorance just to keep everyone under your thumb?"

"A *peaceful* world. One where nobody has to needlessly die. It's for their own good in the end," Enerjak claimed. "And I'm *eternal* , Sorun. Immortal, thanks to my power. I'll watch over this world until the end of time if need-be if only to ensure this peaceful world I'll have created will remain for all time."

"He's nothing but an insane luddite that thinks he's better than everyone because of his power," Sorun heatedly thought. That's all he could see when he looked at Enerjak. A tyrant that wanted to

dictate the entire world. Somebody who wanted to control everyone's ways of life because he considered himself to know better. Somebody who hated technology enough and saw it as such a genuine threat he'd completely destroy it all for his new world order.

An abolishment of all technological and cultural progress. Intellectual suffocation. An entire world kept in ignorance all for an idea of "peace" that came from the same person that stole the souls of every person on the planet. Sorun absolutely refused to let someone like that have any iota of influence in the world. He didn't even want him to exist anymore.

"You would do nothing but stagnate all of civilization. That's all you would accomplish," Sorun claimed, voice having gone quiet. His body posture had gone more relaxed, though his blue eyes were still smoldering as he looked up at Enerjak. "You'd keep the entire world in a state of limbo where nothing would ever change just because it's 'for the best'? Because you said so? You're not even giving anybody any say or choice in this; it's all nothing but slavery you're trying to pretty up with noble intentions. You're no better than Robotnik."

"I am *nothing* like him," Enerjak hotly claimed. "He sought to rob everyone of free will just for his own benefit! I'm doing this for the benefit of everyone in the world!"

"They can't even decide of themselves if it's good or not! You're taking that choice away from them! None of your plans factor in their consent!"

"What use is there for free will if I make a world where everyone is content to begin with!? They've clearly abused it with all the suffering this world has seen!"

Sorun's teeth clamped down in both anger and revulsion, with a low hiss breezing past his teeth as he breathed out. "And just how," he asked, "do you plain on maintaining such a world? Omnipotent or not, you're just one person."

Enerjak's head picked up, like he'd just realized something. His mouth was set back in a neutral expression, and he'd made a small "ah" noise, almost in remembrance. "Yes, I knew I was forgetting to mention the crucial point in my vision. I'm so glad you reminded me." He lifted his right hand up. "Perhaps once you see what I have in mind you'll shift your position on the matter."

His fingers snapped. At the exact same moment, numerous golden circles had instantly appeared all around the tall altar Enerjak stood on. Portals, Sorun had realized when he saw figures begin to step out of them. The same bipedal monsters made from golden energy weaved like threads he'd seen before, with the colored spheres in their chests. Dozens of the things, all of which stepped out of the new portals Enerjak had created. They closed soon after, leaving all the creatures standing motionless around Enerjak as gestured out to them.

"These are my answers to your question. It's admittedly a problem I anticipated ahead of time," he told Sorun. "Even with all my power, I'm unable to make lifeforms capable of independent thought and actions on my own. It's how it should be. Only life should create life. Another taboo technology breaches." His face soured at the mere mention of technology. Sorun felt even more anger spike in him. "Making vessels that can be inhabited by already-formed souls is another matter entirely, however. Though these creatures you see before you are all... well, prototypes, I suppose you could say. Rudimentary proofs of concept, but nothing close to actual completion. Until now, at least."

Once again, he snapped his fingers. In front of Sorun's eyes all the golden thread monsters began to unravel, like balls of yarn being pulled apart. The golden threads of energy all snaked through the air and towards Enerjak, dissolving and reabsorbing into his being. The colored spheres acting as their cores all likewise flowed towards him, seemingly melting through his body and disappearing within him. By the end all that was left was one single creature. One that had a bright blue sphere as its core.

"It's actually fortunate you happened by at this time now that I realize it," Enerjak claimed as he pointed his hand out towards the last monster. "I finally created something I'm satisfied with that meets my vision just last night. I've reabsorbed every single one of the inferior versions I've ever made with the exception of this one before you, just so you can see."

Enerjak's hand began to glow. The golden threads making up the creature began to glow brightly, brightly enough that its entire form was concealed by the corona of energy it began emitting. Sorun was actually forced to close his eyes due to the brightness, and even then he was able to make out a silhouette due to the intenseness of the light shining through his eyelids. Fortunately, it died down after only a few seconds. But when Sorun opened his eyes to see just what had happened, he found himself wishing he'd never opened them back up to begin with.

The golden creature that had been standing near Enerjak was no more. In its place was something whose shape resembled a Mobian. And as far as Sorun saw, that was *all* it resembled. The size and shape was there, but there was no fur. Its skin was nothing but a smooth, silvery surface, more like a robot than an organism, but there were no visible seams as far as Sorun saw. Just a creature of completely smooth, silver skin and absolutely no features on its face save for the eyes. No nose or even a mouth. Just eyes colored in a solid, glowing blue that looked down at Sorun with what he perceived as malicious intent.

That wasn't what horrified Sorun, though. What horrified him was that he recognized this thing. There was something familiar about the blue of its eyes, the pair of glowing lines going down its torso, and the rings around its ankles. And atop its head was a silvery growth perfectly blended into its head that looked like the exact same haircut of someone he knew very well. Even the way it was standing, that stance, seemed familiar to Sorun.

"S... Sally...?" Sorun mumbled out in shock, taking a step back as he looked up at the thing above him.

"SSSZ-Z-Zall *ll* ..." The *thing* that looked like Sally spoke with a voice that barely even sounded like hers despite the lack of a mouth. It was so high-pitched and distorted it sounded less like a person and more like a dying speakerphone. "Z-Z-Zal- ZZ- Sal-Szal..."

Its distorted speaking and the small amount of twitching it was displaying caused a small, dissatisfied frown to go over Enerjak's lips. "Well, perhaps there are still some flaws I've yet to iron out. As close to perfection as I am, even I am not perfect." His gaze shifted to Sorun. "But isn't it beautiful? A faithful servant, dominated completely to my will and sustained with my power? Requiring neither rest nor food, able to carry out its responsibilities for the rest of eternity?"

He flicked his hand towards Sorun. As if it were obeying some invisible order, the silver monstrosity that looked like Sally let out a high-pitched, stuttering noise and leapt through the air and towards Sorun. Sorun, snapped out of his shock from the silver creature falling towards him with its hands extended, automatically reached for the handle of the sword he was holding with his left hand. Yamato was torn out of its sheath and swung right in front of him, cutting completely and cleanly through the thing in a single swipe.

It hadn't even crashed into Sorun after he cut through it with the katana. It'd dissolved into a cloud of evaporating blue and silver particles, leaving behind a floating, light blue sphere in the wake of its disappearing body. It floated off from Sorun, who watched it depart as he slowly settled the katana back into its scabbard. Enerjak, likewise, turned his head to follow the sphere as it floated towards where Sally's body hung on the wall.

The sphere melted through Sally's chest and disappeared into her body. There was a moment where all was quiet and motionless, and then she gasped out loud. Life returned to her face and her pupils and blue irises appeared back in her white eyes as she looked around wildly, panting heavily as her arms and legs unconsciously struggled against the stone restraints holding her against the wall.

"Wha-what's going, I, I can't- what's going on-?" She was cut off when Enerjak teleported right in front of her, floating off the ground. Her face morphed into one of terror and panic as her limbs began to wildly twist and turn in the restraints as Enerjak's hand reached out towards her chest. "No, no don't, please don't- no, NO DON'T-!"

Sally's terror-filled screams were completely and abruptly cut off when the light blue sphere phased right through her chest and flew into Enerjak's hand. She went completely limp, like a puppet with its strings cut, and the lifeless look and white-filled eyes returned to her face.

"Hmph. I shouldn't be surprised that *thing* you carry around is so efficient at dispatching my Prelates," Enerjak scoffed out as Sally's soul shrunk down in his hand before disappearing completely, having been reabsorbed into his body. "Admittedly they're a bit more fragile than I'd like, but it's not as if I can't continue to reuse the souls. That's the remarkable thing about them: all the skills and abilities of the originals without any pesky memories or egos getting in the way. An army that's veritably endless, much like myself."

Sorun stared. His arms had gone completely limp, though Yamato was still held in his left hand. His irises had shrunk to pinpricks as he stared up at Enerjak, with his expression having gone eerily blank. Despite his calm exterior there was a rage inside of him that he could scarcely comprehend, let alone define. A wrath so boiling hot that he heard a dull ringing in his ears as he continued to stare with that empty expression.

"But really, they should all be honored to have the positions I've chosen for them," Enerjak continued, seemingly ignorant and uncaring towards the human teen standing nearby. "My supposed 'friends' deserve nothing less than oblivion for their betrayal, but in this way they get to serve a greater purpose. They get to ensure peace for this world for the rest of time. What better fate could these so-called Freedom Fighters ask for?"

The backpack was shrugged off Sorun's shoulders and into his grasp.

"Though I think there will have to be some changes in my new world. For how violent they've been with Mobiankind I think I'll just do away with the entire Overlander species in its entirety. Perhaps the humans at Station Square as well, just to ensure that meddlesome weed is stomped out for good." Enerjak's turned towards Sorun. "But you need not fear such a fate, Sorun. Soul or no, I'm positive I can do something to convert you into a Pre-"

Sorun's hand slammed down into the opened backpack.

There was a bright flash of light where Sorun had been standing. His entire body alit with a golden corona of energy so intense that Enerjak had grunted out and held a hand up to shield his eyes from the light. As for Sorun himself, he felt surprisingly very little as he was engulfed in the golden energy. There'd been a rush of energy and heat, enough that it had even been painful, even, but soon after a coolness washed over him that oddly left a warm sensation sitting inside of him. An odd paradox that'd put him a bit off at first.

But there was no denying what he felt beneath that. Power. Familiar power.

Bolts of golden energy arced out of the golden corona surrounding Sorun, striking the ground around him in violent torrents as more gold energy rushed around him. Enerjak, for his part, slowly lowered himself back down until he was standing in the middle of the altar's stairs, looking straight towards Sorun with a heavy frown on his face. The golden aura eventually began to rapidly dim down, and then disappeared entirely, revealing Sorun to the empowered echidna. His frown deepened even further when he saw Sorun.

There had been a change. What had once been a head full of free-flowing black hair was now a head of hair that shone a bright yellow color with a golden sheen. There'd been a change with his clothes as well, with the blue, tri-tailed coat he wore having converted into a

gold color. Even the Yamato had changed; the normally dark-blue ribbon tied to the sword's scabbard was now a solid golden color.

Completely disregarding the smoldering glare Enerjak was sending him, Sorun looked down, towards a small divot in the stone floor of the cavern where he saw a small pool of water. He saw eyes that were supposed to be blue, now colored a light teal, looking back at him from his reflection, and then noticed the rest of his changes. With all the emotions he currently felt, he didn't so much as scoff at his appearance.

"Christ, it really is just goddamn Super Saiyan." He looked up from the reflection and at Enerjak. *"All this and still no Devil Trigger. The hell."*

"What have you done?" Enerjak demanded. The confident drawl he'd been using earlier was completely gone. Now his tone was clipped, almost angered. He appeared completely affronted by the being standing before him. "What have you done to yourself?" he repeated, sounding marginally angrier.

"Something profoundly stupid," Sorun answered, tossing the empty backpack away to the edge of the cavern. "I'm so sick of people trying to change this world 'for the better'. People that act like they're better than everyone around them, people who think they know better." His right hand re-grasped Yamato's handle. "All of you people hurting so many others just because you think you're right. You think this world is so messed up it's okay to hurt so many people just to get it your way." Golden sparks were emitted as the sword was slowly pulled out of its scabbard. "Why can't you just give this world a chance like I did?" Sorun asked, sounding genuinely sorrowful past the frustration and anger in his voice as he fully pulled the sword free.

"I did give it a chance. My entire species almost went extinct as a result," Enerjak plainly answered. "Monsters like Robotnik exist because we 'gave the world a chance.' No more. I know what's best

for this world. I am doing what's needed because I am the only one who can!"

"That's not for you to decide!" Sorun yelled at him. "You think you know what's best because you're so all-powerful!? No, you don't! You're just some old scientist possessing my friend that doesn't even remember who he is anymore! Nobody even remembers who you originally were!" The golden ribbon on Yamato's scabbard, seemingly moving of its own free will, wrapped around Sorun's waist. The black scabbard hung off his waist as a result, with Sorun grasping the katana with both hands. "You're just a loser with way too much power. That's all we are, Enerjak. Losers with power. And the world has enough losers without us making things worse. It's time for both of us to go."

"You stand there, judging me without seeing the fruits of my work as if you know any better than I do, and you *dare* have the gall to compare me to you?" Enerjak slowly began to descend the steps as his voice grew more heated. "You? Some commoner from a foreign world? How could you possibly know better than I for what this world deserves, Sorun? You don't even belong here."

Enerjak extended his right hand. From a plume of golden light shining from his palm, an item appeared. What looked like a khopesh sword fashioned from pure gold appeared in his hand, which Enerjak grasped and swung in front of him.

"You could have been glorified for all eternity as a Prelate along with the others. Now you'll go down in the annals of history as a childish upstart who truly thought a bit of Chaos energy would be enough to topple the god of this world. No, not even that. I'll ensure you're erased from this world's memory entirely after you die today." He stopped at the second-to-bottom step, still glaring at Sorun past the white slits in his golden helmet. "You could have finally had a place in this world. A purpose. Now you'll be less than nothing."

In a bright, golden flash, Enerjak teleported right in front of Sorun, khopesh fully extended with his arm and ready to strike. Though the

golden hair hid it, Devil's Body along with the rest of Sorun's old abilities were in full effect from having absorbed all the Emeralds and the rings, so when the strike came Sorun was actually able to perceive it. The curved, sickle-shaped blade rushed towards him quicker than he would have expected even with the enhanced reflexes afforded by Devil's Body, but it was still slow enough that Sorun was able to Trick away, leaving behind a cloud of black and golden vapors that instantly disappeared when the khopesh's blade sliced through it.

Enerjak started in surprise, and then instinctively whirled around. He dodged to the side just as Sorun sliced downwards with the Yamato where he'd been standing, with the human taking a step forwards as a result. He immediately whirled around when he saw the strike missed and, seeing Enerjak charge him with the khopesh raised, rose the sword back up and sliced it back down again.

The silver and golden blades clashes against each other, neither giving way due to the equal strength both of the blades' users wielded. They both stared at each other past the locked blades, Enerjak's face alight with fury and Sorun wearing a passive, yet nervous expression. Golden sparks seemed to pour out from the point their blades met as the two continued to struggle against one another.

Enerjak

The Deific Malefactor

"I'm taking their souls back," Sorun grunted past the sound of the struggling blades. "Everyone whose futures you've stolen. I'm taking it all back."

"You'll take nothing!"

The struggle had become too great, and the two managed to push each other away. Violently. Sorun's body flew backwards and crashed into the altar's steps. Enerjak had slid all the way to the center of the cavern on his feet, holding his weapon in front of him with his teeth grit.

No sooner had Enerjak stopped did Sorun teleport right behind him with Yamato at the ready. Enerjak had smirked, and then teleported before Sorun had even swung, appearing behind the golden-haired human. Before *he* could strike Sorun Tricked again and appeared behind the echidna, katana still at the ready. The smirk disappeared from Enerjak, though he did, once again, teleport behind Sorun. For a third time Sorun Tricked behind Enerjak, though this time the self-proclaimed god shouted out in frustration and swung his khopesh behind him.

His swing had hit nothing but air, as, once more, Sorun teleported away. Enerjak gasped out at this and, sensing a presence above, looked up. He saw Sorun right above him, body twisted in the air and both hands on his sheathed katana as he stared down at Enerjak. The echidna jumped away just as Sorun's body zoomed straight down at the ground with unnatural speed, leaving behind black and golden speed lines in his wake. Yamato had quickly been drawn out in a downward cleave right as Sorun had made contact with the ground, forming a long, straight groove in the stone due to the attack missing its target. Enerjak laughed at the kneeling human, and then extended his open left hand towards him.

"To think you'd assume such an attack would land on me!" he boasted as golden energy gathered in his hand. "Take this! Thunder Arr- agh!"

Enerjak was cut off when three golden spectral swords suddenly found themselves impaling his torso. Sorun stared on, completely silent while Enerjak looked at him with his mouth drawn in a snarl, the energy fading from his hand.

"That's what you get for callin' your shit out," Sorun thought as he re-sheathed Yamato and stood up to his full height. *"Fucker's an amateur. All power, no skill. Like I'd expect anything more from some egghead, and Knuckles always preferred punching his problems away."* His mouth creased in worry. *"He always was a great fighter, though. Quick on his feet, too..."*

Glaring hatefully at Sorun past his helmet, Enerjak reached up and grasped at the hilt of one of the swords impaling him. He squeezed down, causing the sword to shatter into crystalline shards that rapidly evaporated in the air. Before he could move to remove the other two they detonated, hitting him with enough force that Enerjak stumbled back on his feet. As the gaping holes in his torso closed Enerjak managed to catch his footing, looking forwards just in time to see Sorun appear in front of him while swinging his sheathed katana at him.

He ducked his head to avoid getting hit in the head by the sword's handle. Without uttering a sound Sorun swung the sword the other way, aiming for the tip of the scabbard to hit Enerjak. Like the first strike he'd dodged the second, making Sorun's brow furrow. He grabbed the sword's handle and tore it out in an effort to slash at Enerjak, though his blade was blocked once again by the echidna's khopesh.

"These moves of yours... they lack a certain weight to them," Enerjak noted as their blades locked again. "As if they're borrowed. You don't truly own them." He grit his teeth in exertion at the force pushing him back. "Where did you learn this style? I know Antoine never taught it to you."

"At least I've practiced with a sword. Have you ever even held one before now?"

"For beings such as I, practical skill is unneeded. Chaos energy provides all that is necessary." Once again, the two pushed each other away, though this time they only slid back a marginal distance from one another. "Though... your words have merit," Enerjak

admitted with a contemplative hum. "I know what happens if that abomination strikes me. We won't have a repeat of that." He rose his left hand in the air, the appendage roiling with golden energy. "Let me show you... why I stand above all others."

His fingers snapped. Golden circles began to appear all around Sorun, golden lightning striking out of them at random intervals as they began to brighten in intensity. Feeling worry at being surrounded, Sorun flexed at one of his powers and breathed out in relief as the silver wave that inverted the colors of the world around him spread out, making time itself come to a halt.

And then his breath hitched when a golden wave originating from Enerjak spread out, impacting his own wave and causing both to vanish. Sorun was shocked to find colors returned to the world as things began speeding back up to a normal pace.

"Surprised?" Enerjak asked. "You honestly thought something as banal as time itself is beyond my grasp? You won't be performing that again, either."

"He can negate Quicksilver? That's bullshit!" The golden, glowing circles floating around Sorun began to glow with such intensity he couldn't see their actual shapes. Beams of pure white light fired out of them - beams Sorun was able to avoid easily enough by simply Tricking out of the way of where the circles were aiming. He found no respite, though, as an arrow-shaped bolt of energy impacted him in the shoulder after he reappeared at the other side of the room. He frowned, glancing towards Enerjak who was holding his hand out to Sorun, with more of the yellow bolts sailing towards him.

He continually kept Tricking back and forth, doing his best to avoid the myriad of projectiles that kept being fired at him. And it was becoming too much. Too many lasers firing at him from golden circles that kept appearing everywhere. Too many of the energy arrows Enerjak kept conjuring and firing at him. And the echidna himself was teleporting all over the place in the same way Sorun was, sometimes appearing on the other end of the room, other times

appearing next to Sorun in a split second just to swipe at him with his khopesh and teleport away before Sorun could swing back. It was all he could do to simply just avoid the onslaught, and even then he wasn't always successful.

"He's doing nothing but spamming attacks at me, and I just can't keep up." A large gash on Sorun's cheek sealed itself and healed completely before it even had time to bleed. *"What was the point of even going into this stupid golden form? I don't feel any different. It's the exact same speed and strength I had with just Devil's Body - there's been no change. I'm not noticing any difference in my abilities other than the color."* He Tricked away just as a dozen electric arrows touched down where he'd been standing, creating a deep crater. *"So why? What did it do? What changed?"*

A large part of him was concerned that he wasn't compatible with a Super form after all, and all mixing those rings did really was just turn his hair, coat, and powers golden. He'd be incredibly annoyed if that really was the case, and worried, too. He couldn't do anything with his powers as-is if he kept being overwhelmed like this.

"I'm honestly disappointed in you, Sorun. Truly," Enerjak drawled out, sounding about as uninterested as possible. He stood off on the other end of the cavern, near the altar's steps, while he watched Sorun continually avoiding more and more energy projectiles that kept racing towards him. "I honestly thought you'd see sense in what I'm trying to do, but like all the rest you're little more than some short-sighted fool who can't see what's right for the world. I'd hoped you'd at least put up a decent struggle, unlike all the rest, but it seems you're failing all my expectations today."

Sorun hopped away just as a white laser cut through where he'd been standing momentarily. "Yeah, well... I've disappointed every single person I've ever met, so you're not special in that regard."

Just as he finished speaking, more golden circles appeared. This time they were resting flat against the ground at Sorun's feet, and the only reason he was able to know they were there to begin with

was because he caught their glow just on the bottom of his vision. His teal eyes shot down, and then widened when he saw spears made from raw, electrical golden energy shoot out from the circles. He'd managed to raise his sword just in time to catch the spear tips with the flat end of the blade, gold sparks falling all around him as his entire body was thrust backwards from the force of the block. He'd tumbled over and over three times, still sliding back even after righting himself on his feet while looking ahead. To his panic, he saw Enerjak was gone.

He'd heard it before even turning around. The crackling of electrical energy, just behind him. An alarmed Sorun had whirled around before he'd even come to a full stop, just in time to see that Enerjak had teleported behind him. A victorious smirk on his face and a large, golden bolt of lightning held in his hand, twice the length of the echidna's own body. And the instant Sorun's eyes locked onto the crackling spear Enerjak had thrust it towards Sorun's body.

There'd been no time to concentrate on a spot for him to Trick to. The idea of teleporting away from the danger hadn't even crossed Sorun's mind as he saw the electrical spear fly towards him with the intent to skewer him. Baser instincts had taken hold, and, without thinking, he'd dropped Yamato and held his right hand up directly in the path of the spear in a feeble attempt at protecting himself. All this move seemed to do was encourage Enerjak, as he'd seemingly pushed even harder with his arm and rammed the tip of the spear right into Sorun's hand.

There was a sound.

It had been a peculiar sound. A cross between glass being smashed and something heavy crashing against metal. A sound that seemed to come directly from where Enerjak's energy weapon had impacted Sorun's hand.

To Enerjak, the sound was completely foreign, and he'd made a confused hum while turning his head a bit.

For Sorun, it was a sound he was intimately familiar with, and to him it may as well have been the equivalent of angels singing in his ears.

The mild confusion that had been on Enerjak's face turned much more severe when he pulled his crackling spear away and saw, to his shock, there wasn't a single injury on Sorun's hand or person. Not even so much as a scorch mark. He'd teleported away back to the bottom of the altar's steps, frowning greatly as he looked towards Sorun, who was staring down at his hand with a wide-eyed expression.

"..." Blinking, Sorun turned towards Enerjak so that the two faced each other. He had on an owlish, disbelieving look on his face that looked too hopeful for the echidna's liking. He'd made a small growl and threw his energy spear at the human, who only watched as it sailed through the air towards him. Sorun blinked, and then, the instant before the energy lance struck him, close enough that it may as well struck him by the time he made a move, he rose his hand up.

The strange, crashing sound appeared again. The spear impacted Sorun's hand, and, very briefly, a cone of golden energy spread around the point of impact before disappearing entirely, along with the energy spear. Once again, Sorun was left without so much as a scratch. He blinked once more, and then looked down at his hand with a dumbfounded expression.

"Oh. That's what Super gets me. I get Royal Guard," he realized. A small, bemused chuckle left him, and he flexed his hand. "Oh, well, that's it. That's the whole fight right there. I just win."

"What are you babbling about over there?" Enerjak demanded, a displeased scowl forming on his mouth. "You haven't won a thing."

"No, dude, you don't understand. I *literally* just won the fight. It's over." Looking more confident than he'd felt in months, Sorun looked up at Enerjak with a teasing, coy smile that instantly got on the god's nerves. All it did was make Sorun feel more gleeful. "In fact..." he continued, summoning Yamato back into his hands. He stared down

at the weapon for a long moment, and then scoffed, letting it disappear in a shower of golden particles. "I'm not gonna need that until I'm done with you. I'm not gonna need *anything* but Royal Guard."

Spectral Swords? Unneeded now. Spectral fists? Unnecessary. Teleporting, time-stopping powers, regeneration? All of that was useless now that he had this power. And that information filled Sorun with so much excitement that, if it weren't for that display he'd seen with Sally minutes ago, he'd be feeling almost pitying towards Enerjak right about now. But it had, so he didn't. All he felt was glee. A sadistic sort of elation and anticipation for what was about to happen.

"'Royal Guard?'" Enerjak repeated with a scoff. "You always did have colorful names for your abilities. But really, I'm insulted. You gain a brand-new ability from a temporary form of ascension, and you honestly think it will be enough to beat me? Truly?"

"Mm-hm." Smiling, Sorun pointed his right index finger at Enerjak. "Hey, lemme ask you somethin'. What would you say if I told you I could beat you using nothing but dumb kung-fu poses?"

The scowl Enerjak wore worsened, as if he was greatly offended. "I'd say you've finally gone mad and I'm disappointed you think so little of me."

"Man, if that's what you think, then you're gonna be *really* disappointed by what happens next."

And then, Sorun began walking. Not teleporting, not even sprinting. Walking, straight towards Enerjak. There wasn't an ounce of worry of concern in neither his gait nor his expression. His steps were confident, and his expression was full of a smugness that did nothing but anger Enerjak further. His golden khopesh shining in his hand, the echidna teleported in a flash of gold light and reappeared right next to Sorun mid-swing.

In an instant, there was a shift. Sorun had spread his feet out, placing his left hand over his waist, his right elbow pointed towards the ground, and his hand in the direction of the khopesh's edge. At the exact moment the sword made contact with him Sorun activated the new power. The crashing sound was heard again, golden energy shimmered over his arm for a brief moment, and the momentum of the blade was completely reduced to zero, leaving no damage on Sorun.

"Royal Guard."

Enerjak slowly brought the blade back, looking almost dumbfounded at what just happened. Gritting his teeth, he swung again. All Sorun had done in response was shift his body into another exaggerated pose, this time blocking with his left hand. Once again he called out "Royal Guard" as the blade hit, and, just like before, there was a sound and a shimmer of golden energy, and a lack of any damage being done to Sorun's form.

Snarling in outrage, Enerjak teleported away from Sorun. At the same time the golden circles appeared again, all around him in the air and on the floor. Sorun, for his part, merely stood his ground, waiting for the attacks to come. Soon enough a barrage of white lasers and crackling, golden energy lances assaulted him, but with his enhanced speed and reflexes he was able to intercept them all, his hands a blur as they whirled all around his body. When an attack neared him, he'd raise his hand to block it. Like all the times before, he'd be completely unharmed, as if the attack itself was negated in its entirely.

"Royal Guard!" He'd call it out every time he successfully defended against an attack. Unnecessary in all honesty, but Sorun saw Enerjak's ire grow whenever he did it, so he took personal pleasure in doing it just to get on the god's nerves. Between that and successfully blocking all the attacks thrown at him, Enerjak's features only began to become more and more enraged. He'd thrusted his hand out at Sorun, summoning all manner of energy-based projectiles to fire at him. Lances, spears, bolts of energy.

Laser beams with enough intensity to cut through buildings with perfect precision. Energy spheres with enough destructive potential to level towns.

None of it proved effective. There were no blasts, no explosions, no signs of cuts or singes, nothing. No matter the attack Enerjak would summon, once it reached Sorun, the strange sound was heard and the shimmer was seen as Sorun physically blocked, and the attack was negated. As if any attack that power was used on disappeared entirely, like it never existed. Sorun didn't seem the worse for wear, and grew more and more confident with each attack negated. And he kept calling the name of the power out, over and over, which only served to annoy and enrage Enerjak even further the longer this went on.

"Royal Guard! Royal Guard! Royal Guard! Royal Guard, Royal Guard, Royal Guard Royal Guard Royal Guard Royal Guard Royal-Guard-Royal-Guard-Royal-GuardRoyalGuardRoyalGuardRoyalGuardRoyal-!"

"ENOUGH!" Enerjak roared out. The countless amounts of energy attacks of various shapes and compositions ceased. The bolts, balls, lances and lasers disappeared, leaving Sorun standing across from a now-visibly fuming Enerjak while he stared on with that cocky grin. "Why are all of my attacks ineffective against you!? You should be ash!"

"Royal Guard, son. It blocks anything you throw at me." Sorun un-spread his feet and stood up at a normal height, sighing and running a hand through his hair. "You can't hurt me, Enerjak. Not as long as I have this power."

"Is that how you think it is?" White-gold energy began coalescing around Enerjak's hand as he rose it up towards Sorun. "Well, if I can't attack you, then I'll just fling you up into space. We'll see just how well that insufferable blocking ability of yours-"

Sorun twitched his right hand, and the crashing sound was heard again as well as a faint, golden shimmer momentarily washing over his body. Otherwise, there was no change in him. Enerjak had gasped out in shock, and then made a reaching gesture towards Sorun again. Once more, Sorun twitched his hand and activated Royal Guard, causing him to remain in place.

"Why? Why isn't it working!?" Enerjak continued making the grasping motion, though no matter how many times he tried it seemed to be in vain. Nothing happed after Sorun used Royal Guard. "Why can't I grasp you!? This shouldn't-!"

"You don't seem to get how this works." The cocky grin fell off of Sorun's face entirely. His expression had gone back into a cold, apathetic glare. "Royal Guard completely negates any action I construe as an offensive action against me. Everything from physical to energy to mental attacks, to even trying to telekinetically grasp me. Royal Guard blocks *everything* . There's not a single ability in your arsenal that can get past it. Royal Guard overrides your omnipotence." He glanced down at his right hand. "It comes with its caveats, of course, but for someone like me it's a non-issue."

Enerjak's breathing grew heavier. His arms began shaking in fury, and his teeth were gritting down hard. "I won't hear another word of this," he growled out. The white-gold energy roiling over his hand turned into a green color. "Just disappear already."

There was a small, tingling sensation Sorun felt on his hand. One that almost felt like it was burning if he really concentrated on it. When he looked back at his hand, he saw a green spot on the back of it. Green energy that was trying to eat away at his flesh, like acid eating away at some material. The spot wasn't growing, however. It looked like it was trying to, but the green spot would continuously grow and shrink at a rate that it never expanded beyond a spot on the back of his hand about the size of a coin.

"Why aren't you disintegrating!?" Enerjak roared out at him.

"Ultra high-speed regeneration sure is a fun power, ain't it?" Sorun looked up at Enerjak, and then flicked his hand. There was a gold shimmer, and the green spot disappeared. "Also Royal Guard."

Before Enerjak could vocalize his outrage, Yamato appeared in Sorun's grasp. He Tricked away, disappearing from Enerjak's sight who'd instinctively leapt forwards to avoid the edge of the supernatural katana cutting through his back. He whirled around to face Sorun, who was staring directly at him as he slowly sheathed the blade.

"If it hasn't sunk in yet, you're going to die here," Sorun told him. "No ifs, ands, or buts about it. You're done. Get it?"

"I know that golden form well," Enerjak stated. How sounded unsettled, deeply so, and there was a frantic edge to his voice. "It's similar to the one Sonic bore in the past, and I know it's temporary. I can just simply leave-!"

"What, and leave your precious Master Emerald all alone with me? The source of all your power?" Sorun interrupted, causing Enerjak to freeze. "I wonder how much damage I could do to it? I'm a pretty creative guy." He slowly began to walk forwards towards Enerjak, who had begun shaking. "Just admit it." Eight golden swords began spinning around Sorun. "There's no running from this."

He Tricked in front of Enerjak, who himself had teleported away to avoid the spinning swords around Sorun. He'd frowned as a result, and then willed the eight swords to pause in place and close in on him. As Enerjak charged an attack of his own in his hands the swords shot outwards, one of which impaled Enerjak right through his shoulder, causing him to shout out. Before he could reach up to take it out the sword detonated, and in a gravity-defying act Enerjak's body was lifted up into the air. He let out a cry of surprise at this, and just barely managed to twist his body out of the way when Sorun Tricked right next to him and swung his sword. He teleported again to get away form Sorun, appearing back down in front of the altar's steps.

Panting heavily, more out of worry than exertion, Enerjak thrust his hand out. "Help me!" he bellowed out, his hand flashing as more of the silver constructs he'd devised began to materialize in front of him. A silver hedgehog with red glowing eyes. Another one with blue eyes. A silver fox with yellow eyes and two tails. A silver chameleon with purple eyes. The blue-eyed silver chipmunk from before.

All of them were ingulfed inside spheres of warped space before they could even move. Numerous blue slashes from inside the spheres rent the Prelates apart, leaving behind the glowing cores to float away.

"Relying on numbers isn't gonna save you from me, Enerjak!" Sorun called down from above, Yamato held in his hands. He teleported right next to the growling echidna, who blocked his sword strike with his khopesh.

Snarling out in rage, Enerjak began slashing at him with the khopesh. The movements themselves were frenzied, heavy swings behind large arm extensions as Enerjak swung that blade seemingly as fast as he could manage. No skill or thought put into the attacks themselves. They were swings full of raw desperation that almost matched the raging look he had on the part of his face that was exposed by the helmet. Rage that only increased every time Sorun used Royal Guard to block a strike.

"Why!? What right do you have!?" Enerjak screamed at him. Sorun's response was to continually stare at him, silent and with that cold expression as he almost casually blocked every single strike of his khopesh with the back of his hand. "What right!? That look you're giving me says it all!"

Four golden swords appeared behind Sorun. They each began swinging at Enerjak in slashing patterns that varied between the swords. Random swipes and jabs that forced Enerjak to defend himself with the khopesh as he began backing up.

"You say I've stolen this world's future, but you're the one who's taking it! I'm the only one who can save this world's future! You think you know better!?" The four swords swung around and under towards Enerjak in a vicious, slashing uppercut. Four consecutive upward cuts pushed Enerjak all the way up into the air, who was still pursued by the now-spinning swords. "How could anybody who wields a demon as a weapon be any kind of savior!?" He continued to scream as he did his best to deflect the spinning swords with his khopesh. "The eyes! I see them, Sorun! I SEE THEM!"

One of the spinning swords nailed Enerjak in the back. For a single moment gravity lost all meaning for Enerjak, and he was flung higher up into the air with his back facing the ground. The four swords continued to fly into and cut him, again and again with each hit raising him back into the air when he began to fall. When he moved his arm to try and intercept the swords with his khopesh, their movements shifted, the four swords tilting diagonally so that their tips touched. The four swords spun towards Enerjak in tandem, like a giant, spinning golden drill that rammed right into him. He attempted to blocked with the khopesh, sparks flying out from where the fours swords ground against the flat end of the blade, but it proved to be too much. The sword was flung from his grasp, and Enerjak was sent flying back - right towards Sorun.

Midway towards reaching Sorun's position, a group of twenty spectral, golden swords spawned above Enerjak in his flight path, all pointing downwards. Just before Enerjak passed under the cloud of swords, they all began raining down. He'd tried his best to twist his body to avoid the swords, though, unfortunately for him, he'd been nicked in the arm by one of the swords. That proved enough for the effect of the Heavy Rain Swords to take effect, causing his body to slow down to the point he almost seemed to be paused in the air. His teeth were grit, with his head looked towards Sorun in what was surely a baleful look, his body shaking as his muscles and divine powers attempted to break out from the pausing effect the swords had afflicted on him.

And as Enerjak floated there in the air, completely helpless while in front of the person responsible for his position, Sorun did something unexpected. He didn't attack any further with his swords. He didn't make any sort of large movement. All he did was continue to stare at Enerjak as he remained frozen in the air, with his right arm outstretched towards him. His index and middle finger were pointed out with his thumb raised, making a large finger gun pointed directly at Enerjak's face. And then, his face still eerily blank with his eyes locked onto the white slits in Enerjak's helmet, he uttered one, single word in a dull, quiet tone:

"Jackpot."

It was little more than a taunt delivered with such a serious tone. Even still, the single utterance of that word made Enerjak's expression grow slack for just a moment as he processed the word. And then, he'd grown angry. Furious. His efforts to escape the Heavy Rain Swords' hold seemed to double in their effort from how much his body was quivering in the air. He was practically foaming at the mouth in rage, snarling and keeping his eyes locked right on Sorun and the finger gun he was making as he struggled in the air.

Of course, eventually, the effect wore off. And the second it did Enerjak, in all his rage and anger, channeled so much Chaos energy into his hand that his entire arm was practically glowing a green color, green bolts continually arcing off of it. He'd still been falling straight towards Sorun, and in that moment of undefinable, pure rage of being insulted on top of everything else Sorun had done, he'd aimed that fist charged with so much Chaos energy downwards and punched directly at the finger gun pointing at him.

There was a crashing sound, and a golden flash.

Royal Guard, like all the other powers gifted to Sorun through the Chaos Emeralds, originated from the same games as all the rest. He recalled hoping once upon a time that this power specifically was one of the abilities the Chaos Emeralds would grant him. Alas, they

never did, and while he got by just fine without it regardless he still would have preferred to have that over some others. And for good reason.

It wasn't a skill of Vergil's interestingly enough, unlike most of the other abilities Sorun had been given. It was a skill of his twin brother. Essentially it was a blocking ability, but in the hands of the right player, it was, without question, the most powerful skill in the entire game series, bar none.

While true that Royal Guard could block all damage, depending on which game it was featured in there were penalties for blocking damage, such as chip damage or an expenditure of a variable amount of energy resources depending on the frequency and power of the attacks. If one were to block perfectly using Royal Guard, however, meaning that the attacks were blocked at the same moment they connected, the attacks were negated entirely with no penalties whatsoever.

But that was only half of what Royal Guard was capable of. Energy from attacks blocked using Royal Guard was stored, and could thereby by released back onto the attacker. Using the same perfect timing for perfect blocks it was possible to expend the entirety of this stored energy in an single attack as opposed to using it piecemeal, which ultimately resulted in a staggering amount of damage.

In the hands of a skilled player, it was the ultimate offense and defense. The entirety of the games could be finished by users of Royal Guard without so much as using a single weapon due to its ability to block all damage with no exception and release attacks that caused grievous damage even to the most heartiest of boss health bars. The cost, of course, was perfect mastery of the skill, and needing to learn the perfect timing required to consistently pull the skill off. For a majority of those who played the 'DMC' games this proved too high a skill ceiling to break through, so they sought other means of beating the game.

For Sorun, who'd grown in enough skill in the past to be able to beat the games solely using Royal Guard just for fun, mastery of the skill had been a cinch. And the supernatural reflexes given to him by Devil's Body certainly helped matters.

The plan had been simple enough: use Royal Guard to keep Sorun alive from all of Enerjak's attacks, all the while storing enough energy to disable him in a single hit of Royal Release. Once enough energy was stored, get him in a position so that, when Sorun did use Royal Release, it wasn't in the direction of all the bodies hanging up on the wall so they weren't caught in any potential blast. He'd managed to do that by successfully stalling Enerjak in the air with the Heavy Rain Swords, so all that had been left was the small taunt.

It was long ago that Shadow taught Sorun against using taunts in a serious fight. Generally he followed the advice, but in Sorun's eyes this particular foe was a special case mainly due to one reason: Enerjak had an ego larger than Sorun could imagine. That much was plain to see to the human throughout the duration of the fight, and in the words he chose to use when they conversed. His demeanor, his goals, it all screamed of him being full of himself. It was a point only proven when Sorun showed off being able to negate all of his abilities regardless of what he tried. The taunt had mainly just served to goad Enerjak into attacking Sorun while he was in the perfect position. An act he likely would have committed regardless if there was a taunt of not, he certainly looked angry enough to try, but there was a sense of personal victory Sorun felt when he managed to say that one word aloud to Enerjak's face. As far as he was concerned that made it more than worth it.

So Enerjak had broken free of the Heavy Rain Swords' hold once the effect wore off, and then struck Sorun. The exact same moment the strike struck was the moment Sorun activated Royal Release, and was subsequently blinded by the light it caused. A golden beam of light so intense he wasn't able to see shot out from his arm, engulfing Enerjak who'd let out a pained scream that was quickly drowned out by the roar of the beam. It'd only lasted for a few

seconds, after which the beam dimmed down at such a rate that, if one weren't paying attention, it would have seemed to have disappeared all at once.

At the end of it Sorun was left standing there, panting lightly not from the exertion of the attack he'd just unleashed, but from the intense rush of having felt all that energy channeled through him and expunged. Like a monetary adrenaline rush, magnified tenfold and only lasting for a brief moment before his senses were returned to normal. He immediately saw the damage the attack had sustained on the cavern: the entrance leading into the spacious chamber was gone. Melted away completely, with light from the outside bleeding through to the inside the cave from the widened opening. The sides of the new entrance were still glowing red-hot, smooth and, if one were to look closely, almost running due to the molten surfaces that were quickly cooling. Even some of the ground leading up to the entrance of the cavern had been scorched by the Royal Release, leaving a long groove of molten glass in its wake.

And then, there was Enerjak himself. He was left stumbling back a bit, mouth gaping in a silent, gasping scream, unable to do anything but stand there. His left side was entirely gone, from his whole arm to the left side of his torso and hip. In fact, there was so little flesh and bone connecting the upper half of the body to the lower half now that it was honestly a miracle the two halves didn't snap away altogether. And the flesh exposed from the intense blast of Royal Release was less burnt flesh and more charcoal now; the exposed side wasn't bleeding at all, and instead was a large, black mass that was crumbling apart in flakes the more Enerjak moved.

Unflinching at the sight, Sorun willed a golden, spectral arm to appear over his right shoulder. The feathered Bringer Claw struck forwards, down towards Enerjak's legs. It struck with brutal savagery, delivering enough force that both legs were completely severed at the knee due to the single punch. The discarded limbs flew away, blood streaming out from what was left of Enerjak's legs as the force tossed him up in the air. His strangled scream was interrupted when

the left Bringer Claw lashed out and clamped onto his helmet, hard enough that the golden material began to crack. The spectral limb slammed his head into the ground, smashing away the helmet completely to reveal a head now slightly deformed from having its skull shattered against the ground. The golden Bringer Claw lifted the body up by the head, and then threw it far enough that it rolled against the ground at the landing and stopped at the center of the room.

A small exhale left Sorun as the Bringer Claws disappeared. He heard a commotion from behind him, confused murmurs and shuffling sounds, and quickly realized the vessels for the souls from the Prelates he'd killed a minute before were coming to. Ignoring them for now, he opted to look out towards the mutilated body, slightly quavering as it attempted to move, and began walking towards it. He saw Enerjak had tried to raise himself up, but lacking an arm and legs he kept falling back down onto the ground with every attempt. The sheathed katana in Sorun's left hand was only gripped tighter the closer he got to the unmasked echidna, and he felt something inside of him give an uneasy stir when he saw Knuckles' pained face attached to that mutilated body in that pathetic state.

"How disappointing this must be, hm?" Sorun murmured out quietly, stopping in front of Enerjak. He was lying flat on his stomach, just barely held up by his remaining arm as he glared up at Sorun. Green energy was completely enveloping the half of his body that had been vaporized and what remained of his legs, and Sorun could see the bones in his anguished face moving around as they righted themselves in their proper positions and healed. "How long is it going to take for you to regenerate your body? Six seconds? Eight?" Sorun wondered, pulling Yamato out of its scabbard. "When you're finished healing Knuckles' body I'm separating you right out of it and killing you."

Enerjak's breathing became heavier. Rage, pain, and quite possibly fear was all mixed into an expression of pure hate that was glaring

right through Enerjak's eyes. But when Sorun looked closer he saw, strangely, that he wasn't looking at Sorun's face. He was looking down a bit, off to the side. And when Sorun traced the direction his violet eyes were looking with his own he realized he was staring right at Yamato's blade.

"Those eyes..." he whispered out, "they keep staring at me..."

"... Right..." Unsettled slightly, Sorun brushed off Enerjak's words and looked back towards his body. The half of his torso that had been blown away had already been regenerated, along with his arm and legs. He looked to be almost fully healed. "Looks like you're all healed up," he said, gripping Yamato's handle with both hands.

It wasn't clear what Enerjak's plan was from there. If he'd been trying to somehow feign still being injured despite his appearance or if it was just some frenzied, desperate reaction on his part. Whatever the case, he'd lunged towards Sorun, hands balled into fists with green energy arcing between the two spikes on each hand. A howl that almost sounded deranged left his mouth after he sprang up and tried to rush Sorun with those fists, but, before he'd gotten close enough to strike, something struck him from behind.

Slckht!

Enerjak stopped dead in his tracks, the energy fading from his sharpened knuckles as he looked down. The golden blade of a spectral katana was piercing his shoulder from behind, coming out through the other end. Releasing a shaking breath, he looked away from the Sorun in front of him, spark of golden electricity occasionally arcing over his whole form, and looked over his shoulder to see the golden, spectral clone of Sorun standing right behind him, piercing his shoulder with a spectral Yamato. He attempted to raise a hand up to attempt to dislodge it, but before he could he'd made an involuntary grunt when Sorun, using the real Yamato, pierced the opposite shoulder.

"That's game, Enerjak," Sorun muttered, golden energy flowing down the length of the silver blade. "Now get out of my friend."

Green lightning sparked around Enerjak's form. There was an attempt at struggling against Sorun, but by then it was too late, as he'd gripped the echidna's face with a golden Bringer Claw. The blades were pulled out from his shoulders after a small flash resulting from the movement, after which Knuckles' body was tossed far away as Sorun looked at what was leftover.

It was the same, ghostly golden phantom Enerjak had left the last time Sorun had separated the two. A golden phantom with shimmering skin that closely resembled the armor and helmet he wore, hollowed and empty but still staring up at Sorun. Before it could move he stabbed it through the chest with the Yamato, eyebrows furrowing in concentration as he channeled Yamato's power through the blade.

There was, however, an issue, which Sorun felt through his blade which caused his eyes to widen a small amount. At the same time there was a roar - loud, and so distorted it barely sounded like the voice of a person screaming. There was an explosion of light that originated from Enerjak's ghostly form that was sufficient in knocking Sorun back far enough that he'd smashed right into the altar's steps, causing that small section to crumble as his body bounced up onto the stairs above.

Grimacing a bit, Sorun sat upwards and began lifting himself up to his feet, his minor wounds from the crash regenerating. *"Well... that didn't work,"* he thought to himself, stabbing Yamato into the stairs to use it as a crutch. *"I'd hoped to sever his Chaos Force link to make him disappear entirely, but it seems Yamato can't affect that. Too much Chaos energy for it to work..."* He began stepping down the stairs. *"Fine. We'll do it the hard way. Yamato can still hurt him. And if I kill his spirit, he's still gone forever. It's fine either way..."*

He heard more of the distorted screaming as he came to the bottom of the steps. Enerjak's spirit was still at the center of the room, on its

knees and screaming that distorted wail. Bolts of golden energy were snaking out of its body with such intensity it was leaving grooves and cracks in the stone walls and floor were the branches of energy touched. His hold on Yamato tightening, Sorun sprinted ahead straight to Enerjak, his golden Doppelganger appearing next to him and running right alongside him.

The wild, arcing energy whipping around Enerjak attempted to strike Sorun and the Doppelganger as they neared. There were dodges and teleports from both of them as they avoided the arcing tendrils, still approaching closer to the kneeling form at the center of the room. Pillars of golden energy that completely tore the cave ground up raced towards the two, but those were dodged even easier than the energy bolts.

As the two neared, the ground underneath their feet began to rumble. Golden cracks of glowing energy appeared, Sorun and the Doppelganger looking down in unison and jumping upwards just as planes of roaring, wild golden energy ejected from the ground in long, flat geysers. By now Enerjak was close enough that the pair were right on top of it, though the near-lack of distance made the wildly arcing energy around the phantom harder to dodge. Sorun had been forced to swipe at one stream of energy to disperse it before it'd struck him, and then another as he began falling. The Doppelganger had been struck behind by one of the bolts, causing it to dissolve away in a cloud of energy and electric sparks as its spectral Yamato flew from its grasp.

His eye darting back, Sorun saw the spectral sword spinning in the air and snatched it with his left hand. Armed with both the spectral and solid Yamato in his hands, he began slashing back and forth madly at the energy tendrils as he continued descending towards Enerjak. The ghost was still screaming, its empty helmet with those white eyes that somehow seemed to be staring at Sorun so hatefully staring right up at him as he descended.

All the screaming had served to do was make Sorun grit his teeth harder and harder the louder it became. The density of the electric

tendrils was sufficient that, even with two weapons, he wasn't able to fully defend himself and continued getting struck by bolts. He still fell, right towards the wailing phantom, his body spinning around with the swords outstretched to form a deadly, golden wheel that shredded through everything between himself and Enerjak. But, finally, Sorun had dropped within range. The spinning had ceased, momentum cutting out as Sorun straightened his body with the two swords held above his head. With Enerjak still screaming at him in defiance, Sorun himself had shouted outwards as he cleaved the two katanas downwards just as his feet touched the ground.

Brightly-glowing, golden ichor sprayed away at both sides as two golden, ghostly limbs flew away from Enerjak's torso. The armless body screeched, causing another explosion of light to manifest and blast Sorun back. This one, however, had been significantly weaker, only serving to throw Sorun away by a few meters. The teen had bounced and rolled over the ground, the spectral Yamato shattering and evaporating away while the real one had impaled its blade in the ground in front of him after he came to a stop.

A short huff left Sorun. The pain had almost-instantaneously been offset by the regeneration, but exhaustion was beginning to plague his senses, and the edges of his vision were growing slightly darker. Thankfully, at least, his ears weren't being assaulted by the screaming anymore, and when he looked up, he saw Enerjak was still there. The arms he'd removed, interestingly, weren't regenerating. The disarmed shoulders just continued to bleed that golden fluid as their owner kneeled there, still and staring towards Sorun.

"You..." His breathing becoming heavier, Sorun, with some difficulty, planted his knee on the ground. "You're not going back. You're not going anywhere." He pushed himself up off the ground, dragging his feet towards Enerjak while also tearing Yamato out of the ground as he passed it.

If Enerjak even had the capacity to respond, it didn't use it. That ghostly, armless visage just continued to sit on its knees as it

watched Sorun slowly approach it.

"I'm going to use Yamato and its power of separation to kill you," Sorun rasped out. "You're not going back to the Chaos Force. Not there, not the afterlife, not even that void I wound up in when I died. There's *nothing* for you after this."

There was, surprisingly, little malice in Sorun's voice as he continued to approach Enerjak. There was exhaustion, of course, bitterness even, but seeing Enerjak in the sorry state that he was in, Sorun couldn't muster up the energy to feel complete hatred towards the sad thing he was limping towards. Enough that he was able to keep moving forwards with the intent on erasing the phantom from existence, but it didn't belay the pity he felt in addition. Feelings that increased the nearer he got to Enerjak.

"You'll cease to exist. You're never coming back to hurt another soul ever again..."

He stopped right in front of Enerjak. Two hands gripped around the sword's handle as Sorun's breathing increased. Something - some garbled, distorted speech that was almost too quiet for Sorun to hear - left the empty helmet staring up at him, but Sorun wasn't even able to make out if those sounds were words or just random noises. He rose the blade over his head; golden energy began to flow over the sword, enough that the silver blade was completely bathed in golden light with energy crackling up and down its length.

More incoherent, distorted sounds came from Enerjak's spirit. The white eye slits in the helmet were looking up at the katana raised above its head, though without any expressions it was impossible to tell what it was feeling. Eventually, the thing slumped forwards, with its head bowing down as if it was giving up entirely.

"A[illegible]"

Sorun sliced the Yamato downwards. A thin, clean white line that bisected Enerjak's entire body appeared, instantly cutting off the

warbling sound coming from the phantom. It'd frozen completely as small, white bolts of energy sparked out from the seam separating its body in half. The phantom began shaking as the lightning slowly increased in its density and intensity, while at the same time its entire body began to glow brighter and brighter.

Before anything else could be done, there was an explosion of light.

He hadn't been knocked completely unconscious from the blast - Sorun was certain of that much. There wasn't the telltale loss of cognition between losing consciousness and regaining it upon awakening that he was familiar with from having been knocked unconscious in the past. It had been less of that and more, quite simply, that he was getting extremely tired and it took him a few minutes to muster up the energy to open his eyes after the blast of light knocked him down.

When he did open his eyes, Sorun found that his vision was blurry, though blinking was serving to quickly straighten it out. He looked down and, to his surprise, found he was still standing, though rather worryingly it was hard to tell he was standing. The actual sensation of gravity weighing down on him was faint enough he had to search to feel the feeling. Looking beyond his feet he saw the spot Enerjak had been kneeling in before he landed the final blow. There was nothing there now. Just a small crater and splatters of a dull, dark yellow fluid that once held a shining luster, which was slowly disappearing.

It was when Sorun looked up at the sky he saw it, or more accurately *them* . More souls. Enough of the colored, glowing spheres to completely and utterly cover the entire sky, enough that it was impossible to see the sky itself or the clouds covering it. A massive corona of color that covered as much of the sky that the cavern allowed, all floating along the sky, some falling down while others moved on in various directions.

Hundreds of millions of them. Billions, probably. It was hard to count with the limited sight Sorun had, and he mentally wasn't fit enough at the moment to make an honest effort at counting them all. He did note that, under normal circumstances, it must have been a sight to behold. But, as it was, he just wasn't in a state to appreciate it fully.

"Huh. I did it." Sorun looked down, towards his own body. He found it noteworthy that his coat was flashing between a blue and golden coloring, quicker and quicker. And then the gold seemed to dissolve away entirely, solid blue coloring bleeding back into his clothes as he felt his power begin to fade away. Wisps of energy particles were leaving his body and gathering around at seven points around his body, until finally they solidified into the seven Chaos Emeralds. They glowed brightly, and then shot up into the air. *"So that's how it works,"* Sorun thought to himself, watching past the now-black locks of hair blowing in his face as the Emeralds reached the sky, and then blast off in seven different direction. It was just after he saw the Emeralds leave that a sudden bout of weakness overtook him, causing Sorun to fall down to his knees. And then he'd seen his hand. *"Oh dear."*

He only needed a glance at his hand to confirm something was gravely wrong. The flesh had taken on an ashen gray pallor, and the hand itself was littered with cracks along its surface. He even saw small pieces of skin slowly flaking off of the hand in the breeze, and from the corner of his vision he saw more of the flakes near his head, likely from his face. Like his body was crumbling apart. *"So that's how it is."* The arm went slack at his side. *"Kinda... funny how it came full circle there in the end..."*

With that thought, he completely collapsed onto the ground on his front side. He heard a commotion from somewhere behind him, shouts of alarm and stone breaking. The others, Sorun assumed, finally breaking out of the restraints. He was at least glad to hear the souls were returning to their rightful vessels, so he'd at least succeeded in doing that much. The knowledge brought him more peace than he figured it would have.

He heard a single pair of rapid footsteps near him, and then stop right next to his head. His blue eyes glanced up, and met with a pair of panicked, alarmed green eyes. He didn't have the energy to scoff when he saw the Mobian's face. Of all the faces he wanted to die seeing, Sonic's wasn't anywhere close to the top of the list. He'd rather it be hers more than anyone else.

"Hi, Sonic." Sorun's voice came out as weak and scratchy, and he found it a struggle just to speak. "It seems I've made a bad habit of doing this."

"S-Sorun...?" It was almost odd, hearing the hedgehog's voice after so long. And the way he sounded, too. So... disheartened and sad. Sorun wasn't used to hearing him sound like this. "What-what did you do to yourself?"

"I would think it's fairly obvious," Sorun tiredly mumbled out. He pressed his palms against the ground and pushed himself up. He tried standing up, but failed and only managed to roll over on his back so that he faced the brightly-colored sky, his arms outstretched at his sides. "Nicole's going to be upset at me again," he said. "That's all I ever seem to accomplish with her. Make her upset."

"Th-that isn't- you can't- Sorun, what did *you do* ?" Sonic stammered out. He kneeled down at Sorun's side, looking him up and down and ending on his face. "Y-your skin, it's- why are you falling apart!?"

"You... know I can't withstand Chaos energy. And I needed a lot to... to beat Enerjak." Sorun made a sigh, his head lolling to the side. "I don't need to explain it to you, do I?"

He wasn't able to place the expression on Sonic's face. It honestly looked like he was torn between breaking down and shouting at Sorun, and his hands, hovering over the Earthling's form, were shaking in indecision. He eventually seemed to reach an internal decision, and then reached down towards Sorun's body.

"Alright, come on," Sonic muttered out. He pulled Sorun's right arm up and slung it over his shoulders, and then supported the other teen with his own arms as he helped him up to his feet. "W-we're gonna fix this, okay?"

If he had the energy, Sorun would have scoffed. "There's no fixing this," he rasped out, voice dry and barely above a whisper. Sonic began walking towards the altar, where Sorun saw everyone else was, and due to being supported by his body he had no choice but to be dragged along by Sonic. "Sonic-"

"I don't want to hear it," he said. "I just- I can't believe you- what, Enerjak did whatever he did and you decided it'd be such a great idea to go and do this to yourself again!?"

He sounded angry. And hurt, and frustrated, and above all that scared. Sorun supposed that was natural. He doubted they all even knew what happened with the world if they didn't have their memories past when Enerjak stole their souls from their bodies. Thinking on that note it probably wasn't any wonder why Sonic was reacting like this. The poor guy must have been so confused waking up to what he had, probably everyone else, too, and Sorun honestly doubted he had the time to explain it all to them. Nor did he want to, really. He barely had the energy to stand.

"There wasn't anyone else," Sorun informed Sonic in a quiet voice.

"What do you mean 'there wasn't anyone else?'"

"Just... ask Nicole. When you get back," Sorun told him. "I don't think I have the time to tell you."

"Don't say stuff like- ahh..." Sonic cut himself off with a worried whine when Sorun grew more limp while leaning against him. His features tightened, and he shifted his arms so they provided more support for Sorun's body. "Okay okay okay, just, just chill out here for a minute while we figure this out, alright?"

Practically carrying him at this point, Sonic dragged Sorun off to the cavern wall, nearby and to the left of the altar stairs. He sat the human down against the wall, taking one last worried look at him before retreating to go back to the others nearby.

"What is he trying to do?" Sorun silently wondered. He saw the others looking his way, all with their own reactions. Mostly shock, confusion, horror and realization. Mixtures of all those emotions spread out towards everybody when they realized what was happening with him. *"Why do I have to die seeing them look at me like this?"*

The first time he'd died he'd wished he wasn't alone during it. It was terrifying enough dying as it was, and having to do it alone had been woeful enough. But now he was here, dying again, and now that he was surrounded by people he considered friends he was beginning to wish he was alone the second time around, because it was almost too much to handle the looks they were all giving him. The human propped up against the wall that looked like he was crumbling apart. He even caught a few individuals like Tails and Antoine shedding some tears his way.

It was touching knowing he had people that cared this much about him, but he just couldn't handle seeing those expression. Having those faced in his mind as he sat there slowly dying didn't conjure good memories. And Sorun couldn't even do anything about it but stare blankly at all of them because he didn't even have the energy to make his face make any kind of emote. If he could he'd just crawl away to get away from them all, but he couldn't move. He wasn't sure what to make of all of it. The looks, how sudden and jarring this must have been for all of them. Too much happening at once. It was all strange and disorienting, and it made his head hurt.

He heard arguing nearby. His blue eyes just barely managed to look over in the direction, where a blue hedgehog was arguing with a black and red hedgehog. Interestingly Shadow looked even more confused and conflicted than anyone else there. Angrier, too. Sorun wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Explain to me right now-!"

"Does it look like we have time to explain everything!?" Sonic shouted at Shadow. "Look at him! If we don't do something he's gonna-!"

"Why is he *still here* !?"

"It's a long story, okay!?"

Darkness briefly washing over his vision and a wave of exhaustion assaulted Sorun. It came on and off, vision continually darkening and clearing back up. He was fairly certain he was fading between consciousness and unconsciousness, because every time he lost sight and regained it people's feet were in different positions. Or it could be he was just mistaken. Sorun wasn't sure enough to tell for certain.

He couldn't think much past how tired he was getting. How it was getting harder to stay awake, how breathing was becoming more exhausting, how he was losing more and more feeling in his body by the second. How his skin was crumbling away quicker and how the cracks were growing in length and number. The thoughts were significant enough that they overrode any worries he had about dying, the people around him or everything else going on. He was tired enough that he just wanted to close his eyed and go to sleep. And he nearly did until he felt someone shake his shoulder.

"Sorun? Sorun, hey, come on, stay with us."

He cracked his eyes open. Sonic was kneeling in front of him, hand on his shoulder. Less panicked, but still very worried and solemn-looking.

"..." Sorun's eyes slowly trailed to the hand on his left shoulder. "Go away." He tried to brush the hand off of him, but he only managed to raise the hand halfway before it dropped back down to the ground.

Sonic made a sad sort of frown. "Sorun, seriously, come on. We have an idea."

"What?" Sorun looked back to Sonic's face. He shook his head. "No, I'm not-"

"Would you just listen!?" His raised voice seemed to surprise Sonic himself, as he'd looked momentarily stunned before calming down. "Look, I know you might not be wild about this, but just hear it out." He glanced past his shoulder. Near them and ahead of the crowd, Sorun saw Knuckles. He still seemed to be nursing the two stab wounds in his shoulders, and there was still some blood crusted in the fur around the wounds, but he seemed fine otherwise. His face, on the other hand, told a different story. There was a heavy amount of guilt mixed into the sorrow that everyone else around possessed, and he wouldn't stop staring at Sorun. His father was nearby with a similar expression. "Alright," Sonic continued, looking back at Sorun, "w-we can't... we don't know how to stop *this* -" he gestured down to the crumbling flesh on Sorun's hand, "- but we might be able to stall it."

"Sonic-"

"A long while back that Mogul guy, you remember him, the whole prison thing, he got, err, he got frozen in the Master Emerald, right?" Sonic explained in a quick pace. "We talked it over with Knux and his dad and they think they can do the same thing with you-"

"Sonic, I don't-"

"It'll just be 'til we figure something out, you won't even-"

"Would you stop it?" Sorun had tried to sound as loud as possible, but in his state, he'd barely raised his voice above a whisper. Sonic still seemed taken back by it, and closed his mouth while allowing Sorun to speak. "I... no, Sonic." He shook his head. "I'm done. Alright? Look at me." He glanced his grayed, crumbling hand. "I-I can't..."

He slumped forwards before he could finish speaking. The energy to do so just wasn't in Sorun, as by now all his effort was completely just focused on staying awake. Sonic seemed startled by this, scared, even, and after a moment's deliberation he pulled himself back together and reached for Sorun.

"No, come on, you're not leaving us now," the hedgehog said as he grabbed at Sorun's body. He pulled him upwards, dragging - more carrying - Sorun towards the altar steps as he continued speaking. "You just pulled your life back together! Y-you were finally... egh, it's not happening. Not again. We're not letting you die again."

As he was carried up the steps, Sorun found himself thinking about all the ways he could be protesting against this. About how stuffing him inside of a giant Chaos Emerald to put him in stasis sounded like an insane idea he wanted no part of. How he was too tired to try and do anything and just wanted to sleep. How he wanted to struggle in Sonic's grasp to escape, but he didn't even have the strength to speak, let alone move, so he was helpless to do anything.

But the way Sonic sounded made him think, at least using what little thought Sorun was capable of gathering now. How... resolute he sounded. How serious, like he was sure he was going to save Sorun's life. Half of him wanted to laugh, but the other half found itself being cautiously hopeful. Living past this point wasn't the plan. Managing to do so would be... it would be nice, wouldn't it? And Sonic sounded so sure, but Sorun... he was too tired. Too tired to even notice when they reached the top of the altar.

Gently, Sonic set Sorun down next to the Master Emerald. He knelt down in front of Sorun again, putting a hand on the Earthling's shoulder even though he didn't have the strength to look up at him. "Sorun, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Sonic said to him, voice wavering. "Th-this wasn't supposed to happen, you weren't supposed to be doing this anymore, you... you were finally getting happy." He made a choked sound and stood up. "We're not leaving you in there forever, alright? It's just until we find a way to fix you. We'll get you

better and things can go back to normal. You can go back home and see Nicole and everyone else, j-just don't di-"

Sorun couldn't listen to Sonic anymore. Words were blurring together as his weakness worsened. He couldn't even remember most of what he had said, and what little he did remember he couldn't make sense of. It was all just garbled nonsense that Sorun had no choice but to cling to with the last vestiges of consciousness he possessed.

The sporadic blackout that kept playing over Sorun's vision were reappearing again. It was bad enough that he didn't even notice when Knuckles and his father appeared. Standing there, in front of Sorun. Greenish energy was wafting around their hands, and their mouths were moving in sync as the pair of echidna were chanting something. Sorun couldn't hear what. All his hearing was at this point was a low drone.

There was a small jerk on Sorun's arm. He looked towards it, and saw that Sonic had moved his hand so that it was touching the Master Emerald. And that it was... sinking into the large gem. Phasing through, almost, though the actual rock's surface wasn't being disturbed and he could make out his hand on the inside through its green, translucent surface. The green energy from the echidnas' hands was spreading around them, waving through the air and flowing towards the Emerald, which was beginning to glow more brightly.

He was getting pulled further into the Emerald. First his entire arm, and then his shoulder. He wasn't nearly cognizant enough at this point to even feel what was happening to him at this point, other than recognize the darkness encroaching on his vision and mind. The last thing Sorun managed to see before his head was phased inside the Emerald was Sonic looking after him as he was subsumed into the Emerald.

Consciousness had long faded from Sorun by the time his entire body was placed inside the Master Emerald.

A/N- If you really wanna bead on how picky about the swearing thing Sorun is then there's a small detail that he refuses to swear in front of Enerjak. He does this because Sorun's worried that Knuckles would be left with the memory of Sorun swearing, and he's so neurotic about who hears him talk like that that he's borderline obsessive about choosing who to swear in front of. It's not all that important but I thought it was a cool detail.

But anyways, yeah, I gave Sorun Royal Guard because I literally couldn't think up of any other way he could have possibly beat Enerjak. I'll admit it right now, he only won because of that one power. It carried him through the whole fight. And in my defense they never even really figured out how to beat him in the comics. The first time Locke had to kamikaze himself just to stop him and when Silver had to go fight the alternate universe version he basically did the same thing Sorun did but instead of Royal Guard he had telekinesis to fall back on. That's the problem with writing near-omnipotent characters that are so absurdly broken compared to the rest of the cast - you gotta jump through these kinds of hoops just to find ways to beat them.

And to be fair Sonic gets a flat invincibility buff when he goes Super, along with a lot of other plot-convenient powers, so I don't think by that point Royal Guard is that big a stretch.

So that whole ending scene needed a lot of rework on my part. During the whole planning phase of this story Sorun, from the point he found out Earth was gone to now, was supposed to be borderline suicidally depressed throughout the entire duration, and this whole arc was really just supposed to be an excuse for him to finally die while saving everyone in the process. Due to a combination of me wussing out on going that hard on the depression and the story flowing against that concept, the whole idea kind of went on the wayside since the story portrayed him to be getting better to a point he wasn't nearly that bad anymore. I mean Sorun flat-out stating to Finitevus he

didn't wanna die but was gonna kill himself to save everyone anyway because there was no other choice pretty much blows it out of the water. What I wrote was an ending sequence three times longer than what was there, where Sorun was arguing about Sonic that he didn't want to be saved and just wanted to die, and Sonic was basically yelling at Sorun the whole time. I go over it, and then realize that it's so out of place it's almost narrative-breaking, so I end up re-writing it three whole times before eventually deciding it just doesn't work so I redid it entirely. So we got this instead of Sorun arguing he wanted to die because, with all the context the story gave us prior, it doesn't actually make sense he'd act like this. It's not that big a problem, might make things a bit awkward later since I kinda planned around that, but in the end everything should work out.

Chapter 79

Recursion Error

Episode 79- The future sucks

Sleeping was a strange thing. The sensation of drifting off towards unconsciousness, slowly becoming more and more weightless until consciousness is snapped off entirely. You're not aware of the exact moment you fall asleep. Dreams, nightmares, or the lack thereof on either side is never a straight line; rarely is there a starting point, or an ending point, and for most simple awareness over their reality being a dream escaped them barring rare circumstances.

Being stuck inside a giant magical crystal wasn't like that. For Sorun, it was... well quite frankly it was boring. And annoying. He'd been floating, for what was either minutes or hours. In the same way one couldn't tell how much time passed as they drifted in and out of sleep, he couldn't tell how long he'd been floating there. In some... green, vast, empty space, where the only thing besides him were strange, towering crystalline structures that dotted the infinite landscape, with seeming infinite lengths. That was all there was. Just an empty, green space he was consigned to float around in for who knew how long. During what he perceived as his first few minutes in there only one thought had gone through Sorun's mind:

"I'm gonna punch Sonic in the fucking mouth when I get out of here."

The fact he'd been shoved in the Master Emerald without his consent was something that caused Sorun great distress. This entire situation caused him distress, and he was honestly more upset at himself for being mad than at Sonic himself. He knew they were all just trying to help him, and he hadn't been in any condition to actually have any say over what was to happen with him. Maybe he'd even feel grateful to Sonic after a while, assuming this actually

worked and he pulled through, but for now he'd be content at being mad at Sonic.

But, those were thoughts that had only lasted during the first few moments Sorun was floating around in that green space, the only time where he'd had any sense of lucidity. It'd lowered dramatically after that, as if his energy was being sapped right out of him. Ironic, really, considering he could almost *feel* the Chaos energy that saturated this space. Impressive, really, since he wasn't sensitive to sensing that stuff like other Mobians were. Then again, this was his first experience being *inside* an Emerald. He didn't like it very much.

He wasn't sure the why of it. Why he felt so tired here, where even here was, if it was some physical space inside the Emerald or some mental space, what was going on, if he'd actually been successfully put in stasis, anything. If this was just his mind shutting off due to a dying body or something else entirely. Mental acuity would fade rapidly as Sorun would go in and out of consciousness, on and off, and in the few moments where he would become awake before going back to sleep he didn't even so much have the ability to conjure overly tangible thoughts.

That was what it was like, being put inside of the Master Emerald. Floating around in a green space, drifting in and out of sleep, and never being entirely aware of what was going on when awoken because those periods of wakefulness were just too brief. To a point that, really, Sorun didn't remember how many times he'd awoken for what seemed like a few moments, only to go back under to sleep, his body still floating in that green space. He could only recall a handful of moments, though something at the back of his mind told him there were many, *many* more times than just a few. But he never had time to contemplate this, or even try to remember, as he'd go back to sleep right after, and more often than not any potential he had to remember those memories were lost.

And the dreams themselves were even more incomprehensible than his bouts of wakefulness. Flashes of images of things he didn't recognize, nor could barely remember once they passed.

A destroyed city in a desolate world. Familiar surroundings, decayed and dead.

A battlefield littered with the bodies of machines, Overlanders, and Mobians alike. Red blood and black oil both stained the ground. A lone figure stood in the center of all their corpses, purple coat freely flowing in the breeze. In their right hand was sword, a twisted amalgamation of metal and meat. A curved blade fused to a mass of flesh attached to the handle of a noble broadsword.

A tower.

A Mobian. A hedgehog that once likely had such an immaculate coat of white fur, now stained in blood. The body was littered with cuts and bruises, limbs bent and twisted in wrong directions. The face was frozen in a anguished expression, and one of the yellow eyes was gouged out completely. There was a large crater in the chest, where something had impaled the hedgehog to the ground. The purple figure standing in front of the corpse reached down, gripping the white hedgehog's right arm and ripping it completely free of its socket. An item was retrieved from the severed arm: a strange, orange gem, hidden within the glove worn by the arm. The figure in the purple coat clutched the gem tightly as the arm is thoughtlessly discarded.

Eyes.

Fleeting images that held absolutely no meaning to Sorun. Images that a mind in the state of flux he was currently in had no way of comprehending or even remembering. Most of his effort, what little he had to spend, was spent trying to sort through all the madness as he floated there endlessly in that green, empty space.

Of course then there'd been a bright flash of light. The dreams ceased and Sorun suddenly felt like he was falling.

Reality snapped back in a literal flash of light. Following that was the sensation of gravity taking hold, and then Sorun grunting out loud when his back impacted hard, solid ground. The sudden rush of sensations, temperature and smell and actually feeling atmospheric pressure instead of floating in a void, overwhelmed him all at once along with the memories of what happened.

The fight with Enerjak. Him disintegrating. Sonic - fucking Sonic - putting him in the Master Emerald. An undetermined time of drifting in some space, vague memories of dreams he couldn't decipher, no recollection of time. All of it too much, making Sorun's head throb as he reached a hand up to rub at his forehead, though massaging his head went and did nothing towards soothing the migraine he felt.

"What... the fuck *... was all that...?"* Groaning once more, he opened his eyes up. The sight that greeted Sorun wasn't one he was expecting. *"Oh, what the hell now...?"*

His vision was still clearing up, though even now he could see he wasn't in the natural cavern that was the Master Emerald's chamber. This was something artificial. A vast, circular metal room, colored in blacks and gold. Dark and dreary, with little lighting. At a first glance it looked less like a room and more like a gilded storage room. Or a prison cell.

Groaning a third time, Sorun pulled his hand away from his forehead. To his surprise, he saw that the skin on his hand had gone back to its normal, pale complexion, free of the gray color and cracks along the surface. He felt equal joy and confusion, but didn't have the patience currently to contemplate it. "Cool," he muttered out, shaking his head and sitting upwards.

The first sight that greeted him was the Master Emerald, sitting right at the center of a large, circular metal platform they were both on. And unlike the last time he'd seen the Emerald, where it'd been affixed to a regal altar in an almost reverent manner, now it was suspended off the ground by multiple chains wrapping around it that lead to the far walls of the room. And not a single altar in sight.

"I... I got no idea what's going on here? Do you? Not really, no," Sorun muttered to himself. He stood up to his feet, surprised to find that he was able to find stable footing, and then looked closer at the Emerald. "Huh?"

He saw his reflection in the gem's green surface. Everything seemed to be right: same face, same clothes, same blue coat, same everything. There was something off with his hair, though. Still its normal shade of jet black. Still a bit of a wild mess. But for some reason, it was shorter than it should have been. Where it used to reach all the way down to his chin, now it barely reached beyond his ears.

"What happened to my hair?" Sorun asked himself, running a hand through his black locks. "I don't have a single clue. I'm still trying to figure out how the hell I'm still alive."

If he recalled correctly Sonic putting him inside the gem should have just been a temporary form of stasis until they found out a way to stop him from disintegrating on the spot. He honestly doubted such a thing could ever happen, but evidently something worked seeing as he was standing here and not crumbling to pieces. What he couldn't figure out was exactly *what* was done to him. Or why he was all alone. Or why the hell the Master Emerald had gone from being in a cave on an altar to this dreadful-looking place.

"This place kinda reminds me of something you'd see in 'Warhammer'." Sorun walked away from the Master Emerald and towards the edge of the platform he stood on. It was essentially a saucer suspended by more chains over a hole in the center of the circular room. What was at the bottom he didn't know, because when he looked over the edge all he saw was an abyss. Beyond that was more floor outcropping from the room's wall that circled the hole, and near the back side of the room he saw a door leading out. "I'm not even sure I wanna know how the Master Emerald ended up from being in a cave to wherever this is. Just where am I? Who knows, man..."

Fortunately, the gap between the saucer platform and the floor on the other side wasn't that vast, and he was easily able to hop over to the other side. The door was just a short walk away, though he had to pause when he reached it.

"What is this sci-fi nonsense?" There weren't any visible knobs or handles in the slab of metal blocking the way that he could see. Based on the seams he saw in the center it looked like the kind of door that split apart and retracted into the walls, and the electronic panel next to it lead credence to that guess. "Alright..." Sorun leaned closer to examine the panel jutting from the wall. A bright blue display with a small number pad under it greeted him. "Alright, what do we got... hm?"

Curiously, the display only had two images displayed on it: an image of an opened door, and another of the door being closed. Blinking, Sorun reached forwards and pressed the image of the open door, not at all expecting anything to happen. To his surprise, the image brightened for a second, and then the actual, physical door split open and sunk into the wall, opening the way for Sorun.

"Uh..." Stepping away from the panel, Sorun looked towards the opened door with a dumbfounded expression. "I-I didn't think... what, does it only lock from the outside or something?" He regarded the doorway for a few more seconds, and then shrugged before stepping out.

Sorun's first assumption was that, strangely enough, he was in a dungeon of some kind. The dark, dreary lighting, tight stone corridors, and the numerous locked rooms he kept coming across painted a clear enough picture. That and how dank the place looked, felt, and smelled, certainly a large contrast to that admittedly clean, metal room he'd just left. The lighting and dark colors made Sorun uneasy just stepping around in the place, jumping at the smallest noises.

And there were some rooms he'd come across that he was able to see in. Rooms separated off from the main corridors by bars, and inside of what he could see was usually strange things. Things that looked like artifacts and cultural pieces, all chained off the ground like he'd seen the Master Emerald. He didn't recognize any of them, and he didn't care to try and memorize anything he'd seen, just that it all looked old.

Another odd thing was that he wasn't encountering any locked doors. He had confirmed, however, that the door to the room containing the Master Emerald did in fact lock from the outside. There'd been a panel on the other side, and when he'd pressed the display to close the door it'd asked for a code when he attempted to open it again. Ever since then he'd been careful to leave any doors he came across open, but it confirmed enough to him that he was working backwards from whatever this place was. But, without any kind of map or even so much as a mental layout, all he could do was blindly go forwards until he found something.

"Maybe it's some kind of storage place or something like that. Some of those rooms back there, though, the doors that lead into rooms I couldn't see... they seemed kind of small. Like the kind of thing you would see in some castle dungeon. Or a prison." He felt a chill go through his spine despite the lack of a draft. *"There's something wrong with this place. How dark it is, how eerie everything feels, the shapes... where the hell am I? What happened?"*

Eventually, thankfully, he'd found stairs that lead upwards. He'd climbed them without hesitation, anxiety still steadily growing even as he neared what he assumed to be the top. He did manage to reach the top; thankfully there was just a normal door there, doorknob and all. And even more fortunately the door wasn't even locked.

When Sorun decided to open that door, he was forced to squint when a practical wall of light flooded in through the doorway. Blinking his eyes heavily a few times to clear the blurriness, he managed to see that the door lead out into a hallway. A large, wide hallway,

brightly-lit by artificial lights attached to chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and lightbulb sconces hung on the wall.

Rubbing at his eyes some, Sorun released his hold on the door and stepped out into the hallway. Unlike the dank dungeon he just walked out of, this hallway by comparison was downright opulent. Expensive-looking red carpeting that ran the entire length of the hallway's floor and beyond around corners he couldn't see, expensive-looking vases on handcrafted, wooden stands. Yellow walls that shone so brightly Sorun wouldn't he surprised if the things weren't made from actual gold.

"Well this is... huh..." Sorun mumbled out, not too sure on what to make of it. On the one hand the bright lights and lack of grime compared to the dungeon was assuring, on the other hand there was something about everything around him that made him uneasy despite how immaculate everything looked. He couldn't put his finger on what, though, until he'd walked a few steps away from the door he just emerged from and just happened to catch something out of the corner of his eye hung up on the wall. "Wh..." he whispered out, not even being able to form a single word as Sorun turned to see it fully.

It was a painting. A full-body portrait that was hung up on the wall portraying a Mobian with one of the most intense scowls Sorun had ever seen. The weird part was Sorun both recognized the scowl and the Mobian himself.

What he didn't recognize was the golden crown and the red cape the Mobian wore, because Sorun never once saw Shadow wear any of those items in the time he spent with him.

"... I'm choking Sonic out when I find him."

It had only taken Sorun some walking around to figure out that, wherever he was, it was a castle. It had to be for how big and complex the layout was. For now he'd only been walking for about

five minutes, and had chosen to stick to the floor he emerged from out of the dungeon door as he figured this was the ground floor and didn't want to get more lost. But no matter where he turned it was just more gaudy hallways. And a painting here and there. Surprisingly no suits of armor hung on displays like one would think to find in a castle, though Sorun couldn't find it in himself to focus on that.

Through all the walking he'd turned his head to the leftmost wall, which was lined with windows tall enough that they reached the ceiling high above his head. Out of those windows he managed to see that there was a courtyard of greenery that surrounded the entire castle. No fencing or gateways, either, which he filed away for later if he needed.

But beyond the castle itself? It seemed, from what Sorun could see outside the window, that the castle was dead-center in the middle of a city. Not a city like New Mobotropolis, which was really just a large village with a few large structures. This was a proper city, like the kind Sorun would see back home on Earth. High-rise buildings as far as he could see outside the window that stretched everywhere and bright lights everywhere that illuminated the night, traffic from both ground cars and, from what he could see at this distance, flying cars of all things, even a sizeable amount of dots walking between the buildings that he assumed to be people.

The sight alone caused Sorun to stop so he could stare out the window. What he saw out there was nothing short of a full-blown metropolis, a bustling city full of life. The kind of sight he hadn't seen since the mission he'd taken part of in Station Square some months back, and before that when he was abducted from his home planet; seeing this sight alone was enough to cause a strong sense of nostalgia to beat inside of Sorun's heart.

"There were not that many places on Mobius that had these kinds of cities. Wherever I am is not the Mobius I'm familiar with. It just can't be..." Sorun thought. *"What happened to me? Where is this? None of this makes sense, none of it, none of it..."*

He pushed away from the window, head throbbing from the sheer confusion his mind was suffering from. How nothing made sense and he couldn't figure out what was happening, where he was or what this place was or what the painting he'd seen even meant. None of it.

"What is it, what, is it a whole new Mobius altogether? Did I get spit out in some other universe? What did they call them, zones? Di-did something else happen? Is this just some sort of screwed-up dream? Can barely remember anything that happened inside that Master Emerald..." He continued walking on, idly dragging his fingers along the walls and panes of glass as he kept soldiering further. Most of his focus was spent gazing down at the floor as he walked forwards. *"What could have possibly happened while I was in there?"* Another thought passed him. *"How* long *was I in there?"*

It was a chilling thought to have, and one Sorun didn't want to entertain with much thought. He immediately found himself shaking his head in an attempt to rid himself of the idea altogether. That he'd potentially been in there for longer than a few hours or days. *"No, no no, it's something else, something else happened, gotta be something... voices..."*

Automatically he'd dipped down into a crouch without even thinking about it, moving forwards towards the nearest corner. He creeped his head around it, heart throbbing and head spinning as he peered down the next hall, releasing a short breath when he saw them. Two figures at the end of the hallway he was peeking in. Definitely echidna from what he was able to identify, the red fur and dreadlocks was a dead giveaway, though he recognized neither one. A male and a female talking amongst themselves, both garbed head to toe in black, almost sinister-looking garb. The male one in particular had a dark, hooded cloak of all things, and the female one had a tight-fitting leather outfit.

"The hell's up with the skimpy one over there?" Sorun wondered, eyes drifting to the coiled whip she wore on her belt. *"Can't make out what they're saying from here, and no way am I getting any closer."* He moved back behind the corner to take full cover from their sight

before they could notice him. *"From how casual they're acting they're probably guards or soldiers or something. Dressed in full black... yeah, I'm not trusting that."*

A part of him entertained the idea of revealing himself, but the paranoid part of his brain took over. The part that had an ingrained mistrust of echidna, the way those outfits looked so shady, the paranoia and fear he'd been feeling ever since exiting the Master Emerald. He shook his head and crouch-walked away from the corner, back down the hallway he'd walked in from to get there.

"I can't trust anything here, wherever I am. I need to find... what do I even need to find? Someone I know? I know Shadow, but... but something's wrong, I can't... what am I supposed to do?" Sorun's breathing became a bit heavier after backtracking by a few hallways. He felt his heart thumping quickly in his chest, and he looked out the nearest window towards the city beyond. *"Need to get out of here. Find help, find... something! I don't know how long I have until someone finds me."* He leaned closer towards the window, angling his head so he was able to see the ground. It wasn't far from where the window was; just a short hop more than anything. When he looked up, he saw that the lawn separating the castle from the rest of the city was clear of guards. *"Fuck it, there's nothing out there, I can just break the window and make a break for the nearest alley before someone comes to investigate. Doubt I'd make it through the front door if I even found the thing anyways."*

He could give up all hope of sneaking through the front gate if this place was fully staffed with watchful eyes, and he wasn't nearly confident enough in his stealth skills to pull that kind of exit off. Especially considering he had no idea what the status of the gate was, or even what the layout of the castle was. And the alleys between the nearby buildings looked too enticing for him to pass up. Alleys easy to get lost in. A maze that promised safety that Sorun desperately desired at the moment.

Making his decision, he looked around until he spotted one of the wooden stands holding a vase. He carefully removed the vase from

the stand and gently set it on the ground, and then hefted up the wood stand in both of his hands. Struggling a bit with its weight, he swung it back and forth a couple of times, both to test its weight and build momentum. At the third, largest swing he let the stand loose and let it fly through the air, watching as it smashed right through the window.

At the same second he heard the sound of shattering glass, Sorun dove forwards and jumped right through the new aperture in the window. He landed on the grass on the other side, wincing and hissing at the sensation of glass shards cutting into him, and did his best to ignore it as he stood up to his feet.

He ran. As fast as he could, straight towards the nearest alleyway he could see. He almost dove once again after he crossed the street and reached the alley, not even stopping until he'd reached a corner to swing behind. It was only after he was behind the cover of the building's wall that he stopped, bending over and placing his hands on his knees while breathing out heavily from exertion. After catching his breath he'd creeped back towards the building's corner to peek around it.

There were already people swarming around where he'd broken the castle window. More echidna in the black uniforms, at least a dozen of them, and thankfully enough none of them were looking over in his direction. He noticed the female one from earlier, the one with the whip secured to her belt, shouting at some of them like she was barking orders. Seeing enough, Sorun leaned back behind the corner and let out an exhaustive breath.

"Alright... alright, we're good." Running a hand over his ragged face, he palmed the wall behind him and pushed off it, stumbling a bit from feeling the rush from earlier quickly wear off. *"Okay, gotta, gotta find... find something, I dunno. Anything. Where even is here?"*

Shaking his head, and still clueless as to where to go from here, Sorun decided that the best course of action was to, one, get as far

away from that castle as possible, preferably deeper in the city. And from there... from there he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do.

He decided at first to keep to the alleyways, away from public sight. He could barely even tell it was nighttime due to the amount of city lights all around, which in other times would have been a warming sight for Sorun, but now all it did was further fuel his anxiety and cause him to continually shoot paranoid glances behind his shoulder whenever he felt spooked. He mostly stuck to cover where he could, hiding behind corners and dumpsters and only transitioning between buildings when there weren't many people around.

There was a wide mix of Mobians that wandered the streets. Mobians of so many varieties and species he couldn't count them, much less identify half. Lots of echidna, too, which Sorun had found odd. At least he did until he discovered, much to his dread, from eavesdropping on some groups of Mobians talking that this city, Portal City they called it, was on Angel Island. The information alone had sent Sorun into an panic-fueled wheezing fit, and he was forced to hide somewhere until he managed to calm down and process that information.

The Angel Island he knew was practically a wasteland. Ravaged by Eggman and most of its inhabitants evacuated by Enerjak. There *had* been a city, Echidnaopolis, but from what Sorun knew that place had been little more than ruins by the time he came onto Mobius. Everything he saw was in direct defiance of that. It was wrong. All wrong.

It also meant he was stuck here until he found a ladder that reached for a few miles, but one problem at a time.

"Then there's this..." Sorun thought to himself as he peered out an alleyway. He was looking out into what looked like a town square, full of Mobians. Praying Mobians. All praying to a statue, it seemed. What was really bizarre was that it was a statue of a human. Or an Overlander, perhaps, but Sorun wasn't able to tell. A stone statue of

a human or Overlander girl that didn't even look to be a teenager yet, with large, angelic wings sticking from her back.

"They... worship a human-looking girl...?" The sight did, oddly enough, put some ease in Sorun's heart, and he found himself easing up off the alley wall he was taking cover behind. *"This just gets odder and odder. I... maybe it's fine if I just walk around normally? Guess I can just hide again if worst comes to worst..."*

Certainly it'd be much easier getting around without having to stalk through alleyways, so he figured it was worth a shot. He'd made his way away from the square with the statue, though, if only so he didn't inadvertently interrupt something or cause something else that was unpredictable to happen. A few city blocks later, and another ten minutes of gathering the nerve up while Sorun nervously muttered to himself, and he'd stepped out onto the sidewalk and began walking in a random direction that struck his fancy.

Fortunately enough, nobody accosted him, which was a huge breath of relief for Sorun. He did get some odd stares from passing Mobians. Whether it was at what he was or the blue, exotic coat he wore he wasn't sure, but nobody was chasing after him or calling out at him, which was good enough for him. He did make a note of the strange fact that some Mobians he passed bowed their heads and quickly muttered something under their breaths, but it was always too quiet for Sorun to make out. He decided to ignore them all and press on.

"There's something reaaally wrong with this place..." Now that he was out of the alleys it was easy for Sorun to see what the city looked like from within. Digital signs were plastered on the surfaces of all the biggest buildings he passed. Like advertisement billboards, except instead of advertising products these signs looked like they were displaying propaganda. *"'The Chaotix is watching y-' Christ, it really is '1984' out here. And what does that even mean? What, is the Chaotix some kind of secret police now or something? God, is that* Knuckles *?"*

It was on the one sign he was paying particular attention to. The stern face of an echidna he was very familiar with was superimposed over the Chaotix message, though Sorun didn't remember Knuckles having a red, cybernetic eye replacing his right eye. Chrome metal around the socket and a big, red lens in place of an actual eye. There were other signs besides that one, too. Signs that read things like "obey", or "King Shadow's word is law". That last one was particularly unsettling to Sorun.

"It's all wrong. Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong..."

He felt his left hand unconsciously clench inside of his pockets. He couldn't help the deep yearning he felt for Yamato. The security in feelings its weight in his hand, the safety its power provided. But knowing his hand was empty just made Sorun all the more nervous.

Sorun wasn't sure how long he'd been wandering the streets. An hour, maybe two. Doing nothing but walking with his head hunched down, thoughts looping over and over in his head as he tried and failed to make sense of everything that was going on. How nothing made sense and how his mind was stuck in perpetual confusion, wondering and trying to make sense and failing and feeling scared over the whole ordeal. He only got snapped out of it when he accidentally kicked a can that had been lying in his path. The sound of it skittering and clattering across the ground made Sorun look up, and for the first time in hours he took a look around at where he'd walked to.

... It was still just streets and buildings everywhere, he didn't know where the hell he was.

"Sorun...?"

There was a heavy blink. Another blink. He heard his name called out in that quiet voice, and he recognized the voice, though there was something different about it he couldn't place. He dared to hope, though, and the teen forced himself to turn his head to the left towards the source of the voice he heard call his name.

He was right. He had successfully recognized the voice. He was there in the alley next to Sorun, sitting against the wall with a trashcan nearby. Sonic. More... disheveled than Sorun remembered, but the blue fur and green eyes was hard to miss for Sorun. There was something else different about him, beyond the patches of matted fur and the worn shoes and gloves, but Sorun couldn't place what it was...

"S-Sorun, I can't believe it." The look of disbelief that was on the hedgehog's face began to morph into a smile of relief, while Sorun silently continued to stare at him. "You're... you're really here. Oh, Sorun, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you-"

"YOU MISERABLE FUCK!"

The shout had stunned Sonic, who'd frozen halfway towards getting him. He'd been so surprised, in fact, that he wasn't able to react at all when Sorun burst forwards and punched Sonic right in the mouth. The hit surprised Sonic, who made a grunt of pain as he fell down on his back. Not even a second later Sorun pounced on top of him, straddling him and wrapping his fingers around his throat before squeezing down as hard as he could.

"What the hell were you thinking putting me inside that thing!?" Sorun screamed out, his voice drowning out the choking sounds Sonic was making as he clawed at Sorun's arms. "You stick me in there and I wake up into whatever this place is! What was actually going on in your damn head you fucking fuck!?"

Sonic's hand reached up to Sorun's face in an attempt to try and push the teen off him. In his frightened, frenzied state Sorun bit down on one of Sonic's fingers, causing him to yell and kick one of his legs out. The kick struck Sorun in the center of his chest, throwing him back against the wall.

Gasping, Sonic sat up and grabbed at his throat while breathing heavily. He was only allowed a moment's respite before the lid from the nearby trashcan flew through the air and struck him right in the

center of his face, knocking him back into the wall. On the other side of the alley Sorun was sitting against his wall, breathing heavily as he stared towards Sonic with eyes full of scorn.

"You owe me... so many fucking answers..." Sorun gasped out between breaths, pointing his finger at Sonic. "Start talking."

"Ah, man, Eggman was right, you really do swear..." Rubbing at the spot he was struck with the trashcan lid, Sonic groaned out and sat against the wall facing opposite of Sorun. The relief was all but gone now. In its place was a tired, dour expression that overtook Sonic's face. "In answer to the first question, I was trying to save your life, *buddy* ," Sonic said in an unamused tone.

"Save my life? Pfft, yeah, right..." Sorun glanced up and threw a hand up. "I'd say I was grateful but then I woke up here."

"Glad to see you're so thankful," Sonic remarked.

"... It's not that I'm not, it's just... ugh..." Sorun pinched the bridge of his nose. The truth was he *was* grateful to still be alive and not be reduced to, well, absolutely nothing upon dying without any Emeralds infused in him, but the gratitude fell short given current events. An array of feelings and impulses was really why he decided to attack the blue hedgehog. Half of Sorun felt like apologizing. The other half reminded him it was his fault he was here and suddenly he felt the urge to try and choke him again. He resolved to just keep talking. "Fine, yeah, thanks, now what the hell's going on?"

He flinched back, like he'd been struck. "Can you cool it with the language, man? Seriously." Rolling his eyes, Sonic asked, "You mind telling me what even happened? How are you here?"

"I don't know, man, you put me in there, I was in a weird dreamscape or whatever for I don't even know how long, then I wind up in some creepy castle dungeon, did some running, wound up here." Sorun made a sigh and deflated against the wall. "Dunno what happened, dunno how I got healed from literally disintegrating, dunno what...

what all this is." He gestured around at the buildings around them. "I-I don't know. Was hoping you did."

A low sound left Sonic's lips. He gave Sorun an appraising look, and then glanced down at his worn shoes as a troubled look settled over his features. "Yeah, I... guess that'd be pretty disorienting for you," he muttered out.

Sorun's eyes narrowed. He was still hearing it. The difference in Sonic's voice. It was different, rougher... aged. "What's with your voice?" Sorun asked him, though it came out sounding more like a demand. "There's something different with you."

"Oh, noticed, huh?" A dry laugh left Sonic. He ran a hand over his quills, some of which were standing up and away from the major spikes hanging off the back of his head. "Yeah, I guess being in your forties'll do that."

"Forties...?" Sorun quietly repeated. He felt his throat grow dry as fear and denial gripped at his heart. "W-what do you mean-?"

"Sonic? Sorun!?"

The new voice caused both males to perk their heads up and turn towards the source. The owner of the voice was standing at the mouth of the alleyway. Despite the toolbelt, goggles, and other assortments worn on their body, Sorun would be hard-pressed not to recognize Tails given his abnormal amount of tails, new physical maturity aside. There was somebody else behind him, but he didn't recognize them. A female echidna, clothed with a navy blue pair of boots and a jacket Sorun had realized with a quiet scoff. He paid less attention to her than the fox in front of her giving both him and Sonic a large, bug-eyed stare.

A short grunt left Sorun. He should have been happy that he finally found people he knew, but the forties comment from Sonic earlier was screaming inside his head and he was finding it hard to be happy over everything right now. "Hey, Tails," he lethargically

greeted, gripping the wall behind him and rising to his feet. He took a few steps in the direction of the fox, leaning closer as he looked him over. A mixture of wonder and fear went through him as he took in the details, the more angular features and trimmer form the Mobian held now, and the maturity in his eyes that he didn't recognize. "Wow, you... you grew up. And got taller. I mean not by much, but-"

"H-hey!"

"- but this is just... man..." Sorun glanced over Tails' shoulder and at the echidna behind him. "... I don't know who you are," he said.

"Oh!" The girl - teenager from the sound of her voice, Sorun guessed around his own age - cleared her throat and adjusted the glasses on her face before addressing him. "I'm Lara-Su. Nice to meet you!"

"I-I still don't know who you are."

The small smile she held instantly vanished. "Yeah, well, feeling's mutual," she said, causing Sorun to rear his head back a bit. She ignored him and turned her attention towards Tails. "Hey, Tails, who's the weird Overlander?"

He didn't respond immediately. The yellow Mobian was still staring towards Sorun, eyes wide and mouth agape. There was a pained expression on his face, and in an attempt to form words he ended up making a stammering sound before finally getting something out. "He's... he's a ghost..." he mumbled out, much to the confusion of Lara-Su.

"A... ghost?" she repeated. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He means this *human* ," Sorun said, giving the echidna a pointed look, "is an old friend." His eyes snapped to Sonic, who was silently observing the three. " *Very* old, evidently," he hissed out, causing both Sonic and Tails to glance away at him.

"Human?" Lara-Su echoed, watching as Sorun leaned his back against the wall opposite of Sonic. "You mean like that Overlander subspecies that live under that mountain?"

"I'm not explaining it. Don't have the time." Sorun's glare shifted to Sonic. "You know what we do have time for? You fucking explaining to me exactly how long you left me in the Master Emerald." Lara-Su blinked in surprise, features thinning as she continued to look at Sorun. Tails had practically jumped hearing him speak, after which his expression turned more and more regretful the longer he looked at Sorun, whose glare hardened, causing Sonic to shift uncomfortably from where he was sitting. "Everyone's older. You, Tails. I don't recognize anything around here, and apparently Shadow's a king now?" He leaned forwards. "Sonic. What. Happened?"

"Sorun, I..." Sonic tried to explain, but words seemed to fail him, causing him to sigh out and hang his head. Tails, similarly, avoided eye contact with Sorun, a fact the human took note of, while Lara-Su watched on in confusion. "Twenty-five years," the hedgehog said, causing Sorun to snap his head to him with wide eyes. "You were in there for twenty-five years."

Twenty-five years. The number echoed repeatedly in Sorun's head, so much that it was the only sound he could recognize. He'd felt his breathing increase slightly, and he had to fight from collapsing right there out of shock. Amazingly, he managed to keep his composure, just barely, though it didn't help all the thoughts running through his mind.

Shock and denial, which was quickly fading away to outrage. Anger. Confusion and more anger, all aimed at the hedgehog sitting across from him. He tried breathing heavily to calm himself down, but Sorun was finding that it wasn't helping in the slightest. He felt his hands twitch, the urge to pull a sword out from an invisible scabbard that he wasn't holding very evident to feel, but instead of doing that all he managed to do was run a hand over his face.

"Twenty-five years...?" Sorun mumbled out, equal parts angry as he was astonished. He'd missed Tails stepping towards him holding a hand out to try and help steady him, but he'd frozen when the human began speaking. "You... I can't believe it. You gave me the Noctis treatment?" The anger overgrew his astonishment. The hand was dropped to his side as he gave Sonic an angered look. "No, it's even worse than Noctis!" he yelled out. "He was only in his magic crystal for a ten-year timeskip, you stuck me in one for more than double!"

"I don't know who Noctis is!" Sonic exclaimed, throwing his hands up. "And-and what was I supposed to do, Sorun, huh!? Let you die!?"

Gasping out in outrage, Sorun pushed himself off the wall. "I don't even know what's worse at this point!" he angrily stated. "Twenty-five years of my life just gone like that, fuck all the effort I put into fixing my life, and I get to wake up in this dystopian nightmare, and all you got to say is 'what else was I supposed to do!?'"

"What were we supposed to do then, huh!?" Sonic argued. "Let you die!?"

"You could have not stuck me in the Master Emerald for two-and-a-half decades and ruin my life! Again!" Sorun screamed out. "Jesus fucking Christ, *twenty-five years* , Sonic!? What the actual fuck were you thinking!?"

"It wasn't his fault, Sorun!" Tails' voice made Sorun whip his head towards the fox, though he found his anger subdued somewhat when he saw the saddened, and heated, look the older fox had on his face. "We tried everything we could to save you, alright!? For years! We tried for years to find some way of saving you but we just couldn't find anything! I tried, Rotor tried, Knuckles and his dad tried, Sally and the Republic tried, even Shadow got G.U.N. to try! Nobody could figure anything out!"

The information did nothing to assuage Sorun's anger. "So you all thought the best solution was just to leave me in there!?" he yelled.

"'Ah, Sorun, cool guy, saved all our lives multiple times now, guess we should just leave him in the stupid magic crystal forever!' Is that how it went!?"

Tails' expression began to turn into something that was equaling Sorun's own anger. "What, would you have preferred we just let you out to turn into dust right in front of our eyes!?"

"No! Maybe! Fuck, I don't know!" In anger Sorun pounded the wall behind him. He instantly regretted it, recoiling his hand back and hissing a bit as he felt the appendage throb from the impact. Afterwards, a sudden weakness began hitting him once the heat of the anger began to ebb off, and Sorun was forced to lean back against the wall. "Arguing about the ethics of what you did to me isn't gonna get us anywhere. We're here. So does someone mind explaining to me what 'here' is? How Shadow became a king?" His eyes darted across all three Mobians. "Anybody?"

"That," Sonic began, gaining Sorun's attention, "is a bit complicated." He made a low sigh, staring down at his shoes as a look of deep contemplation overtook his features. It took a full minute of silence before he began speaking. "Some time after you were put in the Master Emerald someone killed Eggman. Him and Snively. We never figured out who. Best we ever got were reports of someone wearing a lot of red from some of the Dark Egg Legion guys, but... well, to be honest, I don't think anybody ever cared enough to look too deep into it, and it never came up again, so who knows?"

Sorun stiffened. He'd been near-elated to hear Eggman had been killed off until Sonic mentioned someone wearing red. *"That's three times now. Three times I've heard about the same person. The man dressed in red..."* Sorun thought to himself. *"This guy..."*

"Things worked out really well after that," Sonic continued, though by now Sorun was only paying half-attention, too caught up in his own musings. "M-me and Sally actually got back together, you know? And-and after a while Elias stepped down as king, so... so we took over leading the Republic. Can you believe that?"

"That people trusted you enough to be a king?" Sorun asked with a barely-suppressed scoff. "Not really," he truthfully admitted, though he was surprised Sonic had even chosen to shoulder that much responsibility to begin with. Sorun never pegged him as that kind of guy.

Sonic actually laughed a bit at Sorun's response. "Yeah, well... won't lie, kinda hated the job," he admitted. "Things were going well, but..."

"But then the time anomaly happened," Tails finished, drawing everyone's attention towards him. "I don't know exactly what caused it, but I saw enough that I was able to protect myself and my family from... from whatever happened in time. That's how I managed to remember everything, why... why it feels like I'm walking around with two sets of memories now," he said. "Is that what you mean to say?"

"Yeah. That," Sonic confirmed with a small nod. There was a moment where he'd looked happy at the mention of Tails' family, a bright look that had quickly flashed over his face, though it'd left as soon as it arrived. "Rotor managed to figure it out. Him and this other scientist he worked with, Cobor. Said it was my fault," he muttered out, causing surprise to bloom on the faces of the other three watching him. "Me breaching dimensional barriers back and forth using my powers all the time back in the day, saving the whole planet from the stupid Quantum Dial thing the Xorda used that one time, that zone me an' Knuckles blew up in that one fight long ago, it... I dunno, it all stacked together or something."

"You did *what* ?" Sorun muttered out, half in shock and half in tired disbelief. "Since when can you do all this? W-how did you and Knuckles-?"

"It was... it was all before you came to Mobius. Earlier on," Sonic quietly answered. "I never really traveled to other zones 'cause I didn't have reason, and the thing with Knuckles is a... it's a long story, and it's not important." A short sigh left him. "Rotor and Cobor said everything I did caused some kind of anomaly to form, that it was tearing apart the fabric of reality or something. We were all

feeling it - the earthquakes and the storms that wouldn't go away. Pretty plain to see something wrong was happening, and according to him we didn't have long before the whole zone was consumed in it.

"So... we decided to fix time."

"... Fix time." The words that left Sorun were equal parts flat and incredulous. He'd followed along with the story easily enough to this point, trying his best not to think about all the reeling implications of being twenty-five years in the future, but this was making him pause. "You decided to 'fix time,' huh? And how exactly did you plan on accomplishing this?"

"Robotnik was makin' a time machine." Any further questions Sorun had died on his tongue when he heard Sonic say this. "Long after you were put in the Master Emerald. 'Fore the red guy got him. Guess he saw he was losing and was desperate to try something. We'd been routing him for a while, and someone or something, don't know what, kept hitting major installations of his, stalling his plans and shorting his resources. Whatever was hitting him was making it so we were cleaning house, so the best we could figure is that it was a last-ditch attempt at winning. But I guess the red guy got him before he finished it."

The pieces were beginning to click together in Sorun's mind. "Sonic, don't tell me you tried using an unfinished time machine made by that madman to fix this," he said, mostly in a groan that well-hid the pleading tone in his voice.

"Call him whatever you want, but Eggman's stuff usually worked. Rotor just didn't have time to think up anything else; there weren't any other options. So I went in the... what was it, the tachyon somethin' or..." Sonic paused as he attempted to remember the name, but then shook his head with a grunt. "Doesn't matter. The scientists had a plan, we had the machine, I just had to go in and fix everything."

"Christ, you did." Suppressing a sigh, Sorun reached up to pinch at the bridge of his nose. He wanted to shout, but the part of his brain telling him he wasn't there and couldn't judge kept reminding him of the fact. He snapped at that part of his consciousness in anger, and did his best to keep his voice level as he looked back to Sonic. "So what happened?"

"..." Staring towards Sorun with a blank, unknowing expression, all Sonic could offer was a shrug. "I guess I screwed up," he said. "One minute I'm there, fixing everything, the next minute I'm... I'm here in this alley, in a world I don't recognize, and I... I... I don't know what happened, Sorun."

"You altered the timeline." This came from Tails, in a tone more grave than Sorun wanted to hear. All eyes focused on him, with Sorun withering a bit when he saw the solemn look on the fox's face. "I don't know exactly what you did, Sonic, but you're not in any of my memories of this timeline. In fact, I don't think anybody here knows you. Knuckles did, I talked with him earlier and he knew-"

"He was there when the time machine went... all wrong. Him and Rotor and Cobor," Sonic supplied.

"So the tachyon chamber did preserve the memories of those that were nearby..." Tails mumbled out, rubbing at the back of his head in an uncomfortable motion. "You shouldn't have been messing around with time like that, Sonic. You stopped the time anomaly, but best I can see is that you wrote yourself out of history up to the point in time you used the time machine in the process, and because of that the timeline got... well, you see. It's so altered now that it looks nothing like the other present."

"Wait. W-wait, just wait a second." Sorun held a hand up, his breathing increasing a bit as he gave Tails a wide-eyed stare. "What does that even mean-!?"

"It means nothing in the original timeline, the one we remember, ever happened. None of it exists anymore," Tails sadly stated. "Us, the

Freedom Fighters, our experiences, events, *everything* . Because Sonic was never there due to erasing himself from time history took a different course. This course." He rose a hand up to gesture at the buildings surrounding them. "This timeline where Shadow conquered the whole world, because Sonic wasn't here to save it." He focused his attention on Sorun. "I don't even know what happened with you since you don't even exist in this timeline, but what happened back then's starting to make more sense. Maybe the Master Emerald... preserved you somehow. Chaos Energy and time don't really go hand-in-hand so maybe being in there, maybe, shielded you from the time alteration? The shock of the timeline shifting must be what ejected you from the..."

The sound all around Sorun began to fade out to the sound of his own heartbeat. The feeling he felt was the emotional equivalent of hearing a record screech to a halt. Tails' words echoed endlessly in Sorun's mind, reminding him no matter how many times he tried to deny it of what happened. That the world he'd been living in didn't exist anymore.

That everything he did didn't exist anymore. That none of his actions carried over into this world.

That almost everyone he knew didn't even remember him anymore.

It was almost maddening, the torrential rush of emotions going through him, and all he could do was stand there while staring down at the ground. He felt his head throbbing, repeatedly, tried holding a hand to his forehead to try and calm the throbbing but it did nothing to help. He had to fight down the urge to scream.

Instead, Sorun ended up laughing.

It wasn't an overly loud or energetic laugh. It was more a quiet, dry chuckle that held absolutely no joy or mirth in it. The three Mobians gathered around all gave the Earthling odd looks as he turned away from them, hand held to his face as he continued with his low, choked chuckling as he slowly shook his head.

"This is just rich. Truly," Sorun muttered out, hand dropping from his face as he turned his head to Sonic. His face was far from amused. It wasn't clear if he was about to break down and cry or fly into a rage. "The biggest hero in the world dropping the ball this badly. I really can't believe it."

"W-what the..." Sonic's features began tightening. "What, you think this is funny!?"

"I'd find it hilarious if I wasn't dragged into this mess, too." Sorun's features began to change to match the growing, angered expression Sonic was adopting. *"The* Sonic the Hedgehog, the guy everyone looked up to, fucking *king* of all things, and what'd you end up doing, huh? How big a failure did you end up being?"

"I did my best-!"

"Oh, your best, is it? Your best!?" Sorun's voice began to grow hysterical as he shouted over Sonic. "Yeah, some good your best did, huh? Fucking erased any evidence we ever even existed from history, all our friends are gone and replaced by whoever the hell lives in this world, changed the world into som-some dystopian world, this was your best!?" He ran his fingers through his hair, shouting out, "For god's sake, the world was screwed up enough as it was, how the fuck did you manage to screw it up even more than it was already-!?"

"I LOST MY KIDS, SORUN!"

He stopped dead at hearing that, having frozen in shock. Before Sorun could even respond Sonic had zoomed up off the ground he'd been sitting on, standing mere centimeters from the human's face with a truly furious expression.

"W-wha-?" Sorun stammered out, but was silenced when Sonic began screaming directly into his face.

"Yeah, Sorun, my kids! The ones I had with Sally! Two of them!" he exclaimed, loudly enough that Sorun began shrinking back. "But she doesn't even know who I am in this timeline, so guess what!? They don't exist anymore! You think I don't realize what I've done when my own children ended up getting wiped out of existence!?"

Tears had begun streaming out from the corners of the hedgehog's face halfway through his rant. He'd stopped eventually, either from running out of steam or being too emotional to go on without bursting into tears, though he continued to stare at Sorun through the tears even with the heaving breaths he was taking.

Sorun didn't respond. All he could do was stare back at Sonic, looking more shocked than anything else. He listed off backwards, his hand moving up to cover his face as he looked down, quiet sounds coming out of his mouth, muffled by his hand. Sonic looked ready to go off shouting again, but then he'd leaned in closer, and stopped completely when he made out the words coming out from Sorun's mouth.

"What are we supposed to do? I don't know, Sorun I don't... is there anything we can... don't know, you seriously want to fix... Yamato, maybe, but I don't think... that isn't gonna work, you know there's nothing it can... we can't just leave things like this..."

"S-Sorun?" The furious look Sonic had held began to fade away into a more disturbed one the longer he listened to Sorun. He looked to the side, growing more visibly worried when he saw both Tails and Lara-Su both had equally disturbed, unsettled looks on their faces.

Before anybody could say anything further, Sorun's hand dropped away from his face and slapped against the wall. The three Mobians jumped in shock, looking towards him and recoiling when they saw the vacant, empty stare he was giving the ground. Sonic was the first to react, slowly reaching forwards to try and jostle Sorun, but before he could make contact the human lifted his head and looked right into Sonic's still-moist eyes, surprising the hedgehog somewhat.

"Alright. Alright," Sorun mumbled, voice dry. "We're gonna fix this." He used his hand to push himself off the wall, coattails blowing past his legs from a passing breeze as he shook his head. "Not gonna let this lie. We're gonna make this right."

"Make this right?" Sonic echoed. "And how exactly are we gonna 'make this right,' Sorun?"

"Dunno. We'll figure something out," he claimed, walking past Sonic towards the alley entranceway. "But we're getting your kids and the old timeline back."

He was stopped in his walking when he passed by Tails, who reached out and grabbed at Sorun's wrist. "Sorun, this isn't something we can fix. We can't just 'reset' a whole timeline," he said with a shake of his head. "And besides, we have other things we need to talk about. You-"

"Whatever you have to say can wait," Sorun said, pulling his wrist free from the fox's grasp. "We're dealing with this now before anything else."

"No, Sorun, you don't understand, wait!" Tails shouted out as Sorun began walking away. "You told me that- would you just *wait* !?"

"I don't care what you have to say. I'm not gonna stand around waiting when-!"

"Hey, would you just chill out!?" Once more, he was grabbed. This time by the echidna, on his shoulder. This resulted in Sorun deeply inhaling after halting in his movement, and then turning to meet the echidna teen's eyes while resisting the urge to smack the glasses off her face. "What exactly is your plan, huh!? You can't just go off half-cocked without even knowing what you're doing!"

"And what's it to you?" Sorun shot back, slapping the hand off his shoulder and then turning to Tails. "Who even is this?"

Seeming to suppress a sigh, as well as visibly appearing to hold in a great amount of frustration, Tails gestured out to the echidna. "As she said, she's Lara-Su. She's Knuckles' daughter. She retained some memories of the previous timeline, probably because of her Chaos powers, we're not a hundred percent sure."

"Oh. *Oh* ... I see." Immediately, Sorun's face took on a soured expression, surprising both Sonic and Tails and causing Lara-Su to scowl at him. He completely ignored their reactions and looked closely at her face, particularly at the stands of pinkish hair amidst the fleshy dreadlocks on her head that blended well with the red fur and the purple eyes behind the glasses. "Pfft. Friggin' figures you're *his* kid."

She didn't seem very appreciative of the tone Sorun had taken. "And just what is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"I don't mean any offense, but your father isn't exactly on my list of favorite people right now." Sorun glanced off to the side. "He's pretty low right now, actually, you know, with his face being on evil-looking billboards all over town and everything."

"Hey, he's a great guy! And a great dad!" With anger in her voice, Lara-Su stepped forwards and jabbed a finger in Sorun's chest, hard enough that he was sent back a step. "I don't know what your problem with him is, but I don't see how some guy I've just met-!"

"You poke me one more time and I'm breaking those glasses right off your-"

"FREEZE!"

Following that yell, and a series of thunking sounds, the entire alleyway was engulfed in bright light. The light was intense enough that Sorun and the rest were forced to shield their eyes from the sudden brightness, and when Sorun lowered his arm from his face, he felt his stomach drop when he saw something at the end of the alleyway. A *lot* of somethings.

Cars. Both the floating variety and the ground variety, all parked or floating at the end of the alley and shining their headlights at the four occupants. And alongside and in all the vehicles were echidna, wearing matching tan uniforms and pointing weapons right at them.

"Wait, is that...?" There was something on the sides of all the vehicles that caught Sorun's attention, forcing him to look closer. Even as he and everyone else were forced to raise their hands in the air in surrender, he couldn't help but notice the red, swirling, tribal-like symbol that was emblazoned on the sides of all the vehicles shining their lights on the group. *"Isn't that the same symbol that was on Shadow's bike from that one time? Man, what the fuck, he's got his own symbol and everything."* A figure, one of the echidna, stepped in front of all the other ones pointing their guns at the four of them seemingly to address the group. All of Sorun's attention was torn away from the symbols on the vehicles to the sole echidna standing in front of them all. *"Oh, it's you, huh?"*

From how menacing his face seemed from all those billboards Sorun had seen wandering the city, he would have assumed Knuckles would look more authoritative at the moment. He certainly looked the part, with that tan uniform and the wide-brimmed, leather hat he was wearing on his head. That and his visible age made it so Sorun wouldn't have recognized him at all if it weren't for the red, bionic eye he'd seen in the posters. But at the moment Knuckles didn't seem so authoritative at all. Not menacing in the slightest, even given the squad of heavily-armed echidna right behind him.

No, he was... surprised, and that was about it. Surprised and disbelieving, with his sight focused solely on Sorun. Not on Sonic or Tails. Not even his own daughter, who was standing besides Sorun and giving her father her own shocked expression. He was only looking towards Sorun.

"It... it can't be..." Knuckles mumbled out under his breath, so quiet Sorun could barely hear him. "You... you're not supposed to exist in this... Sorun? *How* ...?"

There were a lot of words Sorun wanted to say to Knuckles. Some kind, most not so kind. And certainly there were enough grievances, both due to present circumstances and Sorun's current disposition over the echidna and everything else. That would have colored most of everything he had to say in a negative light. Instead, all he could do was look up at the hat Knuckles was wearing, and then make the loudest scoff he could utter.

"I was wrong. That hat looks ridiculous on you, Knuckles."

A/N- So originally I had this whole chase scene planned out where Sorun had to run away from the castle while being chased by echidna, followed by a motorcycle pursuit. I had it planned for the entire time ever since I started writing this story, but then I got to this point and I realized two things: baseline human Sorun has a 0% chance of outrunning a Mobian of any kind, hands down. He'd have, like, ten seconds at best before getting dogpiled.

As for the motorcycle scene, the idea was that there was a couple who parked their bike in front of the castle and Sorun would just steal the bike and drive away, resulting in this big thrilling, high-octane motor chase. Even if I managed to write around that being too convenient, there's the matter that Sorun would barely even know how to drive a motorcycle to begin with. How to operate one, yeah, vaguely, but he isn't nearly skilled enough with one to outrun being pursued by other vehicles. So for the sake of "realism", a term I use really loosely considering the setting, substitute it for immersion if you really feel like it, I cut the two scenes out in lieu of the practical "just break a window and run out when no one's looking" solution.

So I find sometimes in writing, when you've planned a whole story out, some parts of it are planned different. There are parts where you go, "I know exactly how this chapter/part/arc whatever is gonna go 100%," and sometimes there are parts where you go, "kinda iffy on the details here but I know the

general important bits so I'll just improvise it when I get there." In terms of how I've done the story it's about 80% the former and 20& the latter, give or take 5%, and this whole section of the alternate future, out of all the parts I had planned for this whole story, sits firmly in the latter category of "I'll wing it when I get to it." Part of it is because when this happened in the comics there were a lot of details and specifications that weren't ever really addressed or they were poorly explained. And technically speaking this never even happened in the main "cannon" timeline, it was one of those alternate universe timelines (alternate future turning into a different alternate future, as if that isn't confusing enough), and technically events in the main cannon timeline should have made it so something like this could never even happen, but all I have to do is get Sonic to say "there was a red guy that did such and such" as a way of the story saying, "Rubrum did some stuff in the background offscreen that made all this possible." And since that's the case there's some details that aren't completely 100% in-line with the comic variation of these events, but they're relatively minor, doesn't affect much, and I honestly don't think anybody even cares to look that deeply into it as long as it's done well enough.

Chapter 80

A/N- Man, we're a million words in and the story still hasn't explained why it's called 'Recursion Error' yet.

Recursion Error

Episode 80- The future really sucks

Used to be easier. Get by one day, rest in preparation for the next. Some were easier than others, some weren't. Still, routine was an easy enough concept to find comfort in, and with that came complacency - and Sorun found he enjoyed a complacent life.

And then Mobius happened, threw everything off kilter. Fight in a war he didn't want to fight in, die when he didn't want to die. Old way of life destroyed, adapt to the new. Had its own challenges in of itself, ones he himself was surprised in overcoming. Not for virtue, but merely for managing to stick it out long enough to acclimate. Its own respect in some regards.

But then, once again, he started to grow into complacency once again. Began carving a new routine out, a new life. Grew comfortable and quiet, had finally once more found a home to set himself down in. He'd *started* to finally believe happiness was something he could truly have after all. It was supposed to be the end of it there.

And then Enerjak happened. And that Emerald. And Sonic, once more turning Sorun's world upside down. His home, gone again. Complacency, gone again. Once more - *once more* - there was nothing but emptiness that he tried to fill with anger and spite over this entire situation. Some was aimed at Sonic, whose fault this all

lied upon. It was his fault this future had changed, it was his fault he was put in the crystal, everything was his fault.

Hearing he'd lost his children had stayed Sorun's hand from lashing out at him, and made him realize that he wasn't completely to blame for this. That his only fault was in attempting, and admittedly succeeding in some regard, to saving the world, just at a... steeper cost than anticipated. Sorun couldn't fault him for that, even if he wanted to. So all that was left was bitterness. At the situation as a whole, mostly.

That and the fact his arms were tired. Having them shackled above your head apparently did that.

Knuckles - ever faithful to his duty regardless of the timeline it seemed, Sorun had snidely thought - as the chief enforcer to... whatever King Shadow's regime could be described as, empire, dominion, had taken them all back to the castle. For what reason they could only stipulate. That they all had knowledge of the old world, and King Shadow saw that as a threat for some reason. Their working assumption, at least. The officers, Knuckles included, hadn't been very talkative of the matter.

So here they were now. Back in a dungeon Sorun had escaped from not too long ago in a panicked haze, manacled to walls by cuffs made from pure energy emitted from outlets in the wall their wrists were cuffed to. Tails, the lucky boy - man now, Sorun had to remind himself - got an extra set of energy shackles just for his tails. Sorun didn't know whether to scoff in begrudging respect at the precaution or curse King Shadow's paranoia.

"So what's the plan, Sorun?" He looked up at the wide cell they'd been locked in, at his mirror image squatting on the ground in front of him, eyes cast upwards to meet his own. "What are we doing? Actually wanna bring the old timeline back?"

Sorun made a grunting sound as an affirmation.

"How's that gonna work?"

"Dunno. Find a way."

Sorun tilted his head a bit. "'Find a way.' Tails doesn't seem very convinced a way exists. None of them do. Why so desperate to go back anyways? What's so wrong with this world?" He stood up to his full height. "Everyone's older, sure, but even though we lost twenty-five years doesn't mean our body did. We didn't move on, even if the world did. Could still make something of it."

"I don't *want to* , though," Sorun argued. "Had a life, people, community. Fought and bled for it. Don't want to restart, not again. I want to go back to that life. When everything was easy, when I didn't have to worry." His eyes trailed down. "I want to go back to my friends. People that are the closest I have to family anymore. I don't want to restart and lose them if there's a way I could just get them back."

He liked that life too much. More than he realized, now that it was gone. Earth may have been gone, it was a fact he'd long accepted, but he'd made something nearly equivalent in that old Mobius. He refused to cast all that work aside, to have his own sacrifices mean absolutely nothing. He didn't deserve that. Neither did Sonic, who'd lost his own children to this whole mess. He'd get it all back or die trying. Damn the consequences.

"Well, we're gonna have to find a way out of this bind first before you do anything." Sorun's eyes turned up to the shackles cuffing him to the wall. A resigned look overtook his features. "Without our abilities, or even the skills necessary to escape this, I really doubt we're gonna find a way, though."

Another grunt left Sorun, this one more agreeing. It certainly was worrying, being trapped down here in a dungeon.

"Hey, uh, Sorun? Could you... maybe not mutter to yourself like that? Really freaking us out here."

They could have at least locked them up separately.

Wordlessly, Sorun turned his head to the left. Sonic was locked up next to him in the same position he was, followed by Tails, followed by Lara-Su. They didn't seem nearly as worried about all this as he did, a fact that made Sorun confused. A bit angered, even, when he saw the small smirk on Sonic's lips.

It was the same smirk. Even after all these years, he still had that same confident, cocky smirk Sorun hated so much. Like it was ingrained in his very being.

"Seriously, are you okay?" the hedgehog asked, face growing concerned. "You're really scaring me with-"

"Fuck you, Sonic." He missed the shocked and hurt look Sonic gave him when Sorun hung his head forwards. "I have nothing to say to you."

A silent beat passed. "Sorun-" Tails began.

"Fuck you too, Tails."

"Okay, you know what!?" This aggravated response came from Lara-Su, who'd moved as far as the shackles allowed her so she could glare directly at Sorun. Despite this, the Earthling didn't so much as stir. "We've just met, and I'll admit I don't know a whole bunch about you, but for someone who Sonic claims to be a Freedom Fighter you sure don't act like one!"

" *Was* a Freedom Fighter. I left." Sorun's eyes glanced to the side, at Sonic. "Didn't stop me from fighting though, now, did it? Going from fighting god himself right into this mess, glad you're asking if I'm fine with all this. I'm not."

Whether out of shame or wanting to give him space, Sonic looked away. Lara-Su glared harder, only growing angrier at Sorun's words.

"I don't have a whole lotta memories from the old timeline like the rest of you do, but I know the Freedom Fighters were legends. Heroes that saved the world and put others before themselves! Nothing about you says you were ever a Freedom Fighter."

"And who are you to judge?" Now he was looking up to meet Lara-Su's gaze, even if he was rapidly becoming more and more irritated with her. "Random person like you who only ever heard stories. You weren't there. Your words are empty."

"Hey, my words have plenty meaning!" she heatedly argued. "I'm a Guardian!"

Sorun's expression grew flat. "That title means nothing to me. It means nothing to anybody not an echidna." He looked down a bit, seeing bits of a white crest pattern on her chest above the line of her shirt and jacket. He scoffed. "Knuckles filling your head with nonsense of a worthless title like that? Genes and powers - those are the only worthwhile things you got from him." He looked back up at the echidna's face, a sneer on his face. "That and bullheadedness."

Based on the look Lara-Su was giving him, she would have punched him if the shackles weren't restraining her. "You don't know what you're talking about. There's nobody among echidna more respected than the Guardians! They have the biggest responsibility of making sure our kind is safe from danger!"

Sorun laughed out loud at that. "Oh, that's rich. Things back in the OG timeline would have went real smooth if that were the case." He looked back forwards, spiteful grin still on his face as he continued speaking. "Noble Guardians? Really? Here's what they really were: a cabal of old fools that groomed their children into taking over the title." Once more, he scoffed. "Guardian. Right. They didn't even care about all echidna kind, just the ones on Angel Island. Knuckles? I think he was the only person in that whole messed up family that saw the world was bigger than this fucking island, and he was the strongest Guardian ever with his powers. But if the results he got

was indicative of a Guardian's worth, then I really don't see why you aspire to be one."

"And just what's so bad about being a Guardian!?"

"Oh, nothing much. Knuckles did his best. It's not like his people were torn apart by civil war. It's not like he failed to save nine-tenths of his whole species from being wiped out. It's not like he became a mad god-tyrant that threatened the whole world. Twice." A beat passed. "Oh, *wait* ...!"

A low, seething breath that did nothing to calm her down left Lara-Su's mouth. "And I suppose you're so great by comparison, huh? And what have you done that makes you think you're so better than him?"

"Saved some towns. Saved the world that one time. Surprisingly my record's pretty fuckin' stellar compared to Knuckles'."

"What, and that gives you the right to make fun of all the echidna lives lost!? What if they were your own people!?"

Sorun lethargically turned his head towards Sonic. "Should you tell her or should I?"

"Would you knock it off, Sorun? Seriously," Sonic muttered out, smirk dropping and tone turning irritated. "I get the Guardian's aren't your favorite people-"

"Literally the only ones that were still left alive when I came to Mobius was Knuckles and his dad, and the whole species still almost got wiped out. Guardians didn't protect shit."

" *I get it* , but this isn't helping! So quit it." An uncharacteristically deep frown settled on the hedgehog's face. "Besides, you were never there for any of that, either. You're only getting all this from everything Knuckles ever told you."

Sorun rolled his eyes. "I'd point out how reliable a source of information that is along with, you know, all the dead echidna and insane cyber-psycho ones that were around, but fine. Have it your way." He sagged back against the wall, noting how the soreness in his raised arms was making him more irritable than the nearby echidna chained to the wall with him. She seemed to settle down in a huff and settled down as well, though he tried not to think too hard about her.

Maybe Sonic was right and he was being too hard on her. He wasn't an echidna; he didn't understand the cultural importance of a Guardian, or everything the title entailed. Even if from his perspective it didn't amount to much. But either way Sonic was right: this wasn't a conversation that was helping them out of this mess.

The moan Sorun heard besides him served as a reminder for just what kind of position they were in to begin with. Sonic had been pointing out how odd it was that they hadn't met up with Rotor and that other scientist he mentioned, Co-something, since they were in close proximity of the time machine when... whatever Sonic did went off, which, according to all evidence, should have meant they were left with memories of the original timeline.

Well, it became pretty clear what happened when the four of them had been locked in this dungeon room.

The walrus was shackled to the wall besides Sorun on his right side, already having been there when they'd arrived. Significantly older-looking than what Sorun remembered him as. Unlike them he was unconscious, and Sorun only needed a cursory glance over his body to tell him why. The bruises discoloring parts of his purple body. The fact his left tusk was broken in half. The long lacerations all around his body that cut through the tattered robe he wore and skin, as if he'd been struck repeatedly struck by something.

Nobody else wanted to comment on it, the Mobians on his left side were actually taking great care to avoid Rotor altogether, but Sorun saw it for what it was. Felt the rage boil through him as his irises had

constricted at the sight of it. The brutalized and tormented body next to him. But what really set him off was how Sonic and Tails didn't seem overly concerned about it.

"Damn them..."

The door to the cell opened, making Sorun's and everyone else's heads snap forwards. The person that entered had been that one echidna he'd seen before when he'd snuck out of the castle - the woman. She was flanked by two more echidna guards dressed in dark uniforms, carrying those strange rifles he didn't recognize. Energy rifles of some kind, probably. Despite the dangers they posed he couldn't help but keep his eyes focused on the woman.

"You know, it's not too often we get dissenters that stir up as much trouble as you lot," she said. The longer she stood near the more and more Sorun disliked her. The haughty, superior tone in her voice, that confident smirk she wore and that damn *look* she was giving them. Him in particular for some reason. That "I'm better than you in every way" look, the way they were slightly closed and so unconcerned with everything. "It's gotta be so sad for you, though, Sonic. To go from being on top of the world to this lowly state. Don't know about you, but I'd say it's pretty fitting."

The look that was on Sonic's face didn't paint him as being nearly as amused as the echidna woman looked. "Hey, Lien-Da," he dryly stated, form slumping against the wall. "So you retained your memories of the other time like us, huh? How'd you pull that off?"

Sorun cocked an eyebrow in Sonic's direction. He sounded familiar with her, though he himself didn't recognize her or the name. He did see her brush a hand over something on her right arm, a strange metal band, but he didn't see the significance behind it.

"Oh, I had something special made up. Nothing you need to worry about." Her blue eyes shifted towards the side, right at Sorun. "As much as I'd love to *catch up* with you, I have other business to attend to. But we can get back to that later." She motioned to one of

the guards besides her, who slung his rifle as he approached Sorun. "You. Boy. You're coming with us."

Confusion and a tinge of fear grew in Sorun as the echidna guard began fiddling with the energy shackles chaining Sorun to the wall. The fact Sonic had suddenly grown a worried expression didn't do much to help his nerves. "What do you want with him?" Sonic asked her. The uneasiness in his voice wasn't helping much, either.

"Who knows?" The echidna, Lien-Da, gave a shrug. "The king wanted to see him for some reason. But considering what I saw him setting up, I wouldn't count on him making it back here."

His arms finally being freed from being raised over his head was little comfort to Sorun, not after what he'd just heard. Nor was being poked in the back by a rifle held by the echidna who just released him. He honestly would have preferred to remain chained to the wall, but the look Lien-Da was giving him didn't leave room for much argument.

"Hurry up, kid, I don't got all day. Unless you think you're fast enough to dodge a photon beam going over two-hundred and ninety million meters a second at point-blank range?" The defeated slump in the teen's shoulders did enough to answer that question. He looked down, hoping she wouldn't see the submissive look on his face, but it didn't seem to do enough from the laugh he heard from her. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Come on."

Sorun couldn't help from gritting his teeth. The humiliation almost burned enough to make him forget the fear and worry for what was about to happen to him. Almost. He looked to the left, seeing both Sonic and Tails giving him worried looks. Even Lara-Su looked just about as worried as they did. Probably even more so.

Were it not for how grim the situation was looking and felt, he would have scoffed at the looks. As it was all he could manage was to slowly walk away with the three echidna. He heard the three whispering to themselves behind him, but he'd already been lead out

of the room with the door snapping shut behind him before he could make out anything meaningful.

The guard behind him poked Sorun's back with the rifle again. For fear of getting a hole burned through him, he resisted the urge to try and slap the gun out of his hands, and settled for following the other two echidna marching in front of him.

There was a primal kind of fear Sorun felt as he was lead further down the dungeon by the three echidna. With all the media he'd consumed in life with similar situations, it was hard not to think about what possibly awaited him. Here, down here in this dark dungeon. Especially after he saw the state Rotor had been in.

It was probably the growing adrenaline that made him feel so wired, what was causing his breathing to quicken. His immediate desire was to try and flee down one of the corridors in the dungeon they passed, but ration told him that he wouldn't make it five feet before he got shot with a laser. Or they decided to save whatever powered the weapons and just run him down to physically restrain him. Both options were equally as viable, really, and without any of his abilities there was nothing Sorun could do in the situation.

Helplessness, dread, fear and anxiety, it was all racing through him and he hated so much that there wasn't anything he could do to stop it. That he was in this situation to begin with. Because of how wrong this timeline had gone. All of it. He hated all of it.

He tried taking his mind off of it, mainly failing to do so, by trying to examine Lien-Da as she and the guards lead him down the dungeon. He still didn't recognize her, but he saw some of the dreadlocks on her head were metal, artificial replacements. He'd wondered why those seemed familiar until he remembered Julie-Su had similar cybernetics, and just thinking that word made him wonder if she had been a part of that Dark Legion. Probably why Sonic had recognized her; he'd never actually encountered them himself, unlike him and the other Freedom Fighters. He couldn't help

but be unsettled further by those thoughts, seeing as how unhinged everyone had always made them sound.

But what really drew his attention was the weapon clipped to her belt. The black, leather whip. The same kind of weapon that would leave marks like the ones he'd seen on Rotor. Those long, straight gashes.

"I honestly don't know why King Shadow is so interested in you. Or anything relating to you for that matter," Lien-Da said as they continued making their way through the halls. "As far as I could see you were pretty unremarkable even in the other timeline."

"... So you know me?" Sorun quietly asked, his voice barely above a murmur.

"I knew *of* you. Not much. Eggman had some info about you in a database I read, back when I and the Legion worked with him during 'that' time. And I knew further down the line the Republic and a whole bunch of other parties spent a lot of resources trying to save you from something relating to the Master Emerald. Not much beyond that." She turned her head to look at him as they continued walking, an inquisitive look on her face. "I can't for the life of me figure out why so many people would go to so much trouble just for some nobody like you, though."

With how he felt, Sorun couldn't even muster up the will to sigh at the degrading remark. He did, for some reason, feel the need to probe further. "If I'm such a forgettable person, why tell your king about me?"

"Oh, King Shadow doesn't have any memories of the other timeline, like most other people. I had to fill him in on some things. He's real worried anybody with original memories are going to try to do something to disrupt his rule, so he wants you all taken off the board. That's usually the fate that awaits all his enemies." That cruel grin returned to her face as she turned back forwards while giving a shrug. "Really you seem like such a low-level threat I never would

have bothered, but he wants every single person who even knows about that timeline not under him to be eliminated, so what can you do?" Her head picked up. "Oh! here we are."

They arrived to the door of a room, not unlike a door that lead to one of the cells in this place. Lien-Da had opened the door and guided them in, with one of the guards shoving Sorun inside with his rifle. The inside of the room, oddly, was cleaner than most of the other rooms he'd seen in this dungeon, and there were computers and bits of electronic equipment scattered all around. Even the lighting was brighter.

But what really drew his attention was the thing in the center of the room. A metal table, like the kind they would strap someone down in at the dentist's office. It was fitted with leather straps more than likely used to restrain someone and, even more worryingly, wires and electrodes, though Sorun couldn't tell their purpose.

At the behest of the guard behind him, who seemed to only be capable of communicating by jabbing Sorun with his gun, he'd climbed onto the table. Lien-Da was the one who began strapping him secure to the table in addition to attaching various electrodes on his body. She maintained that cruel smirk of hers the entire time.

"You know, publicly speaking our government's not supposed to do things like this, but the great thing about being part of King Shadow's illegitimate enforcers is that we don't have to worry about things like that. Not that he even needs to bother; not like there'd be any use in anyone protesting." She tightened a strap around his wrist particularly tightly and gave it a mocking pat. Sorun stared. "But I mean, hey, I'm not complaining about how much creative freedom we get over interrogating criminals."

"'Creative freedom,'" Sorun repeated under his breath. "Is that what you call what you did to Rotor? Torturing him like that?"

"Calling a few lashes torture. Pfft. I had way worse growing up and training in the Dark Legion, and you don't see me crying about it.

Besides, King Shadow did way worse to him than I did," Lien-Da said with a dismissive roll of her eyes. "At any rate, you should be thankful. Death by electrocution is one of the more merciful deaths criminals get around here." She tightened the last strap around his leg and then fully faced Sorun. "Then again I hear the engineers crank down the voltage on these things so it takes a few minutes to fry completely to death, but I'm not gonna tell people how to do their jobs."

Unconsciously Sorun's limbs fought against the restraints. He managed to keep a straight face, but he wasn't able to stop himself from shaking. Or even to look up at Lien-Da's face, who seemed to grow an even bigger grin when she saw his quavering body.

"That's enough."

The voice. It was one Sorun recognized, enough that he'd stopped his shaking, though the sensation of dread he felt didn't dissipate when he knew *who* the voice belonged to. And even then there was something wrong with it. The tone it was spoken in, the way the words came out. Like recognizing the sound itself but not the speaker.

Immediately the three echidna had formed a line and turned towards the voice, standing at attention. Following this Sorun heard footsteps - heavy, like metal striking the floor with each step. Being strapped to a table left little room for Sorun to move his head to look, though this proved unnecessary as the owner of the voice had stepped into his view.

For all appearances, outside of the golden crown and the red cape, this Shadow looked the exact same as the one Sorun knew. Not a hint of aging to be found on him, unlike everyone else he'd met so far. But when his eyes had turned to Sorun, he'd frozen in his restraints completely. Multiple emotions, contempt and rage and hatred, all played over his face and eyes, only adding to Sorun's confusion. There was nothing but pure hostility in his eyes, all directed at Sorun. Why? Why all that hate, when he'd never met this

version? Was it just because he had knowledge of the original timeline, and that alone was enough for King Shadow to feel threatened? That alone?

He was severely overestimating Sorun if that were really the case, but the human himself wasn't able to voice this out of fear for the gaze that was burning into him. It was an even more intense glare than the one the other Shadow had given him when they'd first met.

"... You haven't aged a day." Of all the words Sorun expected the black and red hedgehog to say, that hadn't been them. He made a puzzled expression as a result. "Do you remember me?" King Shadow asked. They were words less said and more growled out, and were it not for the restraints Sorun would have shrank back further against the table were it possible. "Well?"

"I... only knew the other you. F-from before," Sorun answered in a small voice, blue eyes darting away from the crimson eyes staring at him.

"No. We've met."

More confusion. Uncertainty. That statement didn't make sense to Sorun. "Wha-" he began, though only got that far before one of Shadow's gloved hands grabbed at Sorun's face and forcefully positioned it so that he was staring at King Shadow's face. He'd gasped out in panic and squirmed harder in the restraints, but had to stop when King Shadow painfully squeezed down on Sorun's face as a result of his struggling. Mercifully, he'd relaxed his grip when Sorun stopped struggling, though he still kept a firm grip on him and forced the two to maintain eye contact.

"You remember me," King Shadow claimed. "Decades ago. Above the sky at Space Colony ARK. You disrupted the plans I had for this world."

"What? I 'ever-" Sorun's face was released mid-sentence by King Shadow. He'd winced in response at the sudden release, and then

managed to speak out normally without the hand disrupting his speech. "I don't know what you're talking about."

For whatever reason, King Shadow's glower only increased. "You stole two of the Chaos Emeralds from the main weapon. You attempted to cripple me. You twisted my limbs and ground all of my bones to dust. It took me *hours* to regenerate from the wounds I sustained because of you!"

Maybe it was the confusion masking the terror Sorun felt. Or, strangely enough, seeing a familiar face despite the fact it wasn't friendly. Acceptance for his situation slowly setting in. Whatever it was, somehow Sorun found enough will to tell King Shadow plainly, "I honestly have no clue what you're talking about. We've never met before this point." He'd even managed to do it without stuttering.

"..." Miraculously, the intense glare King Shadow held settled into a heavy scowl. He regarded Sorun for what seemed like whole minutes, silent and unmoving while the three echidna on the side continued to stand at attention. He found *something* in Sorun's face, though he personally wasn't sure of what, and then he finally turned to the three echidna. "I'm overseeing to this execution personally," he told them. "Leave. Now."

Sorun heard a series of "Yes, your grace" from the three echidna, followed by their footsteps departing the room. King Shadow only shifted his gaze back to Sorun once the door had closed, leaving the two of them alone in the room. The half-Mobian's expression, oddly enough, had changed. Still angered, but it was much more subdued compared to what it had been a minute prior. More... confused. Or solemn. Sorun wasn't completely sure. He wasn't sure of much except for how peculiar the situation had become.

"I was never much one for public executions. Necessary at times, in matters for 'moralizing' the masses, but I always found the simpler and expedient solution was more often than not the best one." King Shadow turned around and began slowly walking towards a nearby computer console. Sorun saw there were wires connecting it to the

table he was strapped to. "One memory that sticks out to me is during the time I was wrestling control of the world away from that infuriating Robotnik. I'd planned on beheading him in front of as many broadcast cameras as I could fit in a room, but he'd escaped my grasp a day before his execution. When I caught him the second time I decided to just plunge a Chaos Spear through his heart and save myself the trouble. As it turned out people were just as satisfied to see a corpse anyways."

He began typing away at the console. Sorun began fidgeting in the restraints again when he heard electrical sparking sounds.

"I suppose at this points it's just habit for me," King Shadow continued. "It's simpler just to remove things that don't belong. Easier. And the world was always better for it. I don't see why this should be any different."

There was a quiet, yet audible whirring sound that reached Sorun's ears. Like the sound of some electrical device beginning to charge up. Sorun began struggling harder in his restraints, a small, uncontrollable whimper leaving him when he saw blue spark jumping out from the cables. *"No, no no no please don't please I don't want it stop it stop it pleae-!"*

In an instant, King Shadow was at Sorun's side. And then, bizarrely, he'd reached out and grabbed at the electrodes that were strapped to Sorun's body. The diodes that had been taped to his arms, the coat's sleeves having been rolled up, the ones on his chest underneath his clothes and the ones clamped to his head. Even more bizarrely was that King Shadow removed them all, and quickly at that. Thankfully quickly enough, as it was when he set down the last electrode on the table and removed his hand they all began sparking.

Sorun's body automatically flinched when it happen. Small streams of blue electricity were being spit out of the electrodes, and the voltage was enough that they were jumping around on the metal table. Thankfully, he himself was untouched from it due to their

removal. It wasn't what he'd expected to happen. Not the electrical torture he hadn't been prepared for followed by death. Just... him sitting there on the table, completely confused as he shifted between looking at the dancing electrodes and King Shadow, who was staring down at him with an unreadable expression.

Without making a sound, King Shadow turned around and walked back to the console. After a few keystrokes the electricity was cut off: the whirring sound disappeared and the electrodes stopping jumping around and spitting electricity. Not missing a beat, he'd turned towards the door to the room, walked to it, and exited the room while swiftly closing the door behind him. As Sorun laid there, catching his breath in heavy heaves, he managed to make out muffled voices beyond the walls, though he wasn't able to make much out. There was then the sound of departing footsteps, and he'd thought that'd been the end to whatever was happening until the door opened again. King Shadow stepped back in, once more closing the door behind him, and Sorun found himself growing still.

"It's a shame the person that set this device up miscalculated how much electricity a member of your species can withstand compared to a Mobian," King Shadow said, his voice breaking the tense silence. "I was so looking forwards to seeing you suffer a painful death for the humiliation you handed me, but much to my consternation you died instantly once the power kicked on. Lien-Da seemed equally as disappointed and went to go confront the engineer at my order. I imagine he won't live to see tomorrow morning as a result of his blunder."

"... You're... not killing me after all...?" a quiet Sorun asked, the faintest bit of hope in his voice. Those hopes were dashed when King Shadow shook his head.

"That's not what's happening." Slowly, he began walking towards Sorun's table. "The memory of what you did to me aboard the ARK haunted me for years, you know. Those Chaos Arms bending and twisting me in impossible positions. I'd never felt such excruciating physical pain, and never have since." He stopped besides Sorun,

eyes boring down into his own. "When I was informed of your capture, I wanted to do the same to you. To break your body like you did mine. To beat your head until it was nothing but mush like I did that meddlesome scientist when he refused to answer my questions. Cobor, I believe his name was."

The name rang familiar to Sorun's ears. The other scientist that had been working with Rotor on the time machine, that had been his name. He remembered Sonic wondering why he hadn't been down there with them and Rotor. He supposed he knew now, and the knowledge made Sorun loudly gulp as a result. "So, uh... s-so what's happening now?" he stuttered out in question.

"What's happening now is I have an image to maintain as king. Showing mercy is a sign of weakness. But you dying to the incompetence of a single engineer is a completely different matter entirely." King Shadow glanced to the side. "I'd call it a shame if the man weren't so replaceable, but still, he did... somewhat admirable work. I'll have to remember to have someone draft a letter to his wife and child commemorating his service to me." He looked back down at Sorun. "But don't get any ideas. You're not leaving this room alive."

A bit of disbelief mixed into Sorun's expression. "You're killing someone off just because you don't want to torture me to death? Even though you actually do?" It sounded like sheer lunacy to him, causing Sorun to shake his head. "What the hell kind of illogic even is that?"

There wasn't a single facet of any of this that made sense to Sorun. He couldn't figure out King Shadow's actions, nor even the words he spoke. Why he was speaking as if they knew each other when the two of them had never spoken before today. The mention of "Chaos Arms", something that sounded vaguely like his Bringer Claws, made some uneasiness stir in Sorun, but that was still impossible. There was no way he could know about that power.

None of this made sense.

"I have my reasons," King Shadow stated in response to Sorun's question.

"Your reasons," the teen repeated. "Okay, then do you maybe mind divulging these so-called 'reasons' to me? I'm dying anyways, thanks to you no less. It's the least you owe me."

Indignation crossed over King Shadow's face, causing Sorun to clamp his mouth shut and question why he'd suddenly grown so lippy to the man holding his life in his hands. Thankfully, the king had let out a small, almost imperceivable sigh before addressing Sorun.

"... You could say it's out of thanks."

"Are you being for real right now?" That's what Sorun wanted to say. He didn't out of fear of retribution, so instead he said, "I don't understand."

"I made a promise to somebody once, long ago. To protect this world. Back then, twenty-five years ago, when I'd just been awoken from cryostasis I'd been... admittedly volatile. Angry. Something very dear to me had been taken away and I wanted nothing more than watch the entire world burn for what it had done. So I set out to do exactly that."

"The orbital cannon," Sorun suddenly realized. "The one on the ARK. You told me about it once."

"Is that so?" King Shadow's eyes narrowed at Sorun. There was confusion and some other emotion in his look that Sorun couldn't identify. "But yes, the cannon. My plan was to use it to destroy the entire planet. But then you stopped me and absconded with two of the Chaos Emeralds needed to power the cannon, permanently thwarting my efforts." He turned around, leaning against the table while crossing his arms. Sorun just stared on. "I never heard of you again until today."

None of this rang a bell in Sorun's memories. "And... you're sure this was me, 'cause-"

"I remember perfectly well your face and voice. Even the coat. You wore this exact coat that day." He glanced down to eye the blue coat Sorun wore, the helix designs on the coat's breasts and sleeves. "I would never forget something so distinctive."

Well, that clinched it even further. King Shadow was right: the coat was too distinctive. And Sorun had it on good authority he should be the only person around with it. It still didn't satisfy any of the questions that were zipping through his head, such as what King Shadow was even talking about and why Sorun had no recollection of a single word he was saying. And though he tried, he couldn't come up with any reasonable explanation for what he was hearing.

"It was because you rendered the orbital cannon inoperable by stealing two of the seven Chaos Emeralds needed to power it that I'm thanking you," King Shadow continued. "I had some time to think following that... encounter of ours, up there and aboard the space station. I came back down to Mobius afterwards, to truly look around and see just what was so special about this planet." From how much of King Shadow's face Sorun could see from this angle, he saw it wrinkle in frustration, like he'd been exposed to something sickening. "It was utter madness - an entire world at war with itself. A madman vying for world domination and destroying everything in his way, a deranged empress in the eastern lands attacking the villages and settlements and empowering the clans of bandits, a kingdom of Mobians in disarray, an oppressive Overlander government, the echidna of this island tearing themselves apart in civil war, villains and miscreants left and right plotting and planning inane schemes, it was, it was..."

He looked so angry and upset Sorun wouldn't have been surprised if King Shadow began shouting right there. He managed to calm himself down, though, taking in a deep breath and taking a second to compose himself. It was after he shook his head that the king continued speaking.

"Insanity. This entire world was besieged by insanity," he told Sorun. "So I decided to do what I promised to do. I was going to save this world." He rose his right hand up, greenish energy swirling between his fingers briefly. "And as it happened I had the power to make this desire a reality. I made this world my own, battle after battle and conquest after conquest. There wasn't really anybody alive who could match me, though some certainly tried. They died. I subjugated and destroyed everything in my way until this entire world was mine."

"I can understand the intention behind wanting to take over the world for good intentions, but this is coming from the same guy who openly admitted to me that he just offed some innocent engineer. Along with all the other shady stuff I've seen around..." Sorun pointed out.

"Yes, you wouldn't be the first one to criticize some of my policies. And it seems no matter how many times I stomp these protestors out more always rise up out of the woodwork," King Shadow grumbled out. "People always seem so quick to judge how I rule but forget all the good that I've done for the planet as a result. The world is unified under my rule. The death tolls of the past ten years are a *fraction* of what they were during those days of madness. Nobody dies of hunger and medical technology was distributed to every corner of the globe. Pollution caused by Robotnik's ambitions was eliminated and measures were taken to ensure similar damage was never done to the environment ever again. Crime is nearly nonexistent. People are free to live their lives as they see fit as long as they follow my laws. What *exactly* is so wrong with this world that you don't agree with what I've done to save it?"

"Yeah, sure, all that stuff sounds fine. Except for the people you're torturing and killing in a castle dungeon to maintain that status quo," Sorun rebuked. "What about their lives? Are they just not good enough to live in your world?"

At hearing that, King Shadow turned around so they the two could face each other once again. "I do what is necessary so that the good I've done for this world is not undone. If people take umbrage to that,

then that is their problem. They're free to disagree in the privacy of their own homes. But actions against the status quo will not be tolerated. I will not allow even the smallest risk of disrupting my world order to persist," he said to Sorun. "If a single person must die so that a hundred others can live in peace, then it is a worthwhile sacrifice." His eyes narrowed at Sorun. "Do you believe differently? Would you truly kill a hundred people just so that one would live?"

"Yes. I would."

It hadn't been the answer King Shadow was expecting. That much was obvious from the way the anger on his features melted into confusion, uncertainty. Like he couldn't comprehend the answer he'd been given. He'd looked down a bit, as if he were attempting to think over the answer and puzzle it out, but in the end he'd just lifted his eyes back up to Sorun's with that same confused look that betrayed how he couldn't understand.

"How can you even justify such an answer?" King Shadow demanded, halfway between confused and angered.

"How are the lives of a hundred people more valuable than a single person's life?" Sorun asked back, voice completely even and serious. "Because there's more of them? Is that it? Is the fact every life is unique and unquantifiable not taken into consideration?"

King Shadow shook his head. "What does that even matter? Of course lives are precious, but so are the ones connected to those lives. Killing one person as opposed to a hundred causes less pain overall for every person connected to those one-hundred and one lives. It's the lesser of evils. It's just."

"It's just because you say it's just. King." A scoff came from Sorun, and his head rolled to the side. "There's an adage where I'm from, about six people tied to train tracks with a train bearing down on them. Five tied to one track the train's heading for, one tied to another track. You have the option of pulling a lever to divert the train to the other track." Sorun rolled his head back so his eyes met with

King Shadow's. "You're the kind of person that would pull the lever and kill one person. I'm the kind of person that would let the train kill five people. I'm afraid it really is just that simple."

They stared at each other for a long while. Blue and red eyes staring at each other, unblinking. Sorun tried thinking over King Shadow's words, but no matter how many times he replayed the voice he just couldn't see the sense in it. How killing ordinary civilians was a "necessary act" even if it meant others got to live in peace. The reasoning behind it just wouldn't click for him, and he found himself hating even the very idea. And it seemed, from the expressions flashing over King Shadow's face, he was reaching the same conclusion as Sorun. They broke eye contact, King Shadow stepping away while Sorun remained in place, strapped to the table.

"It seems we can't come to an agreement on this," King Shadow admitted after a long moment of silence. "But nevertheless, you're wrong. I only need to look out a window and see the world I've created to know it. Your way is nothing but insanity."

"I'm the sanest person on this whole island. You're the crazy person killing random people in a torture dungeon." Sorun's own glare intensified. "Killing that scientist, Cobor. Torturing Rotor, executing me, probably planning to execute Sonic, Tails, and Lara-Su, too. Just because we all know about the original timeline. Where the fuck is the sense in any of that?"

King Shadow's face wrinkled in displeasure. "Come, now, you're better than using crass language like that," he chided. Were it not for the anger Sorun felt he actually would have felt amused at that tone he'd taken with him. "Sorun... was the name Lien-Da gave to me," he continued, tone turning back to his serious, grave way of speaking. "I told you that not even the smallest threat to my world order cannot be allowed to persist. I can't have people with knowledge of another time, with another way of living that ignorant people would perceive as a better way of life than this one, running around. And I can't have people like that blue hedgehog try and stage some kind of coup to usurp me as king just for him to undo all my work and the good I've

done in an attempt to change things back to the way they were in *his* time. And I *certainly* can't have scientists with working knowledge of time travel exist." He shook his head. "The old echidna scientist died because he wouldn't talk no matter how many times I beat my questions into his skull, and serves as an example to the walrus. He's been... stubbornly resistant to my attempt at extracting information, but I've cracked worse. The others will tell me all they know, whether they want to or not, and then they'll be summarily executed. Lien-Da can fill in the rest with her knowledge, and once she's outlived her usefulness in this matter I'll dispose of her, too."

"So that's it? You'll even kill people loyal to you because you're that paranoid over your rule being disrupted?" Sorun asked in disbelief. "Even Knuckles? Your big chief enforcer? The guy whose face is plastered everywhere?"

King Shadow waved a hand. "It's a regrettable loss, but a necessary one. It would have been quiet, but his daughter just had to get wrapped up in this, too. I'll need to dispose of his wife as well for her connection; that entire family is just too much of a risk. But everyone else will get to live on happily in honor of their sacrifices. That is all the justification I need, Sorun."

Sorun's eyes narrowed, and then closed. Something that sounded like disappointment left him. "It's not sacrifice if you don't give them the choice."

The look King Shadow gave him was the equivalent of an invisible shrug. "It's as you said. I'm king. My word is law, and the power to dictate what is right and wrong lies with me."

"So that's how it is..." With a resigned sigh, Sorun allowed his head to thunk back against the table as he opened his eyes up at the ceiling. "So what about me? Why all this? Why bother with the words when I'm dead anyways?" He couldn't figure out why King Shadow would have any reason to bother with any of this, unless he really was just that bereft of entertainment. And even then it didn't explain why he wasn't being slowly shocked to death.

"Right. You." Sorun found himself blinking in surprise. King Shadow's voice had gone quieter. "Certain details were shared to me by Lien-Da. What the previous world was like, what that version of me did." There was a small clacking sound, like teeth gnashing together. "Why that version of me chose to throw his lot in with those insolent soldiers at G.U.N..." he growled out, sounding more angered than Sorun had heard him since entering this room. It was surprising enough that Sorun had lifted his head back up to see King Shadow, but by then he'd already taken a calming breath. He looked back at Sorun, saying, "According to her you, for whatever reason, were trapped inside of the Master Emerald and that various governments and organizations tried to find a solution for removing you. Is this correct?"

"It was a bit more complicated than that, but yeah," Sorun answered.

"Including G.U.N.?" he pressed, to which Sorun nodded. "Why?"

"Well... you asked them, from what I was told. The other you," Sorun clarified. "You had a lot of pull with them, being their top agent and all."

King Shadow closed his eyes, and then let out a small breath. "I see." He opened his eyes back up to look at Sorun. "And what were we? In that time? What significance did you and I hold towards each other?"

For some reason he didn't sound nearly as demanding as he was with the rest of his questions. It almost sounded to Sorun like King Shadow was simply just asking him. He couldn't fathom why this was, but lacking a reason to refuse him, even out of spite, he decided to answer.

"We were friends," Sorun honestly answered. "That's the only reason."

"..." The mouth on King Shadow's tan muzzle thinned. He looked down again, silently contemplating something as he thought Sorun's

words over. Sorun saw his shoulders fall slightly. "I think I can see why, hearing you speak," he said, looking back up at Sorun. "You. Those words, some of them at least. Your species, your... your eyes."

Sorun made an odd expression. "I... don't understand."

"You just remind me of someone. Maybe that's why." Without elaborating any further he stepped back to Sorun's table. Sorun felt his heartrate pick back up when King Shadow began to reattach the electrodes. "It's because of that and out of thanks for preventing me from destroying the planet in my blind rage that I'm offering you mercy. As well as... recognition, for the relationship we shared." The final electrodes were clamped back onto his head, prompting the half-Mobian to turn around and make his way back to the console connected to the table. "I'm modifying the amperage on the device," he explained, his fingers running against the console. "You'll be struck with a high enough voltage that you won't even realize what's happened. Death will be instantaneous. Painless."

"I'm not feeling very gracious." Sorun's eyes glanced down at the wires connected to the table when he heard a small, whirring sound.

"I suppose you'll have to live with that with what little time you have left." King Shadow stepped away from the console and began making his way to the doorway. He stopped right next to Sorun's table, his eyes glancing down at the human one last time. "I don't expect you to understand, but everything I do is for the sake of the entire world. I've done too much good for it all to be undone." He turned his head back forwards. "Goodbye, Sorun."

Without any further words passing between them, King Shadow walked out of Sorun's field of view. He heard the door to the room open, and then close, followed by the muffled sound of a single pair of heavy footsteps disappearing down the hallway.

Sighing, Sorun laid his head back on the table. Slowly but steadily the whirring sound from the wires and nearby capacitors was

growing louder. He didn't know precisely how much time he had until they were fully charged, but he didn't imagine it would be long until all that electricity got discharged into him. Escape would have been ideal, but he didn't have a way of accomplishing that.

"Well, this fucking sucks," Sorun morosely thought. He felt grief and sadness eat away at him as, once again, it seemed like he was going to die. *"I got this far just to go out like this. 'Least I won't feel anything, but... yeah, that's not really that big a comfort. Goddam-"*

A new sound tore Sorun from his thoughts and caused him to look towards it. There'd been a small, rattling sound that came from a nearby ventilation grate on the ceiling. It rattled a few more times, and then a sound like something striking the gate was heard. It fell away from the ceiling, clattering on the ground below, and from the resulting hole in the ceiling a head popped out upside-down, looking down towards Sorun.

Sorun was pretty certain he'd never been so relieved to see Tails' face ever before. With all the emotions he'd been subjected to today he wasn't so sure what to feel about that.

"Sorun! Hey!" A smile spread over the upside-down fox's face, and a hand extended from the vent hole and waved at him. Sorun stared at him dumbfounded, losing the capacity to speak momentarily as the Mobian dropped out of the vent. "Hold on just a second, alright? I'll get you out of there as quick as I can!"

"Uh... sure, yeah..." Sorun mumbled out, not managing to say much else as he saw the fox dart towards the console connected to the table. He still heard the nearby capacitors whirring louder and louder - much louder than they had been the first time around when they'd went off while detached from Sorun - and the copious amount of blue sparks flying out from the cables and wires wasn't doing anything to calm his nerves. He actually began to feel his hair stand up on end and was beginning to fear that Tails was being too slow and that'd he'd end up dying. Again.

But, in the end, it seemed those fears were unfounded. There was a loud *clunk!* sound, followed by the whirring sound abruptly quieting down to nothing while at the same time the blue sparks died off. A massive sigh of relief came from Sorun, who quickly was growing sick and tired from brushing so close to death so repeatedly.

And then the anger began setting in. Anger at Lien-Da for everything she did and that haughty expression she wore and that sadistic smile. Anger at King Shadow and every single thing about him. Anger at Sonic, anger at himself for being too weak to do anything and having to be saved *again* , anger at this whole situation.

"Hey, Sorun, it's alright. You're safe now." The words barely reached Sorun's ears as Tails stepped besides him and began undoing his restraints, though he did feel another spike of intense anger at that patronizing voice he had used on him. He couldn't manage to focus on Tails, though, more focused on the mirror image of himself sitting on top of a nearby metal box bolted to the wall, legs swinging freely as the two Soruns looked at one another.

"Okay, great, se we live to see another day," the Sorun across the room demurred, resting his head against a closed fist with the elbow leaning on his leg. "Do we actually have a plan, though, or are we just winging it again?"

There was a question he wished he had an answer to. "I don't know. Let's just see what happens and we'll go from there," Sorun muttered in response. He felt Tails stop undoing the restraints momentarily, and he glanced at the fox to see him giving Sorun an odd look. Whatever had given him pause seemed to wear off, though, as he then resumed freeing Sorun while also removing the electrodes. A few seconds later, and he was completely free of the table.

"Alright, there we are." After freeing him, Tails had reached forwards and gently gripped one of Sorun's arms to help him sit up. His voice had taken on a soothing tone. Sorun wanted to punch him for it. "It's alri-"

"Don't fucking touch me." Barely suppressing a snarl, Sorun tore his arm out of the shocked fox's grasp, barely avoiding lashing out at him. He turned his back towards him, head bowed towards the ground with teeth clenched out of indignation. Humiliation for having to be saved, for everything that had gone on so far today. Those sounds, those damn pitiful sounds he'd made in front of King Shadow when he thought he was going to be shocked. The squirming.

Goddammit, he hated all of it.

Tails, who'd recoiled his arm in shock, slowly lowered it. His expression turned into a scowl. "Sorun, do you really have to use those kinds of words?" he asked, sounding partly uncomfortable and partly irritated.

"Fuck you, you're an adult now, I can say whatever the fuck I want." A beat passed as Sorun stared down at the floor. "How'd you get out?"

"Knuckles came and freed us," Tails explained, causing Sorun to feel some surprise. "When we got out I got into the castle's systems, managed to reroute most of the guards. I found out from there where they took you so I came to get you out." There was a shuffling sound as Tails crossed his arms. "You're welcome, by the way."

Even after hearing that Sorun didn't thank him. "So Knuckles just changed his mind or what? Thought you said he wasn't helping out," he muttered out.

"He had his own plan."

"And that plan involved us getting arrested and me almost dying, huh?"

"He didn't want to arouse suspicion, and seeing as we're all free and you're fine I don't see why you're complaining."

Sorun made a scoff. "Yeah, well... I'm still punching him when I see him."

He heard a small, disappointed sigh from behind him. "Sorun," Tails began, admonishing, "I know you're stressed out over everything, but attacking our friends isn't gonna solve anything."

"I'm still a bit salty over the whole Enerjak thing. I'm owed one solid hit." His hands gripped the edge of the table, and Sorun pushed off it so that he was finally standing up. He rotated his arms a bit, and then made a small sigh as he turned to meet Tails' face. He saw him staring intently at him. "Still, uh... yeah, sorry. Thanks," he mumbled, glancing away so he didn't have to meet Tails' eyes. He felt that just maybe he should have been a bit more concerned over himself that he only recognized the gratitude he felt for being saved far after that fact, but he managed to shake it off quickly enough. There were more important things he wanted to focus on. "I found out what happened to that Cobor guy Sonic was talking about. Sha... the king beat him to death."

Tails flinched, heavily. He glanced down, ears flattened halfway and a weary breath leaving him. "Yeah. Knuckles told us," he said in a somber tone. "His daughter went to go take Rotor to the nearest hospital for his... you know, the injuries. She said she'd come and help right after."

Sorun made a small nod. "Alright, so what are we doing? What's the plan?" he asked him.

"Well... I think it goes without saying that we need to get King Shadow off the throne," Tails said to him. "I know you weren't, well... *there* during that time, but Sonic and I have the memories to compare how things are here compared to how they are then, and we're in agreement that what Shadow's doing is wrong."

A troubled hum left Sorun. They decided to throw a coup, right in the middle of this? Sorun didn't want a coup or a change in government; he wanted things to go back to normal. He almost said as much to

Tails until he remembered King Shadow's words, and how desperate he was to make sure he remained in power and would retaliate against all threats against the world order he created.

In the end, Sorun held his tongue. If he, or any of them, wanted to have any chance at doing anything at all, he needed to be dealt with first and foremost. They wouldn't get anything done with King Shadow hounding their every footstep, and Sorun didn't like his odds of outlasting the immortal, super-powered Mobian.

"Okay..." he agreed in a careful tone, "so how are we going to go about doing that?"

"Well, Sonic already went to go confront King Shadow. They're probably fighting right now as we're speaking," Tails informed him. "I'd like to say Sonic's got this in the bag, but, well..." He frowned a bit. "Shadow's Shadow, and Sonic, he's... he isn't really in his prime anymore. I can't help him fight, but you..."

"Yeah, sure, if I had my powers, but I don't," Sorun expressed with a shake of his head. "So unless you're carrying around a Chaos Emerald or two we're sunk."

For some reason, Tails smirked. "Funny you should say that," he said, and then reached down towards the toolbelt strapped to his waist. Sorun watched the movements with a curious eye, blinking in confusion when he saw Tails open a small, square pouch on the belt. He was about to ask what Tails was doing until he pulled *it* out.

Sorun stared, wide-eyed, at the blue, glowing gem that was held in Tails' hand. The blue Chaos Emerald. So similar to the one he was accustomed to in the other timeline it may as well have been the same one. He couldn't help but adopt a dumbfounded expression, while Tails held a cheeky smile at seeing Sorun's reaction. "..." Blinking a couple more times, Sorun looked down from the Emerald and at the pouch on Tails' belt. "Dude, how the hell did you even fit that in there?" he asked, noting how the pouch itself was smaller

than the large gem Tails was holding. It hadn't even looked deformed in the slightest from holding such a large item.

"Oh, uh... it's bigger on the inside." At Sorun's blank stare, Tails was forced to elaborate. "I invented it a few years ago." Suddenly looking abashed, he turned his head away from Sorun. "Mostly 'cause Mina kept telling me the garage was too cluttered. I kept trying to tell her it was fine, but the kids kept getting into things, so... yeah."

"Of course you managed to figure out hammerspace and- wait, Mina?" Sorun did a double-take on Tails. "Li-like the singer? Her? You ended up marrying *her* ?"

"U-um, yeah. She's my wife," Tails confirmed. He made a sheepish laugh, a small blush creeping across his face. "It's actually a long story since-"

"But-but what about her and Ash!? Last time I saw them they looked like they were in a really steady relationsh... you know what, I don't really care." He shook his head to take his attention off of the topic and then began reaching towards the Chaos Emerald Tails held. "Whatever, good for you, gimme that."

Sorun's intention had been to take the Chaos Emerald and use it to manifest one of his powers. Which one he hadn't decided on, maybe Yamato, but the allure of the Emerald and its power had been so tempting that he hadn't even thought that far ahead before reaching forwards to take it from Tails.

But then Tails pulled the Emerald away before Sorun's fingers could brush up against it.

"..." After a long, slow blink, Sorun's eyes slowly traveled back to the Emerald, which was being held away from Sorun by Tails. He almost thought the fox was playing a joke on him first until he saw the serious look in his eyes. "Tails, give it."

"I can't yet," Tails said to him. "We have to irradiate you first."

"..." Sorun's arm fell slack at his side as he regarded Tails with a dumbfounded expression. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I know what happened to you while inside the Master Emerald. At least I managed to piece the important bits together," Tails murmured, looking down and cupping his chin with one hand while the other one ran its fingers over the blue gem. "When it comes to Chaos energy it's an entirely unique cosmic force separate from time. Er, well, technically speaking entropy, but same thing regardless. Chaos Emeralds are completely immune to the effects of time, and the Master Emerald is pretty much just a giant, more powerful Chaos Emerald, which is why you were essentially 'frozen' in time when you got put in there. It's probably why you weren't affected by the chronal shift when the timeline was altered - it managed to protect you since you were inside the thing - but the shock must have caused some reaction that affected your own chronological clock as well as ejecting you from-"

Sighing out loudly, Sorun held a hand up to stop Tails mid-sentence. "For god's sake stop the technobabble and give me the barebones answer."

Both of Tails' arms dropped and he gave Sorun a flat look. "The Master Emerald de-aged you. From the looks of it not much, probably just a few months, six at most, which is how your injuries disappeared."

"Was that so hard?" Well, at least that question was answered. Explained the hair at least - he'd have to grow it out again, he'd liked having it reach past his chin - but it was still nice knowing that- "Wait, hold on." Sorun's eyes suddenly widened in realization. "Oh, fuck, it didn't rewind me so far back I lost my ability to touch Chaos Emeralds without absorbing them, did it? I need that!"

Based on the look Tails was giving him, that was most likely the case. The shortened hair lead credence to that fact, and when he thought back to that day that they opened the portal and saw Earth, he recalled his hair having a longer length than this. Probably. The

more he thought on it the less certain he actually was with that particular detail.

"I'm... actually not so sure," Tails admitted to him. "We could have you test it out by touching this one, but-"

"But if I did lose it I'll be stuck with it and out twelve years," Sorun finished with a resigned sigh. That was a serious problem. A permanent power would be nice, but he couldn't swap them out as opposed to just using an Emerald. And he wasn't too keen on shaving years off again, either. Suddenly his eyes held a lot more trepidation as he eyed the Emerald in the Mobian's hand. "So what was that you were saying about irradiating me?" he asked.

"Well, if you need to get that ability back if you did lose it, then we just need to repeat the circumstances that gave you those powers to begin with, don't we?" Tails asked him. "So we just need to give you a heavy dose of radiation. Aaaand, as it happens King Shadow hoards a lot of weapons and artifacts and keeps them in vaults inside the castle dungeon. And as it *just so happens* I found out where he's keeping a cache of old Overlander nuclear warheads down here," he finished, a small, proud smirk spreading over his face. "I just gotta disassemble one to get to the plutonium core."

Sorun, by contrast, didn't have so much as a hint of a smirk on his face. "Do you even know how to do that?"

Tails actually managed to look insulted by the question. "Sorun, I could build a nuke if I wanted to. Not that I ever would," he hastily added, "but I could." He gestured to his belt full of pouches. "Plus I got a whole workshop's worth of tools with me, so it shouldn't be any trouble."

"Well, when you put it like that..."

It was only after spending an extended period of time alone with this older Tails did Sorun realize how different he was. Watching him

skulk down hallways with Sorun close behind in tow, the way he exuded sheer confidence when he tore apart a bunch of wall consoles to hack through any doors in their way, the lack of pause. The determination in his steps.

Hell, even his voice kept catching Sorun off guard. The way it sounded so similar to what he was accustomed to, but more mature now. The boy was a man now. A family man at that, which made Sorun feel twice as awkward since he hadn't grown up along with everyone else. If anything he'd actually gone backwards, physically at least. And now *he* felt like the kid. It was almost insulting, like the universe was playing yet another cruel joke on him amid all the others.

Then again, twenty-five years was twenty-five years. It was practically a lifetime. To that end Sorun made the decision that the Tails he was with now, the one working on disassembling a nuclear missile they'd found locked in a storage room while Sorun himself sat on top silently watching, may as well have been a completely different person from the Tails of the past that he knew. Practically strangers. And really, what could Sorun have possibly been to Tails? A friend that hadn't even been there for a full year of his life when by now he was in his mid-thirties? Even less than that considering he was working with two sets of memories, one of which Sorun was completely absent from?

No. There was little substance there. In a weird way he was and wasn't *his* Tails. It made Sorun muse if he should even care about the fox past his utility and usefulness, which made him consider how cold that reasoning sounded. Regardless of what they meant to each other back then, he'd had time to reflect on the fact people had tried to save Sorun while he was inside the Master Emerald. They'd all failed, evidently, but he couldn't fault their efforts. And he didn't want to think of someone like a tool and nothing more when they were a person. That was going too close to King Shadow's philosophy, which he absolutely refused to entertain.

But it was still hard to see the person below him and picture the timid nerdy kid who liked building things that he knew in the past. Twenty-five years did a lot to change someone, apparently. Well, either that or marriage.

"I can't believe he fucks an idol. My man." Sorun palmed the surface of the missile and slid off it, feet touching the ground and then spinning around so he could admire the missile. On the outside it didn't look that special. It looked like an ordinary missile, smaller than the ICBMs of his own world by a large margin. Small enough to fit in this room, at least, which was about the same size as the one that held the Master Emerald was. There were others, all shelved on a giant rack of all things, though Tails assured him he only needed the one to fulfill his plan of irradiating Sorun.

It was a plan Sorun himself had many reservations over.

"So how exactly is this gonna work without me dying of radiation poisoning?" Sorun asked Tails, crossing his arms and arching his eyebrow in the fox's direction. He didn't even turn to acknowledge him, his arms elbow-deep in the electronic innards of the missile's warhead, various tools scattered around his feet. "I needed a hospital the last time around to avoid that, so unless you got a bottle of iodine for me to chug or something in your magic inventory pockets I don't see this turning out well for me."

"Surprised you even know what iodine is," Tails commented, his eyes still locked onto the warhead.

"I know things," Sorun said defensively. His grip on his arms tightened. "Answer the damn question."

"Your white-haired form regenerates you and cures diseases, doesn't it? You should be fine after going into that state for a couple of seconds."

"... I suppose so..." Sorun admitted after a long pause, grip on his arms loosening. That form was limited to his knowledge of the 'DMC'

games and the benefits of being a fictional devil-human hybrid. He knew the regeneration was top-tier, at least in terms of pure speed compared to every other regeneration system he'd seen in fiction. He didn't exactly know it inside and out since the lore of the games never went that deep on the subject. But there had to be something going on there since one of the characters lived exclusively off deserts and pizza and managed to stay in top physical condition without even trying, not to mention none of the characters had ever grown sick. At the end of the day it was up to the interpretation of the Chaos Emerald and his own heart how the power manifested.

Still though...

"I'm not a hundred percent on the diseases part, so I don't know where you're pulling that from. More like ninety, but if it was a cure-all wouldn't it have cured the mutation that gave me the ability to freely control Emeralds in the first place?" Sorun asked. "Or does that just not count since it wouldn't be classified as an 'ailment' due to being exclusively beneficial for me?" Could it even differentiate the difference? Was the power just that good? Or was he actually missing something? He knew for a fact that demons' evolution in the lore of the games was partly dependent on will and desire, not just environmental factors and genes. That was hard canon, and would have been factored in when his heart made the ability. So did him subconsciously considering that mutation as something "good" exclude it from Devil's Body curing it?

Tails shrugged. "You'd know more than me."

"This doesn't exactly come with an instruction manual, Tails."

A short sigh left the fox. "Alright, listen," he began, turning his head over his shoulder to look at Sorun. "There was a lot of people that went through the effort of examining your blood while trying to figure out how to save y-"

"People did what?"

"They stuck really big needles in the Master Emerald, would you just- look, let it go." He made a huff at Sorun's bewildered look and turned back to the opened warhead. "Your biology is really weird. By that I mean everyone I talked to said your blood samples reacted really, *really* weirdly to Chaos energy. And Chaos energy has always had a similarly weird relationship with radiation - the radioactive isotopes mixed in with the Chaos energies used in the gene bombs the Xorda set loose on Mobius is the only reason Mobians even exist. Chaos energy wasn't even proactive on the planet until those bombs," he said. "So your alien biology mixed with Chaos energy mixed with radiation does really, really weird things."

"Like let me use Chaos Emeralds?" Sorun asked.

"Like use Chaos Emeralds," Tails confirmed. "I don't know. Maybe it's the same reason why some Mobians are so much more, you know, Chaotically inclined than others. Evolution, biology... not really my field." He reached further into the warhead and pulled at something. Sorun heard a few snapping sounds. "Then again Mobians aren't exactly immune to radiation, so take it for what it's worth. I've personally seen that. Do you really need to take it any further than 'Chaos energy plus radiation equals control of powers?'"

"I mean not really, no," Sorun conceded, arms falling to his side. "I just don't want my hair falling out or something like that."

Tails laughed at that. "Sorun, you'll be fine."

Well, he sounded confident enough. That combined with Sorun's own reasoning of the situation and Devil's Body was enough to convince him. At that point he practically had more evidence for than against this being a good idea. And besides, reservations aside he trusted Tails.

"Well, here we are." Tails seemed to finally be finished with his work. He stood up from the warhead, turning around and presenting to Sorun an item held in his hands. "Here it is. One plutonium core, fresh out of the weapon of mass destruction."

It was such an innocuous little thing. The item in Tails' hands resembled little more than a chrome sphere about the same size as a shot put ball, the things athletes would throw in sports. If he didn't know it was a plutonium core for a nuclear weapon Sorun could have easily mistaken it for an oversized ball bearing. Somehow that made Sorun even more afraid of the thing.

"You're... sure that's safe, right?" he hesitantly asked.

After a moment's consideration, Tails crouched down and gently set the ball on the ground. "Relatively."

"Tails..."

"Sorun, it's fine. Trust me." He stood back up to his full height, and then held a second item out to Sorun: a hollow, metal hemisphere. "This is a beryllium cap," Tails explained after handing the thing to Sorun. "The basic gist is that, by covering the plutonium core with this, you're going to cause the neutrons emitted by the plutonium to bounce around against each other. This will create a nuclear reaction and release enough radiation to irradiate you." When Sorun grabbed the cap, Tails grabbed at his wrist and gave him a very serious look. "Now listen to me very closely. Don't let that cap cover the core for even more than a second. If you leave it on too long you'll cause the core to meltdown, and the explosion will not only kill us but destroy the whole island and everything on it. No more than a second. Take it off right after putting it on."

Somehow Sorun didn't feel like the grave tone Tails had taken didn't belay just how deadly the situation was. He felt a cold sweat begin to form on his face as he shakily took the metal cap from Tails. "You know this is how the guy that was messing around with the Demon Core died, right?" he shakily asked, having to force himself to grip the cap tightly enough not to drop it.

"Is that something from your world?" Tails asked, stepping back from Sorun. "The Demon Core?"

"It was just a silly nickname some scientists gave a plutonium core they were experimenting on back when nukes first became a thing," Sorun explained. "One slip of a screwdriver and the guy dies a week later from radiation poisoning." He blinked. "Now that I think about it you're having me do pretty much the same thing that got him killed."

Tails grimaced, turning his head slightly to avoid Sorun's gaze. "Well... I won't lie to you. This is a lethal dose of radiation we're hitting you with." Sorun had opened his mouth to argue, forcing Tails to quickly add, "But we're curing you right after so it doesn't even matter!"

Sorun closed his mouth. He had a pretty good point. "... Alright, fine," he sighed out. "So where are you going to be?"

"In the hallway, behind the lead-lined walls and far away from this. Just come out when you're done and I'll give you the Emerald."

"Yeah, sure, that's a... pretty solid plan, yeah." Sorun's voice trailed off as he watched the fox quickly - a bit too quickly for his liking - retreat out of the room while closing the door behind him. "All I gotta do is not screw up and cause nuclear armageddon, easy, no pressure, my species has a real great track record with that," he continued under his breath, turning back around to look down at the metal sphere at his feet.

The beryllium cap he was holding was beginning to feel like it was made of lead. He didn't even know if that expression was apropos; how the fuck was he supposed to know the density of some obscure metal he'd never heard of before now? And he didn't know why he had to be the one trusted with not causing a nuclear explosion when he had a bad history of screwing things up.

"Alright, just gotta... just cover it for a second. Single second, probably even less than that. I'll drop it on and slap it right off. That should work, right?" He let out a shaky breath and reached up to wipe the cold sweat off his forehead. *"I mean I need these powers,*

but... well, Tails is usually right about these things, so can I really say there's that big a risk...?"

The Earthling got down on his knees, breathing heavily as he held the cap over the core. The knowledge that this was may very well be his last thirty-odd seconds of existence was pounding in his head about as hard as his heart was pounding in his chest. He could probably kill everyone on the island accidentally just by dropping this thing over the core and being too slow to remove it.

"Eeeeasy..." The cap was lowered over the core. Only a single millimeter of space was left between it and the ground. One single millimeter away from sealing the core completely and potentially causing a nuclear eruption. *"Oh shit here we go!"*

The very instant he'd dropped the cap over the sphere, Sorun experienced heat and light. Blue light that engulfed him and the entire room, seemingly shining from the reacting core next to him somehow, like the light was so intense it was shining *through* the metal cap. Or maybe the cap itself was the one bathing Sorun in that blue light. And the heat was... odd. Not the kind of heat one would experience when being shined on by the sun, or if they were close to a roaring fire. This heat felt more internal. Similar to the momentary adrenaline shock one would feel after a massive surprise, but hotter. More intense.

Whatever the case was, Sorun hadn't even experienced it for a full half-second before shrieking in fright and slapping the metal cap off the core. The blue light and heat completely disappeared the moment the cap was removed with such force it rolled away to the other end of the room, leaving a completely normal-looking metal ball sitting in front of Sorun.

"OH...! Oh, man..." Gasping out a heaving breath, Sorun bent forwards and had to place his hands on his knees for support. "Oh god, I feel... I feel... I feel pretty normal actually, huh..."

He straightened up and began patting down his body in surprise. He didn't feel any differences or abnormalities. No fever, no sickness or aches, no anything. Not even the smallest bit of nausea. Maybe it was too soon to be feeling the effects of radiation poisoning a few seconds in. Well, whatever the case, he was actually feeling pretty good all things considered.

"Hey, Tails, I'm done with the blueberry-whatever-it's-called cap," Sorun announced, opening the door and walking out into the hallway. He quickly found the fox leaning on a nearby wall, blue Emerald in hand and a relieved look growing on his face. "Hurry up and give me the Emerald before my skin starts sloughing off and I begin sounding like I've been smoking for a consecutive hundred and twenty years."

Tails gave Sorun an odd look that belayed no understanding whatever of what he just said. He hadn't even said a word in response. All he'd done was flatten one of his ears and tilt his head in confusion at Sorun.

"It's... it's a 'Fallout' reference, there- it was supposed- gimme the damn rock," Sorun snapped, snatching the glowing gem right out of the Mobian's hand. To his own satisfaction, he didn't find that the Emerald instantly glued itself to his hand. He even began tossing the gem back and forth from one hand to the other, but it seemed nothing was happening. "Well, either it worked or I never lost the ability to begin with and this was a waste of time. Win either way."

Gripping the Emerald with both hands, Sorun let out a small breath as he began focusing. He saw Tails blink in surprise when his dark hair began to turn a striking white, and with it came the energized, healthier-than-life-itself feeling Sorun got whenever he transitioned into this form. "Man, could spend a lifetime staying like this," he muttered, letting the transformation fade a few seconds later. His hair darkened back to completely black, and right after the blue Emerald instantly transmuted from a blue gem into a sheathed katana. "Hello, old friend..."

A strong sense of solace flooded Sorun when the familiar weight of the katana settled in his hands. Fortunately, the Yamato seemed to be unchanged along with what he felt while briefly using Devil's Body. Seemed nothing with the abilities themselves changed, which was further relief for Sorun. He idly began twirling a finger around the blue ribbon tied to the sword's black scabbard while turning to Tails.

"Everything okay?" Tails asked him, only briefly regarding Yamato before turning his eyes upwards at Sorun's face.

"Hm? Oh, yeah," he confirmed with a nod. "Just, uh... thinking about how the sword alone isn't gonna be enough for the king upstairs. I mean even with Sonic I'm not so sure, and if it gets knocked out of my hands-"

"Well, fortunately for you I got the solution to your problem right here." Sorun watched, wide-eyed, as Tails reached into the pouch he'd pulled the blue Emerald from earlier and pulled out, to his shock, a second Chaos Emerald. The red one. "I had two," Tails explained.

"... Wow, geez, that's perfect." A short laugh left Sorun as he reached forwards and took the red gem from Tails. "Where'd you even get two Chaos Emeralds to begin with? I would figured Shadow'd hoard 'em all or something like he did with the Master Emerald."

"Well... you gave them to me."

Sorun paused. He took his eyes off the Emerald to look at Tails, and to his confusion he was giving Sorun a completely straight expression. Like he wasn't kidding around. "Pretty sure I didn't," Sorun said, slowly and unsurely. "I... would remember pretty clearly me doing that. And I haven't even been in this timeline for a day."

A drawn-out sigh left Tails. He reached up to run a hand through his hair, and then shook his head while muttering to himself, "Right, you wouldn't know." Sorun was about to ask what that even meant, but

before he could he said, "I'll explain when this is all over, alright? But right now we really need to focus on King Shadow."

"... Okay, I guess I'll hold you to that." The words spoken by Tails left a lot of questions burning in Sorun's mind, more than he was comfortable with, but he agreed in that King Shadow was the more pressing issue at the moment. The numerous questions could wait for after. "Anyways, I know exactly what to do with these two. Hold this."

Sorun tossed the red Emerald back to Tails. The Mobian caught it, and was about to ask what Sorun was doing before he unsheathed the katana and began dragging its edge along his fingers. "Er... Sorun, what are you doing?" Tails asked, looking squeamish at the sight.

"Gotta separate out my sense of pain for this next part."

"Why do you- SORUN, *WHY* !?"

Apparently Tails hadn't been that prepared to see Sorun lift his vest and shirt up and then stab his stomach with the katana. He would silently admit he probably should have warned him in advance, but then decided by the time he began dragging the blade across his torso it was probably too late. "Relax, it's a tried and true method," he grunted out, though it did nothing to wipe away the horrified expression Tails held. Sorun shook his head and rolled his eyes as a result, and then reached forwards to take the Emerald from the frozen fox's hands.

Once again he found the sensation of inserting a large, foreign object in his guts to be an unpleasant one. Like being unnaturally full and carrying around a weight that wasn't supposed to be there. His hair turned white once more, and he felt a momentary twinge of pain from the gaping slit he'd carved into his stomach before the wound healed completely, trapping the Emerald inside him. He made a discontent sound, shaking his head and inserting Yamato back into its scabbard.

"Alright, we're good to go," Sorun said, turning to a staring Tails. "What?"

"Why... would you do that...?"

"In case I lose this-" he shook Yamato, "- I'm not left completely defenseless and, you know, die in a single punch or something. No way I'm losing the one inside me unless it gets torn out."

"I-I... I mean, sure," Tails mumbled out, shaking his head, "but couldn't you have just held it?"

"What about this aren't you getting? If I lose both it's game over for me. No way do I rely on items." He turned his back to Tails. "And if I use the one in me to make Yamato it transfers to my hand, so it's not like I gotta cut myself open again to get it out." He began walking forwards, sighing a bit while holding his free hand up to his head. "I'm not so sure this'll still be enough to take on Shadow, though. Just two? Yeah, but we got Sonic, too, so it's not completely hopeless."

"Sorun?" Tails began walking after Sorun. When he didn't respond to him calling out, his walking increased so he could catch up to Sorun faster. "Hey, Sorun!"

Seemingly ignoring Tails, the human kept moving forwards. "I'm still worried about what we're supposed to do after. I dunno, we'll figure it out, that's pretty much how we solve all my problems at this point. Yeah, I get it, but this isn't-"

"Sorun!" After finally catching up with him, Tails shot his arm out to grab at Sorun's. He stopped in his tracks, turning his head to meet Tails' eyes. "Why do you keep talking to yourself like that?" the Mobian asked, worry creeping into his tone. "It's... you're really making me concerned."

There was no response from Sorun. He simply kept staring at Tails, a vacant, empty look on his face, like he hadn't even heard or

registered the question that had been asked to him. Tails was ready to try again when Sorun suddenly looked down at the hand grabbing him, looking confused.

"Tails, what are you doing standing around for?" Sorun asked, shaking the grip off and nodding his head. "We got a king to overthrow, come on, get the lead out."

"Uh..." Speechless, Tails could only watch was Sorun turned back around and continued down the dark hallway. Eventually he shook his head, made a resigned sigh, and began to follow closely behind. "Yeah, sure, let's go."

In fairness to himself, Sorun didn't have a plan moving forwards.

What was he supposed to do? Getting rid of King Shadow was a given - wouldn't get a moment's peace to do anything otherwise. After that? Sorun just didn't know. Ideally he'd fix this timeline so it'd just go back to the way it was, but he wasn't sure how he was supposed to go about doing that. Nobody else seemed to think it was possible, and the way Tails was talking about how Sonic wanted to stage this coup and become king again to fix the world made it sound like they all already decided they were just sticking with this timeline.

It was a conversation they could get to later, where Sorun would tell them he completely disagreed, but as he was stalking through the castle halls, freshly out of the dungeons below and into the brightly-lit, opulent hallways, he couldn't help but continually remind himself that he didn't know how he was supposed to fix an altered timeline. Or even if it could be fixed to begin with.

Maybe Tails was right. In fact, he most probably was, and he'd know more about it than Sorun. About how the change was irreversible and nothing could be done about it, that they'd just have to buckle down and make the best with what they had now.

A dark look overtook Sorun's features. Easy for Tails to say that. He got to keep his family.

But, at the end of the day, he didn't know what to do other than begrudgingly admit that Tails, despite in Sorun's personal opinion being very heavily biased towards the decision of not messing with time further, had a real good point he himself couldn't counter at all. And either way they'd have to talk once this was over anyways, about the Chaos Emeralds and what Tails said about them and Sorun and how he'd "given them to him." Whatever that meant. But later. Once King Shadow was dealt with.

And Sorun was still struggling figuring out just what he was supposed to do about that guy...

He was so caught up in his silent musings, in fact, that when he rounded a corner into a long stretch of bright hallway, he hadn't noticed the trio of individuals in front of him until he just happened to look up, and then froze mid-step in surprise. The three echidna he'd run into, a few meters ahead, seemed to be frozen in a similar state of shock. Tails, following behind Sorun, had been more responsive and have made a startled noise before diving behind the cover of the nearby corner.

Sorun didn't do the same thing. He just stood there, staring at the three when he realized they were the same three echidna that had taken him out of the cell. The two nameless guards and that female one, Lien-Da. The one that had tortured Rotor. Who probably would have tortured Sorun, too, if King Shadow hadn't called dibs. And Sorun was very cognizant of the white locks of hair on the edges of his field of vision.

... Well he wasn't going to go out of his way specifically for her, but if they just happened to run into each other, then it was a different story.

"You're supposed to be dead." To her credit, Lien-Da had snapped out of her shock rather quickly, narrowing her eyes in Sorun's direction. The two male echidna had, too, getting into more balanced stances while aiming their rifles at Sorun.

"I know, right?" Sorun replied in a nonchalant tone. He was aware that the slightest grin might have appeared on his face with the knowledge that, yes, it was very likely these three would never eat solid food ever again after the next minute or so. And the knowledge there was nothing they could do to stop Sorun helped enforce that idea. The physical abilities of Devil's Body were so far above the norm of a normal Mobian that it wasn't even funny. Except maybe for this instance.

Lien-Da's eyes shot up to the top of Sorun's head. She made a scoff. "I heard stories about people being so frightened or stressed that their hair turned white, but I didn't know it was actually real." A frown grew on her features when she looked down into his eyes. "I don't know how you're here, but I'm going to make you regret every single second you dared to think you deserved to live past dying at the king's hand."

Sorun idly tapped his left fingers on the scabbard of the sword his left hand held. His grin grew fractionally wider. "Ya think?"

"Men." There was a whirring sound. Sorun saw yellow light gather in the barrels of the rifles the two guards besides Lien-Da carried. "One chance. You go with me in one piece or lots of pieces. Your call."

"What if-"

For what was a fraction of a fraction of a second, Sorun felt a searing pain in his left shoulder. It'd made him cut off what he was trying to say, with his face going flat when he perceived the trail of yellow light in the air fading. He looked at his left shoulder, seeing a hole in his coat and a patch of skin, completely unmarred and healed.

"Guess I can't dodge lasers," he bitterly thought. That'd originally been his intent, but it seemed that he wasn't on a sufficient enough level to dodge an attack going at the speed of light. He wasn't even able to perceive its flight path before the laser hit him. It'd just appeared, instantly, and left almost as quickly. *"Well, whatever,"* he thought, gripping Yamato's handle with his right hand, *"those guns can't do anything to me anyways."*

In the time it took to blink, Sorun had pulled the sword out, slashed it in the air twice, and then re-sheathed it. Blue lines appeared on the photon rifles held by the echidna guards, though they quickly faded away to reveal impossibly clean cuts bisecting their weapons. The guns fell apart in pieces in the Mobians' hands, and before they could even act out in shock Sorun was right in front of them, moving past the threshold using supernatural speed they had no hope of keeping up with.

The end of Yamato's scabbard flew forwards and impacted the leftmost echidna in the chest. He doubled over, completely winded, with the sound of crunching ribs accompanying the sound of him hitting the ground. Before the rightmost echidna had any time to react Sorun's right hand had reached out, grabbed his face, and then slammed his head right into the wall. The head had gone right through, cracks spiderwebbing around the entrance and the echidna going limp after Sorun let go.

When he turned forwards to Lien-Da, he noted, with some amusement, she was clutching to that whip of hers. The way she was holding it implied she actually intended on using it against Sorun, and while she was doing a good job of not shaking in her boots right there, her eyes were beyond uncertain. Frightened, even.

"So. Magic katana that can cut through time and space versus a leather whip. Which one you think comes out on top?" Sorun asked.

She actually tried using it on him. He didn't know if it was sheer audacity that guided her hand or blind, animalistic panic, but she'd attempted to strike him with the whip. With his reflexes, though, it

would have been impossible not to catch the whip before it cracked against him. As such, he actually had caught the whip and sharply tugged it, making Lien-Da stumble right into the backfist he'd swung right on her jaw.

It was less he felt and more heard bone completely shattering under his fist. The handful of teeth he saw fly out of her mouth as her body hit the ground was also a good indicator of what he'd done. He'd done so much damage with that one hit alone that Sorun had leaned forwards a bit to examine her after Lien-Da fell, worried he'd accidentally hit her too hard and snapped her neck. But he'd heard a small, pitiful moan leave her, and saw the body twitch, and was satisfied enough to leave it be.

"That was... more annoying than anything else," Sorun thought, feeling odd at the sensation. He thought he'd feel something more than that. Satisfaction, vindication, something along those lines. He didn't, and more than that he didn't feel the need to dwell on it. So he turned around and began walking away. He'd glanced a bit to the left while walking, making a satisfied sound when he saw the hole in the coat's shoulder shrink down as it repaired itself. *"Well, if my life were simple Shadow would go down that easy. I feel like he's not gonna go down that easy."*

"Wha-what the... Sorun!"

The teen stopped in his tracks. That was Tails' voice, sounding distraught and horrified. Based on that tone, when Sorun turned around, he'd half-expected to find King Shadow right behind them, carrying Sonic's mangled corpse with him. He'd even began reaching for Yamato while mentally preparing himself to see the sight of a Chaos Spear running through and killing Tails.

What he did see was something he couldn't have prepared himself for. He saw Tails, almost looking like he was stricken with grief, kneeling over Lien-Da. That echidna he'd just taken out. That enemy. Eyes wide and horrified, mouth agape. It was a sight odd enough Sorun almost dropped the Yamato.

"You... you completely destroyed her jaw..." Tails mumbled out in shock, not able to take his eyes off Lien-Da.

"Er... yeah." Something about his even, neutral tone caused Tails to stiffen and snap his gaze up to Sorun. "That's what I was going for," he said.

"Why!?"

"... 'Cause it was easy?" Sorun gestured to Tails while shaking his head. "What do you- what do you want from me? I saw some enemies, I disabled them."

He actually had the nerve to look angry at the explanation. "You could have done it without crippling them for life!" Tails shouted at him. He swept his arms to the side to gesture at the three bodies. "Look at them!"

"I don't care." Ignoring the shocked look on Tails' face, Sorun turned around. "Come on. We still have to deal with Shadow."

Sorun began walking forwards, but then quickly noticed he didn't hear a set of footsteps behind him. He stopped after a few steps, sighed, and then turned around. Tails hadn't moved from his spot near the echidna, and his glare towards Sorun was still heated.

"King Shadow can wait," Tails said. "We need to get these three to a hospital."

It was a struggle for Sorun not to rush forwards and slap the fox right across the face. He settled for keeping on an impassive face and said, "No thanks. I don't want to."

"Sorun-!"

" *Leave it* , Tails. They don't matter." With a disgusted sigh barely disguised as indifference Sorun turned back around. "She's honestly lucky I don't tear her in half for what she did to Rotor. If you wanna

waste time with them than feel free. I really doubt Shadow's gonna wait around for you, though."

How this was even an argument was beyond Sorun. He went out of his way to make sure he didn't use enough force to kill them, but even that wasn't enough. He honestly didn't see the problem, and decided Tails would just have to deal with it. It wasn't any inconvenience to Sorun what he decided to do anyways.

Eventually, he heard a sigh behind him. "I'm going back to the security center to double-check and make sure you don't get bogged down by guards fighting King Shadow." The whirling sound of Tails' tails spinning up reached Sorun's ears. "Once he's dealt with I'm arranging for these three to get medical attention."

"Fine. Whatever. Do what you want." The retreating sound of the whirling let Sorun know Tails had flown away without saying any parting words. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes and pressed forwards. Towards the direction Tails had previously told him was the throne room.

He could already hear the sounds of fighting from here. Of high-speed objects colliding, the vibrations in the air. He could have sworn even the walls were shaking. With all that it didn't seem likely neither Sonic nor King Shadow were holding back against one another. It did little to assuage Sorun's anxiety, maybe even enough he considered turning back. He probably would have followed that instinct, too, were it not for the knowledge he was through on options.

"With how blatantly the king's playing for keeps, I really don't think Shadow's gonna go easy. Hard to see him even staying down." He felt his right fingers lightly ghost along the Yamato's handle. *"I really do hope Sonic had a plan for keeping him down and didn't charge in without a real plan."* A sad frown grew on his face. *"Sonic, you... you know what you're doing, right?"*

Sorun hoped he did, because he couldn't even say he knew what he was doing anymore.

A/N- I know it feels really weird and out of place that Sorun hasn't even once thought of Nicole's name and hasn't mentioned her in any capacity. The reason behind that is because this whole arc was planned out long before *that* was even a concept, so I chose to stick with what I had planned out. If you want kind of a gimped explanation you can imagine in the back of Sorun's mind he realized there's a minute chance he might see her again and have to deal with that super stupid mistake he did before leaving, so he's subconsciously trying not to think about her at all to avoid thinking about any possible consequences.

Chapter 81

Recursion Error

Episode 81- The future well and truly sucks

The throne room to the castle was about what Sorun had expected. Big, open, brightly lit. Bright colors everywhere. Interestingly two giant thrones were set up at the back of the room, and if he looked up he could see another statue of the human/Overlander girl with the angel wings fitted in a depression in the wall above the chairs. And honestly the place was so big it was less a room and more a great hall.

Sonic flying into Sorun's view and rolling to a stop at his feet ceased the sightseeing, however. Lazily, Sorun looked down and noted the multiple scuff marks all around the hedgehog's body, the somewhat laboored breathing and shaking, though otherwise he seemed no worse for wear. He glanced up to see King Shadow across the room, giving Sorun a wide-eyed look, his crown and cape discarded, and then looked back down when he heard him cough and saw Sonic looking up at him.

"And here I was thinking you'd already have this wrapped up," Sorun said, voice slightly mocking.

Sonic groaned and had the audacity to roll over on his side. "Gimme a break. My knees started clicking a couple years ago."

"... Dang man." Not feeling overly sympathetic, Sorun looked back up at King Shadow. "Well, catch a breather and come help when you can. I'll take him on."

"Yeah, sure, go for it." Sonic waved a hand up in the air as Sorun stepped over him and began approaching King Shadow. "Just

gonna... phew, yeah, just gonna chill here for a bit."

On the outside, Sorun managed to keep on a neutral, overly unexpressive face as he slowly walked towards the dark hedgehog. On the inside he was worried. He'd only ever fought him once, that one time long ago, and that'd been against a Shadow for the most part going easy on him in a training bout, whereas this one was likely aiming to kill Sorun right here.

But, on the other hand, Sorun liked to think he was at least moderately more skilled than he was back then. Even so, he wasn't comfortable going into this with just two powers, really one and a weapon he could lose. He wouldn't be comfortable doing this even with all seven if it were possible; he was, after all, *a* Shadow if not *his* Shadoow. He'd seen what he could do, and Sorun genuinely didn't think too highly of his chances at winning this. Maybe if Sonic managed to get back in fighting shape, maybe, though it stung Sorun's pride to no end that he had to rely on *him* for help.

Still, this was something that had to be done, whether Sorun liked it or not. And it was far too late to turn back anyways.

"I vividly recall having killed you," King Shadow stated in an even tone. Sorun had stopped right in front of him, the two once again staring intently at each other. Sorun had unsheathed his katana, scabbard held in his left hand and the sword in the other, while King Shadow's right hand was tightly clenching a crackling spear made of pure Chaos energy.

Sorun shrugged at the observation. "I'll be real with you, Shadow. With how many time's I've come close to dying or actually died in the past year, I really don't think I can die."

"That remains to be seen, I'm afraid." The two slowly began to circle one another. "What exactly is it you hope to accomplish here?" the king questioned him. "Depose me of the crown and then what? You'll 'fix the world' of all my crimes?"

Sorun didn't respond at first. He'd glanced over his shoulder and saw Sonic still lying a fair distance away from them. A fair bit out of earshot, probably even passed out from the way he was barely moving. "I don't really know what Sonic has planned for the government," Sorun admitted, turning back to King Shadow. "And I don't much care. His goals aren't the same as mine."

King Shadow's features tightened. He shot Sorun a wary look at the answer. "Is that so? Then why go through all this? You could have simply left after escaping that table, however you accomplished that. You evaded me for twenty-five years after the ARK, despite my efforts; you could have done so again."

"I seriously don't have any idea what you're talking about," Sorun claimed, a weathered sigh leaving him as he slumped his shoulders.

The harsh glare being sent to him by the half-Mobian didn't waver. "Explain," he demanded. "Why do this? What do you possibly have to gain?"

"If you really must know, I don't agree with them. Those quitters are content to just make whatever they can of this new world." Sorun had grown a tone that made it sound as if he was disgusted with the entire situation, and in all honesty, he was. He wasn't satisfied settling for this world, this timeline. Not at all. Not when there was a chance at fixing everything. "No, I'm after something different entirely. I want to return to the other timeline. The *true* timeline. Not this... mockery that should never have even existed in the first place."

King Shadow blinked at first, almost in confusion. He'd glanced down as he processed Sorun's words, like he couldn't believe what he just heard, though slowly his crimson eyes had widened further and further. And then he appeared to grow angrier by the second. "You're insane," he snarled out, snapping his head back up to meet Sorun's gaze. "You would return this world to all that chaos I saved it from? Undo *everything* I've done to save this world for... for what? Why?"

He sounded more than angry, Sorun had realized. Some other emotion behind his tone, more primal than anger. He sounded horrified, not out of fear, but out of the mere implication of Sorun's goal, out of genuine confusion for why he would even want that. It caused the human to pause when he realized how heavily King Shadow actually believed in everything he'd done being for the better. And a small part of him would admit that, if he looked hard enough, he may have found himself somewhat agreeing.

But he was beyond caring at this point. It didn't matter. None of it did. The only thing that did matter was the right timeline.

"I don't like you," Sorun said in a plain, honest tone, causing King Shadow to stiffen. "Not you, nor this world. That's all." He rose his sword up and pointed its tip at King Shadow. "And as it stands, you'll just do everything you can to stop me. That's where we are, and that's where we'll be until we settle this."

"It would appear so," King Shadow agreed, tone low and eyes smoldering. Quite literally, actually, as his red irises were glowing slightly and the Chaos Spear he held was crackling with more intense energy. "I don't know if what you desire is even possible, but it won't matter. I will not let that blue buffoon back there undo my work. And above all else, I will not let you undo this entire world."

Sorun blinked, and lowered his sword down. The conviction he heard in the other's voice was more genuine than he thought anybody could make themselves sound, enough that he found himself surprised. He shook his head of it after, grip tightening on his sword and scabbard as he stared the down the darkened hedgehog.

Deciding not to waste any more time, Sorun decided to make the first move. He rushed forwards, closing the distance between the two of them in a single step and swinging the Yamato at a speed so fast King Shadow had fractionally widened his eyes in surprise. He was quick enough, however, to raise his Chaos Spear up and block the strike, deadlocking the two weapons as white and green sparks flew between the pair as they struggled against one another.

King Shadow

The Despotic Savior

King Shadow had began gritting his teeth and putting his all into pushing Sorun's sword back with his energy spear, but despite his efforts he wasn't able to make the human budge even with both hands on the weapon. Sorun was making an equal amount of progress, scowling as he used his left hand to push the sword's scabbard against the back of the blade. In a rare moment of being proud of himself Sorun was pleased to find it was actually sufficient in pushing King Shadow back. It was slow, but he was winning the contest of strength.

Disbelief crossed King Shadow's face as he found himself being pushed back. He planted his feet on the ground, pushing the entirety of his weight against the sword, though it did nothing to halt Sorun's progress. A growl left him at the same time an igniting sound was heard, Sorun glancing down to see the jets on the underside of his shoes had activated. And with that Sorun found that *he* was the one being pushed back now.

"Forgot about those," Sorun thought. He decided to abandon the deadlock, twisting around King Shadow's body and dragging the sword along the side of the green Chaos Spear. The sudden lack of pressure bearing down on him had forced Shadow to unexpectedly dash forwards, and a hiss left him when Yamato's edge dragged along his shoulder and cut him as he passed Sorun. He huffed out, green energy surrounding the cut and causing it to slowly closed as he turned towards Sorun.

"You were never this fast or strong. What did you do to yourself?" he asked, eyes glancing up at Sorun's hair. "You cha-"

He was cut off when Sorun rushed forwards again and slashed at King Shadow. He dodged back to avoid being cut by the blade,

though he did offer Sorun an incensed, almost insulted glance as the human met his eyes right after.

"We had a chance to talk it out. That's long passed." Sorun sheathed Yamato, feet widening as his eyes narrowed in concentration. Crackling, blue energy began arcing over the Yamato's scabbard. "You made your stance on the matter clear enough anyway."

In credit to his guile, King Shadow had moved like he intended to attack Sorun. Before he'd had the chance, though, Sorun's arms had moved, and for a split second the entire sword he held shifted into an intense blue color. Using the Yamato's power to cut through time and space itself, he'd unsheathed and re-sheathed the katana in a movement so fast not even King Shadow had been able to perceive it, causing his movements to stall in surprise. His entire body was surrounded by a bubble of warped space, and he had the sense to try and dodge out of it once the brief confusion passed him.

He'd been just a bit too slow, though. His left arm had still been caught in Judgement Cut's area of effect, and had been assaulted by the endless amount of ethereal slashes in the bubble. He shouted out in pain, rolling away into a kneel while panting heavily. He brought his left arm up to his face, a gasping sound leaving the hedgehog when he saw his entire arm was riddled in countless, bleeding gashes and cuts.

Before the disbelief and confusion faded from his face, another warped bubble of space surrounded him as Sorun unleashed the technique yet again. King Shadow had been quicker at reacting the second time around, his shoes igniting and propelling him far outside of the attack's range before it managed to strike. Sorun's own eyes did their best to keep up with the king as he quite literally skated in circles around him. Skating fast enough that he was easily able to outmaneuver the bubbles of warped space that appeared in his path that threatened to cut him to ribbons.

Seeing that his efforts were doing no good, Sorun released a quiet, disgruntled sigh as he did his best to keep up with the red and black

blur circling around him. He was surprised to find that, even with Devil's Body's enhanced reflexes, he was having trouble keeping up with him. He'd been easily able to sidestep it when a Chaos Spear had been thrown at him, almost effortlessly, but the hedgehog himself was skating at a speed *just* too fast for Sorun to follow with his eyes. If he weren't so frustrated he would have been impressed.

Then he heard it. That unique whirring sound. That high-pitched whine that indicated something was rapidly spinning through the air, and Sorun knew exactly what that object was. It'd struck before he even had time to react: King Shadow's spinning body, spines flared out, zooming past him and shredding across his arms and chest. The wounds healed instantly, but it was still distressing for Sorun to learn that the hedgehog's Spin Dash was somehow even faster than him simply skating around him on the rocket shoes.

It was a que King Shadow seemed to pick up on, too, because he kept doing it. Skating outside of Sorun's melee range, keeping to his blind spots and then quickly Spin Dashing towards him at a speed Sorun couldn't intercept. He certainly tried, swinging Yamato in the direction he heard the sound in or in the direction his peripheral caught a hint of black and red, but either he was too slow or King Shadow was so maneuverable even while in a Spin Dash he could simply just dodge the sword strikes. Sorun reckoned both cases were true, which made him even more concerned.

There was intense worry, too, every single time he felt the king shred across his body. The regeneration would hold up, but unlike it Sorun's stamina wasn't infinite. He wasn't feeling winded, not yet, but that wouldn't remain true for long if King Shadow kept chipping away at him with those damnable Spin Dashes.

"If he keeps hopping around like that I'm gonna cut his fucking legs off." He was probably going to have to at this rate, what with Sorun steadily realizing that, even with the white hair, he was getting outclassed here in terms of speed. But the problem was King Shadow was sticking to a winning strategy and unless he used something else-

Suddenly Sorun's head picked up in realization, but then he grimaced. This wasn't something he wanted to use so early, and it said a lot that he was being forced to pull this out near the beginning of the fight. But he was running out of options, desperate, and Sonic still hadn't gotten up to help. But even still, this wasn't something even King Shadow could doge as long as he was caught in it, and, lacking any other options, Sorun decided to commit to it.

The Yamato was fully sheathed, and Sorun's feet slowly spread out. He let out a slow breath as he concentrated as hard as he could at the sword held in his left hand. A wide ring of blue energy spread out around him-

King Shadow Spin Dashed across Sorun's back. The human stumbled, cursing under his breath as his wound healed, but the blue circle had faded. He tried once again, assuming the same stance with his right hand hovering over the katana's handle, eyes piercing as he tried to focus, but the blue ring that had been spreading from his body the second time around didn't even get the chance to fully expand before he was once again struck by King Shadow.

"It's no good. He's not giving me an opportunity to get Judgement Cut End off." It was a fact Sorun was coming to a grim realization of, even as he stood firm and attempted to initiate the move, over and over, only for it to be interrupted by a hit from King Shadow. The move itself required an intense amount of concentration just to perform on Sorun's part, and while he theoretically could perform it no problem even while under the assault of light damage, the equivalent of having a spinning buzz saw the size of an adult Mobian shredding across his body was by no means light damage. If he were in his normal, black-haired body just one of those hits would have been enough to kill him. The large splashes of blood - Sorun's blood - thrown all around the glossy flooring around him said enough.

While Sorun continued to stand there, silently panicking as he attempted to figure out what to do next, the miraculous happened: King Shadow made a mistake. Perhaps he'd grown tired of using

Spin Dash, or, and Sorun figured this was most likely, him standing in place and essentially tanking all the Spin Dashes with subsequently no visible wounds on his body must have given the impression to the half-Mobian that what he was doing wasn't an effective strategy.

He'd be wrong in thinking that, of course, as it actually was a devastating strategy, but despite the blood all around Sorun there was no visible evidence of that. So it seemed that King Shadow decided to change his approach and did probably the most foolish thing possible:

He went in for a punch.

Sorun had seen it immediately when King Shadow began skating straight towards him, fist reeled back for the punch and the angry look on his face. Sorun was almost tempted to laugh at him, and probably would have if it weren't for the fact that the punch actually landed.

Sure, the combination of the rocket shoes and King Shadow's swing speed made it so that Sorun had no chance of dodging the hit. And yes, it'd struck with enough force that Sorun felt the bones in his face splinter and break under the one hit. Superficial damage seeing as it would all heal before the gloved fist would even leave his face. Sorun didn't care about that.

What he did care about was that King Shadow wasn't able to pull his hand away nearly as fast as he was able to punch with it. Which gave Sorun the perfect opportunity to snap his right hand up and grab King Shadow's wrist.

By then King Shadow's eyes had widened, realizing the mistake he'd made. He attempted to wrench his arm out of Sorun's grip, but the teen held firm. So firm, in fact, that he felt bones creaking and crunching under his grip he was squeezing down so hard, causing an angered King Shadow to grimace in pain.

"Nowhere to run," Sorun growled out, twisting the wrist around. He felt bone splinter in his grip, causing King Shadow to grit his teeth and pull harder in an attempt to free himself. It wasn't enough, though, and Sorun took this to heart as the blue ribbon on the Yamato's scabbard wrapped around his waist of its own accord. His left hand grabbed the sword's handle and pulled it out, dark scabbard secured to his waist as his blue eyes gazed downwards, to the hedgehog's legs.

There'd been no hesitation or consideration on Sorun's part. He'd swung the Yamato as quickly as he could, right at King Shadow's thighs with the intent on cutting clean through his legs. There was no way for King Shadow to avoid it, and he seemed to catch on to the plan as his pulling became more frantic. But by then it was no good, as the blade struck true and hit its mark.

But then something happened that shouldn't have.

Sorun stared, wide-eyed and disbelieving. The sword had struck King Shadow's leg; that wasn't the problem. The problem was it was stuck halfway into his leg, wedged between muscle and tissue, not even reaching the bone. Which shouldn't have been the case, as the blade should have effortlessly cleaved through both of the limbs with its power of separation. It shouldn't have been stopped at all.

Unless...

"Oh no. You're kidding me." So stunned by this new revelation Sorun wasn't able to immediately pick up the sound of crackling energy near him. He did eventually, though by the time he looked up towards the source of the noise, the crackling Chaos Spear in King Shadow's left hand, it was too late. The king swung the energy spear at Sorun, who was forced to block it with the flat end of the blade after it had been swiftly pulled out from King Shadow's leg. It'd struck with such force Sorun was tossed backwards, losing his grip on the king's arm and rolling across the ground before coming to a stop.

A small grunt escaped Sorun, who'd stopped on his back and facing the ceiling. He heard a wheezing sigh besides him, and turned his head enough to see that he happened to land next to Sonic, who was now sitting up and glancing down at Sorun. Between that and the troubling information the Earthling had just encountered, he couldn't help the deep frown that settled over his face.

"Hey, Sorun, how's it going?" Sonic tiredly mumbled out, glancing between him and King Shadow, who stood nearby with that smoldering scowl on his face. "I thought the magic sword was supposed to cut through everything?"

"It would appear Shadow has so much Chaos energy naturally running through him that he's negating Yamato's power of separation," Sorun blankly responded, a bitter edge to his tone. It was just like all the way back when he was fighting that mech suit Eggman was in, the one with the Chaos Emerald installed in it. He wouldn't be able to instantly win with a single, clean strike. And what made it worse was that whatever that alien DNA mixed into his biology did made King Shadow, at least his muscles, tough and dense as hell. Separation power nullified or not he still should have been able to cleave through his legs with his current strength.

A pit began settling in Sorun stomach as he was beset with worry. This fight just grew much, much more dangerous if that was the case. He'd been banking on ending this with a single, decisive hit. But he couldn't even get that, and he was struggling to think of another solution to beating him. Never mind even getting another chance at getting a hit in.

"Really, huh?" Sonic's voice made Sorun shift his attention back to him. A troubled look was on the blue hedgehog's face. "So it can't hurt him?"

Sorun began sitting up alongside Sonic while saying, "Well, I can still cut him with the physical edge of the actual sword." His frown worsened. It was looking like he'd need Sonic help with this, desperately, a fact that was only increasing his frustration at the

whole situation. He squashed the feeling down and looked at Sonic. "I'm going to set up 'that' move. I need you to keep him off me and lead him into it."

Sonic sent him a confused look for a second before he made an understanding noise. "Oh, the big ring thing with the-"

"The Judgement Cut End, yes," Sorun sighed out. He bit his tongue to avoid shouting out when he heard Sonic chuckle besides him.

"Almost forgot about those names." Sonic made a soft grunt as he pushed up off the ground. "Get him in the circle, right, no biggie."

Sorun nodded at Sonic, and then looked back towards King Shadow. He was still giving the both of them smoldering glares, and it seemed Sorun had caught him just when he had finished healing. There were still vestiges of green energy floating around him that were fading away, but the mangled bone in his wrist was straight again and the cuts on his arm had disappeared entirely. And he seemed to be giving Sorun more attention than Sonic.

He would have likely made a move against the Earthling right there and then if he wasn't struck by a blue object moving faster than Sorun's enhanced eyes could perceive. King Shadow had stumbled back, though from the look on his face he looked more insulted than stunned in any capacity. He snapped his head over his shoulders to glare at Sonic, body practically quaking with rage.

From there, Sorun just wasn't able to keep up with what was happening. The best he could make out were two vaguely round, spinning objects clashing against each other over and over, zooming and curving all around the throne room at such speeds Sorun wasn't able to pin them down at specific locations. Most of what he could make out were the trails of blue, black and red being left and the sounds. The high-pitched whirring of their spinning bodies moving quickly through space and shredding through sound barriers, the loud, dull thuds of their bodies impacting each other at such a high rate a machine gun firing would have sounded slower.

It was honestly chaotic to behold, almost disorienting. And this was *with* Devil's Body's reflexes. Sorun wouldn't doubt if he had to watch this fight with normal eyes he'd either see nothing or throw up from all the motion. His jaw had tightened at the sight. How not just one, but two people could be moving so incomprehensibly fast.

He scoffed and tightened his grip on Yamato. It didn't matter if his speed couldn't compare. He had things over them. All he had to do was win this fight to prove that much.

Once again beginning the process of clearing his mind and putting all his focus into the sword he held, Sorun felt the ring of blue power fully extend around him as the Yamato's energy built up. He'd cracked his eyes open, right hand hovering over the handle, to observe the battle between the two Mobians, but they were still moving hopelessly fast and the blue wall of flowing energy surrounding him didn't help his visuals.

Though, actually, now that he looked closer he could see... yeah, Sonic was slowing down. He was still moving incredibly fast, but it was measurably slower than King Shadow and dropping. What quick glances Sorun could catch revealed a strained, winded look on the Mobian's face. Either exertion from the blunt injuries he was sustaining or dropping stamina. Likely both, and the fact he was fighting someone eternally in the prime of their youth likely didn't help matters.

But he was still doing his part, leading King Shadow towards the blue circle surrounding Sorun. Mostly just drawing him further in by hanging around just outside the technique's range of effectiveness, though no matter what he did King Shadow wasn't being baited into entering the circle. He wouldn't even enter it to try and disrupt what Sorun was doing, likely, and correctly, assuming he'd had enough time to set up the technique and was just waiting for him to enter.

It was as frustrating as it was harrowing. This wasn't something Sorun could hold forever; the physical toll was draining. He only had a few more seconds before he'd be forced to drop it entirely, and in

his state Sorun wasn't positive that Sonic would be able to defend Sorun if his guard were to drop for that long.

Just as worry began to set in Sorun Sonic had done something. Either out of desperation or seeing Sorun's distress, he'd pulled a move and curved mid-air right behind King Shadow in a move that, if Sorun were a physicist, he probably would have called impossible without sheering his body in half. Despite that, Sonic had still managed the maneuver and exited it kicking outwards. King Shadow, mirroring the movement, had committed to the same kick, causing both hedgehogs to be struck and sent flying back. Sonic had impacted the ground a far distance away and rolled to a stop.

King Shadow had been launched right into the Judgement Cut End's area of influence. For the briefest moment Sorun had caught a look of panic on the half-Mobian's face. That was the only action he was able to do before Sorun disappeared entirely.

Time itself completely froze. Innumerable, invisible seems in space appeared, accompanied by momentary warps in the air around them as space and time were cut apart, with King Shadow's motionless body frozen in the air in the middle of it all. Phantom silhouettes that had cut the seams converged into a single body, who slowly began to sheath the katana as the invisible seams thinned.

At the moment the sword was fully sheathed, the seams disappeared, time resumed, and pieces of reality broke away and rained down like immaterial shards of glass. There was a single scream and the sound of blood splattering the ground behind Sorun as blue electricity arced violently around his whole body.

The human teen turned his head right when he heard King Shadow's body thump onto the floor. To his surprise, King Shadow was still fully conscious, albeit kneeling down on a single knee. How he was still conscious, though, Sorun didn't have a clue. Long, deep gashes had been cut throughout his entire body. Cuts deep enough that in more than a few spots Sorun saw hints of white bone peaking out from the deep cuts, with blood freely flowing out of the wounds and

matting the fur all over his body. Heavy, heaving pants were leaving the hedgehog as he fixed Sorun with exhausted, baleful eyes, eyes so full of hate they somehow were able to mask the pain he was in.

More unbelievably, he began to stand up. It was plain to see he was having difficulty, his body was shaking from the effort, but he was still managing it. Sorun scowled at the sight and fully turned towards King Shadow.

"How the hell are you still standing?" He was honestly surprised he was even in one piece. That technique didn't cut the targets it was intended for: it cut the very space they occupied. By all rights he should have been diced into a million pieces, though it seemed the Chaos energy that allowed him to nullify Yamato's abilities allowed him to weather even that. Just barely, at least. Though Sorun found his scowl deepening when green energy began to surround the dozens of bone-deep cuts spread all over King Shadow's body. "Oh, you're kidding. Black Arms DNA is such bullshit."

King Shadow didn't bother responding. The wounds he suffered were closing - slowly, more slowly than they had been since the beginning of the fight Sorun had noted - but they were still rapidly healing. It was enough that King Shadow seemed to get some of his composure back, and made it known he was still willing and able to fight by taking a step forwards.

A step forwards was all he managed before he froze entirely. It was a pause so sudden even Sorun was a bit surprised by it, by that and the intense shock that instantly formed in King Shadow's eyes. He slowly dipped his head down, something like fear appearing on his face as he looked towards his feet.

He'd let out a strangled gasp when he saw his shoes littered in deep gashes, the occasional electrical spark sputtering out from one of the cuts made in the footwear.

Of course Sorun had been aiming for the shoes when he'd finally caught King Shadow in the Judgement Cut End. They'd been his

true goal, though severely wounding King Shadow to this state, if not outright decommissioning him entirely, had been a swell enough bonus. As far as he knew, unlike Sonic, all his speed depended on those things. Even without them he may have had advanced speed above a Mobian's norm, but Sorun doubted it was above his own while in Devil's Body. Even if it was as long as it slowed him down that Sorun could actually hit him it didn't matter.

So yeah. He'd aimed for the shoes. As far as Sorun cared it was the equivalent of cutting his legs off.

"Yeah, that's right." Sorun ripped Yamato from its scabbard as he began stomping towards King Shadow. "No more zipping around on fucking rocket shoes for you."

The expression that formed on King Shadow's face caused Sorun to pause in his footsteps, more out of surprise than anything else. He'd thought he'd seen the upper limits on how angry King Shadow could look, both him and the actual Shadow Sorun knew. That anger or frustration could only bring him so far and that Sorun had seen all of what he had to offer in that department. He just wasn't the kind of person that ever went beyond quiet anger.

Apparently that was wrong, because Sorun didn't think he'd encountered the expression King Shadow wore when he looked up at him on anyone else in his entire life. To call him angry or livid would be a gross understatement. There was such fury twisted onto the hedgehog's face that it was almost staggering to see how angry a single person could get. He could practically *feel* the rage wafting off of him. Hell, for all his Chaos powers for all Sorun knew he really was projecting tangible anger for him to feel. Either that or he left that much of an impression.

But none of that could have prepared him for the sight of a single, lone tear rolling down from eyes that, just now, Sorun had realized held more than anger and rage than his face. He looked almost distraught. Pained. Not from physical wounds, but from something deeper. With that added into the rage he held it formed an

expression Sorun would have figured was reserved for when someone's mother was just shot to death in front of them. He couldn't fathom why he held that expression until he remembered that King Shadow hadn't looked nearly upset until he figured out Sorun destroyed his special shoes.

"How attached was he to those things that he's crying over them?" Sorun wondered. Despite the fact he'd just crippled King Shadow's mobility, something primal in himself was letting off warning signs, and he found himself growing wary of his opponent. *"Guess I'd be upset if my coat got permanently ruined, but come on-"*

Mid-thought King Shadow had disappeared, and Sorun found himself remembering that there were other abilities the half-Mobian held on account of his alien DNA outside of what he'd encountered already. Such as teleporting. And stopping time. He didn't know which one King Shadow just used, but he was cognizant of the presence suddenly behind him and the sound of crackling energy.

In a desperate bid Sorun whirled around, raising his sword up defensively. By the time he managed to see King Shadow he'd already been mid-swing with a Chaos Spear. He'd felt Yamato's edge brush up against the spear, but he'd been too late to even attempt at parrying or blocking the strike. By the time Sorun managed to recognize what was happening it was far too late.

That was primarily the reason why the Chaos Spear ended up cutting through his whole neck.

This thing was an impossibility.

Thing. Oddity. Anomaly. Those were the only labels Shadow could see himself giving Sorun, because he couldn't see him as an Overlander. Or that strange lot that lived in the city in the mountain, those humans. Humans and Overlanders didn't have abilities of this caliber. Not even the odd technomancer that cropped up among Overlanders, like that annoying woman from the eastern lands he'd

killed long ago. Humans and Overlanders in general had such weak Chaos Force links they never manifested abilities outside of those exceptions.

He'd thought as much until they first met twenty-five years ago on Space Colony ARK. He hadn't had white hair then, or these enhanced physical attributes, or that *thing* he kept swinging around. He had everything else. The face, demeanor, clothes. Missing was the flippant attitude he'd held.

That and those... arms. The ones he'd broken Shadow with. He fully expected those to come out at some point during the fight in an attempt to twist Shadow into submission yet again, prepared for it, even, but they never sprouted over his shoulders. They never showed up even once, not a hint of them, which was an extreme curiosity to Shadow. Maybe Sorun didn't figure they'd be useful to countering his speed, and to be fair, he'd be right.

Or maybe he didn't have them. Which would support the argument that Sorun was telling the truth in that they never met. Shadow hadn't believed him, not a word, but that in addition with the lack of those arms, these new powers... well, frankly he had to wonder if he was telling the truth and it really *was* someone completely different. The fact he showed no visible age from back then lead credence to it. A son, maybe, the age fit, the coat could have been handed down, but the fact they had the *exact same* face and voice made him hesitant to accept that theory.

Something didn't add up. He wanted to know what, because he hadn't gotten this far leaving unknowns and curiosities in his wake, things that posed a risk coming up to bite him in the back when he gave slack. He'd learned *that* particular lesson long ago. But the fact he and that blue meddler were playing for keeps and refused to back down, and that somehow Sorun had evaded death itself, took precedent over unraveling a curious mystery. Not after all the work he'd done towards finally making a peaceful world. He wouldn't let anything or anyone put that in jeopardy.

It was somewhat of a shame Sorun would die before Shadow would ever figure out what exactly his deal had been, but it wasn't as if it would matter once he died. Give it a few decades and the memory would fade away. It wasn't important in the grand scheme of things.

He thought it'd be as simple as overwhelming Sorun with sheer speed until the fight had actually begun. He honestly didn't know what Sorun had done to himself. What his abilities really were, where this strength that he obviously hadn't had before came from, what the significance behind the change of hair was. He almost suspected it to be a Super form of some sort, maybe even a bootleg or poor mimic, but that theory was cast aside. It didn't appear anything of the sort and he would have felt such a thing. Another mystery to be cast aside with the anomaly's corpse.

It would have been as easy as that, but whatever change Sorun had gone under was significant, though he was still slow. Oh, he was fast, there was no doubt on that. From observing Shadow concluded that this new Sorun could move at speeds even a Mobian couldn't perceive. To him it was still slow as could be. No, the danger was his strength. That and his... recovery ability.

That was what was really throwing him for a loop. His hits were landing, he knew they were. The blood surrounding the boy proved that he was doing damage. But every time he'd looked back there wasn't so much as a single wound on Sorun's body. He'd peg it as regeneration, but to think he could heal so fast the wound disappeared in practically the same breath as the wound being inflicted was impossible. Not when even Shadow himself couldn't regenerate to such an insane degree. But *something* was going on with him that was making it so wounds just weren't sticking. Even that strange coat of his was repairing any damage it sustained.

Another oddity. Another mystery. Another thing to forget about once this was over with.

The fight itself was progressing along how Shadow had expected it to. There were admittedly some hiccups, ones he should have

predicted beforehand, but they were easily circumvented. It would have easily concluded in his victory if that meddler, that false king, that... pretender hadn't decided that being knocked around senseless one time around hadn't been enough.

It shouldn't have mattered. That blue hedgehog was old and worn. That boy just didn't have the power. Shadow should have been able to handle them easily enough until Sorun had unleashed that... attack. The one with the field of blue energy surrounding him.

He'd tried using it multiple times in the fight. Every sense, Mobian and otherwise, screamed at Shadow that he absolutely *did not* want to get caught in whatever it was. He'd been able to knock him out of performing it a few times before he fully prepared it, and that had been working well enough, but then the false king Sonic interfered. Bought the human enough time to prepare the attack. And if it weren't for him sacrificing himself like a queen on a chess board he could have simply avoided going near Sorun.

Except he had. Shadow's instincts must have been true, because Sonic apparently thought the attack was worth taking a devastating hit just to get Shadow in its attack range - what he assumed the blue circle surrounding Sorun represented. He hadn't even had the time to react before it happened.

Pain, deep and excruciating, had erupted on multiple points of his body. Simultaneously, with no gaps between them. Time manipulation of some sort, had to be, and considering what happened on the ARK he couldn't be *that* surprised; he'd hit him with such a cheap trick before after all.

But this was different. The influence on time was there, but subtle. The feeling of space temporarily being warped, seeing pieces of reality fragment out of the space around them before it repaired itself, the cuts all along his body that somehow felt like more than cuts, the overwhelming amount of that rancid energy that lingered in the air. The pain of those horrible, grievous wounds.

Worry that hadn't bloomed in so long he'd nearly forgotten the feeling spread in his chest. Genuine worry for his own life was beginning to show, and he didn't like it. It wasn't supposed to be feasibly possible. The entire reason he was engineered was to be superior to all other lifeforms. Biology couldn't outpace him. Engineering couldn't overcome him, and Robotnik had stressed that theory to the limit before his demise. His power over Chaos was supposed to be second to none.

And Sorun had none of that. None. So why was he getting so far? What was he?

The fact he had to kneel there, heavily panting while struggling in his mind not to succumb to the pain of his wounds was just as nauseating as the wounds themselves. The cooling sensation of pain being deadened by his regeneration was a comforting one, but the repairs were going slower than he would have liked; his powers were being pushed to their limits with these cuts, and with everything that'd already happened the beginning tinges of exhaustion were already setting in.

"How the hell are you still standing?" Shadow looked up. Sorun was just standing there, that... look in his eyes. It was something so beyond contempt Shadow couldn't even comprehend what it was. Scorn the likes of which nobody had ever dared give him of all people, even before he'd been crowned king. It was more insulting than the wounds he'd inflicted. "Oh, you're kidding. Black Arms DNA is such bullshit."

It wasn't a total shock Sorun knew of his origins, G.U.N. had leaked all sorts of information before its disbandment and he hadn't cared enough to try and plug information leaks over the decades, but it was still somewhat surprising. Then again, he'd known where Space Colony ARK was. How *that* had been possible he'd never discovered, and every Overlander he'd ever spoken with swore they'd never even heard of him. And he'd been thorough with the questioning.

Still, it didn't matter. He felt some indignation at the language used at him, but it was false bravado at the end of the day. A single glance told Shadow that the blue hedgehog was unconscious and down for the count, which just left Sorun. And as there was no way Shadow would ever go into that attack again, he was essentially defenseless against him while Shadow himself couldn't be touched.

Shakily, he stood up to his feet in open defiance to Sorun's insulting gaze and took a step forwards. It would be over in a matter of moments. He'd aim for his limbs, dismember him one by one starting with the arm holding that infuriating-

The jets on his sneakers didn't fire.

A strangled, uncontrollable gasp left Shadow. That shouldn't be possible. Those sneakers were designed to be as timeless as him, by a mind greater than anyone else this planet had ever produced. They'd never failed him even once in his over eighty decades of life. The technology was infallible. Perfect. There was no possible way they could fail to activate even after he began directing his Chaos energy into the devices... unless...

Terror, actual terror completely separate and unrelated to Shadow's own life, gripped his heart as he slowly looked down. They couldn't be damaged. That couldn't happen. The worst of G.U.N.s weapons and Robotnik's machinations never so much as laid a scratch on his precious footwear. There was no conceivable way-

Something inside of Shadow broke when he finally saw his sneakers. They were in tatters. So many cuts and fissures that half of the shoes were practically gone, circuitry and wires spilling out of the exposed parts. Any attempt at activating them resulted in pathetic, blue sparks being spit out from the exposed internals.

"Yeah, that's right. No more zipping around on fucking rocket shoes for you."

Sorun's voice completely failed to reach Shadow's ears. Most of the world around him faded away, his sole focus on the pieces of ruined footwear he had on. Distraught that was near a level he'd only felt once in his entire life tore through him as he took in the remains of his sneakers, or at least what little was left of them. He was so stunned he didn't even notice the single tear rolling down his face.

Images flashed through his head of a smiling old man and a laughing girl. Hundreds and hundreds of images that remained crystal clear despite every other unrelated memory dulling with time. Among them was the image of the both of them presenting those very same shoes he cherished so much, both holding joyous llooks. The shoes that had been his only companion ever since those two people were lost to him. His only mementos.

He ruined them.

There was rage as the world faded back into his senses. Anger that sent his blood boiling as he looked up at Sorun, the corners of his vision tinted red. He'd paused while moving towards Shadow, some of the contempt fading from his eyes to show surprise at Shadow's sudden turn.

Shadow didn't care. His power flexed outwards, a red ring spreading out from him and temporarily bathing the entire world in inverted colors for a few moments before everything returned back to their normal colorization. Everything, from physical objects to Sorun to the air itself had been completely frozen as time ground to a halt, all except for Shadow, who began trudging forwards with heavy pants.

By now his wounds were only halfway towards being healed and he was really feeling the strain. Were he in top physical form he would have formed a Chaos Spear right now and skewered Sorun's face while in the stopped time, but with how he was now he was struggling just to maintain the halted time. He'd have to do with appearing behind him and beheading him with a hastily-made Chaos Spear once he let go of the power.

He deserved more as far as Shadow was concerned. He'd doled out far worse deaths to those who had done far less, but what Sorun had done, in addition to what he was trying to do, called for so much more. A simple beheading, such a quick and clean death, felt almost like a disservice. But he couldn't help it. So much hate boiling in him for the thing standing frozen in front of him. What he was, what he represented, the humiliation given to Shadow by him time and time again, ruining his most precious mementos...

There was no question that the person standing before him was the person he hated most in the entire world. So he couldn't control himself from moving forwards to cut his head off so he didn't have to deal with him anymore.

Once Shadow was in position behind Sorun, time resumed. The instant the power left and the world returned to motion was the same moment a Chaos Spear sprang to life in his hand. Sorun, surprisingly, had caught on to what he was doing and had whirled around, blade in hand. By then Shadow had already swung, and though he was near successful in intercepting it with his blade, Sorun had been just too slow.

He thought he'd feel satisfaction in seeing the Chaos Spear cleave through Sorun's neck entirely, leaving a large, red line. At seeing the mixture of shock and surprise on Sorun's face after getting his head severed from his body. But there was nothing. No satisfaction, no relief, no anything. Nothing but pain for the loss of the sneakers, and not even beheading Sorun was enough to ease the aches he felt in his heart.

Shadow turned around in disgust, not even bothering to watch Sorun's head drop away from his body. His eyes locked onto Sonic's body nearby. A snarl tore past his lips as he made his way towards the still body, Chaos Spear clenched in his hand. Everything was his fault. His and Sorun's. Him, that miserable mutant fox and family of echidna, everything. To having his rule threatened, to have all the work he'd done towards bettering the world go to waste, for destroying the last thing he had of her-!

The blade of a katana burst out through Shadow's chest. He gasped out in shock and pain, reflexively snapping his hand up to grab at the blade piercing through him. He heard ragged breathing from behind him, right next to his ear, and Shadow had a hard time figuring out if he was shaking from the blade piercing him or the impossible thought racing through his mind trying to make sense of this impossible event happening to him right now. It was less he'd turned his head around and more his own body forced it to confirm that the impossible hadn't happened, in order to assure his screaming mind something impossible hadn't happened.

Something impossible happened. Sorun had stabbed him. Sorun's head was still on his shoulders. The shocked and surprised look he wore when Shadow's Chaos Spear cleaved through his neck was replaced by a mad, frenzied look in his eyes that he wasn't even trying to hide.

"H-how...!?" This shouldn't have been happening. He should be *dead* . He killed him! He'd killed him multiple times by now! "Why won't you die!?"

"Regeneration."

There was no end to the malice that completely comprised the single word said by Sorun. It was less said and more hissed out, with more venom and hatred than Shadow thought possible.

And still, he wasn't satisfied with that simple explanation. A regenerative ability didn't explain it. Regeneration didn't save you from having your head cut off. He knew it didn't for him, so for anyone else it was impossible. Completely. It didn't make sense.

The suggestion was so outrageous, the audacity he would claim such a thing, lit a new fire of rage inside of Shadow and caused him to roar out as he swung his Chaos Spear. The blade was torn out of him as Sorun leapt back a fair distance, though he kept his eyes locked onto Shadow the entire time as the king turned around to face him.

"I cut your head off," he angrily snarled at him. "You couldn't have grown a new head! That isn't in the realm of possibility!" It was a bluff. Had to be. He didn't see a severed head lying around, and there would have been no way to transfer memories. Even if he grew a new head it would have been a cloned head with a freshly cloned brain. No experience, no memories. He shouldn't even have been cognizant if that were the case.

"Grow a new head? You're mistaken." Looking insulted himself, past all the hate and contempt he wore, Sorun reached a hand up to wipe a thumb over the bloody line on his neck. The skin underneath was completely unmarred and fresh, as if Shadow had never even struck it. Just like the rest of his body. "The regen's so quick it healed over. By the time your Chaos Spear came out of my neck it was already mostly healed."

"Regeneration isn't that fast." It couldn't have been. It wasn't possible. That would have been engineered into him if it were. "You're lying."

"Why? Just because you're the 'Ultimate Lifeform' and nothing's supposed to be better than you?" With a roll of his eyes Sorun nodded his head behind Shadow. Towards where the blue hedgehog was. "Oh, wait, there's Sonic over there. The guy's who's faster than you without your stupid shoes."

Shadow's teeth clacked together as his nerves flared. "Don't you dare..."

"I bet it grates you to no fucking end how you were engineered to be this perfect super weapon and some random hedgehog without a scrap of bullshit alien DNA was just *born* better at something than you," Sorun continued, tone scathing as he affixed Shadow with a hateful sneer. Shadow bristled uncontrollably at that look. "Hell, even in the true timeline you had a rivalry with the guy, but at least the real version of you was way more humble about it. I liked that guy. I liked him a lot. He was real down to earth. You, though..." Something, maybe sadness or pity, flickered in Sorun's eyes, but it was drowned

in the hate and derision shortly after. "You're fucking nothing compared to him. Loser who has to have everything his way and turns into a crybaby over a pair of shoes. You shouldn't even exist. None of this should."

Somewhere inside of Shadow something had snapped. Having heard enough, he disappeared from his location and appeared next to Sorun, Chaos Spear mid-swing. Simply teleporting seemed to be much more ineffectual than moving within the stopped time, however, as either he'd been expecting it or Sorun's reflexes were sufficient in intercepting him. The Chaos Spear was less parried and more simply batted away by Sorun's sword, as if he felt so much disrespect he wasn't even bothering to take proper form with his sword.

Even more Shadow found his limits being pushed. At Sorun's words. His attitude. The fact he just *wouldn't die* . Nothing he was doing worked: teleporting around Sorun to try and surprise him would just result in him swinging the sword at Shadow, something he had no hope in overcoming other than to simply block or dodge, and with his exhaustion coupled with the teleportation delay he couldn't deploy it fast enough for rapid position switching to try and confuse the monster.

Throwing the Chaos Spear was even more ineffectual. He'd just sidestep it if it soared towards him, lazily, as if to personally insult Shadow. He'd tried tossing it at Sorun's feet, charging the Chaos Spear to explode and perhaps catch him in the explosion, but somehow Sorun *knew* they would explode and would just leap or sprint away before that spot would be engulfed in an explosion of energy.

Another sphere of warped space engulfed Shadow. He knew what followed this, and tried his best diving out of the way of it. His speed even with the sneakers were far above a normal Mobian's, but even that wasn't enough to save him from catching a few new cuts from the strange slashing effects that manifested inside whatever that sphere was. Sorun knew he was at a disadvantage without them,

too, because he kept releasing that power. Over and over. To Shadow's credit he managed to dodge some. Some, but not all.

He was left a panting, bleeding mess, once again riddled in gashes his powers were trying desperately to heal. The thought of blood loss was yelling out to him somewhere in his mind, though he tried pushing it away. That and the sensation of his body constantly reminding him of his exhaustion. Sorun, from across the throne room, wasn't blind to his obvious health, and stopped where he was. With the way he was breathing heavily he seemed almost as exhausted as Shadow was, even if he didn't have the wounds to show it. Even still he didn't look victorious over Shadow's visually worse state. Not even happy in the slightest. He just kept staring at him like he was something that brought Sorun visible distress just to look at.

The blue ribbon attached to the scabbard of whatever that weapon was wrapped itself around Sorun's waist. He gripped the sword's handle with both hands, twisting it around and bringing the sword up to his eye level with the tip of the blade pointed directly at Shadow. Blue arcs of lightning began dancing around the length of the blade.

"I'll find a way to erase this timeline and bring back the real one. The one that's supposed to be here. The only one that should." More Chaos energy began crackling along the blade's length, and off Sorun's own body. The incomprehensibly concentrated Chaos energy that was somehow being emitted by that sword was so intense that it came off as a deep, blue fog gathering and swirling around Sorun and the sword.

Shadow reeled from the power. Not by the amount of it, but from the quality. What if felt like. From the moment Sorun had first entered the throne room he felt it, that sword. There was something intensely, extremely wrong with it, but Shadow just didn't know what it was or why it felt wrong. It just was.

But now that he could feel it so clearly due to its sudden intensity it was all too clear. It was Chaos energy so warped by whatever Sorun

had done to it that it barely even felt like Chaos energy. Twisted beyond recognition. Cold where Chaos energy was warm. Intrusive and prickling on his senses when Chaos energy, even radiated by his opponents, had always felt inviting. But this was foul, stifling, and...

Pulsing. Like something with a heartbeat. But it was a heartbeat with a rhythm so off and *wrong* that it couldn't possibly be a beat made from a heart.

It could have been the severe blood loss Shadow was no doubt facing. That, the disorienting sensation from trying to focus in on the energy that sword was producing, anger clouding his vision, a number of combination of things. But past that swirling blue energy and sparks around the sword's silver blade, for just a moment, he could have sworn he saw them. Eyes. Dozens of eyes, housed in the blade's reflective surface, mottled in blackish-blue flesh. All staring at Shadow with the exact same look of pure disdain Sorun held. Even their color was the same as his eyes. But when he blinked, that image of the eyes in the sword was gone.

A momentary hallucination due to all the stresses on his body and mind. It was the only acceptable answer Shadow could think of. But it didn't explain why half of his very being, the Black Arms DNA that comprised his cells, was screaming at Shadow that the abomination Sorun was holding needed to be thrown into the nearest star.

"You, this castle, this world's history, all of it." The rancid Chaos energy flowing around Sorun intensified as he spoke. "I'm turning everything back to normal."

"Normal?" Of all the things Sorun had said, of all the spiteful, infuriating things he'd said and done, somehow that was worse than everything else to Shadow. He didn't mean to simply undo his work like the blue hedgehog did. At least if that happened there'd be history of what he'd done, everything he accomplished. Something for people to look back on as a guideline for how things should be should the worse pass. People loyal to him that would carry on even

should he fail. A legacy made it so that wasn't a completely hopeless situation.

But what Sorun wanted... was so much worse. He didn't want to undo his work. He wanted to erase it completely! That and this entire world! Everything! All just to bring it back to... to *that* . That time. That awful, awful time. And the way he said it, that look in his eyes, it all conveyed the message to Shadow that Sorun didn't even think he or anything else in this timeline had a right to exist. That because they weren't in the "normal" timeline he and everyone else was less than worthless. Because they weren't "normal" in Sorun's eyes. That they were less than people.

It infuriated Shadow. Enraged him. More than that, it horrified and disgusted him. Why anybody would ever want to go back to that horrible time when things here were so much better, where the world was united and the world hadn't been torn apart by degenerates like Dr. Robotnik and other of his ilk. He wanted to bring them back. Bring everything that was wrong with the world back while doing away with people he didn't consider living people. It was revolting.

"Why!? Why are you so insistent on going back to that time!?" Shadow screamed out at him. "I saved everyone from that insanity, and you want to bring it all back!? Insanity like Robotnik!? Others like him!? You'd bring them back to life along with everything else!"

Some small part of Shadow had hoped Sorun would see sense. That he maybe misunderstood the gravity of his desire, that maybe he hadn't thought it through and wouldn't keep going forwards when the full weight of what he was trying to do crashed down on him. But he wasn't relenting in the slightest. His cold gaze remained firm and the energy swirling around him only intensified.

"I dealt with every single villainous scum plaguing this world and united everyone years before that blue cretin did in his timeline!" Shadow continued screaming out, his voice growing hysteric. "This world had peace YEARS before he managed it! Do you not think that means there are people alive in this time that never even existed in

the other time!? That people that died in that time are alive in this one!? If you do this, you'll kill them all! They'll cease to exist! ARE YOU THAT SELFISH!?"

Sorun moved forwards, and not in a way Shadow expected. There was a flash of bright, blue light from the sword, and Sorun's body seemingly *slid* forwards without him actually moving. Like the space separating the two of them suddenly vanished and he'd been pulled to Shadow's position, almost too fast for him to react. He'd gasped out, raising his arms up to block the incoming strike from Sorun's sword. It clashed against the golden rings on his wrists, the blade struggling and sparking against them as Sorun continued pushing with the blade.

"And what about people who are dead here that are alive there!? What about people like that scientist you killed, Cobor, huh!?" Sorun yelled out as he struggled against the two rings. "Don't they deserve to live just as much!?"

Shadow found himself losing in the struggle. Against that cursed blade pulsing with blue energy, against Sorun who continued pushing against it. He tried to fight back as hard as he could, but to his utter shock Sorun kept pushing him back.

"Y-you... you're insane...!" Shadow gasped out, even as he tried calling on every bit of power he had to try and fail to push Sorun back. "People shouldn't have to die just for your selfish desires!"

Sorun didn't respond. As he continued slicing down on Shadow's wristbands, he heard it. A small crack at first, followed by subsequent, louder cracks. He looked towards the source, crimson eyes widening when he saw the sword's blade begin to chip and break through what were supposed to be the indestructible, golden rings on his wrists. The cracks became larger and more pronounced the further the blade dug into them, and red sparks of Chaos energy began arcing out from the cracks.

Were he not fighting for his life Shadow's arms would have gone slack in shock. He was actually meaning to break through the rings to get to Shadow. By all accounts that was... possibly the poorest possible choice Sorun could make. He'd intentionally guarded with the rings thinking Sorun would go out of his way to avoid them because the risk for breaking them was too great. When he actually struck Shadow figured he had taken a risk, not figuring his sword would slice through the rings.

He was honestly more surprised that Sorun was actually trying to do it than that he even could do it. Shadow only needed a moment's thought to figure out why he would ever try to do such a thing.

"He doesn't know about the inhibitor rings." That was the only conceivable explanation. There was no way Sorun would actually go for the rings otherwise.

It was probably the one saving grace that would win him this fight. As it was, there were a number of ways Shadow could have avoided the sword cutting deeper and deeper into the rings. From teleportation to stopping time to simply trying his luck to roll out of the way in hopes the blade would miss. Maybe even try to knock Sorun back with a Chaos Blast with his remaining reserve of Chaos energy. Any one of these methods would have been viable.

Instead Shadow chose to let Sorun cut through the rings and cut his hands off.

In hindsight, at some point in time, maybe Sorun should have asked the real Shadow what the deal was with the rings he wore on his wrists.

He always found it odd. Shadow never seemed like one to accessorize. The rocket shoes somewhat flew in the face of that, but they at least served a function. They got him around. That should have been Sorun's first hint that the rings he wore on his wrists, too, more than likely served some kind of function, and weren't just mere

trinkets he wore. Because Shadow had been one of those Mobians that wore nothing but gloves and footwear, so the rings always seemed off to Sorun.

The second hint should have been that they looked just like Power Rings. That was probably significant.

He really should have asked.

After he killed King Shadow's shoes the fight had been going well enough. Cutting off the hedgehog's mobility like he had really put the ball in Sorun's court, because compared to that annoying aspect of King Shadow's, the rest of his powers and abilities were manageable.

Admittedly getting his... head nearly cut off... hadn't been ideal. There'd been a moment where Sorun genuinely thought he'd died there, but the neck wound had healed before the despair even set in, and he remembered his body regenerated so fast he doubted Sonic could even cut his head off fast enough to beat it. Probably the only thing Sorun had over King Shadow was that his regeneration was so much faster than his, something Shadow seemed to have a hard time believing.

Apparently demons beat out aliens on healing. Go figure.

That healing was probably the only reason Sorun even had a shot at winning, because there was a realistic chance he could just bleed King Shadow out before he himself fell. Even so, it wasn't a given, and Sorun's stamina was waning heavily, so he'd wanted to land a definitive blow and end the fight without leaving it to chance. He'd been hoping to catch King Shadow off guard by tricking him with the Yamato - using its separation power to separate the space between them so he'd instantly appear, and then use the surprise to land the definitive blow. He would have just preferred to have Trickster for a proper teleport, but a discount teleport would be better than nothing.

Or it would have been if Sorun had actually landed the hit, but King Shadow had blocked with the rings. So naturally Sorun endeavored to cut through them, maybe take King Shadow's hands in the process and make it easier on himself. To be fair he'd actually managed that. He'd even felt relieved when he felt his body suddenly lurched forwards, and saw pieces of ring and a set of hands fly away out of the edges of his vision.

And then King Shadow started glowing red. Not just the crimson stripes on his fur, but even his black fur, the white patch on his chest, and the tan fur on his muzzle. Every single part of his body began glowing red, began radiating Chaos energy thick enough that Sorun felt it crackling against his skin, and he realized right then and there this started happening because he cut through the two rings.

After that King Shadow exploded. Literally.

If Sorun were running a human body he would have died right there. In fact he was reasonably sure his whole face was flash-vaporized down to the skull after he was blasted, and then completely regenerated in the process of him being thrown back. He wasn't completely certain, but he knew he'd been blinded for a moment and he hadn't been able to feel anything in that time. Once the nerves regenerated all he felt was the sensation of being thrown backwards.

Then he hit a wall.

The fact that the entire wall, the entirety of the wall that made up that section of the throne room, completely fractured and splintered upon Sorun crashing into it was a testament to just how hard he'd been slammed into it. He'd slid down into a sitting position, panting heavily as he struggled to catch his breath even with his regeneration aiding him. When he looked down at his arms he saw that the sleeves had been blown away entirely, the coat slowly growing back over oddly clean-looking arms that Sorun suspected were freshly regenerated after having been completely destroyed from the explosion.

He was less worried about that and more on the fact his hands were empty.

A quick upwards glance revealed the blue Chaos Emerald all the way on the other side of the throne room and far away from where Sorun was. Likely blown away from him in the blast, or more likely he momentarily hadn't had fingers to grip onto the thing to prevent himself from losing it. Now it'd lost its sword form due to missing contact with him and was a disparaging distance away from him. He'd silently cursed at that, at losing the sword simply because it'd been tossed away from him. He counted himself fortunate that he'd had the foresight to surgically put the second Chaos Emerald inside of himself as a safety net, but the simple loss of Yamato justified in his mind how much Sorun *hated* relying on items for these life and death situations.

The giant beacon of red light standing between Sorun and the Emerald, of course, was the main reason Sorun didn't leap up and immediately try to go for the Emerald. That and he just didn't think he could get to it, with his energy exhausted to the point he was fighting to stay up. Even if he could Sorun wasn't sure he could, locked in awe and fear as he was staring at the thing slowly approaching him.

King Shadow had... Sorun didn't even know. Undergone some transformation that turned the entirety of his body red. A violent, churning red aura was permanently flailing around him with such intensity that the throne room flooring was being torn apart from his mere proximity to it, his footsteps leaving molten footprints in his wake.

And he wouldn't stop looking at Sorun. Even though his eyes had gone completely white, either from the transformation or due to his frenzied rage, Sorun could feel the hedgehog staring right at him as he approached. The power he was exuding was so intense that Sorun felt himself being pressed into the wall he'd been slammed into, felt his skin smoldering from the intensity of the power King Shadow was projecting alone.

Deep inside Sorun knew. A dreadful realization that, even with Yamato, he didn't have a chance of beating this thing. That primal and instinctual part of him was telling him flat-out this was an opponent beyond him, and with him losing the sword he was beyond hopeless. The only reason he wasn't being crushed to death under the weight of this power was because of Devil's Body, and even then he was struggling to weather it.

"This...? He... he had this kind of power the entire time...?"

There was movement along the stumps where King Shadow's hands had been cut off. Chaos energy, so condensed and pure it appeared to be a shifting, liquid form glowing an intense, blazing crimson, flowed out from the wounds. It was less the hands regenerated and more the raw Chaos energy simply formed itself into the shape of hands to mimic the function, and in those faux hands a single long Chaos Spear formed. A weapon that lacked the usual greenish-yellow hue. This Chaos Spear was an intense red, crackling with such energy and heat the air around it was being warped. All throughout the entire process King Shadow didn't halt his progress towards Sorun, or keep his burning gaze off the frozen human who could do nothing but stare at his approaching doom.

"You're... you're nothing but a monster... a demon... only a demon would use such a despicably perverse weapon like that thing you held..." King Shadow's voice was empowered enough that the very air was reverberating from its vibrations. It only emboldened the terror that was rapidly swelling inside of Sorun as King Shadow came within a meter of him. "I will not... let you kill countless people just to fulfill your warped desires... I promised her I would save this world... I promised her...!"

He rose the red Chaos Spear above his head, point directed right at Sorun. It shone with such intensity that the entire room almost looked darkened in comparison. Like the sun itself was right in front of Sorun and poised to strike through him. He wondered if there'd even be anything left of him once it hit. With how much energy he felt

radiating off of that weapon he wouldn't be surprised if King Shadow ended up obliterating the entire castle with that thing.

It almost ended right there. Sorun had no doubt, absolutely zero, that being hit with that Chaos Spear would mean death for him, regeneration or not. All he could do was sit there, completely helpless, as King Shadow moved to thrust it down on him. He'd seen the muscles move, the tip of the spear descend towards him while King Shadow maintained that hellish gaze. It if weren't for the fact the energy pinning him down was so stifling Sorun would have screamed out in fury, outrage, and fear at his impending death. As it was all he could do was stare with horrified eyes as that terrible spear descended on him.

And then a pair of hands reached out from behind King Shadow and grabbed his head. A number of things followed this: King Shadow, who for all intents and purposes was the victor of the fight, began screaming. The red Chaos Spear faded from his grasp. The entire transformation faded, the Chaos energy supplementing his hands, the raging, red aura, the completely red body and white eyes, all of it. He reverted back to his normal form as his entire body was engulfed with a new, green aura of Chaos energy. Something that he quite obviously was doing his best to oppose as he flailed around in the grip locking his head in a vice.

After that he'd... frozen. Completely, and without warning. It was such a sudden thing, his screaming and flailing coming to such an abrupt halt, that Sorun almost assumed that, somehow, time had stopped. But there was no way it had, because he still managed to hear the quiet, ambient sounds of the empty throne room, and the green aura completely surrounding King Shadow's body was constantly in a state of movement, flowing around the black and red hedgehog. And yet the king himself was more than immobile - he was truly frozen in place. Expression completely locked in that terrible, raging expression, eyes motionless, handless arms uselessly trying to reach back and remove whatever was grabbing him. Somehow he looked more still than a statue.

It was like he was completely frozen in time.

Right when Sorun was catching his breath, his mind a whirlwind of relief over having narrowly avoided death again and confusion and lingering vestiges of fear, he saw a head with a smiling face poke over the frozen King Shadow's shoulder. Sorun couldn't help the exasperated sigh that left him when he saw it was Lara-Su's face, Knuckles' daughter. Any other time he would have had a negative reaction to the exuberant joy she held on her face, but at the moment he couldn't muster up the energy to do anything.

"Hey! Looks like I got here just in time!" The echidna teen maneuvered around King Shadow's frozen body - Sorun couldn't stop staring at it - and stood out in front of Sorun, bent down with a hand outstretched towards him. "I got here near the end of the fight. I hardly even needed to look for you two - the amount of Chaos energy you two were bleeding off was crazy!"

It took a few moments for Sorun to realize that the hand being offered to him was a sign that she wanted to help him up. He blinked at the appendage, and then, shakily, rose a hand up and accepted the hand. He was pulled up to his feet, though with how his legs wobbled Sorun was surprised he didn't fall right back down, and he didn't know if it was whether due to exhaustion or sheer shock over what just happened.

He still couldn't stop staring at King Shadow and his frozen expression. Really, he had no idea what was going on.

"You have a really funny surprised face." That single sentence was enough to drag Sorun out of his stupor and look besides him. There was a sheepish, teasing grin on Lara-Su's face. "I-I'm sorry, I just couldn't help myself from pointing it out. What's the matter?"

"No-nothing, I... you..." Sorun looked away from the echidna and back towards King Shadow. "What did you do to him?"

"Really advanced Chaos Control technique," she replied, leaning around Sorun so she could stare at the king along with him. "Used a bit of time manipulation to force him in a stasis bubble. He's not aware of anything. As far as we have to worry he's stuck in there until the effect wears off."

"Ah... ah-huh..." Numbly, Sorun looked back at Lara-Su. "And how long will that take?"

The lighthearted smile she wore turned significantly more smug as she turned her nose away from Sorun. "Oh, I would count on him still being in there for my grandkids to see. And my grandkids' grandkids. And their grandkids. And so on and so forth."

"Oh, you can... you can just do that, alright..." Well that was certainly busted and overpowering to a degree that Sorun could barely comprehend it. He didn't even know that kind of thing was possible. Either Lara-Su inherited more than just good genes and powers from Knuckles or she really was a prodigy with this Chaos Control stuff. Or both, maybe. Sorun didn't know, and from how terrifying that thought was, that she could just pause somebody in time for that long, he didn't want to keep thinking on it.

There was still a sense of confusion going through him even though there shouldn't have been. Whiplash from going towards inevitable death to the threat being taken care of in such a short manner of time he was still recovering from it. Some parts of him were still shaking, eyes still locked onto King Shadow. Harmless now. Completely neutralized when he'd almost killed Sorun literal seconds prior. The fact that the danger had passed and that they'd technically won hadn't even crossed his mind as he stood there, stock still and staring as he shallowly breathed out.

"Won, we... we won, it's over? I-I, it's... We did it? I did it? She... it's really over, just like that? I'm not dead?"

"Hey, uh..." Distantly, he felt Lara-Su tug on the newly regenerated sleeve on his coat. Through great effort Sorun managed to turn his

head towards her. "Not to ruin the moment, but what'd you do to your hair?"

Sorun didn't respond. His gaze had shifted back towards the frozen King Shadow. He maintained his gaze for a few seconds, and then turned his head slightly, so that he was staring at the blue Chaos Emerald across the room. He began to move towards it.

"Er, uh, guy? Sorun? Hey, what are... alright." Lara-Su trailed off as Sorun silently passed her on the way to the Chaos Emerald. Her eyes followed him, a slightly perturbed look on her face, but she shrugged it off and then turned towards the throne room entrance when she saw movement. "Oh hey, Tails!"

The flying fox flew into the throne room, his eyes immediately locked onto the motionless, blue hedgehog lying at the center of the room. Both he and Lara-Su raced to his position, concern written on their faces as they attempted to rouse him. Their relief became evident when Sonic groaned out, slowly sitting up with Tails' help while rubbing at his head.

"Ugh, what, uh... what happened? We do it?" He looked towards the other hedgehog on the other side of the room, blinking when he saw the green aura around his frozen form. "Ehck! What happened to him?"

Sorun reached the blue Chaos Emerald. He bent down and picked it up, the glowing gem shifting into the katana. He turned right back around and began moving back towards where King Shadow was.

"Oh, I did that. Froze him, I mean," Lara-Su explained to Sonic. "I saw Sorun was having some trouble with him so..."

The words faded off the further Sorun got from the trio. He barely even registered them, having stopped right in front of the paralyzed half-Mobian. Still holding that same expression with enough rage to shake the world. It almost seemed like he was looking at Sorun, even in that flailing pose.

It was difficult to classify one distinct emotion of Sorun's. Indignation. Anger, shame, defeat. Hate. Of all of them that was probably the most prevalent one, right next to indignation. All directed at the frozen figure in front of him, whirling through him and unceasing. Strong enough that Sorun almost felt his head splitting from all of it.

Once again, he'd almost died. Once again, he'd been beaten by somebody. *Once again* someone stronger and blessed with more power had to come save him because he just couldn't do it. The fact that Lara-Su could just do this, could just freeze someone in time using a technique she possessed just because she was born with those powers, infuriated him to no end. He'd put his all into it, with his weapon and a body superior even to Mobians, and he'd still lost.

"Power. Why is the problem always power? Why do I never have enough of it?" There was a soft scraping sound too quiet to make an echo as the Yamato was slowly pulled from its scabbard. *"Why does everyone always have to have more power than me?"* His eyes snapped to the side, towards the nearby trio of Mobians. Specifically at Lara-Su. *"Why does she get to have so much power? Why does she get to smile like that? Like nothing's wrong?"*

He knew he couldn't smile. There was nothing to be joyful about this situation. The world was wrong and everyone in it but him was wrong. He'd almost died twice, TWICE, in the same night, but people like her and even Tails and Sonic got to go on smiling like nothing was the matter. It pissed him off to no end. Why were they smiling when everything was still wrong?

The sword was fully pulled free. Sorun shifted his gaze back to King Shadow. *Him* . Every emotion Sorun held was multiplied by tenfold when he stared at the frozen hedgehog, eyes widened and irises constricted at his mere sight. The one that beat him.

He couldn't stop the images that kept flashing through his mind. Him being strapped to that electric table. The fight, him cutting through Sorun's body, Sorun *losing* . That enraged, red form, that scorching, suffocating aura. The imminent threat of death, over and over, on

that chair, in his words, in that Chaos Spear that had hung over Sorun's head. Sorun being frightened through it all.

The final image of King Shadow cutting through Sorun's neck with a Chaos Spear was what pushed him to raise Yamato up and bring it down on the Mobian's neck.

A loud and wet slicing sound echoed through the throne room. The jubilant conversation between the three Mobians died off completely, and their attention was drawn to the source of the sound. All of their eyes widened in shock and horror when they saw Sorun standing in front of King Shadow, his katana buried halfway through the frozen one's neck.

Sorun's eyes widened further in anger, furious and frustrated that the sword, the sword that was supposed to effortlessly cut through everything, *his* sword, didn't instantly cut through King Shadow's neck because he just had to be *so fucking special* . He pulled the sword out of his neck, and then cleaved the sword down on the same spot. His silent fury only increased when it still didn't go all the way through.

He kept pulling the sword out just to keep slicing at King Shadow's neck. Spurts of blood kept flying out as a result, pausing midair as they were enveloped in the same green aura that was freezing him. Frozen moments of time that only grew in volume the more he kept cutting at King Shadow's neck.

"Sorun, what are you doing!?" Sonic screamed out. He attempted to get up to sprint to Sorun's position, but then made a grunt and fell back down onto his knees, his arm held over his aching chest. He turned pain-filled eyes upwards and reached an arm out towards Sorun. "SORUN, STOP IT!"

A running pair of footsteps and the sound of a whirling pair of tails was heard approaching behind Sorun. He didn't care. They weren't sounds he was capable of hearing at the moment over the rushing

sound in his ears. All that he cared about was finally cutting through King Shadow's neck.

And then, right before Lara-Su and Tails reached him, he'd done it. With one final swing the Yamato finally managed to cut cleanly through King Shadow's neck. The green aura surrounding him and the blood faded, the red liquid splattering down at Sorun's feet as the body fell limply on the ground.

His head fell down shortly after, rolling a bit before coming to a stop. King Shadow's face, expression deadened but somehow still rage filled, stared out at Sorun with glassy, dead eyes. The human stared back at the red eyes, looking almost confused as his breathing became shallow.

"I... I killed him? I killed somebody? Shadow? I killed... I killed Shadow? I killed someone?"

He would have thought he'd flash back to the real Shadow. The one he was actually friends with. That images of someone who was actually his friend would replace the images of this Shadow flashing through his mind, and then be replaced by the image of the lifeless head. But there was nothing. In fact, all the thoughts and images that kept distressing him disappeared altogether, and Sorun felt himself slowly calming down the longer he looked at the head.

"Shouldn't... aren't I supposed to feel something right now...?"

He didn't. Not sorrow over killing someone that looked just like his friend. There wasn't relief over killing the source of all his recent anguish, no joy in killing the most major threat that opposed him, no vindication for what he'd done to Sorun and others, no sorrow at the fact he'd just taken a person's life. Just... calmness. That was what was most shocking to Sorun, how calming this all felt.

The calm was ripped away when he felt a pair of hands roughly grip his shoulders and turn him around. Sonic seemed to finally find the wherewithal to ignore his pain and had reached Sorun's position.

There was... Sorun could scarcely describe the look on his face. Horror and anger, even outrage. There were similar looks on Tails' and Lara-Su's faces just behind him, the latter having risen her hands to her mouth she'd been so overcome with horror.

"Why did you do that!?" Sonic roared at him. His hands were squeezing down roughly on Sorun's shoulders, and there were even the beginning of tears pricking at the edges of his eyes. "You killed him! You... why!?"

"Why...?" Sorun echoed, confused, his voice sounding distant. "I-I-I-"

"You just killed Shadow! I can't believe- what were- what were you thinking-!?"

There was a sudden shift in Sorun's demeanor. In an instant he'd gone from appearing stunned and having a vacant look in his eyes to looking insulted and angered. The rush of anger was so intense that the hand holding the sword's scabbard lashed out, smacking Sonic across the face with the side of the scabbard. He grunted out in surprise and stumbled back, blinking his tears away and staring straight at Sorun as he held a hand to his face.

"Why!? The hell do you mean why!?" Sorun screamed at Sonic. "After everything he did you're telling me I was supposed to let him live!?"

"He was contained!" Sonic screamed back. "Helpless! He wasn't going to hurt anybody like that, and-and you just-!"

"Guys like that always come back, Sonic, they always do!" Sorun loudly argued, frantically shaking his head in refusal. "He was dangerous, he tried to kill us, fuck letting him live after all that." Breathing heavily, he turned his head down at the severed head. "Doesn't matter, I... I beat him. I won. I'm the winner. I fucking won. He didn't win, I did."

"You won!? That's your only take from this!?" The incredulity in Sonic's voice was mask by something breaking in his tone. "Y-you... Sorun, I can't... Sorun, how could you!?"

When Sorun looked back at Sonic, the Mobian looked at a genuine loss for words. From how he was sounding Sorun was expecting him to look angry, possibly getting ready to fight Sorun over what he just did. He would have been willing to, was even gripping Yamato to get ready for a fight.

What he was greeted to instead was a sight Sorun could barely fathom. He'd never seen so much raw disappointment on somebody's face before in his entire life. Disappointment and sadness, even grief, to the point that Sorun felt something uneasy in him stir when he saw Sonic giving him that look. Lara-Su certainly looked like she wanted to fight him, Sorun could have sworn he even saw a few flecks of green energy swirl between her fingers for a brief moment. Tails... he just looked completely shocked, arms and tails limp and his jaw hanging open.

"Sorun, you... you can't just kill somebody on a 'maybe'..." Sonic sadly mumbled out, shaking his head at the sight of King Shadow's severed head. "What makes you think this is okay?"

"Because it is okay. Fuck you for thinking it isn't." Sonic and the other two Mobians stiffened at Sorun's tone and words. He stomped past Sonic, eyes fixed to the ground. "I'm not gonna stand here taking criticism from someone so incompetent they can't keep their own kids from getting obliterated-"

He was stopped when Sonic's hand shot out and gripped Sorun's wrist. Sonic's head whipped up at a speed so quick it startled Sorun, eyes angered. Threatening.

"Sorun, you..." There was confliction in Sonic's face, amid the disappointment and new anger that was growing, but he seemed to be struggling to find the right words to say. "I... Sorun..."

"Let me go," Sorun demanded. Sonic's grip held firm, and in response a few bolts of blue lightning arced over Yamato's blade. "Is this really what you want to do? Really?"

Even in the face of the threat Sonic's gaze didn't waver in the slightest. Sorun saw Lara-Su take a step forwards, more green energy around her hands. A tinge of fear surged through Sorun at seeing that, plans already being made in his head to deal with the threat that could freeze him. Throw Sonic off of him, jump back while he was still holding on if need-be, get as far away from her as possible and use a Judgement Cut to-

"Everyone, stop it!" It was Tails that instantly shattered the tension between everyone. He stepped between Sorun and Sonic and, to everyone's surprise, wrenched the hedgehog's hand off of Sorun's wrist. "Fighting each other isn't going to solve everything!"

"You can't be serious!" Sonic argued. "Sorun just-!"

"I know what he did, but we're all going to die unless I get Sorun to do something!" Tails shouted. At seeing the bewildered looks everyone, even Sorun, gave him, he sighed out and shook his head. "It's... look, just let him go, alright? I get it, I do, but this is important. Please just trust me."

Sonic looked like he wanted to object. So did Lara-Su, but the tone Tails used, that desperate, pleading tone, gave them both pause. After what looked like much internal struggle, Sonic released Sorun, though he still maintained that angry, disappointed glare as he backed off. Lara-Su looked more hostile than anything else, but she'd still relented, letting the energy around her hands fade as she walked away along with Sonic.

"..." Sorun watched them walk off, expression moving back to apathy. He sheathed Yamato, eyes still lingering on Sonic's spiked back before he shook his head. This wasn't a matter that was going to be dropped, but Sorun didn't have any regrets. He'd deal with it if it became a problem. For now he had Tails to deal with. Him and...

whatever this new problem was. When he looked at Tails, he had on what was probably the gravest expression he'd ever seen the fox wear. For some reason he felt like it wasn't because he just cut someone's head off.

"Sorun, we need to talk. We need to talk about something really important."

Chapter 82

A/N- Believe it or not I actually do read all the reviews. I know I said way back I was gonna be more interactive with that, and for the most part I failed in that regard. That being said I've been getting lots of questions by people so I'm just throwing this out here as a blanket statement to all of you:

I'm not answering any questions that would spoil future events of the story in any way whatsoever. Not on if such and such character is appearing, not if this one thing or power or weapon or whatever will show up, not on any of that.

Recursion Error

Episode 82- The future unequivocally, without a shadow of a doubt, sucks

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Maybe there was something to be said about not feeling anything after performing the act of murder. Maybe. Sorun would argue context was important to such a thing, and a number of other factors and variables, but based on how everyone was treating him it seemed he was alone in that thinking.

Which in itself was strange. Maybe it was from back when, back when he'd been hyping himself up to kill Eggman when he thought it'd be the last thing he'd ever do before dying, and if there had been one single person on the entire planet that needed to die if only because it meant the quality of life of literally every single person would improve, it was that guy. Sorun wouldn't have shed any tears for his sake, and when he'd almost done it, he couldn't have been more zealous in the act. And he'd have done it, too, if it weren't for the fact he'd been just a second too slow.

But he'd never put any thought into how he'd feel after. Sorun figured since it was Eggman he'd feel nothing, even if he didn't have the time to ruminate on it. But now he'd killed that fake Shadow. King Shadow. Alternate Shadow. Did he deserve it? Well, Sorun didn't think anybody deserved to die, but he also made exceptions in life and made one for Eggman. Beyond that he considered himself to be the least-qualified judge of character when it came to King Shadow since he hadn't even been in this world for a full day when everyone else spent a lifetime here.

Still, he killed him. Because Sorun was just too desperate to go back to the original timeline and he was in the way. Because it didn't matter because he was going to change everything anyways. Because, the more Sorun thought on it, the more he realized he was completely okay with the fact he'd just killed someone, and really he just wanted to stop thinking about it and move on. The others weren't of the same mind.

Apparently they didn't even trust him enough to keep the Chaos Emeralds. They made him give them up. He would have argued against it, maybe just outright refused, but Sonic was there, Knuckles had returned, and his daughter with that bullshit time freeze ability was nearby and Sorun couldn't see him winning against that without outright killing or dismembering her, and that wasn't something he was willing to do. So he'd relented, given the Emeralds up, realized how brutally tired he was once Devil's Body had left him and his hair turned back black, and had chosen to just slump up the wall he'd been blasted into during the fight while everyone else talked things out.

It didn't help Sorun's mood that Knuckles had come along with a new face in tow. One he instantly recognized, but he knew just from a glance she didn't have a clue as to who he was. Even with the added age of twenty-five years Sally had a distinctive enough face. The hair alone was a dead giveaway, even all... done up like it was now, all regal-like along with the royal-looking dress she wore.

He didn't remember Sally ever looking at him like he was a rabid animal, though, and she chose to stay on the other side of the room along with the others. It might have to do with the fact there was a sheet-covered decapitated corpse near Sorun he kept taking glances at.

Hearing a pair of footsteps stop near him, Sorun turned his head to look up at Tails. Of everyone he was probably the most conflicted-looking out of all of them, and he, too, couldn't stop glancing at King Shadow's corpse. The way his facial muscles kept twitching it looked like he was struggling to make up his mind on whether to scream at Sorun, scold him, or just express his disappointment. Sorun couldn't help but wonder how long his patience would last under those circumstances. He didn't give himself good odds.

"What's she doing here?" Sorun asked, nodding his head in the older Sally's direction. Tails had immediately gotten his meaning, and sighed as a result.

"Knuckles had to look after her during your... fight," he tentatively answered, hesitating for a long time on the fight word. "She was getting ready to become queen. Was gonna marry Shadow and everything. She said she was doing it in hopes of getting Shadow to ease off some of his more unpopular policies."

Sounded like her, at least to Sorun. She never could stand not helping people. "Well..." Sorun drawled out, eyes turning back down to the sheet over King Shadow, "I don't think they'll be sounding the wedding bells any time soon."

Tails' face twitched. "You're making jokes after killing someone?"

"Yeah," Sorun answered, looking back up at the fox. He felt irritation rising. "It's called levity. Fucking look it up."

"I know what levity is, I'm just saying it's not appropriate," Tails said, the anger in his voice rising. "You had no right to make that kind of choice."

"And yet I made it anyways. Look where that got us." Sorun spread his arms out. "I don't see what the problem is. Sonic wanted his change in government? Well, he's sure as shit gonna get it now."

Tails shook his head. "That doesn't mean-"

"Listen, when you fight a guy radiating so much power the air around him is *literally* boiling then you can fucking talk," Sorun snapped out. He stood up to his feet, eyes narrowed and voice dropping a bit, though Tails stood his ground and simply crossed his arms. "'Til then you can't say shit about what I did, so shut the fuck up about it already."

"... Do you even regret what you did?" Tails suddenly asked, in a way that he sounded like he didn't want the question answered. "Are you even feeling any remorse? Guilt? *Something* over the fact you just murdered a defenseless prisoner?"

"Was nothing 'defenseless' 'bout that guy," Sorun argued with a dismissive scoff. "But to answer your question, no, not really."

For a long moment Tails just stood there, looking at Sorun. Then he sighed out, hanging his head in resignation as he mentally processed what Sorun said. After that, a weary breath left him, and his shoulders sunk down.

"You know, from your perspective, just a week or two back, you were a normal person everyone was friends with. You were a hero." He picked his head up to look at Sorun. He didn't know what to feel when he saw that Tails looked so sad. So betrayed. Disappointed. "What happened? What... what changed in you that turned you from the Sorun I knew back then to this?"

He could have made something up. From fighting Enerjak to falling into this mess, there were a number of things he could have said. He decided to just hit Tails with the truth. "Nothing changed. I was always like this," Sorun bluntly answered, making Tails stiffen. "This was just the first opportunity I had to kill someone without it being a

problem and I took it. That's all." He paused. "And I mean, Enerjak, too, if you really count that thing as being a person."

Tails shook his head. "I don't believe that."

"Tails, for god's sake, you're in your mid-thirties. You're a grown-ass man with kids. I know you're not stupid, so what's so fucking hard to understand?" Sorun bit out, making the fox flinch. "For fuck's sake, your parents were war veterans, weren't they? You're really gonna stand there and tell me you can look at them without judging but the second I off an actual DICTATOR trying to *kill us* -!"

"That's different!" he loudly argued.

"How!? How is it different!?"

"Because you're supposed to be a good person!" Wildly, Tails gestured to the sheet-covered, headless corpse. "Good people don't... don't do that! They don't kill helpless people! Are you really going to stand there and tell me this is acceptable in your culture!?"

"Tails, I'm from fuckin' Detroit," Sorun said in a lame voice. "The violence there was admittedly way overhyped by memes and shit but that doesn't change the fact I had a nextdoor neighbor that got shot on three separate occasions when someone tried to mug him. Did Earl ever cry about it? No, he just punched the guy out after he got shot every time. Because Earl was just built different or something, never could fucking tell with that guy," Sorun muttered out. "Or Crazy Ricky, who I'm fairly certain killed, like, fifty people while in the army before he became that one weird homeless guy living in a box behind the local Wal-Mart. Or my..." The teen trailed off a bit, eyes growing vacant for a moment before focusing back on Tails. He made a defeated sigh. "Look, Tails, I don't know what you want me to say. Earth isn't Mobius. Things are different there. I'm different. What do you actually want out of me?"

"I want you to stop using your species being violent as an excuse and say you made a mistake."

Sorun made a sharp breath as displeasure creeped into his features. "Oh, is that really how you're going to play it? We're playing the race card now?" Sorun's eyes narrowed in the same way Tails' eyes narrowed at his. "You're gonna stand there and tell me your parents *didn't* kill any Overlanders in the war? That Sonic's didn't? That there aren't messed up Mobians out there that don't have a problem killing people, because this one jackal I punched out once says otherwise. And you really think there weren't humans where I'm from that'd be just as appalled as you are over the fact I just cut someone's head off?" He reached forwards and roughly jabbed Tails in the chest. "Fuck you, Tails. You don't know anything."

Tails' eyes darted away from Sorun's. He brushed Sorun's hand away. "At least we didn't blow up our own planet with nuclear bombs."

Sorun froze. He felt his right arm twitching at his side, and it took a phenomenal amount of willpower to not hit the fox standing in front of him right now. He managed to let out a steadying breath and stay his hand, even if he couldn't figure out why Tails was on his case so hard. If the hero mentality of being a Freedom Fighter and being a hero as a child was really so ingrained into him that he never grew out of it, If Sorun really did make that big an impression on him back then, or if he really was just that naïve. Maybe being that naïve was a good thing - the whole reason Sorun fought to save the planet and told so little about what Earth was like to people was just to preserve that innocence since he adored it so much. So maybe this was just a consequence of that.

Or maybe adult Tails was just that fucking irritating, but really, that was all his fault if that was the case.

"You sure grew snippy with age, didn't you?" Sorun's voice was cold.

"... Look, I'm not gonna argue this with you," Tails decided, releasing a sigh as the tension left his body. "Just... we'll talk about it later, after everything's settled and everyone's cooled off, gotten their heads straight. We have more important things to talk about."

"Alright, sure. Fine." Crossing his arms, Sorun leaned his back against the cracked wall and crossed one leg over the other. "You got some explaining to do anyways. Like the whole 'we're all gonna die unless I do something' thing, the Chaos Emeralds and how I apparently gave them to you when I didn't, and all this other stuff that isn't adding up like how the late and great king over there knew me when I never did any of that."

"You did. And didn't," Tails cryptically answered. Before Sorun could open his mouth and tell Tails how nonsensical that was the fox tossed him something that glowed blue. Sorun caught the object in the air, eyes widening in surprise when he saw the blue Chaos Emerald in his hand for a brief moment before it transmuted into the Yamato.

It was a move that puzzled him. They'd been so quick to take the Emeralds away from him after he killed King Shadow that he didn't expect to just be given one back. It was as comforting as it was confusing to Sorun. "Er, thanks," he awkwardly said, looking back at Tails, "but I still don't understand-"

"You went back in time."

Sorun automatically pursed his lips in surprise. All things considered he shouldn't have been that surprised, since it sat besides all the other wacky stuff and the fact he'd traveled forwards in time, technically, in an alternate timeline. But backwards was a whole different beast and he already was feeling the coming migraine just thinking about it.

It also didn't make any sense because last Sorun checked time travel was... well, actually, Sonic going into a time machine was what caused this whole mess, wasn't it? So he supposed it did exist. Extremely so. Still didn't explain what he had to do with all this.

"... Okay, I went back in time," Sorun echoed, slowly nodding along. "And how did... you know what, just walk me back from the beginning." If he had to listen to this he at least wanted it put in front

of him in a cohesive enough way he didn't have to think about it too much.

"Right, right." Tails' eyes flickered to King Shadow's corpse. "So you know way back Shadow tried blowing the planet up using a weapon on the space station he was made in?"

"ARK, big laser, yeah I got the gist."

"And in our timeline Sonic stopped him," Tails continued.

"Mhm, mhm, yeah."

"Well, since Sonic wasn't there back then saving the world in this timeline it had to be left to the rest of us, and other people. World was an even bigger mess than it was with Sonic before Shadow came along." A regretful, pained look flashed over his face. "Things like dealing with Chaos in Station Square were... they were really messy without him there to help."

It took Sorun a second to connect the word Chaos with a name and not with the concept that had been screwing with him the entire time he'd been on this planet. "Oh, right, Chaos and Tikal. And those Chao," he said, vividly remembered the group he'd met. A tinge of worry went through him at the face Tails was making. "What... ended up happening?"

"It was bad," was all Tails offered. "Chaos was rampaging a lot longer than in our timeline. Shadow had to intervene, Tikal had to take desperate measures, and it wasn't... it didn't end like it did with Sonic there." Tails looked down at the floor. "You know the dungeon we were in with all the weapons stockpiled? Where we got the nuke?"

"Yeah...?"

"Well, Chaos and Tikal are down there."

For a second, a brief moment, Sorun felt a bit happy knowing they were close. But then it was dashed when he remembered the conversation he was having with Tails. "Why are they down there in a dungeon they keep weapons of mass destruction?"

"Because you wouldn't recognize them if you went down there to see them."

Sorun felt a stabbing feeling somewhere in his chest at hearing that. He tilted his head down, black hair brushing over his eyes as he made a breathy sound. A few moments passed before he shook his head. "I don't want to know," he said, hoping Tails would stop speaking on the subject. Fortunately, the fox nodded at him, looking eager to change topics anyways. "So I'm assuming Sonic wasn't there to stop Shadow from blowing up the planet?"

"No, he wasn't," Tails confirmed with a nod. "So you had to go back and do it."

It was amazing to Sorun how something could make so much and so little sense at the same time. "And I did this...?"

"It's..." Tails paused, sighing out a bit and holding a hand to his forehead as he thought. "From what I pieced together, from right now you used the Yamato to go back in time to stop Shadow, take the Chaos Emeralds, and then you found me, gave me the Emeralds, explained everything to me so that when I got to this point I could tell you all this so you'd go back in time and do the same thing."

"... What?" Confusion and bewilderment blossomed on Sorun's face. "I did what?"

"The sword you make," Tails clarified. "You used it to make a time loop."

"... The Yamato can time travel...?" Sorun muttered, mostly to himself as he glanced down at the Yamato. He gave it a critical look-over,

mentally going over all the abilities he knew it possessed in his head before shaking his head in Tails' direction. "No I didn't."

"Yes, you did," Tails stressed.

"Tails, the Yamato can't be used to travel through time," Sorun rebuked. "It can do a lot, and I mean a lot, but time travel ain't one of them." He'd know if it could. Hell, he was the only person that could know if it did that, since he was the only person in the whole universe with intrinsic knowledge of it.

"Sorun, I am telling you-"

"And I am telling you it can't," Sorun interrupted, tone a bit angry. "Why the hell are you claiming to know more about its abilities than I do? You don't even know where it comes from."

"I know because you're the one that told me!" Tails yelled out, quieting Sorun. "You said its separation power could be used to make a portal that could separate the distance between one point in time to another! You're the one that said it can cut through space *and time* , aren't you!?"

"... Well I mean yeah, but..." Sorun trailed off, floundering under the look Tails was giving him and the steady realization that was coming to him. "But, but that doesn't... oh, wait, it actually might..."

The fact was that the sword he was holding wasn't the true-blue Yamato from 'DMC', but a replica his subconscious had made. That being said his knowledge of it was so thorough that, if it wasn't a 1:1 copy of it, the difference was so marginal it was practically negligible, and he knew the sword's power of separation was loose in that separation applied to everything. That was the power behind tying a power to a single word, how a single idea could blanket so many other concepts.

So time travel could *in theory* happen if he really utilized the Yamato's separating power to cut through time itself. Except it

shouldn't, because the real Yamato never displayed that ability in the games. In fact nothing in 'DMC' lore displayed the ability to travel anywhere in time.

Well, except for that one thing.

"The fucking 'DMC 2' novel..." Sorun internally groaned out. He remembered now - how the worst game in the series had a novelization that had a demon named the Beastheads that could travel through time. Now that he thought of it that really did mean time travel was somewhat canon to the series if one accepted that book as cannon. And for all Sorun knew that mere *idea* somewhere in his subconscious was enough that the power to time travel was included in the Yamato's abilities, if in-universe time travel was a viable thing.

At least it was either that or he was right the first time and the power of separation really was so broad that the power to cut through points in time was just lumped in with it. Either way it was hard to refute facts - how Tails was saying all this, how he had the Emeralds, how King Shadow had knew him and implied Sorun was on the space station twenty-five years ago when he wasn't.

Unless he traveled through time.

"..." Sorun lifted the Yamato up, one hand gripping the handle and the other its scabbard. He pulled the sword halfway out, spotting his reflection in the immaculate, silver surface of the blade, how he was blinking down at in with a contemplative face before he sighed out in acceptance. "Alright," he muttered, sheathing the sword and looking back at Tails, "so future me got to this point, killing Shadow and everything, and after you said all this to him he went back, dealt with the ARK and past Shadow, nicked two of the Emeralds, the blue and red ones you gave me, gave them to past you and explained all this so when we got to this point, you could tell me allll this so I could go do the exact same thing."

Tails nodded. "Pretty much, yeah," he said with a nod.

"Okay." Sorun's mouth thinned. "I don't wanna."

The way Tails' mask cracked resulting in the frozen, half-confused and half-shocked look he was giving him would have been comical under any other circumstance. The dead body nearby sucked a lot of the enjoyment out of the situation, though. "You- I'm sorry, but what?"

"Yeah, I'm good," Sorun reiterated, shrugging at the now-sputtering fox. "Sounds like a lot of complicated work. I don't even like work in general, but throw something as bad as time travel in with it?" He made a low whistle. "Yeah, I think there's been enough time travel as it is. I'm just gonna not do it."

"No, you don't understand." Tails began to shake his head, vehemently, and took a step towards Sorun. "You *have* to do this, Sorun. There's no not doing it."

A groan left Sorun. He somewhat regretting how whiny it sounded. "But *whhyyy* ?" he groaned out. "Weren't you the one telling Sonic how bad messing with time was, and now you're here telling me I have to mess with time? What happens if I don't? I can't be that bad, can it?"

"Yes! It can! It can be very bad!" The panicked enthusiasm Tails had incorporated into his voice, and how actually panicked he looked, managed to catch Sorun off his guard. "You set up a time loop! Do you know what happens if you deviate from that loop and not go back to close it so the next Sorun can do the same thing!?"

"No, I don't! Jesus, Tails, I'm a gamer, not a... a time physicist," Sorun said in a tired voice. "Why, what happens? What happens if I don't go back and close the loop? We're already here because the loop was closed already, wasn't it? Why does it matter?"

Frustration began growing on Tails, both on his face and the way his tails were angrily swishing around in the air behind him. "It *matters* ,"

he said in a very stressed voice, "because if you don't go back in time to close the loop it'll cause a time paradox!"

Sorun's expression became entirely lost, which only seemed to make Tails more frustrated. "I don't get it. Is that bad?"

A loud sigh, short of Tails exploding and screaming in rage, left the Mobian as he did his best to calm down. He began rubbing at his temples with his fingers, muttering under his breath while Sorun silently watched on, and then breathed out.

"Alright," Tails began, light blue eyes opening up to stare at Sorun's confused blue eyes. "Let's say you don't do it. You don't go back and close the loop. Because we currently, all of us, are in a timeline in which you went back in time and stopped Shadow from using Space Colony ARK to destroy Mobius, you would cause a time paradox by not going back in time and stopping Shadow from using Space Colony ARK to destroy Mobius." He rose up two index fingers. "That would create two timelines - one where you closed the loop and saved Mobius, and one where you didn't. Imagine time as a straight line. You going back in time caused a curve that connects somewhere down the line, and when you go back to the future in curves back up. It makes a loop, a circle, but for all intents and purposes it's still one single timeline because the line carries past the circles. But if you don't go back and close the loop the line branches - we get two timeline."

"O... kay, but we're in the one where future... past, I dunno... me closed the loop and saved Mobius," Sorun pointed out. "So why does it matter?"

"Because a zone, this universe, doesn't have the energy or ability to house two alternate timelines! No zone does!" Tails snapped at him in a loud voice, causing Sorun to flinch. "Alternate zones with different histories is one thing, the multiverse is home to infinite zones in that regard, but there's a reason that the entire timeline was completely overwritten when Sonic used the time machine as opposed to it just making a new timeline, and we're beyond lucky

that's all that happened. One zone can only have one timeline. *One* . So if a time paradox happens and creates two..." He loudly clapped his hands, startling Sorun. "The zone just can't sustain itself. Best case is that timelines or whole segments of time get annihilated. Worst, and most likely, case is that the entire zone grows unstable and just collapses. I'm talking complete and utter destruction of the entire zone and everything in it. The whole universe would just disappear."

Sorun's eyes widened. He felt something in him shudder uncomfortably as the weight of Tails' words settled in him. "Oh," he softly murmured out. "Yeah, you're right. That's pretty bad."

"THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN TRYING TO TELL YOU!"

"Alright, you don't have to shout!" Wincing a bit, Sorun rose his free hand to rub at his ear before continuing to speak. "God, this is frustrating. How do you even know all this?"

"Because you told me," Tails answered. "You explained all this to me so that I could explain it to you."

"Yeah, but there had to be a starting point to it somewhere, right? A Sorun that kicked off this loop?" Sorun asked him. "Ugh, I don't even want to think about what happened that made him desperate enough to do something like this. The trial and error alone he must have had to go through while dodging time paradoxes must've been a nightmare. Why'd he even do all this, anyways? Just to make sure Shadow didn't destroy the world?" It was a sobering through the more he dwelled on it. That a version of him at sometime had to deal with what was probably the most headache-inducing problem Sorun had ever tried to conceive. He evidently succeeded, at least, since they were all at this point, but Sorun still couldn't help but count himself lucky he wasn't that guy.

All Tails offered Sorun was a shrug. "We'll probably never know. But whatever that version of you did, it seems like it worked. We just

need to send you back to reset the loop for the next Sorun, and after that everything should be fixed."

"... Fixed." The word felt dry and tasteless in Sorun's mouth. Like there was no meaning behind it. Wasn't hard to see why he felt this way when he looked around. "Right. So how long do I have to pull this off?"

"Probably not long."

"'Course, 'course..." He shook his head, sighing under his breath as he pushed off the wall. "Alright, you made your case. Give me all the details you can."

Well, as far as time travel plans were concerned, it was simpler than what Sorun had feared it would be, so he supposed that was a good thing. Go back in time to point A, do this event, take that, take them to so and so and give them the lowdown, then head back where, should everything have gone right, they'd be done with the time travel stuff for good. In this case it was go back to a specific date Tails had given to him, and then after that go to the space station Shadow was at, incapacitate him, take two of the Chaos Emeralds, go bring them to Tails and give him the information to give to the next Sorun, and then go back to the future.

Unironically it was way simpler than Sorun would have pegged time travel. Maybe he could chalk that up to Mobius and all its weirdness making something that was supposed to be as complicated as time travel simple. It inversed everything, apparently. Or maybe it was because he was going back in time using a magic katana that trivialized the whole concept.

Either way he wasn't complaining. Much. He would have preferred to just not do all this, period, but the threat of annihilation was as good a motivator as any.

He glanced down at the sword in his hands. From a normal person's point of view it didn't look like something that could cut through time, space, and apparently travel through time. By all appearances it really did just look like a normal katana, if a bit stylized. He knew people sensitive to Chaos energy always had weird reactions over it, though, even if it felt normal to him. He never could figure out what about it set people off.

"It's too bad going backwards with this thing has the whole time paradox risk thing if everything Tails said is right. I would have just went back in time and crushed baby Robotnik's head in with a brick otherwise." It made Sorun wonder as he pulled the gleaming, silver blade out of the black scabbard. How the one that set this loop up managed to do it without causing a time paradox. Must have been some mind-bending riddle he was glad he didn't have to solve.

Scabbard hanging off his waist, Sorun held the sword up, tip pointed forwards. He didn't know how this was supposed to work, and Tails knew even less since he'd never used the sword. The Sorun that set him on this path thankfully gave him the advice necessary, which basically amounted to doing the same thing he did whenever he focused on a location to cut a portal to. Except instead of a location just focus on a date, or the amount of time going forwards and backwards. Didn't sound right, but nothing did these days.

"Why am I at a point in life where this isn't even the weirdest thing I've done this week?" Suppressing a sigh, Sorun looked over his shoulder. He'd elected to go into the closest hallway he could find leading out of the throne room so he didn't have to be near everyone else while doing this. Mostly because he didn't want to be bugged anymore by the strangers wearing aged versions of his friends' faces, and fortunately Tails got the hint he didn't want to be disturbed and left him be. So it was just him in a narrow hallway attempting to cut through time and space with a katana to travel back in time. As one does.

Exhaling, Sorun faced back forwards and began focusing into the sword. The date Tails had given him was repeated in his head over

and over in a mantra, and as he did this he pushed the sword forwards. Surprisingly, he met resistance despite the fact he'd stabbed forwards into empty air. The tip of the sword was struggling and scraping off against nothing, with heated blue specks occasionally flying off as if Sorun was attempting to stab into an invisible wall.

His eyebrows furrowed a bit. He could feel it - the same feeling he got when he was making a portal to a different location. A sensation that would travel through the blade to him, a mental *click* as the two locations were bridged and he cut a portal through space to travel there. In this case he felt the "location" he was trying to get to, the point in time he was trying to get to. It wasn't clicking, though. It was just hanging there at the edge of his mind.

He focused more power into the sword. More sparks flew off from the tip as the silver blade began thrumming with blue power. That location back in time was growing stronger in Sorun's mind, closer, and, rather bizarrely, he felt less resistance against the nothing he was stabbing against. Putting some more effort in found Sorun finally being able to sink the blade fully forwards into a thin, glowing blue fissure that had appeared in the air in front of him.

Grunting, Sorun began slicing downwards, lengthening the fissure. It wasn't like making a portal to simply teleport, where space parted effortlessly and was more or less made a smooth process. This was taking a phenomenal amount of effort and concentration by comparison, and Sorun could feel actual strain being put on the sword, the way it was vibrating in his hands. He'd finally cut the fissure long enough that it was as tall as him, and afterwards was forced to turn the sword and use it like a crowbar to widen the fissure into an entrance large enough for him to slip through.

"Okay-okay-okay this is way harder than I thought it'd be!" It was difficult to properly conceptualize the difficulty of using a magic katana to hold open a portal that, if everything went right, lead to the past. Like trying to keep a door wedged open with a crowbar while a raging flood was hitting the doorframe on all sides in addition to the

pulsing waves Sorun felt go through his body. When the portal began to shrink he realized there was no way to open it completely for him to walk in: he wasn't strong enough, and the longer this went on the larger and more numerous he saw the hairline fractures alone the sword's blade grow. *"Fuck it, here goes!"*

Not seeing any alternative to his situation, Sorun decided to bite the bullet and dive right into the portal while it was still large enough for him to fit through.

Going through a portal through time wasn't like going through a portal that simply lead from one location to another. It wasn't simply walking through a doorway through a small interim of darkness intermingled with blue energy, skin tingling with the ambient energy as one made the journey. It wasn't the relatively calm couple-second walk that "normal" portals entailed.

There wasn't a scope to define what going through a time portal was like, much in the same way it was hard to describe what it was like opening it. For Sorun it was the sensation of falling, being pulling upwards, and somehow being yanked in all other directions simultaneously. Tumbling through an endless expanse of darkness and blue, where the space was so thick with energy it was like being dragged through the ocean. That's the best Sorun could come to even think about what was happening, as he could hardly see, and his mind was racing so hard he struggled to even comprehend the way his body was tumbling around this expanse. Like he'd been tossed in some king of cosmic washing machine.

Realistically the process only took somewhere in the ballpark of ten seconds, even though to Sorun it felt like minutes, and he'd been so disoriented the entire time that for all he knew the opposite was actually true, but he didn't have a way of knowing. Eventually, and mercifully, whether he'd been tumbling through some sort of undefinable tunnel and finally made it to the other side or reached the other portal he'd cut into this space, he made it to the other side and fell out. Flat onto his face, with the blue Chaos Emerald falling

out after him and falling next to him with a soft *plink!* noise. The portal, less that and more a blue tear in space, promptly closed afterwards, leaving behind wispy, blue vestiges of power that slowly dissipated in the air.

For a solid minute Sorun laid there, completely motionless aside from his breathing. Then a groan left him, followed by some coughs, followed by Sorun, looking sick and feeling incredibly nauseous, pushed himself up, maintained the position for two seconds, and then flopped over and fell back onto his back.

"God, it's the wave pool from Adventure Bay all over again... fuck that water park..." Sorun groaned out, cursing at the memory and how falling through a time portal reminded him of that terrible trip he and his friends had went on during that one spring break. At least this time he hadn't almost drowned and didn't have water pouring out from his mouth, nose and ears and didn't feel like his head was going to explode from having his nasal system power washed. On the other hand every other symptom from his aching body to the nausea and disorientation was also there.

After a few more minutes, during which the nausea slowly faded away and Sorun didn't feel like he was going to throw up on the spot, he sat up. At this point he realized he was sitting outside, as opposed to the giant castle he'd been in prior. He was actually in front of a similar building, probably the same location since it had the same giant lawn space, instead of except of a castle it was more a giant townhouse. Rundown, dilapidated. Abandoned in every way, and the grass all around him was overgrown.

He grabbed the nearby Emerald, not paying it any mind as it transmuted into his katana, and stood up to his full height. The afternoon sun shined down on Sorun as he turned around to take in the city sight. A sight that was wholly different than the city he'd just come from. Where that city was lived-in, well maintained and bustling with bright lights, the city in front of him was completely empty, and in the same state of disrepair as the townhouse he'd just turned his back to.

"... Wow, it actually worked," Sorun murmured to himself, slightly in awe. It had to be the past, because it was either that or the apocalypse happened without him seeing it, and he doubted it was that latter explanation. There was a single, surreal moment where Sorun had actually stumbled on his feet, nearly dropping the sword he held when he realized he just *time traveled* . Genuinely and legitimately. He made a small, empty scoff, holding a hand up to his swimming head and shaking it in bemusement.

"Does it even get any deeper than this?" he wondered to himself, still murmuring as he turned his head up to the blue sky. "Jeez, and now I gotta go into space. Where even- where's that card Tails gave me?"

As Sorun began rummaging around in his pocket, he began to idly wonder if Tails really distrusted Sorun so much that he had to write explicit details about what he was supposed to do on a card for him to carry around in case he needed any reminders or pointers. As if the three separate times they went over what he was supposed to do wasn't enough in addition to the pressure named "The Universe is Irreparably Fucked if You Screw Up" bearing down on him wasn't enough.

Then again, Sorun barely even trusted himself to remember important details for something this incomprehensibly important, and the more he thought on it the more he supposed he couldn't blame Tails writing this all out just to make sure Sorun wouldn't make a mistake. He'd probably do it himself.

He brought the object out of his pocket. It was little more than a yellow sticky note, heavily crumpled and filled with Tails' messy scrawl. There was a basic outline of what he was supposed to do - stop King Shadow firing the ARK, get the Emeralds, yadda yadda - as well as some other important details that Tails figured must have been better written down than said. Like the coordinates for where the actual space station was, because Sorun didn't like his odds of blindly exploring space for that.

"Alright, Space Colony ARK, located... at wherever this mess of numbers is," Sorun said in a flat voice, exhaling a bit through his nose when he saw the long string of numbers. His brows furrowed, and he shoved the note back into his pocket as he looked back up at the sky. "Right, so how the hell do I go up to space to get into a space station...?"

A few minutes were passed with him standing there, standing and thinking. There was a good chance a breeze had blown a nearby tumbleweed passed him, but Sorun had been too preoccupied with his own thoughts to pay any significant notice to it. This went on for another minute until the blue ribbon tied to Yamato's scabbard reached up and tapped Sorun on the wrist.

"Hm? Yeah?" Blinking away his thoughts, Sorun looked down at the katana. Then he'd blinked in realization, and nearly rose his free hand up to smack him. "Right, I have this..." he said, slowly pulling the blade out while making incomprehensible grumbling noises all the while.

Teleporting to different locations via Yamato-made portal was still a much better experience than time traveling via Yamato. Less falling and feeling like one's body was being dragged through an otherworldly whirlpool. By comparison it was little more than a nice, small walk. One that didn't make him want to lose the little food he had left in his stomach.

God, but was he hungry. And tired. He couldn't even remember the last time he ate or slept. A large part of him hoped this would be over soon just so he didn't have to keep thinking on the subject.

When his feet emerged from the blue portal they touched down on hard, metal flooring. The Earthling's body emerged fully from the portal, absentmindedly closing the portal behind him and sheathing the sword as he took a look around. His environment had changed from the bright, barren city he'd just come from into moderately-lit metal corridors. There were paths that branched off into other

hallways, with helpful signs attached to the ceiling above and even colored lines painted on the ground that coincided with the colored signs above, which made Sorun assume they were guidelines. A blue line that, according to the sign, lead to the cafeteria, white line for the labs, yellow for the sleeping quarters...

"Well, this certainly looks... space-y," Sorun noted. Having never been on a space station he didn't know what to expect. A small hop revealed that the gravity was normal, so either the people who built this figured out artificial gravity or he was in the wrong place. Temperature seemed normal, if not a bit cold, no feeling of wind or air circulation on his skin, and the air smelled... off. Akin to the way air in hospitals always smelled too clean, like antiseptic, but this was different. More stale.

It was just when Sorun was beginning to wonder if he was even in the right place that he turned around and saw the window right behind him.

An awed gasp left Sorun when he took in the vista before him, separated by what was hopefully reinforced glass. An infinite expanse of black dotted with innumerable lights. A moon that had a large groove carved through it, a whole chunk having been blown off with pieces frozen in orbit around it. And right down below both him and the space station was the planet itself. Mobius, what had once upon a time been an alternate version of the Earth he once knew. Speechless, it was all Sorun could do but slowly step forwards and press his hand against the glass as he looked down at the planet, eyes wide and shining.

Vaguely he remembered that map Sally had shown him, back when he'd first come to Mobius. For the most part the continents and landmasses he saw below was the same as those on the map. A planet that looked so much like his own, but warped, only holding the vague shape of the planet he was born on. Continents misshaped, islands missing, even the home state that had contained his city was gone completely, sunken to form a giant lake that was at the head of a great river that split what was once America in half.

"Huh..." Sorun breathed out, eyes glued to the sight before him. "Hey, mom. I did it. I'm in space." It'd always been a secret wish of his, to go up and experience space. Something about it, from all those games and movies... he didn't know. There was just an allure to it; just an urge to go up there beyond the sky to see what it was all about. Lots of people on Earth had that same urge.

Being here in person to see it, though, and have that dream realized so quickly and instantly, it left Sorun feeling about as hollow as it did breathless. He didn't think it'd be this easy. Realistically it shouldn't have been, because really he'd cheated to get here, and he couldn't help but feel that took some of the wind out of the accomplishment. Even so, he still felt accomplished. Oddly happy, which was probably the first positive emotion he'd had all week.

"Yeah, it's... it's, um, it's space. About what we expected it'd be like," Sorun continued to whisper out. "Real neat, um... you know. I know Dave and the others guys'd be just as psyched out about it as I am, and, uh... yeah. Yeah. Still miss you all." He pushed off of the glass. "'Kay, gotta... gotta go stop the crazy half-alien animal guy and save the world. I don't really get it either. S-so... yeah. Bye."

When he'd turned around and began walking away from the window, Sorun had noted that his left arm that was holding the Yamato began shaking. He did his best to steady the arm by holding it with his right arm, and had to use his right sleeve to wipe away some of the stray tears falling down his face as he made his way down the metal corridors.

Were circumstances different and he had more time on his hands Sorun would have loved nothing more than to explore the empty space station, creepy and noiseless as the place was. Because when else would he ever have the opportunity? Unfortunately the stake of the entire universe just happened to be resting on his shoulders, and he didn't want to risk something bad happening because he dawdled off. So against his more childlike instincts he had to resist the urge to run around touching everything.

Except a fork. He'd gone to the cafeteria and stolen a fork. It was completely indistinguishable from a normal fork other than the fact it came from space. But it was his space fork now. He was walking away from this with at least one souvenir.

On another note, Sorun had never been to the Space Colony ARK before now, so he didn't actually know where he was going. The signs helped out, and he was forced to rely on them and the lines painted on the ground to lead him around. From what Tails had told him all the Chaos Emeralds powering the super weapon were all slotted into a core somewhere in the facility, and all he had to do was walk up to it and take them out. So that was the easy part. The hard part was actually finding the thing.

At least it would have been hard if he didn't find signs and a path that lead him to the laser weapon core. Took him fifteen minutes to even find the pathway and another thirty minutes of following it to arrive at the place. Sorun didn't have much scope for how large the station was without getting an outside view, but based on the fact it'd been nearly an hour of him walking straight without seeing familiar sights the place must have been *huge* , which was mindboggling for Sorun.

The weapon core wasn't so large by comparison. The other side of a door lead Sorun to a large chamber lit up with blue, fluorescent lights. At the end of a platform fitted with large computer consoles was a catwalk that lead to a large, spherical piece of machinery suspended in the center of the room by cables and metal struts, held over a large chasm that Sorun could barely see the bottom of. He didn't even have to look for the Emeralds; they were slotted right in the front of the core, six in a circle surrounding the seventh one in the center. Just like Tails said.

"... Alright." Wasting no time, Sorun ran forwards across the catwalk and to the front of the mechanical core. He stopped in front of it, blinking as he looked down at his hands, one carrying the Yamato, and looked back up at the Emeralds slotted in the machine.

Sorun frowned. He looked back down, but even after he willed the sword to transmute back into the blue Emerald that still left him with one hand filled. "Okay, I guess I can just pocket one," Sorun quietly mumbled. His right hand reached forwards and gripped the red Emerald that was slotted into the machine. He pulled it out with surprising ease, causing the nearby lights to flicker and dim briefly, but otherwise there was no change. He looked down and attempted to jam the Emerald into his pocket, but to his dismay it didn't fit. "Man, what the hell?" he grumbled out. "Geez, why do these things have to be so big? It's gonna be really awkward trying to carry these..."

"And just what do you think you're doing?"

Hearing that voice was to Sorun the equivalent of somebody dumping a vat of iced water over his entire body. That voice, *his* voice, the voice of the person he just killed. Would kill. He slowly turned around, blue and red Emeralds in hand as he faced the owner of the voice, who sounded very displeased with Sorun.

It was him, alright. Shadow. This timeline's version, before he'd taken over the world and become king. No cape or crown, and otherwise he looked identical to the real one Sorun knew. But then again never saw his Shadow have that murderous glare in his eyes that turned Sorun's blood ice-cold. The kind of hard expression and determined look that promised quick and decisive death.

Not even King Shadow had looked that murderous until he and Sorun had started fighting, which made Sorun briefly wonder why this one looked so angry until he had to remember this version of Shadow was upset enough to blow up the whole planet. The details around that reasoning was still vague to him, but it was enough to put him on edge. Especially after how his fight with the future version had went, how poorly it ended.

"..." Sorun didn't have a response. He wanted to make one, maybe even make it somewhat witty to try and add some levity to the situation, but nothing could come to mind. His eyes darted behind

him, at the core still holding the other blue Emerald he needed, and then he looked back at Shadow, stuttering out, "U-um, Emeralds need." He cursed himself for making such a stupid sentence.

His words seemed to annoy Shadow more than amuse him. "Is that so?" His eyes narrowed as he peered closer at Sorun's face. "Overlander. I presume based on that gaudy coat the Doctor sent you."

Sorun did his best to ignore the comment on his coat. "N-no."

The dark hedgehog's eyes narrowed further. "G.U.N., then? I'm surprised they even remember this station exists at all."

"Nobody sent me." Technically a lie, but it was more believable than the truth.

The crimson eyes staring into him un-narrowed. He pondered Sorun's words for a bit, and then beneath all the anger a bit of confusion set in. "Then who are you?" he asked. "Some self-proclaimed hero, come to stop my plans under some ill-conceived notion of saving this worthless planet?"

"Man, was my Shadow like this before he chilled out?" Sorun wondered to himself. He honestly couldn't see it even though it was coming out of the man's own mouth, alternate version or not, but this was so early into that and Shadow coming out of cryosleep that Sorun didn't even know if there was a fundamental difference between the two at this point in time. It made it that much harder for Sorun to understand him.

"Well," Sorun began, "no, not really. I just came here for some Chaos Emeralds, but I'm not exactly complaining about the fact it'll end up stopping your doomsday weapon in the process." Maybe the slight anger he felt at knowing Shadow wanted to blow the planet up gave Sorun the confidence to stop stuttering. That and the plan that was slowly formulating in his mind as he gripped the Emeralds tighter.

"And what business do you have saving that wretched ball of dirt?"

"'Cause... 'cause I live there and everyone I like lives there, what-what kind of question even is that?" Sorun asked, voice growing somewhat blank as he looked at Shadow with wide, confused eyes. He was just short of saying, "No shit I don't want myself and everyone else to die" right to Shadow's face, but he'd figured that reasoning would be so implied anyone with common sense wouldn't need it explained to them.

He guessed he was mistaken. That or Shadow was so single-minded in his goal to blow up the planet he wasn't thinking straight.

"Hmf." Shadow turned his nose up at Sorun. "As pathetic an excuse as any."

"I mean I thought it was a pretty solid excuse, but whatever, I guess." Evidently that hadn't been what Shadow had expected to hear, as he leveled his eyes back at Sorun, though now he looked even more confused than before. "Dude, listen, I don't know what your whole deal is and why you're upset, but I don't care. Like I *really* don't care, but you're dragging literally the whole planet into your drama and I have to be the guy to step in because there's nobody else to do it. So as much as I don't want it to be my business, you're making it my business."

"Your 'business' has nothing to do with this," Shadow rumbled out, teeth bared into an angered snarl. "Set the Emeralds down. And move aside. I will not repeat myself."

"You really think killing billions of people is gonna fix whatever your problem is?" Sorun asked Shadow, though the latter refused to back down from the words. "Seriously? That's your answer? Revenge at the expense of everyone else? Is it the anger blinding you or are you really that selfish?"

"Selfish? Selfish!?" Shadow roared out, breaking his composure and making Sorun flinch back. "Selfish is the world taking away the life of

someone who only ever wanted to protect it! I will not-!"

"Quicksilver."

A silver ring expanded outwards from Sorun, spreading over everything. The colors of everything around him briefly inverted, and then slowly settled back to normal as motion halted. That was all expected when Sorun used the power. What he didn't expect, and what Sorun was elated to see, was that Shadow had stopped. Mid-sentence, his entire body frozen in time just like the world around him.

"You utter *fool* ." With renewed confidence Sorun walked directly towards Shadow, newfound vigor in his steps. A large part of him had been worried stopping time wouldn't work on Shadow; that, since Shadow himself could stop time with his natural abilities, he'd be able to negate it much like Enerjak had negated Sorun's timestop with his own timestop during their fight. He'd been wary of trying it at all for risking Shadow responding if he resisted the power. But it seemed either he couldn't or Sorun had caught him in surprise and he hadn't been able to respond in time before freezing. It didn't matter whichever was the truth. What did matter was that Sorun successfully caught Shadow in the timestop.

Which meant he basically already won.

He stopped right in front of Shadow. Sorun scoffed at the sight, half in amusement and half in derision. Here was the person that terrorized him so much, almost killed him during their fight in the future. One of the strongest individuals Sorun knew. Completely helpless and at Sorun's mercy, frozen in stopped time as Sorun pondered what to do. He looked down at the two Emeralds in his hands, humming a bit as he turned back to the machine core where the other six were.

Technically he could just collect the second blue Emerald, use one of them to make Yamato, and then leave, all while time was stopped. Shadow couldn't do anything about it, not while he was frozen in the

stopped time, and without seven Emeralds the weapon he was using to threaten Mobius was effectively inert. But he didn't want something to go accidentally wrong. For the Chaos Emerald fueling the Quicksilver ability to slip out of his hands as he tried to juggle three of the gems or for it to just wear off and have Shadow attack him.

More than that Sorun was still pissed off at the fact his head was almost cut off.

With all that in mind Sorun turned back to Shadow, two feathered, spectral arms having appeared over his shoulders. The right blue-glowing arm clenched its clawed fingers into a fist and shot forwards, right into Shadow's face. His head whipped back from the impact, and then froze immediately after. Sorun leaned forwards to examine the damage, and saw that the hedgehog's muzzle was visibly distended, the bone underneath cracked. There were teeth peeking out between his lips, threatening to fly out once Quicksilver ended.

He got to work on his legs next, the Bringer Claws flashing downwards and gripping Shadow's shins. They squeezed down hard enough to splinter and pulverize the bone beneath the flesh, enough that when the blue hands released the legs they looked as if they had never been even remotely straight a day in Shadow's life. They punched his hands after, bending them far back enough to break the wrists while taking care to not even touch the golden rings hanging off of them.

At that point Sorun could have ended it. Shadow couldn't chase Sorun with busted legs or throw a Chaos Spear with broken hands. He was completely disabled until he healed. But Sorun kept going, for fear he'd regenerate too quickly for Sorun to get away once timestop ended. The Bringer Claws destroyed his joints, grabbed arms and legs and bent them backwards until the knees and elbows popped out, until his hands were touching his shoulder and feet his backside.

More memories assaulted Sorun the longer this went. That radiating, crimson aura that had been spreading around King Shadow as he attempted to kill Sorun with that blazing Chaos Spear. He'd almost succeeded. Sorun had the Bringer Claws dislocate Shadow's shoulder and hip joints and crush them. Tied down to that table, the crackling sound of electricity growing in tandem with the dread Sorun felt. Spectral, clawed fingers grabbed each of Shadow's fingers, twisting them backwards, crushing the bones, demolishing the joints until the bones were powder. That fight, him dodging all of Sorun's swings, spinning around and cutting through him so many times. The Bringer Claws pounded at Shadow's torso, shattering his ribs, clavicles, pelvis, the blows likely damaging if not outright bursting some of the organs underneath.

Him, this whole vendetta, how he tried to destroy the world and then changed his mind and fucked it up even more than it already was, how he thought his motivations and reasons were so much *better* than Sorun's, that he was better than him, everything he'd done and tried to do to him just to preserve his status quo. The blue claws reached up, crushing his scapulae to fragments, and then reached down to his spine, clawing and madly gripping at them, mashing the vertebrae together until it completely lost form.

Sorun's neck. He'd only felt it for the briefest times - that's how all his wounds worked while in Devil's Body because of the regen factor. Just fast enough to notice something happened to cause pain, but it never stayed enough to linger, for him to think on it. Even more that body muted pain somewhat. Not nearly enough to be traumatic in any significant way. But the feeling of that Chaos Spear dragging along his neck, feeling it heal just behind the spear as it went through his flesh, knowing he'd been that close to death *again* , it hit different. The memory stayed when nothing else did.

Some care was taken when Sorun's Bringer Claws began punching Shadow's face. Just enough to ensure the brain wasn't damaged in the same way he'd taken care not to accidentally rupture his heart when he'd attacked his torso. Less care was taken when his orbitals

were shattered and his eyes began spilling out from the broken sockets, hanging by optic nerves.

Finally, Sorun stopped. He was breathing heavily, some flashes of what had happened with King Shadow still vivid in his memory, though they faded rapidly when he looked at Shadow's frozen body. He couldn't even recognize him the longer he stared, the way his entire body was mangled, how there wasn't so much as a single intact bone in his body. Seeing as how he and the rest of the world wasn't being consumed in a terrible time paradox, he didn't fear he'd gone too far and killed the hedgehog. And he felt somewhat relieved that his breathing was calming down to a normal rate the longer he looked at him.

The Bringer Claws faded away, and Sorun released the timestop. Where most bodies would have crumpled down Shadow's more or less spilled to the floor, like he couldn't support any of his own weight. Probably couldn't since Sorun shattered all his bones. He wasn't screaming, though in this state Sorun wasn't even sure he could. There was just a loud choking, gurgling sound coming from the mound of flesh that used to be his face. His entire body was twisting sporadically, likely in agony, but with how much damage Sorun had done all he could do was lay there in a broken mess.

"That's game, Shadow. I win." Still panting, albeit lightly, Sorun turned around and began walking back to the core. "I win," he whispered out, reaching its front. Frowning heavily at being introduced back to his earlier predicament, Sorun decided to just hold the one blue Emerald under his armpit as he reached out and pulled the second blue one out of the core. Again the lights flickered and dimmed, with the blue Emerald shifting into an unsheathed Yamato held in his right hand as he turned back around.

Sorun paused. Already there was a green aura surrounding Shadow's body as his regeneration went into overdrive to try and heal his body. The progress looked slow - parts of his body would seemingly snap together as the bones tried piecing themselves together, but more often than not they'd crumble back apart due to

the extensive damage. He'd manage to fix himself completely eventually, but by then Sorun would be long gone, and the damage was so severe it looked to be inhibiting the process somewhat. It made the Earthling pause as he realized something.

"Oh, hell, *that's* what he was talking about back at the castle. No wonder he wanted to kill me so much," Sorun murmured to himself. A moment passed, and then he shrugged. "Oh well. That's future Sorun's problem to deal with now. Past Sorun? Eh, whatever. I'm gone."

Trying to open another time portal with a red Emerald in one hand and a blue Emerald under his arm was phenomenally more difficult than when he had a hand free. He'd had to summon the Bringer Claws back to help pry open the portal, only to then swear under his breath when he realized instead of awkwardly carry the Emeralds like he was now he could have just had the arms hold them. Regardless he'd still managed to open the portal, which was satisfactory enough as far as Sorun cared.

Before he'd stepped in Sorun took one last glance at Shadow's broken body. The eyes spilling out of his skull were pointed away from him, and even with the optic nerves still attached to his brain Sorun wasn't even sure of he could still see or not in this state. They were slowly sliding closer towards his skull and the eye sockets that hadn't mended yet in the same way some of his muscles that Sorun had torn were slowly reeling themselves back into proper positions, healing.

"..." Sorun turned away from the broken mess and back towards the portal. He didn't want to see him anymore. He couldn't have leapt through the portal fast enough just to get away from it all.

It was official: Sorun hated leaping through time portals he made. It was less disorienting going through a tornado than falling through those things. He counted it fortunate that when the portal spit him out onto the ground in the same way the last one did that it spit out the

two Chaos Emeralds as well. He'd managed to keep a hold on Yamato this time but hadn't had a chance to keep hold of the gems while falling head over heels in whatever that space was that he fell through.

The climate he'd dropped into was a stark contrast from how the space station had felt. Where that place had been cool and relatively comfortable this new place was hot and arid, and a sweltering sun was beating down on him. Already Sorun hated it, and grew to dislike it more with each second as he picked the Emeralds up and then stood up to his full height to get a better sense of his surroundings.

He would have thought it was a forest were it not for the heat. Not a jungle, that was for sure. Not with how dry the air was. And the trees weren't as dense as he would expect a forest to be, the grass a bit too tall and less green. Across the way, past some rocks and trees, he spotted the beginnings of sand and tinges of blue to signify water. Somewhere close to a coast, then.

After examining his surroundings, Sorun tried to dig into his pocket, but found his hand full with a red and glowing gem. He made a displeased grunt and made a Bringer Claw to hold the gem, and then dug into his pocket to retrieve the note Tails had given him. His eyes traveled downwards, towards more barely-legible scrawl and a set of coordinates below that. His eyes darted above the note, back at the trees and nearby beach, and then looked back down at the note. He made a small nod, and then pocketed the note.

"Downunda. In another age, Australia. I still need to figure out how that joke carried past the apocalypse," Sorun thought to himself as he glanced around the area. *"Tails told me he and his family eventually moved here, so their house should be around here somewhere. Why he decided that is something I'll never know. This place was full of things that wanted to kill you before all the animals on the planet mutated from the gene bombs."*

He pushed through some of the brush and foliage to press forwards, dismissing the Bringer Claw so he could hold back onto the

Emeralds. He didn't need to search long to find the house, so apparently Tails' coordinates had been spot on. Homely little place on top of a small hill, big lawn in the back that lead to the forest while the front had a nice view of the beach and ocean from this angle. He didn't see it until he'd moved to the back of the home, but on the other side there was an extremely long, flat stretch of land, with a large shack nearby the house on that side. He didn't even need to look in there to know there was a plane in there.

Sorun maneuvered into the backyard. Nobody present, thankfully, so he assumed everyone was in the house. He knew Tails was at least there: there was something that looked like a garage door behind the house, and he heard the sounds of loud whirring and screeching metal from the other side, along with bright lights flashing from the underside of the door.

"Alright, here we go." Sorun leaned his shoulder onto the garage door and knocked on it with the red Emerald he had in his hand. "Tails!" he shouted out over the sound of metalworking on the other side of the door. When there was no response, he banged on the door a few more time, putting more strength on the hits, and shouted, "Tails, it's important! Open the door!"

The metalworking sounds ceased after a few seconds. There were small shuffling sounds and metal clinking, likely tools being put down. A few more seconds later the garage door began to open up, forcing Sorun to step away from it. Eventually the door opened up, fully revealing the Mobian on the other side.

For all intents and purposes, this Tails... well, he looked the exact same as the other adult Tails Sorun spoke with before committing to this time loop nonsense. He had an apron on, orange goggles over his eyes, and there were dark smudges of grease and oil in some spots on his fur, but otherwise the same. He looked incredibly confused, though.

"Er... hello?" Tails greeted, awkwardly. "Can I help you? Who are you?"

A short sigh left Sorun's nose. Tails, the other adult Tails, warned him of this. How in the original timeline he'd built some kind of room to protect his family from the timeline's alteration due to Sonic's meddling, and how when they appeared in this timeline their memories were spared, unlike everyone else. But this was an event that was a week away from happening, so until then this Tails was only working with one set of memories, those of this timeline. And Sorun never existed in this timeline.

And he had the job of convincing this Tails he was a time traveler who he himself sent back to the past. Somehow the adventure on the ARK was seeming easier and easier by the second.

"... Yeah, hi," Sorun swiftly greeted. "Can I come in?"

"... No?" Sorun did anyways, pushing past Tails and walking into the workshop. "H-hey!" he shouted, wheeling around towards Sorun as he entered the workshop.

"It's a nice setup you set up for yourself," Sorun noted. The workshop was about what he'd expect from a busybody like the Tails he knew. Tables stuffed to the brim with electronics, tools and metal parts to the point he couldn't see the table underneath. Toolboxes with various tools spilling out scattered everywhere, a computer bank with multiple monitors pressed up against the far wall. Machines of various sizes and shapes scattered around, none of which Sorun could even guess the function of.

The place was honestly a mess. Sorun would bet money Tails considered it to be the most organized workspace on the planet.

He sat down on a stool next to the most empty table he could find, which wasn't saying much. He set down the red Chaos Emerald on it, and then the blue one, and then turned to face Tails while laying Yamato in his lap. The fox had moved the goggles up to his forehead, revealing eyes that were puzzled and a slight bit angry as he approached Sorun. Then he saw the sword lying in his lap, and

then stopped completely. Confusion warped into caution, his body going unnaturally still as he looked up to Sorun's face.

Sorun found himself biting the inside of his cheek. He should have known approaching a stranger with a katana was a bad idea.

"I don't appreciate you barging in here without being invited," Tails began. His two tails swished through the air once in sync, almost in a threatening manner. "I appreciate it even less you brought a weapon into the same house my wife and kids live in."

"Admittedly that's on me, my bad," Sorun apologized. He tried sounding sincere, but it didn't get Tails to ease up at all. "I didn't come here to hurt anyone."

"Then why the sword?"

"'Cause I'm an idiot?" Sorun shook his head. "Because I need it. And look, gimme a break. It's Australia, and with how messed up this world is for all I know there's giant spiders skittering around."

The confusion returned to Tails' face. "... What's an Australia? And what do you mean giant spiders? You mean spider Mobians? Like Willy?"

Sorun did a double-take. "What?" he asked, mouth dry. *"Insect Mobians are a thing? Wait, fuck, Charmy was a bee. Bees are insects. OH GOD."*

"Yeah, Willy. He's the mail courier that brings mail to the house," Tails elaborated, not seeming to notice the light sheen of sweat that had appeared on Sorun's face. "Wait, why am I even- what are you doing in my house!?" Tails shouted out, startling Sorun and causing the idea of spider-people to leave his mind.

Wincing a bit, Sorun slowly pointed at Tails. "It's rude to shout," he admonished, though the heated look Tails was giving him didn't

dissipate in the slightest. Sorun sighed and decided to just go for it. "I'm from the future. And the past. It's complicated."

The hostility in Tails' face diminished a small amount. "The future?" he repeated, disbelieving. "Like time travel? That's impo-"

"Tails, I have been introduced to two methods of time travel in the last twenty-four hours alone. I have a sword that ignores the laws of reality. Do not stand there and tell me something's impossible, because I barely believe in that word anymore," Sorun said to him. "And if it's really impossible then how do I have these, huh?"

He nodded his head to the nearby Chaos Emeralds. Tails shifted his gaze towards them, and after a few seconds his eyes widened in recognition. Wonder spread over his face, and simultaneously his disbelief grew. He stepped up to the table, standing right next to Sorun as he picked up the red Emerald to examine it closely. He looked closer, and then made a sharp gasp and almost dropped the Emerald back on the table.

"I-I'd... have to run some tests to confirm, but... yeah, these seem genuine," he mumbled, putting the gem down with a shaky hand. He turned back to Sorun, and immediately his face turned back into looking angry. "Are you trying to get my family killed?"

That hadn't been the reaction he'd expected. "Huh?"

"Everybody knows King Shadow hoards artifacts like this! You, you what, did you steal these from him!? If he tracks these back here then-!"

"He's not gonna know to look here," Sorun promised Tails. "... I mean if you wanna get technical I did steal them from him," he added, and he saw Tails' nostrils flare out as he breathed heavily through them, "but that was twenty-five years ago. Time travel, remember? So chill out."

"Okay, say I believe you." Tails took a few steps back and crossed his arms. "I don't, but let's pretend I do. Why come to me of all people?"

"What do you mean you don't- agh, look!" Sorun dug into his pocket and brought the note out. He threw it at Tails, though, due to it being a piece of paper, it'd barely carried far enough to even reach Tails. His hand still snatched the note out of the air regardless, and slowly he began to read it over as Sorun continued speaking. "It's a note in your handwriting! Ain't that enough!?"

"... Okay, I'll admit this is suspiciously close to my handwriting. I even use the same kind of notepads," Tails slowly admitted as he set the note aside on the table. He still didn't look convinced. "But that alone doesn't-"

"Your name is Miles Prower," Sorun interrupted, causing Tails to snap his mouth closed. "Your nickname is Tails, you have a plane you like to mess around with and fly in, your wife is a mongoose named Mina, you have an uncle named Merlin, your father was named Amadeus and your mother was named-" Sorun cut himself off, and then cleared his throat. "Her name was, uh... MMM... Martha..."

"You mean Rosemary?" Tails asked, expression unamused and voice flat. "My mother? Rosemary?"

"Look, I never knew your mother," Sorun breathed out. "I'm from an alternate timeline where we were friends. Then I got... kinda shunted into an alternate future timeline where we never met."

"Ah-huh..." Well, he didn't look totally unconvinced now. Sorun figured that was somewhat of a good sign. "And you came here to, what, catch up with your pal from another timeline?"

"No, I'm here because I got roped into a time loop and if I don't do this it'll cause a time paradox that-"

"YOU'RE MESSING WITH TIME KNOWING YOU'RE RISKNG A TIME PARADOX!?" That scream was loud to the point Sorun had shuddered and began fingering the inside of one of his ears once again. He'd never heard the fox sound so vocal before in his life, except for maybe that time he'd scratched his plane when he tried to fly it. Sorun still maintained the mountain came from nowhere. "Why would you- what are you thinking!?" Tails began to pace around, more nervous than angry, as he continued to rattle off. "Time is such a fragile, fragile thing and the keystone to the zone's integrity, and if your method of time travel actually carries the risk of a time paradox-!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it, end of the world, life go poof, I heard it the first time you explained it to me when I pretended to listen," Sorun assured Tails, who wheeled back towards him with wide eyes. "It's fine-"

"It's not fine!" Tails yelled back. "Why are you time traveling with that kind of risk!?"

Sorun threw his arms up. "Well, it's not like I want to! We're gonna hit a time paradox and die if I *don't* do this," Sorun argued, making Tails calm down somewhat. "Considering I made it this far and we're not all dead yet I'd say I'm doing a pretty good job of it." Which was honestly surprising. Sorun fully expected to fail five minutes in, so the fact he made it this far to him was nothing short of a miracle.

"But do you realize how *stupid* this-!?"

"Yeah, Tails, it's stupid, I get it, but guess what not everyone is born a genius like you, so if you have a problem you're gonna have to take it up with the idiot that started this whole loop," Sorun snapped. "I'm just the idiot perpetuating it so we all don't, you know, evaporate into the ether."

At that, Tails deflated. He covered his mouth with his hand and muttered something into it, and then shook his head while combing his fingers through the tufts of hair on his head. "Okay. Okay, if it's

like you say then all we have to do is close this loop and everything should be fine." He looked back to Sorun. "So what does that entail?"

Sorun nodded. Finally, he could explain all this and get out. "Through methods I'm not entirely clear on you and your family will get memories of the timeline I'm from in a week, then you go off to Angel Island to talk to Knuckles- er, the chief enforcer guy- forget it, Knuckles, you'll remember, and the rest'll take off from there." He reached to the side and pushed the two Emeralds closer to Tails. "You'll find me, but it won't be *me* me, past me, future me, don't know which term is appropriate, doesn't matter, just... when the time is right, give him these, he'll know what to do with them. And after everything has calmed down and nobody's in danger you need to do three things." He rose one finger up and stared Tails in the eyes. "A, you need to tell that Sorun all this. Tell him the Yamato can go back to the past by separating the distance from two points in time. He's gonna deny it, just tell him it works." He rose a second finger. "B, he needs to go to Space Colony ARK and stop Shadow from blowing the planet up by stealing two of the Chaos Emeralds from the doomsday weapon, from twenty-five years ago. It needs to specifically be the red and blue Emeralds for some reason. You'll remember how to do that when the memories hit you in a week." A third finger. "C, after that he needs to go forwards to the week before you get your memories and explain everything I just explained to you and give you the Emeralds." He dropped his hand.

Surprisingly, Tails had nodded along to the entire explanation, looking like he somehow managed to comprehend it all. "Alright, so assuming that everything you just said is actually the truth... That's it?" he asked, making Sorun let out a bemused scoff that he'd understood all that. There was still a veneer of caution over his face, some skepticism. He honestly couldn't blame him, but he wasn't outright refuting any of what Sorun said. Probably as good as Sorun would get, which was his cue to leave.

Rising from the stool, Sorun gave the Mobian a nod. "That's it," he confirmed. "Believe me, don't believe me, won't matter in a week when the memories hit you. I'll leave the Emeralds with you in the meantime. If everything plays out the exact same as what I just went through it should work out." He rose Yamato up and rested it on his shoulder. "So, uh... yeah. That's all I got. I'm gonna dip out now before your mailman comes around, because... well, I'm just never gonna sleep again if I see that."

He slowly walked past Tails, heading towards the exit to the garage. The fox didn't stop him, didn't even speak up as the human stepped around him and left the room. All he could do was continue staring at the two Emeralds sitting on the table with a troubled expression, sighing deeply as he held a hand over his mouth in thought.

A few seconds later Sorun peeked his head back into the garage.

"Hey, man, uh, you got any food in the house? I haven't eaten in forever."

The sound of his footsteps as he departed Tails' house was hardly heard as his feet thumped down on the soft ground. His left hand held Yamato, still rested on his shoulder. His right hand was holding a sandwich Tails had been kind enough to give Sorun. This Tails was at least generous enough, even if he didn't know Sorun. More of that Mobian kindness.

He wasn't so sure if the other adult Tails that saw him cut King Shadow's head off would be so accommodating.

Sorun still didn't know how he was supposed to play that. By all rights he was done closing the time loop: all the conditions were met and all he had to do was return back to the future after he'd gone back and everything should be golden. That was all fine. It was after that, having to deal with the after effects of his actions, he wasn't sure on. Frankly he didn't want to deal with it at all and just ignore everyone.

Problems for later. Potentially minutes from now, but before then he actually had to get there. He stopped once Tails' house was out of sight, near the same patch of forest he'd arrived in where the beach was visible, and then held up the sandwich to his face. He moved it to his mouth, but then stopped when he smelled a peculiar scent. He looked closer at it and saw a white substance on the inside, sandwiched between all the other ingredients.

"Fuckin' mayo." His nose wrinkling in disgust, Sorun threw the sandwich as far as he could into the woods so he wouldn't be offended by its sight anymore. His stomach rumbled in protest, though he did his best to ignore it as he gripped Yamato's handle and pulled it from the sheath. "Alright, one last time."

There wasn't a particular date Sorun had in mind. Just some point after he went back in the future. Preferably a long bit after, if only to just give everyone some time to cool off and settle with the fact he'd killed someone. Surprisingly he wasn't having nearly as much difficulty cutting this time portal open - he was able to cut it with relative ease and didn't have to put his all into having to use the sword to crowbar it open. Best guess Sorun had was that going into the future was far easier than going backwards. That or he was just getting better at this, but he doubted it.

Even falling through it proved to be an easier time. It was still Sorun tumbling through a dark space of blue lights, but it wasn't too disorienting by comparison to going backwards. He even managed to land on his feet when the portal spat him out into what was visually identical to the location he'd just left. But when Sorun looked up as the portal closed, he'd noted the sun was in a different position. A bit past afternoon. Or morning. He didn't know which direction he was facing.

A long sigh left Sorun. He turned towards the nearest tree he could find, trudged towards it, and turned around just as his back fell against it. Another sigh left him as he slid down into a sitting position, pulling his knees up to his chest as he sheathed the katana.

As far as closing a time loop to prevent total annihilation went, it was a lot simpler than Sorun thought it'd be. And somehow even more exhausting than he anticipated. He was swearing this time travel stuff off once everything went back to normal, because nothing was worth this amount of stress.

Normal.

Sorun's head picked up from his knees. His eyes were tired, his face ashen and gaunt as he thumped the back of his head against the tree bark. *"The fuck even is normal anymore?"* he wondered to himself. The word sounded wrong, like it wasn't applicable. *"Once again the world's saved. Woo-hoo. Now what am I supposed to do?"*

He still didn't want to stay here. In this altered timeline. He wanted to go back to the normal one and just do away with this one entirely, maybe try and go back to having some semblance of normality to his life like he'd had before. Away from all this. But Tails had still maintained that was impossible and they were stuck here.

The weight in Sorun's left had was too heavy not for him to notice. It wasn't the physical weight that was on his mind as he lifted Yamato up for him to see. Time travel - he wouldn't have thought it was possible until he'd done it a few times. Now it wasn't even a concept anymore, but an avenue. An avenue that Sorun was quickly growing to hate because of all the trouble it had caused him. Ripped the memory of him away from all his friends, altered their lives, threw him twenty-five years ahead of where he was, undid all his actions...

Unconsciously he'd gripped Yamato tighter than normal, but then stopped. A few seconds passed of him just staring at the sword, thoughts swirling through his head. He pulled the sword out halfway, just so he could see the shining surface of the blade.

"Time travel got me into this situation," Sorun murmured to the sword. "Gotta wonder... could it get me out?"

There was a faint shimmer along the blade. The reflections he saw were swapped out with images of black-blue flesh and numerable blue eyes staring back at Sorun from within the sword. He stared at them for a bit, cocking his head to the side in curiosity.

He still didn't know what the deal with the eyes were. He had an idea, and it unsettled him how familiar the sight was. Better maybe to just ignore it.

The blade was fully pulled from the scabbard. He experimentally held it in front of him, thinking of a destination. Back in time, twenty-five years. He stabbed forwards, but immediately frowned when the blade sunk into the empty space in front of him.

It was stabbing into the past, yes, but not the *right* past. Just this timeline's past. He pulled the sword out, the frown deepening as he stared at the sword. *"The power of separation. Time and space, reality itself. Concepts. The simple* idea *of separation."* A beat passed. *"Could that work?"*

Another idea was formed by Sorun. Something for him to focus on - a new target for the sword. Crazy, maybe, but that was his life now. He focused deep on the new idea and stabbed forwards.

A different reaction. Blue sparks flew out as the tip of the sword bounced on an invisible surface in the air in front of him. Sorun's eyes widened, his heart rate quickening as he tried stabbing forwards again.

No good. No matter how much force he put into it the blade wouldn't pierce. Even focusing more energy into the sword, enough that the whole blade glowed blue, wasn't cutting it. But there was *resistance* to his efforts. Something tangible that his sword scraped uselessly against. Proof that this idea might actually be feasible, that there was a path forwards.

"But not even you can do it, huh?" Sorun muttered to the sword. "If you don't have the power to do it..."

Sorun shook his head, and then sheathed the sword. Maybe he was rushing into things, messing around with forces he didn't have a clue about. He wasn't even sure if this idea really would work.

A second opinion was needed, one who knew a lot more about this than Sorun did. Fortunately just the expert lived nearby, assuming he was home right now.

Chapter 83

Recursion Error

Episode 83- F!#k the future

Sorun hadn't known what to expect. Really. Walked up to the house with zero expectations whatsoever. How Tails would react, how the family would react. Tails would probably be upset. Mina, he didn't know, the two of them barely ever spoke, it'd been twenty-five years, and Tails probably told her about him. The kids he was blank on. Really he was ready for anything.

Being ushered into the house with a warm smile somehow still managed to surprise Sorun. It was a pleasant one, granted, but still unexpected. He was still in a bit of a stupor when he'd been sat down in one of the most bog-standard living rooms he'd ever been inside of in his entire life, sitting down on a couch while being handed a sandwich. He hadn't even asked for one was the thing, not after what happened last time. He was just being offered one out of courtesy.

The hunger made it so he couldn't refuse, so he'd at least gone through and requested under no circumstances was so much as a molecule of mayonnaise to touch it.

"... Thanks," Sorun said, a bit awkwardly as he took the piece of food. He was sitting on the couch, so the Mobian woman standing next to him stood taller. Of all the future versions of Mobians he'd seen Mina had probably visually aged the least out of all of them, Shadow aside. There was still visible aging, mostly in the eyes, her demeanor, but then again he hardly knew her so he didn't even know if that was due to age.

She offered him a tentative smile, brushing locks of purple hair so it spilled over her shoulder. "It's no problem," she assured him. "It's just nice having someone visit from the... you know, the before time. It's been so long now that the kids have finally calmed down from it, so..." She trailed off, smile falling a bit when she saw Sorun was staring up at her blankly. She tried picking her smile back up. "It's just nice. Seeing you again. I know I can't really complain since you must be dealing with a lot more than a sudden case of double-memories, but if you need someone to talk to my husband and I are here."

They weren't friends. Sorun knew that, Mina would probably disagree despite the fact they'd barely ever known each other, but Mobians would be Mobians. Even if he wasn't committed to his plan Sorun still wouldn't take her up on that offer because he was Sorun, so he didn't so much as give her an acknowledging blink. He instead turned his head around, towards the open entranceway that separate the living room they were in and into the kitchen. He saw two small, yellow forms dart passed. Mina caught him staring and saw the two children.

"Er, sorry. Need to be a mom for a bit." She began stepping towards the kitchen. "I-I'll go get Tails when I get a chance."

Sorun watched her go off, silently. Saw Mina disappear around the corner, and then silently turned back forwards, blinking once as he looked down at the sandwich. He took a bite.

... Halfway decent.

By the time he'd finished the sandwich to calm the hunger pains he felt Tails had entered his vision. He made a small sigh, sitting down in the couch opposite of Sorun so they faced each other. His hands were clasped together, features tight and wound as he looked up into Sorun's eyes. The human kept his face blank.

"What took you so long?" Tails asked. "How long did it take you to close the loop?"

The question caught Sorun a bit off guard. He had to think a bit for the answer. "Like an hour? Hour and ten minutes?" he guessed.

"Okay, and you finished it? It's done?"

"I don't think we'd be here talking about it if I didn't finish it," Sorun answered. "Yeah. It's done. Loop's closed."

That seemed to be the answer Tails was looking for. Relief washed over his face as his entire body relaxed, sinking further into the couch as he let his arms flop to his side. Sorun blinked a couple of times as he stared at the fox, neutral expression discarded in place of some confusion on his face, and Tails offered the barest smiles and shook his head.

"Sorry, it's just... I've been wound up over that ever since you left," he apologized, sitting up straighter. "Waking up every day wondering if I was gonna look out the window and see the entire world disappear because of a time paradox. Thanks for everything, Sorun. I know it likely wasn't easy."

It'd been shockingly easy for Sorun to bend someone into a living pretzel. He didn't know what he felt on that. "It's fine." Sorun couldn't even tell if he'd said a lie. "How long was I gone that you're reacting like this?"

"You left for the past five months ago after we finished talking."

Sorun's lips thinned a bit. He'd gone a bit more forwards than he'd liked. "Time traveling's a new skill for me." Truth concealing a lie. It felt like he didn't even have to think of it anymore. "That's not gonna affect the loop, is it?"

Tails shook his head. "No, as long as you set up events so that the next Sorun in the loop can do the exact same thing you did to preserve the loop infinitely and you went back forwards to a point in time *after* you went back to close the loop, we should be good. You said it yourself: the fact we're still talking confirms it. We're set."

"Oh. Okay. Alright." Sorun still didn't know what his feelings were regarding the loop. How he'd condemned some past version of himself to repeat the same thing he'd done, only for them to do the same thing to another past Sorun. An infinite chain of repeating events. He tried likening it to how there was a Sorun a second in the past, who was sit still for a second until he was in the present, so now there was another second-in-the-past Sorun. Or something similar.

Time. The loop itself and the implication of infinitely repeating events was irrelevant since time flowed ever onwards. So it didn't much matter as long as time and the universe remained intact. He'd move on, they'd move on, everything would infinitely move on because time was time. The point was he fixed things so it wasn't something Sorun had to worry about.

Except now he was fixing to break everything he'd just saved.

"Um, I'm sorry." Sorun's attention was focused back on Tails. He was giving the human an apologetic look, which he found surprising. "I know this must be really hectic for you, how your life went from being in this one place to another, how everything's different. The future, the alternate timeline, all that."

"Mm. Wouldn't be the first time," Sorun commented, making Tails pause. "You would know since you were there for it the first time. Even facilitated in it. Made the portal, dragged me through." A long, uncomfortable silence stretched. "But that's in the past," Sorun finished, the response allowing Tails to breath again.

"Whew, yeah, uh... mmmmHM." He coughed into his fist to clear his throat. "Again, I'm sorry. I know you must be going through a lot."

"You didn't sound very apologetic after what happened at the castle," Sorun pointed out. "There's children present in the house so I won't get into specifics but you know what I mean." How he killed someone.

"Yeah, about that." Tails cleared his throat again, suddenly looking a bit more uncomfortable. "Look, I get tensions were fairly high, and you were probably dealing with a lot at the time. Your nerves were frayed, you were still coming down from fighting Enerjak and getting sent here, and I get even before that you'd been through, well... more than someone could be reasonably expected to handle. But it's been a while, and now that Sonic's the king again he's been fixing a lot of the things King Shadow twisted, so..." He fidgeted under Sorun's empty glare. "Yeah. Everything's going back to normal. I still don't agree at all with what you did, but everything worked out in the end."

Was it just denial? Tails claiming Sorun was in so much mental disarray at the time his judgement had been that skewed? Hell, he was probably right if that was the case; Sorun didn't know. Or had so much time passed it was all a distant memory and he found forgiveness in his heart? Because they were friends? Because everything was fine - *everything was not fine* - now they could just drop it? Sorun didn't even know if he should feel relieved or spiteful.

"Uh. Okay." It took some moments for Sorun to articulate sentences in light of Tails' words. "It's been difficult, wrapping my head around it all, how things are just *gone* and replaced by other things, memories, events." His eyes darted towards a nearby window. "It's like I don't even exist in this world. I didn't."

"I know. I know it's rough." The tight smile Tails wore dropped, his eyes turning sympathetic. "I know you put a lot of yourself into getting a new life on Mobius-"

"Yeah, Tails, I did," Sorun interrupted. Frustration, the first actual emotion he'd shown since entering the house after being greeted by Mina, creeped into his tone. "I had my life shattered into a million pieces and just when I finally start fixing things everything I had, everything I ever did, it just gets erased? Again? Like Earth? I worked my a-" He paused abruptly, and then turned towards the kitchen entrance. A yellow-furred head darted out of the doorway from where blue eyes had been peeking at Sorun. He turned back

towards Tails. "I worked really hard," he reiterated. "Fixing everything. Fixing *myself* . It's all gone now. *Again* . What about that sounds okay to you?"

Tails' ears fell a bit. "I know, Sorun. It's awful," he admitted to him. "Sonic was kind of going through the same thing, but things have gone stable for him. If things were different I'd come up with some way to fix the timeline, maybe try and emulate Robotnik's time machine and make my own to make things the way they used to be, but it's just too big a risk. When Sonic did it the timeline almost tore itself apart and in the process of fixing itself we were left with an alternate history. We only risk making things even worse by pushing it further, or even worse just destroying time, and by extension, the entire zone." Tails shook his head. "No. I know it's not ideal, but this is what we have." The corners of his mouth turned a bit upwards. He had the gall to look hopeful. "And hey, things aren't so bad now, are they? Sonic's back in the throne, things are going back to normal, and now we can all just pick up where we left off. All things considered we could be in way worse shape."

"That's easy for you to say, Tails. You got to keep your family."

"... Sorun, it's not like anyone outside of our group even remembers that timeline," Tails reminded him. "I'm not gonna lie and say I don't have it the easiest, but regardless there's nothing to be done about it."

"Yeah. I know. I'm gonna go ahead and change everything back anyways."

The first reaction Tails had was confusion. Incredulity, a raise of one of his furred eye ridges as he examined Sorun and the completely straight face he was making. Interestingly the first thing that came out of his mouth was a small, nervous chuckle followed by the odd look Tails gave Sorun.

"Sorun, um... I get you're upset, but really, you need to let it go. You can't go back to that timeline. None of us can," Tails said to him,

slowly, like he was explaining this to a child. Sorun began wondering if Tails was thinking he just didn't understand. "I'm not telling you this to be mean, I'm telling you this because it's literally impossible."

For the first time since Sorun entered the house he looked to the left, at his left hand that continued to clench its fingers around Yamato. He rose it up a bit for Tails to see, and then turned his head to him, saying, "Nah. I got this, remember?"

Tails shook his head, and the nervous grin widened. "Sorun, I don't think you're getting this. It's not like the timeline we're on got tacked onto the original timeline or something like that. It was overwritten with this one, supplanted. It's gone. The only past you can travel back to is *this* timeline's past."

Sorun made a noncommittal hum of acknowledgement.

A few moments of Sorun silently staring at Tails found the fox's grin lowering somewhat. "Hey," he said, reaching a hand forwards, "why don't you just hand me that-"

The blue ribbon on the sword's scabbard reached up to wrap around Sorun's wrist. The movements were quick enough to wrap around the wrist in a blink, but the way they curled around the appendage was slow, almost protective. Sorun watched it without any change in his expression while Tails had yanked his arm back in shock.

"I'm fine," Sorun told Tails, still looking down at the sword. "Don't look so alarmed. It's only semi-sentient, no will of its own. Just enough to do what I want it to. Technically all Devil Arms are alive since they're made with still-living souls, but Yamato is special in that it was only made from a third of a soul. And even if it's just an artificial recreation the rules still apply it seems."

"I-I don't understand," Tails stammered out, eyes still staring straight at the sword. "A Devil... Arm? Sorun, you're not making any sens-"

"You know the weird thing about Chaos Emeralds and how they interact with me is I can make *anything* from that piece of fiction," Sorun continued, more to himself, like he wasn't even talking to Tails who listened on. "Weapons, powers, maybe even certain demons if I really tried. 'Cept Devil Trigger. Still haven't cracked that one," he added bitterly. "I thought about making the Beastheads, at the least maybe the statue form, since it has the ability to teleport people to alternate timelines and I could just use that, but that thing eats human souls and I'm not sure I could actually control it. Too unreliable, too dangerous. Never gonna be an option.

"But that's unnecessary anyways. I experimented around with Yamato, and I found a way. A way to go back."

"Sorun, you're talking crazy." Tails had straightened up, face turned into a deep frown as his eyes went from the sword to Sorun, who met eyes with the fox. "I don't know what all the talk about monsters is, but there is. No. Way. Back. It's impossible."

It took some seconds for Sorun to respond. He'd leaned forwards on the couch to get closer to Tails, clasping his hands together with the Yamato between his fingers. His eyes didn't leave Tails'. "The Yamato's power is to separate," Sorun intoned. "I don't think you're appreciating what that actually means, Tails. How broad that description is. The depth of it."

"I'm not seeing a lot of depth in a sword that can cut through anything, Sorun."

"I think I see the problem. You're a genius, Tails, no one can deny that. But all that knowledge of yours sits with practical things. Machines, science, math. But the esoteric nonsense around these powers is where I shine because of all the fiction I've consumed in the past. Mobius just doesn't have the same media," Sorun told him. "What you're failing to grasp is that the sword's power to 'cut through anything' is a singular function under its separation power. The limit of separation is limited to my perspective of how that singular word can apply to something. I think the fact it's a Chaos Emerald is to

blame for that." He tiled his hands a bit so that the end of the sword's handle pointed at Tails. "For example. If I stabbed you with the Yamato, I could use it to separate you from your ability to speak. I'm not saying that like it'd take your vocal cords or carve your speaking knowledge out of your brain or something like that; the idea, the simple *concept* of speaking, would be taken from you. Even if you were physically able to speak, and had full knowledge of speaking, you wouldn't be able to ever talk again. Because the Yamato separated out your ability to talk from you.

"Or I could separate other things. Separate out your intelligence, rob you of your genius status. Take certain memories away. Memories of your children, your family, but leave the intelligence. Separate out your inhibitions so you couldn't say no. I could wipe away your entire personality and lobotomize you into being a little genius slave. That's pretty gross, huh?"

There was a ruffling sound as Tails' fingers squeezed down on the couch cushions, the gloves he wore making a slight squeaking noise. Tails' eyes were alert, focused solely on Sorun with his ears straightened up. The rest of his body, even his tails, was still, and there was no hiding the tenseness in his entire body. Sorun himself remained calm, though a small, almost teasing smile did play across his lips.

"Tails, relax. I'm just kidding around. I'd never do that. What do I look like, Robotnik?" he asked him. "I'm just giving examples to help explain away Yamato."

The Mobian relaxed, albeit only slightly. He maintained his glare into Sorun's eyes, and his gloved hands didn't stop squeezing the cushions. "Examples. Right," Tails muttered out. "You had to make them so creepy?"

"Just trying to get the idea of separating ideas across."

"Well *I get it* . What does this have to do with anything?" Tails quietly snapped out.

"Hmm..." Sorun's eyes dipped down to the Yamato. "You know I tried going back there using the Yamato already? Didn't work because you're right: there's only this one timeline. But you need to realize that, at one point, our old timeline *did* exist. A timeline that isn't this timeline. Two separate things. Regardless if it isn't here or not, it at one point did, and because of that there's an idea that the two timelines are mutually exclusive from one another." His fingers tapped on the sword's scabbard. "I can use the Yamato to get back there. Just like how I use it to cut through space to make portals, or cut through time to time travel."

He could see gears turning in Tails' head as he processed Sorun's own words. The implication behind them, Sorun's meaning. There were periods where he would shift slightly in his seat as he intensely thoughts, eyes widening and narrowing in brief interims along with slight mumbles escaping his lips. The only thing that remained constant was the fox's breathing steadily increasing.

After a bit, Tails shook his head. "No, that doesn't make sense. You shouldn't be able-"

"I think," Sorun interrupted, "it might have something to do with the fact that the Chaos Emeralds, Chaos energy as a whole, is immune to time. Time just doesn't touch it. The only reason I'm even here and didn't get erased is because I was inside the Master Emerald and it shielded me. If you really think about it all the Emeralds here aren't just identical duplicates. The containers, sure, but the energy within? It's the same from our timeline. Combine that with the Yamato's separation ability, maybe even entertain the idea that, since the Emeralds' energies are originally from our time, there's a tangible link back there through them. With how insane all this Chaos stuff can get is it really that hard for you to believe, Tails?"

Tails shook his head. Roughly and quickly. Almost in denial, which had Sorun sit up straighter. "Even if you could, even if all of what you just said is right, a single Chaos Emerald wouldn't have the power-"

"Yeah, I know, when I tried it couldn't do it. Yamato doesn't have the power," Sorun finished. "So what you're saying is I just need more power and I could do it?"

The question didn't cause much reaction out of Tails at first. He seemed to think it over, and then something dawned on the Mobian. He sat back against the couch, eyes opening as wide as they could as he stared at Sorun. There was hurt in his expression, betrayal.

"Did..." Tails began, voice sounding hoarse, "did... you come all the here to my house just to ask me that? You didn't come just to visit me?"

Sorun gave the fox a confused look. "Why would I want to visit you? We're not friends. You're not Tails. You're just a stranger with his name and face."

Tails recoiled like he'd been struck. There was pain in his eyes, some anger as well, but mainly pain. "Sorun, that's not true, that's... how could you say that-?"

"You think the Master Emerald would work?" Once again Sorun interrupted Tails, carrying on like he hadn't said anything offending with a bored expression. "I could try using it as a means of amplifying my powers, stab Yamato into it, use the sword as a power conduit. I have enough control to do something like that now."

He could see Tails stiffen, some things like his ears and tails twitch. A moment where, even unconsciously, Tails had considered Sorun's theory, and then reacted in some way. Realization? It had to be, from the way Tails' visual nervousness just increased. Like Sorun had just said something concerning.

"So it *is* the key. Yamato can do it. I just need more power from the Master Emerald."

"Sorun, what are you hoping to accomplish with this?" Tails' voice had gone lower, his expression becoming startlingly calm.

Something like acceptance passed over him before he fixed Sorun with a cold look. "Even if you manage to temporarily boost the sword's power, and even if you manage to cut your way into the past timeline, what do you plan on doing about it?" he asked. "Are you forgetting about the time anomaly that almost tore the zone apart? The *reason* Sonic ended up inadvertently altering the timeline in the first place? If you try to stop that alteration from happening we'll all die."

In a nonchalant gesture that seemed to frustrate Tails further, Sorun shrugged. "I'll separate the time anomaly from the zone with Yamato," he suggested. "I have no idea where it'll end up if I do that, though. Throw it in the space between worlds, maybe. It's a time anomaly, so for all we know if we remove it from the timeline it was affecting that alone will be enough to neutralize it completely."

"You don't *know that* , though."

"Does it even matter?" Sorun asked. "Why are you being so aggressive about this? I thought you'd be on board with me. I'm trying to fix the world."

"The world's as fixed as it's going to be!"

"No, it *isn't* ." For the first time since entering the house sparks of anger began to appear on Sorun's face. He himself was beginning to feel frustration, at Tails, at the stance he was taking. "This isn't okay. None of this is okay. I promised Sonic I would make everything normal again, and I can do that." He shook his head, looking confused when he asked Tails, "Why are you so against this when I can make everything normal? Things can go back to how they were, everything-"

"Because you don't know what you're doing!" Tails exploded, rising out of his seat in a standing position. "You don't know the consequences of opening a portal that bypasses so many laws of time and space you'll be connecting to a timeline that doesn't exist anymore! You don't know if you can dispose of the time anomaly with

the sword! You'll have to go back in time to before Sonic changed the timeline, you realize that, don't you, Sorun? You know you'll be changing the timeline, and the consequences could mean destruction of the whole zone!" He collapsed back onto the couch, sighing while shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Sorun. Yes, I'll admit that Chaos energy... well, it can do anything, so if you're right about the sword then theoretically, yes, you could do all this. But it would possibly mean disaster. You *can't* , Sorun."

It made Sorun wonder what Tails was playing at. Confirming to Sorun that he probably could do what he was proposing and trying to dissuade him. Why? Because Sorun would just try anyway? Was he trying to lead him with the truth and convince him not to commit because it could mean death for the whole universe? Trying to be transparent with Sorun to have the best chance of convincing him? He'd like to think it, but Sorun very much doubted that, even at a subconscious level, Tails was trying to subtly nudge Sorun towards trying it. Not when he looked this afraid. Not with his family to consider.

Whatever Tails' reasoning was wouldn't matter, though. Sorun had already made his mind up on this.

"I'm still going to do it," Sorun said. "I didn't come here to ask permission. I'm doing it regardless of what you say."

"Sorun, I am *begging you* to listen to me," Tails pleaded. "I know you think you can fix everything, but you can't, you really can't. I know this hasn't been the easiest time for you, I know it's almost never an easy time with you, but just because things are bad now doesn't mean we can't help you-!"

The sharp glare Sorun sent Tails cut him off immediately. He'd heard enough to know Tails stance - how he'd gone from appealing to Sorun to bargaining. He wouldn't budge from his opinion on matters and Sorun was done trying to convince him. All he had to wonder was what Tails would move on to. Would he just accept Sorun had made up his mind and let him be? Threaten him? Sorun only saw it

going one of two ways forwards, but he couldn't figure out which direction Tails would lean in.

It didn't matter. He wouldn't let him stop him even if he did try. Best he could do was wish Sorun luck, but the human felt that was him being wishful.

"Tails. My mind's made up," Sorun said, with an air of finality in his voice. "I'll use the Master Emerald in conjunction with the Yamato to open a way back to the true timeline. I'll use the Yamato to get rid of the time anomaly, and things can go back to normal."

"Or you cause the complete destruction of the entire zone with how much you're messing with time." Tails' expression was hard.

"At this point I'm completely fine with that. Either I make everything normal again so I can go back to sleeping in my bed, or I die in the process and get to sleep forever. Whatever the case I absolutely *refuse* to spend another second longer in this place than I have to."

Tails' teeth grit in anger. "If you think for even a second I'm going to allow you to endanger-"

Whatever he was going to say was interrupted when a figure darted into the room. Small, Sorun had noted. A child. A fox that bore a striking resemblance to Tails. He made the conclusion that he was one of Tails' children when he ran up to Tails and hugged him while he was still sitting on the couch.

The older fox was caught off guard by the sudden contact, anger vanishing off his face while being replaced by a softer, albeit it confused, look. Sorun, meanwhile, simply watched the pair in silence.

"U-uh... hey, Skye," Tails mumbled out, reaching up to rub the top of the kid's head. Slowly, tenderly. "What's going on?"

The child hugged him harder. "Daddy sounded mad," he spoke, quietly.

The answer almost seemed to startle Tails. "I'm not mad at anything," he said, gripping Skye's shoulders to pull him away. "Just, um, having a small argument with my friend."

"Mm." The smaller fox turned around towards Sorun. He looked up at him, less afraid and more curious as he gazed at the human's face.

On a dime, Sorun's expression had changed entirely. From a apathetic mask hiding the smoldering frustration and anger he felt to a kind face holding the smallest of smiles, eyes completely free of malice. "Hey, champ," Sorun greeted in a light tone, reaching with his right hand to pat him on the head. "Just talking with your dad. Nothing serious," he lied.

Skye had responded by giving Sorun the same treatment he'd given his father and hugged him, close enough to bury his face in his torso.

In response, Sorun made a small chuckle. "Well, you're real friendly, aren't you?" He continued to gently ruffle Skye's hair through the hug. At the same time he looked back at Tails' face, and in a seamless transition Sorun's expression morphed back into the fusion of apathy and anger he'd had with Tails. He lifted his left hand up, showing off Yamato in plain view of Tails.

The thumb on his left hand pushed on the sword's guard and broke the seal on the scabbard, showing off a bit of the sword's blade. Tails completely froze at the sight.

"You're honestly the luckiest kid in the world to have a dad as caring as your father." Though Sorun's tone sounded kind, the face that betrayed his animosity towards Tails remained. "Really, he seems like the kind of guy that'd do everything he could to protect his family. He's a good man."

"Mhm." Skye nodded into Sorun's chest.

"Yeah, he and I go way back. Such a dependable guy you could always count on to have your back. You must love him a lot."

The compliments were doing nothing to sooth Tails. He was starting to shake with fury.

Once again, Skye nodded. "Mhm."

Sorun's thumb pushed down on the sword's guard to put the blade back in the scabbard. "Well, sounds to me like you're the luckiest person in the world to have a dad like him." When Skye pulled away from Sorun, his face morphed back into the kind one with the slight smile. He gave the child one more pet on the head. "You seem nice, but this is grown-up talk your old man and I are having, okay? Maybe go play with your sister. What was her name again?"

"Melody."

Sorun's eyes darted up to Tails'. "Melody, huh?"

"Skye. Please leave us alone." There was little to no emotion in Tails' voice when he spoke, and it sounded like he was struggling to say the words. Skye didn't seem to pick up in his shift in demeanor, and happily skipped away back towards the kitchen he came out of. Sorun watched him go, then looked back at Tails.

"Cute kid. Kinda shy-looking," he commented. His eyes lost their kindness, and the smile fell. "What?"

"Get out of my house."

"Tails-"

"Get out," Tails growled out, "and never, *ever* come back, Sorun. Do you hear me?"

"Fine." Shrugging in agreement, Sorun stood up off the couch. "Not like it'll be that hard since this version of your home isn't likely to make it past the hour anyways. I'm heading right to the castle."

He turned around to leave. Tails had spoke out and stopped Sorun before his right hand even managed to reach out towards his sword. "You know, I thought I knew you. I really did. I had to wonder if I really did after what you did to King Shadow, and I managed to convince myself that you were just under a lot of stress." Something appeared underneath all the anger his voice, almost akin to sadness, and when Sorun didn't respond Tails continued. "But threatening my *children* , Sorun? Were you just bluffing around with the sword hoping I'd drop the matter or were you actually serious?"

Sorun didn't have an answer to the question. Truthfully he didn't even know what the answer was. "I just want to go home, Tails," he said, looking over his shoulder at the Mobian glaring at him. "That's all I want."

"And you're willing to go this far to do it? Threatening my family?"

"If you're gonna make a problem of it. Maybe it'd give you perspective," Sorun responded. "I'm going to the true timeline, and I'm not going to let anyone stand in my way. And I'm surely not gonna let you ruin my life again."

By now Tails nearly looked like he was snarling. "I *saved* you!"

Sorun tore the sword out of its sheath. Despite his demeanor, Tails still flinched. "That wasn't the context back then. It was a byproduct. Don't act like you did something noble. You didn't." He slashed a cross into the air, and seconds later it folded inwards into a portal. "Just please do us both a favor and don't try to stop me. Don't call anyone, don't do anything. It'll all go easier if you just let me do this."

Tails shook his head. "You know I can't."

A deep frown settled on Sorun's face. He thought of saying something, but then decided against it and shook his head. "Whatever. It doesn't matter."

He stepped through the portal without another word.

He was acutely aware that he should have gone straight to the Master Emerald the second he stepped out of the portal and closed it. Less risk of outside interference. Sorun *wanted* to, but a lot of Tails' words stayed with him that he couldn't help but mentally go over as he slowly re-sheathed the katana.

In a way, he was right in that Sorun didn't have a full grasp on what he was doing. A lot of it was guesswork and assumptions, though, granted, he was in the best position out of anyone to make accurate educated guesses when it came to the Yamato and its powers. Ironically he was the best judge of the situation despite not being as knowledgeable of time compared to someone like Tails, who was good enough to jury-rig a time-immunity room to protect himself and his family on short notice.

But Yamato let him circumvent the lack of understanding due to the broad nature of its power and its ability to just bulldoze its way through the rules due to the nature of Chaos energy. He just needed more. But there was that risk Tails droned on about, how Sorun might end up breaking the entire universe in trying to fix it. To be fair there was truth in his words, but Sorun had been honest when he said he was at the point where he didn't really care. In the best of all worlds he'd succeed and go back home to the others, but failing that he'd rather die than stay here.

It was still causing him to hesitate, though. Because of what Tails said. Funnily enough the prospect of dying still held weight over him despite the amount of times he'd brushed so closely to death. He didn't know whether to be grateful over the fact that was one thing that wasn't desensitized about him yet, that there was at least that bit

of humanity left in him, or to be annoyed on how it was making him hesitate with this.

So with all that in mind he'd portaled into the castle he'd been loathing such a short while ago, in one of the halls. Somewhere below him was dungeon full of weapons and other things he didn't really want to know about, as well as the Master Emerald. Really he didn't even need to take the stairs down there; he could just make a portal direct. And it still irked him that he should do that but wasn't.

"Not yet. In a bit. Just need to clear my head first."

To that end he began to idly wander the castle halls. Less because he wanted to and more because, quite frankly, he didn't really have anywhere else better to go in this world. It was daytime now, from all the windows he was passing while roaming the halls. Bright and sunny, a stark contrast to when Sorun first appeared here. Almost bright enough to hurt his eyes, to the point he found himself shying away from being too close to the windows.

He noticed there were some changes, at least aesthetically. Not evil paintings hanging on the wall, no reliefs of angel girls. Sorun still didn't know what her deal had been. From everything King Shadow had said he managed to piece enough together to assume she was someone he'd been close to that died, but he decided not to think any further on it than that out of respect for the real Shadow. Without all the distasteful decorations, the castle interior was admittedly... tolerable, in a way. The only thing keeping Sorun from saying it was "nice" were the memories he held of the place.

He wouldn't be shedding any tears once it was gone.

"What the- hey! Hey, Sorun!"

At hearing his name, Sorun had stopped, then he made a small groan when he recognized the voice. More out of annoyance than displeasure. He didn't even get to turn around fully before he heard a

rapid set of footsteps, followed by a blue body standing right in front of him when Sorun finished turning.

"..." Sorun's eyes directly went to the top of Sonic's head. He was wearing a crown - there was some relief when he saw it was a different crown from the one King Shadow had worn. Even so Sorun still had to resist the unconscious urge to smack it off of Sonic's head, and instead looked down a bit to meet his eyes. "Hey," he stiffly greeted.

"Uh, yeah, hi." A few moments passed, each more awkward than the last. From the uncomfortable look Sonic had on he had just about as many words to say as Sorun did. So it couldn't have been that many. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "I, er, didn't hear you come in from the guards."

Sorun quirked an eyebrow. "There's guards?"

"Yeah, Sorun, I'm king now, and guards are kind of a king thing."

He blinked, and then looked around. He and Sonic were the only ones in the corridor and Sorun hadn't seen a single guard in all the time he'd been here. "I don't think they're doing a very good job," he said, turning back to Sonic.

"Probably not," he agreed. He made a sigh and pinched the space between his eyes. "You've been gone for a whole five months, man. So I'm guessing you're done with, you know, the whole time thing? That's settled? Tails filled me in after you left."

"Yeah."

"And you really had to be gone for five months to do this?"

Sorun offered a shrug. "Time travel's tricky," he explained.

Sonic's shoulders sagged. "Don't I know it," he murmured out, and instantly Sorun felt a bit bad.

"... I met with Tails," Sorun began. "He said you're holding things down." Remarkably the city wasn't on fire, so Sorun supposed Sonic must have been at least half-decent at this. Surprisingly.

A dry chuckle left the hedgehog. "You don't have to sound so surprised," he said. He sounded like he tried to be playful, but he just came off as sounding plain exhausted. "Yeah, it was a bit of a mess at first, after you, you know..."

"Killed that last king," Sorun finished, making Sonic jump a bit. "Yeah. Regicide. Deicide. Been getting a lot of the cides in lately." When all Sonic offered him was a blank stare, Sorun added, "It's a Latin suffix that means... oh, whatever, you don't really care."

"Hey, don't say that," Sonic chastised, watching as Sorun walked over to and leaned on the wall near one of the corridor windows. "I get a lot happened, and how... we'll say *upset* ... you were because of this, really showed me a side of you I didn't know you had, but things worked out."

"Mm. So this isn't the part where you crucify me for committing a cardinal sin that I don't really care about?"

"I'm more concerned about the fact you don't care than about you actually doing it." Another silent pause between them. Another sigh from Sonic. "Look, what happened happened. And I know you're not a psychopath that'll go around cutting people even with a good reason, so we can't just, you know, move on? It's been months."

Sorun hummed. It was more maturity out of Sonic than he would have expected, but he was grateful for it nonetheless. And eager to get off the topic. "So things have been good?"

"As good as they can be. All the people I'm in charge of now, they're, um, they've been real supportive, actually. Dunno if that means I'm doing a good job since a lot of it's actually been Sally." He glanced off to the side, his cheeks visually heating under the fur. "We got back together. Probably already guessed it but she's queen."

Sorun's expression grew flat. "You married this timeline's Sally."

"Yeah," Sonic confirmed, "and, well... we, uh... we kind of already have kids on the way, you know? So things are finally coming back together."

Sorun's expression didn't change.

"I know it's not *the same* , never will be I don't think, but this is fine, right?" Sonic asked him. "World's coming back together, everyone seems happy enough, and things are just... things are going great. We're fixing everything. That's gotta count for something, right?"

"Fixing. Sure." Sorun glanced down, folding his hands over Yamato and holding it over his lap as he continued to lean his back against the wall. "None of what happened bothers you?"

"Well of course it does, but-"

"Never mind, I get it."

"O-okay." Sonic waited for Sorun to continue, but when he said nothing, he awkwardly coughed into his fist to try and gain his attention. Blue eyes flicked up to look at Sonic. "How are you doing?"

He could have stabbed him for asking that question. "Who even knows?" Sorun airily answered with a shrug. "I think I *will* be okay, maybe. Later. I'm glad to see you're taking it all in stride." He must have said that a bit harsher than he intended, because he saw Sonic flinch back a bit. "Sorry, I-I didn't mean it like-"

"No, I get it," Sonic assured him. "It's just... weird. Seeing this side of you. The side of you I saw back when we were dealing with Shadow."

"Yeah. And you got old and Tails married an idol. It's been weird for me, too," Sorun said.

"I get it." Sonic slowly exhaled and looked away. "We really did try, you know. To get you out of there after what happened with Enerjak. Everyone did. We didn't want to leave you in there."

"In the past. Literally. 'S fine." It wasn't really fine, but at this point, with what Sorun was planning, it didn't matter. Not a word of this conversation mattered, really, but Sorun had yet to work his nerves up to go downstairs to the Emerald.

"Can I at least ask why you did all that?" Sonic's question made Sorun pick his head up completely. "That whole thing with Enerjak?"

A bit of confusion wormed its way onto Sorun's face. "I didn't want my friends' souls to be enslaved and for the rest of the world to be conquered by an insane god. What about any of that do I need to make clear?"

"You sacrificed yourself again," the hedgehog pointed out.

"Yeah, man, I- Jesus, what do you even want from me?" An exasperated sigh left Sorun when he realized just what kind of answer he had to give. "Look, I *liked* you all, okay? I liked living there, in that city, with all you. Rest of the world, eh..." he tilted his head from side to side, "kinda iffy, but that was true even from where I'm from. It was home."

It was somewhat grating, admitting all this. Doubly so because it was *him* . Triply so because it wouldn't matter in a bit because this whole conversation would be erased. Sorun wondered if any of this even mattered, if he was really even talking to Sonic or if he was just talking to himself again and just using Sonic as an outlet this time. The blue Mobian was at least keeping quiet and letting Sorun speak his mind, and he still didn't know if he should resent him for doing that or not. He still continued regardless.

"Look, in my old life, my old home, I... I mean I had *something* . I had a mom, I had some friends, I had one really good friend who I'd go as far as to call a brother. I knew people in the community,

neighbors, cashiers at places, that one homeless guy that got into fistfights with birds. But that's all gone now, don't know *why* , but it is, but with the exclusion of my mother and David I never... I was never really close to people like I was to pretty much everyone in that city. Like, *close* close. I dunno. It's stupid."

"I don't think it's stupid," Sonic said. Bastard sounded sincere. "Why didn't you ever tell any of us this?"

"I think humans are hardwired never to say any of this, because every sentence I speak on this is making me want to jump off a roof." It wasn't a lie; Sorun was actively fighting himself to say all this and he hated it. "Or maybe it's just me. I'm not social." He paused. "But yeah. I ll... I liked you all. Really. I did. So I didn't have to think very hard about making the choice I did."

It was the smile that did it for Sorun. That really big, wide, happy smile he saw on Sonic's face that made something twist violently in him, that made Sorun grip Yamato tighter. He had to speak before Sonic got the chance to get a word in.

"But I'm going to be completely honest with you, Sonic. Out of everyone, I liked you the least."

The smile shattered away, and he just had to look hurt at the statement. Almost crushed, even. But Sorun pressed on, and for some reason he found it easier to say all this than to admit how much he'd adored everyone back at New Mobotropolis.

"It's not because I think you're a bad person. You're not. You just... everything about you freakin' irritates me. The way you act, things you do. You did one thing to me in particular I never forgave. But... people have flaws and you were a good person, and we were friends. So if it was a question of giving my life up to save yours if it was just you on the line, I'd give the chances of me doing that a solid maybe." A lie, it was a hard yes, but Sorun couldn't find it in himself to admit that. Easier to just fib it. "And even if you do drive me up the

wall, you don't deserve what happened with your life and your kids, man."

There was movement on the other side of the window that caught Sorun's attention. They were on a floor above the ground, so he had to glance down to see it. A flying car had touched down on what looked like a cross between a landing pad and parking garage. A figure was walking towards the castle, towards a pair of guards standing at a gated entrance. The red alone told Sorun it was Knuckles, if that hat didn't give it away.

He clicked his teeth together. Probably meant nothing; could just be a routine visit if he was still a chief enforcer to the king, but for all Sorun knew that position was dissolved. Could also be Tails tattled on him and for whatever reason called Knuckles first, and he was coming here to do... what? Warn Sonic, intercept Sorun before he got to the Master Emerald? Maybe all this was wrong and he was here for some other reason entirely.

Whatever the case it still jolted Sorun enough to finally work his nerves up as he watched Knuckles enter the castle. He didn't like how fast the echidna was walking. Was barely even a walk; more of a slight jog, like he was rushed. Didn't bode well. Good thing he was done talking to Sonic, anyways.

"... Anyways yeah everything sucks but hey glad you're doing well," Sorun quickly finished, pushing off the wall to face Sonic again. "Gotta go now."

"H-huh?" Sonic seemed startled by Sorun's sudden energy. "So soon?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, alright." He seemed almost disappointed somehow, though Sorun didn't know why. "Hey, you have a place to stay?" he asked him. "I get, uh, that you probably don't since, you know, new timeline,

so if you need somewhere to kick your feet up a bit 'til you acclimate-
"

"Nah don't worry about it. I visited Tails earlier and he's giving me a place to crash back at his home," Sorun assured him.

Sonic had visibly sagged with relief. "Oh, that's fantastic to hear. Knew I could count on him," he said, smile returning. "To be honest with you I was kind of nervous with the idea of you staying here, 'cause I raised the idea with Sally, and all she ever saw of you was after, you know..." He made a choking noise and dragged his thumb over his neck. "That. With Shadow. She has this crazy idea you're some kind of unhinged maniac. I tried to tell her different, but you kind of shot your first impression with her."

"..." Sorun made a sharp inhale. As a parting gesture he should have hugged Sonic. He settled for patting him on the shoulder with a stiff arm. "She's a smart woman, Sonic. Smarter than the both of us put together. Don't lose her, 'cause I don't know anyone else with the patience needed to deal with you."

Sonic gave him a questioning look. "What's that supposed to be mean?"

"Hey, don't worry about it." He pulled Yamato out of the sheath. He entertained the idea of cutting Sonic's legs off right now, just to be safe. He decided not to. "Some stuff I gotta go settle," he continued, cutting a portal into the air. "See you when I see you."

"Uh, yeah. Sure." Sonic didn't manage to lift his arm up all the way before Sorun vanished beyond the portal. "Bye."

Somehow Sorun wasn't surprised to find Knuckles there when he exited the portal. Standing right in front of the pit separating the room's floor from the circular platform held aloft above the pit by chains, where the Master Emerald was suspended above that by

even more chains. The lighting was the same as Sorun remembered, bright, the brass/gold metal walls.

As Sorun closed the portal, standing across from Knuckles in the open entranceway to the room, he found himself wondering what was even going on. His presence alone, standing there with his arms crossed, one eye narrowed in his direction and the bionic red eye glaring at him, said enough. That he knew what Sorun was trying to do. He just couldn't figure out why, out of all the ways Knuckles could have gone about this, he chose doing *this* . *Alone* . Instead of trying to go to the king or bringing others.

Perplexing as it was confusing. And Sorun found himself wary of the sight of the lone echidna.

"Hey, Knuckles, how's it going?" He tried playing it casual, on the off chance Sorun was wrong and this was something else entirely. Or at the very least to sound confident to maybe try and rattle Knuckles. But his expression may as well have been stone, so it wasn't working.

"I can't believe I ever called you a friend."

Sorun started at that. "Well that's quite a thing to say to a guy. We didn't even get a chance to talk like normal people during the whole arresting me thing from five months ago. Don't want to talk about anything else, catch up? Wife, kid, job-"

"Tails called me. Told me what you did. What you're trying to do," Knuckles interrupted.

The light grin that was on Sorun's face fell off into a neutral expression. "Mhm. And what'd he tell you?"

"That you're messing with time behind everyone's backs. That you tricked him into telling you things." Knuckles shook his head, almost looking like he was in disbelief. "That you... you threatened his kids so he wouldn't tell anyone? You went that far, Sorun?"

He could have pointed out he never made any direct threats, but Sorun didn't see the point. "It didn't seem to take so well since he still called you. Surprised you came all the way down here just to greet me instead of going straight to Sonic." Risky enough to be suspicious.

"Tails called me because he knew you would never have done something so horrible. So do I. I'm here to convince you that you're making a mistake."

That was the reason? Simply because Knuckles believed reason was enough to win this situation? Sorun's shoulders sagged with disbelief. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the answer.

"Sorun, I know you're a good person. I understand this whole situation, everything, is scary and you're probably more confused than I could even imagine, but this?" Knuckles gestured back at the Master Emerald. "What you're trying to do? It's wrong."

"Why?" Sorun snapped, frustration building. "Why is it wrong? Why is me trying to fix everything wrong?"

"You mean outside of the risk that you could possibly destroy the world doing this?" Knuckles shot back. "There's no reason."

"There's no reason," Sorun repeated, tone dull and monotonous. "You really, truly, honestly believe that."

"I believe it because I'm right! What you're trying to do is wrong!" Knuckles exclaimed. "Do you even understand the gravity of what you're trying to do? You're trying to rewrite everyone's lives, their memories, reality, everything!"

"Back to what things were originally!" Sorun argued. "And you don't have a place to talk." His expression soured. "You're just like Tails, got yourself a happy little family and everything. No, why would you want the timeline to change when things here are working out so well

for you, huh? You can't fucking talk. You and Tails. You're both hypocrites."

If the words hurt Knuckles any, he didn't show it. He just shook his head. "No. You're wrong," he said. "You think you know what you're doing, but you don't. You always do this, even back when you were a Freedom Fighter, thinking swinging your sword around fixes everything because you're just a kid-"

"You're really going there? What, just because you're an adult now you know so much better than me?" Sorun asked. "This doesn't mean a lot coming from the guy who let himself get possessed by an insane spirit *twice* . And both times I had to be the guy to solve the problem. Or are we just forgetting that little detail out of convenience?"

If Sorun wasn't angry before, he truly was now. Everything about this, people trying to stop him when he was just trying to fix everything. People thinking he didn't know any better. And now this, Knuckles talking to him, his words sounding almost patronizing to Sorun. Like he was acting like a parent scolding a child, and it honestly sickened him. He felt insulted.

"You wanna argue with me over this, I'll argue it with you," Sorun said, "but if you really think I'm gonna back down because you're twice my age and know better, we're going to have a short conversation."

Knuckles' features tightened. He bowed his head a bit, shaking it while muttering under his breath, but he remained where he was, standing across from Sorun. Only a distance of two meters, probably not even that. The echidna rose his head up and met Sorun's eyes.

"Fine, have it your way. If this is what it takes to get you to stand down," he agreed. "But tell me why. Why are you doing this? What's the point of trying to make things like they were when things here are fine?"

"Because I didn't fucking die two times to save the entire world only for it to mean jack shit because of Sonic's fuckups," Sorun heatedly answered. "Because I didn't pull my life together only for it not to mean anything anymore because nobody here asides from you, Sonic, Tails and his wife even remember who I am."

"So you're going to interfere with the lives of every single thing in the universe because of what? Your *ego* ?" Knuckles asked, disbelief heavy in his tone. "Because nobody here will acknowledge you for everything you did?"

" *No* . Because back there, in that timeline, I had a life! But here? Here it's all wrong, everything's wrong," Sorun said, shaking his head. "How everything's different, everyone's changed, this world? This isn't the world I gave my life for! Not this place, not these people, none of it!" He stopped himself, and against his will his face began to look pleading. "I just want to go back. Back to the life I had, where everything was better. Why are you trying to stop me?"

"Because this isn't just about you, Sorun. It's about everyone, because if you go through with this it affects everyone in the whole zone," Knuckles answered. His face turned grim. "Have you even given any thought to what's going to happen to some people if you go through with this?"

"Why should I?"

"Do you even realize how many people in this timeline are alive compared to the one we came from?" Knuckles asked him. "Say what you will about King Shadow, even I didn't like a lot of the things he did, but the fact is he unified the world. Ended conflicts way before we ever did, saved more lives than anyone, the Freedom Fighters, the Republic of Acorn, ever did!"

"He took lives, too," Sorun pointed out. "Or did you forget that?"

Knuckles' glare hardened, and he exhaled through his nose. "Yes. He did. And because he did an uncountable number of people, of

families , exist in this timeline that never had the chance in the other. You know what happens to them if you set things back to the way they were? Those people that got to live here but died in the other timeline, those families, those lives? They cease to exist because either they died over there or they were never even born."

"Yeah, but what about Sonic's kids, Knuckles, huh?" Sorun challenged, voice high and cracking. He gestured his left arm holding Yamato behind him while nearly shouting. "His children got fucking erased because of all this! His wife doesn't remember who he is! What about people that are dead here that are live there!? I'm just supposed to let them continue to be gone so people that never should have existed to begin with can live!?"

"He got back together with Sally!" Knuckles argued. "They're having kids again! He got his family back!"

"Do you even know how fucked that sounds?" Sorun asked, voice broken. "That's not *his* Sally, Knuckles, that's just someone else! They're not gonna be his original kids, they're gonna be someone else! Forget how even genetically they won't be completely the same, but the memories he had with them, their personalities? You can't just fucking substitute a lost family and just forget about the originals! And I can just bring them back, so why does it matter!?"

"It matters because of everyone else!" Knuckles shouted. "What about them, Sorun? The people who get erased because you chose to do this? What Sonic had to do the first time, changing the timeline, it was an accident but was necessary at the time. What you're doing? It's a choice. You're choosing to erase people. So what about them, Sorun, huh? What about the people who get erased just to bring Sonic's kids back? What about the kids Sally is pregnant with *right now* ?"

Sorun shrugged. "Sucks to be them, I guess."

Knuckles' mouth dropped open. He looked appalled and furious at the same time. Enough that he had to take a few seconds to find the

words. "You can't be serious."

"Either way you slice it one set of kids get to exist and the other doesn't, and that's just one example. It's a shitty situation all around. The only thing that matters is what I choose to do, and I choose to go back. If that means people I don't know and care about die so that people I don't know or care about can live then fine, whatever. I don't really care. Both decisions are wrong so I'm going with the wrong choice I want."

Knuckles' fists clenched at his sides. They began shaking. "What gives you the right?" he growled out. "The right to make this kind of choice, to decide who gets to exist and who doesn't? Why do you get to decide something like this?"

"Because I can," Sorun answered. Knuckles became so enraged at the answer his teeth clenched. "Because I'm the one with the magic sword. Because I'm owed a home after everything I've done and I want to go back to it. Because this timeline was never even supposed to exist in the first place and I'm just putting things back the way they're supposed to be." He sneered at Knuckles, eyes full of derision as he regarded him with contempt. "You're barely even a person. Everyone and everything here, it's all fake, mocking, *wrong* . Nobody'll even remember anyways so it doesn't *fucking matter* ."

"And if you end up destroying the world? Because of this? Or if your presence end up derailing something in the timeline, ends up altering history anyways? If the zone ends because of your actions? Have you even considered that, if by some miracle you make it back, even manage to go back to the time you were put in the Master Emerald, your very presence could end up changing history when you weren't there the first time?"

"Well that's just a risk I'm willing to take, Knuckles."

"On behalf of the whole world!? Without anyone's consent!?"

Sorun only offered another shrug.

Knuckles didn't have the words at first. Something in his face shuddered, and Sorun had to wonder what it was until he saw him raise a gloved fist up to wipe something away from the one good eye he had left. He shook his head, and then looked at Sorun.

His legs spread out, knees bent. He rose his fists up to either side of his head. Readying a combat stance, Sorun realized, and he looked about as serious as could be.

"I was wrong. You really can't be talked out of this." It came out of Knuckles' mouth as a mumble, almost somber-sounding. His stance tightened, expression looking much more resolute. "I'm not letting you go through with this."

"... 'Let'...?" Sorun echoed, almost in amusement. He glanced down at his side, where he held Yamato, and then looked back up at Knuckles. "Really? You're gonna try and fight me while I have this?" He gently shook the sword.

Knuckles shook his head. "I know the powers that sword has. The basics, at least. And I know they're too dangerous to use on a living person without maiming or killing them - what you ended up doing with King Shadow says enough. And you're not nearly good enough with just the ordinary blade to beat me in a fight, Sorun."

Sorun blinked. He grew confused. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm telling you that you can't beat me using just the sword, and you can't use its powers on me because it's too lethal," Knuckles clarified. "You can either give up or run away in a portal, but either way you're not touching that Master Emerald. Even if you try to portal right to it from there I'm fast enough to stop you from doing anything."

"Oh." That's what he meant. He really didn't know how serious Sorun was over this. He almost did laugh, but he was so shocked by Knuckles' thinking all he could do was stare at him, bewildered. "You know..." he finally drawled out, looking down at Yamato and grabbing

its handle, "there's another benefit to changing the timeline back. Everything'll just get overwritten again, and it's because of that none of this matters. Not this conversation, not everything I did, none of it. It'll all be erased and replaced just like it was the first time everything changed. So you know what, I really could have just slaughtered Tails and his family. Because once I turn everything back to normal that would have just been undone and they wouldn't have even remembered. Shadow'll come back, too, so no matter what I'm walking away from this with clean hands. So it doesn't really matter if I kill you right now." Sorun glanced back up at Knuckles. "You know. Since it's all just gonna be overwritten anyways."

Knuckles tensed up, his mouth thinning. "No. I don't believe you," he said. "You're not going to kill me, Sorun. I was your *friend* ."

Sorun's fingers drummed along the sword's handle. "I dunno. I recently found out it's way easier to kill someone than everyone ever made it out to be." He fully gripped the sword's handle, though it remained sheathed. He affixed Knuckles with the most serious expression Sorun could muster. "I'm going back," he said. "You won't stop me. Believe whatever you want about what I will or won't do."

Not another word was said between them. Knuckles just stood there, still in a fighting stance, his face morphing through so many complex expressions as he thought and tried to come to a decision, and Sorun couldn't tell what was going on in his mind. If he was trying to figure out if Sorun was bluffing or not or what the best method of attack was if he was really committed to fighting him.

As for Sorun himself, he just stood there, hands calmly gripped around his sword. His own stance eerily calm as he stared at Knuckles with a cold, empty expression. Waiting for him to make a move. Silently praying he'd just move aside.

After what could have been seconds or minutes, Knuckles moved. In a dead sprint straight towards Sorun. He settled on Sorun bluffing. He'd only gotten five steps in before his entire body was engulfed in a warped sphere of space. He was in the process of shifting his

facial expression into something, whether it be betrayal or fury or surprise, but just didn't have the time to finish before the slashes from the Judgement Cut came.

It wasn't like with King Shadow, who could weather Yamato's abilities and come out with mere scratches. Knuckles' body had been rent apart completely from the slashes inside the warped space, sliced apart in dozens of places in the blink of an eye. He'd been running fast enough that, even after he'd been cut to pieces, the forward momentum carried the body parts further, making them roll and fly past Sorun.

Slowly, Sorun exhaled and stared down at the severed body parts littered around him. Half an arm there, a quarter of a torso there. He saw Knuckles' head at the corner of his vision. Completely dead, his eye glassy and jaw missing, but even still it looked like he was staring at Sorun. And Sorun didn't know what look he was supposed to give back to the head. One of sadness? Anger, regret? All he could do was shake his head in something that could be closely defined as disappointment, but that wasn't quite it. He didn't know what it was.

"Stupid call, Knuckles," Sorun whispered out. He looked ahead, up at the Emerald suspended in the air by the chains. He didn't waste any further time, swiftly walking forwards and hopping over the divide that separated it from the platform held below the giant gem.

"Ever since I got dragged onto Mobius it's done nothing but throw bullshit at me, and all I've ever been able to do is deal with it," Sorun said aloud, almost glaring at the Master Emerald as he pulled Yamato free from its scabbard. "Well, this time I brought some bullshit of my own."

Yamato flashed outwards, severing the chains that held the Master Emerald up. It slammed down onto the center of the platform, causing it to jostle roughly, the chains holding it above the pit rattling. Sorun nearly lost his footing, but fortunately managed to right himself as the platform and chains settled.

He could faintly feel his heartbeat steadily increase. The scabbard hung off his waist, right hand holding the blade while his left was empty. He'd laid a hand on the Emerald, and immediately felt it for what it was. The intrinsic connection made between it and him the moment physical contact was initiated. Boundless energy contained in a physical form, thrumming beneath his fingertips and waiting to be released by a just simple mental command.

Often, Sorun wondered what would happen if he actually absorbed this thing. It was essentially just a more powerful Chaos Emerald, how much more powerful was an answer he wasn't even sure could be quantified in the context of these things, but what would it mean for him power-wise? Would it let him make things he wouldn't be able to make with normal Chaos Emeralds? He couldn't imagine that was the case; the Yamato was pretty much the ceiling of reality-breaking things he could conjure from 'DMC'. Just more powerful versions of those things? Maybe. He was only having to rely on this because Yamato wasn't strong enough to do what he needed. Or, as a grim afterthought, maybe even for him it'd be too much energy and he'd just overload and get flash-disintegrated.

The thought caused Sorun to subtly shudder. Any ideas of turning the Master Emerald into Yamato were abandoned. Too many unknowns, too many risks. This was was safer, even if it had more steps, that added layer of complexity. But he didn't come this far just to get offed on a stupid mistake like that. An *accident* , after everything he'd gone through. It'd be insulting.

He plunged Yamato into the Master Emerald, halfway to the hilt. So far, nothing, which was good. He focused on the blade, closing his eyes and breathing out. To reach backwards, past the nonexistent breach that divided this timeline from the other. Reaching not past, but *through* time and space, to reach something that no longer existed but was, nonetheless, separate from this reality.

There was a mental twang in his mind, like pulling a string taught. The location was *there* , but he couldn't reach it. Too many rules said he couldn't. Space said it didn't exist, and time said it never

happened. But yet it *had.* Time wasn't a factor when it came to Chaos energy, and the Yamato chose to ignore space at Sorun's will. Even if the location didn't exist, it was still there, and Sorun was locked onto the coordinates. Chaos energy provided the way to make *anything* possible. It was just a question of how much.

"Well, here goes everything." With his left hand resting on the surface of the Master Emerald, Sorun pulled at the energy underneath. Green energy, buzzing and violent, arced up along his arm, causing a harsh tingling sensation. He funneled it through his shoulders and down his right arm, right into the sword.

The change was immediate. He could feel the sword in his hand charge with energy, felt the connection to the location he was focusing on strengthen. The bond between him and the sword blurring together. The pulse of something alive in his hands.

"I don't want to be here anymore..." Sorun's voice could barely even be heard above the crackling green energy racing through his body. "Take us out of here. Out of this place. Bring us back home."

Cracks appeared along the length of the katana's blade. The cracks grew to the point the blade was segmented to tens of asymmetric pieces, each piece still held together into the rough shape of a katana by blackish-blue flesh that cemented the metal pieces together. There were eyes spread throughout the flesh holding the sword together, individually darting their vertical irises and pupils to look around the room before, all at once, they all looked down at the Emerald the sword was stabbing into.

The sword felt Sorun's will, and made it so.

Its power reached out, facilitated by the sword's user and the immeasurable energy flowing into it from the Emerald. The blue irises of the eyes along the sword, as well as Sorun's own eyes, shifted to an intense green. Fundamental, inviolable laws of the universe were bypassed and outright ignored as it reached for the

destination Sorun desired. The concepts that separated the two timelines was cut through.

Sorun twisted the sword.

The Master Emerald lost its green luster, dulling to a dark gray, and the gem was split in two. The intense crackling of energy was heard, there was a bright light, and Sorun lost all his senses.

He came to in however long it took Sorun to recover. Feeling came back first, and Sorun felt himself laying on something soft and damp. His ears were next, registering a quiet, pulsing sound. The air smelled and tasted off in a way he couldn't form into words. Stale ozone.

When he finally opened his eyes, irises still glowing green, Sorun realized he was no longer in the room that had contained the Master Emerald. It was a tunnel, some kind of tube. Dark. Blurry, too, until Sorun realized that was just his own vision still adjusting. Blinking multiple times managed to clear it up until he managed to accurately see where he was, and it was a sight that took his breath away.

He was in a tube of meat. Dark walls of pulsating, blue-black flesh, glistening like it was almost hardened but still flexible. The walls were spotted with the eyes everywhere. Pupils slit, irises glowing green, all staring straight at Sorun.

"The fuck is my life anymore...?" Sorun whispered to himself. He looked behind him, towards the end of the tube. There was an end to it that he saw, though the sight once again stole his breath. The end of the tube looked just like the entrance to a portal: it lead back out into the room where the Master Emerald had been. He could faintly see red at the end, the diced pieces of Knuckles' corpse.

And then he looked ahead, at the other end of the tube. Faintly he could see there was a end, but unlike the one behind him there

wasn't an image that told Sorun where it lead out. Just white light. Bright enough he had to squint his green eyes to see it.

"Is... is that where I want to go? The way back?" Sorun asked the eyes staring at him from the walls, silently hoping for an answer. "I need to go that way?"

All the answer the eyes gave him were to all move in unison from looking at him to looking towards the end of the flesh tunnel that lead to the white light, away from the room with Knuckles' corpse. It was about as definitive an answer as Sorun could hope for, so he took it for what it was and began walking towards the light.

He saw the eyes were changing the further he walked. Whatever power was fueling them to change the color of their eyes, all the energy from the Master Emerald he presumed for lack of a better explanation, it was beginning to wane. The irises were shifting back and forth between blue and green, with Sorun's own irises flashing the two colors in sync with the eyes on the wall. He found himself speeding up as a result, going from a light jog into a straight run towards the end of the tunnel. The flashing colors was quickening in frequency, and he didn't want to dawdle in this tunnel too long for fear of it collapsing while he was still in it. No telling what would happen to him in that case, if he'd even life to experience it.

Fortunately, the exit to the tunnel hadn't been too far away. Once he was in reach Sorun had dove right through.

He ended up landing on what felt like solid concrete. Cool, crisp air blew over his skin as the sight of an eye-filled tunnel was replaced by the view of a city block in the dead of night, with Sorun laying on the street. He groaned and rolled onto his back, spotting the portal he'd just dived through hovering in the air above him. A swirling mass of blue energy, not too dissimilar to the portals he usually made. The space-defying aperture twisted and condensed in on itself, giving shape and solidifying until the blue shape transformed from a portal into a solid object.

Sorun sputtered out when the blue Chaos Emerald dropped onto his face and rolled next to him. He shook his head, and then groped around blindly for the gem until he managed to grip it. The gem shifted into the Yamato, and he used the sword as a crutch to pick himself up.

"I... I... fuck, did I make it? This is?" Panting out heavily, Sorun glanced around him. He was in some city, somewhere, but he couldn't tell if this was in the right timeline or not. There were people on the streets around him, Mobians, all who'd stopped what they were doing to stare at him. Most questioning. A few frightful.

Ignoring the looks, Sorun made his way to the closest one, an echidna he didn't recognize. "Hey, man hey," he called out, stopping in front of the red Mobian to lay a hand on his shoulder. "King Shadow, name ring a bell to you?"

The echidna gave him a confused, if not frightful look as a response. "Wha- who? I've never heard of- you mean King Soni-?"

"I fuckin' made it." Sorun shoved the Mobian away, turning around as low chuckles made their way to Sorun's throat. The Mobian had scrambled away from Sorun as a result, turning around and running away from Sorun. All the other Mobians that had been around him did the same in an effort to get away from the stranger that was quietly cackling in the street. A quiet, wheezy laugh broken up by coughs that betrayed how exhausted Sorun was.

Exhausted, but elated. Even if he could register all the people that had run away from him he wouldn't care they saw him as a loon. They didn't matter at all. He'd made it. Made it back to the right timeline. Nothing mattered but that.

"He-he-he-ghk-chk..." A few more coughs wracked Sorun's throat, throwing the laughs off completely. He made a small shouting noise, shaking his head and then breathing in deeply to try and clear his head. "Ah... ah, man..." He looked down at Yamato. "The hell even happened with the Master Emerald? Did I... shit, did it *break* ?"

He'd managed to see it before he got sent to the meat-tube. The way the color left the Emerald, how its shine dimmed. The actual Chaos Emerald used to create Yamato seemed to be completely intact by all means, but the Master Emerald, the way it'd broken apart before that transition... just how much energy was needed to literally breech the impossible and separate the bounds between one timeline and a nonexistent timeline that had, at one point, been reality? Enough he'd burned through a well of what Sorun was lead to believe was infinite energy?

How did that even work?

"Whatever, long as it worked," Sorun mumbled to himself. He pulled the sword out halfway to examine his reflection. His eyes had mainly returned to their blue color, but, interestingly, there was still an occasional flash of green energy that would color his irises. Residual energy from when he shattered the Master Emerald? The flesh and eyes were gone, leaving a clean blade...

Somehow it still felt like the sword was looking at Sorun.

A distant sound of thunder dragged Sorun from his observations. *"No, not thunder,"* he realized seconds later. Something similar, but there was something *wrong* with it. The pitch of the sound being too low, with a strange warbling after-effect heard behind it. There was a flash of light in the sky and another boom of the off-sounding thunder, and Sorun felt something prickling the surface of his skin.

Looking up revealed the problem. A storm brewing in the darkened sky above. Not any kind of storm Sorun had ever seen. Normal storms didn't make clouds move that quickly, so chaotically. Lightning bolts weren't that luminous and numerous. He felt the ground tremble every time a bolt sparked off in the sky, and Sorun pretty sure that earthquakes weren't meant to coincide with storms. He'd been on Mobius long enough to know.

This was something else. And he knew what.

"So this is the big, bad time anomaly that caused Sonic to mess it all up, huh...?" Sorun mused to himself. He honestly didn't know what to expect from how everyone had described the time anomaly. He almost pictured a Final Fantasy-esque final boss monster that personified the time anomaly. Something he could fight.

But this wasn't that. This was a monster on a whole different scale: a literal force of nature shaking the very foundations of the universe apart. Couldn't fight it in the same way you couldn't fight a tsunami or a hurricane, only this was on an even larger scale. How did you fight time itself breaking apart?

"... Okay, fine, Sonic, maybe you were a bit justified in what you pulled after all. Fate of the world and all that." It rankled Sorun to admit it, but he'd concede Sonic that much if this was really the state of things. It didn't change the fact *him* and his running through dimensions with his power was the cause of it to begin with, but the guy had suffered enough and Sorun could fix it. So he'd let it slide if it meant he was the winner over Sonic, even if it was just on a tangential level.

Yamato was fully pulled out of its sheath. "Still got a bit of juice left," Sorun noted, commenting on how his eyes were still flickering between blue and green in the reflection. "If I just get rid of the time anomaly now before Sonic uses that time machine, that other timeline will never come to pass. Dunno how long before he sets it off, though, miracle I even made it to this point," he murmured to himself. *"Ideally I'd just go to where the time machine is and break it just to make sure, but I forgot to ask anyone where the fucking thing even is."* He glanced back up at the sky. *"Shouldn't matter. Just need to get rid of this and it should work out. Hopefully."*

Realistically speaking he didn't know how good his chances were at using the Yamato to separate out the concept of a time anomaly from the universe it was affecting, but considering all the impossible shit he pulled literally five minutes ago this somehow seemed like small potatoes in comparison. Which was enough to startle Sorun,

somewhat. Seeing *this* as small potatoes. Like the opposite of humbling in some weird way.

Well, not matter how he felt he still had to get rid of this thing, because otherwise he'd just end up right back in that godforsaken timeline.

"Fuck it, I'm game for pulling out a second miracle." A cross was cut into the air in front of him which then folded into a portal. "Man, I hope this works."

He jumped through the portal. It spit him out on the other side, resulting in Sorun tumbling through the air. Wasn't hard to see why when he made the other end of the portal connect high into the sky, right in the center of the clouds where the storm was taking place. The time storm quite literally shaking the world apart.

Frigid air whipped past Sorun as he fell through the dark clouds. He felt moisture fly into his face, forcing him to squint. Lightning was rapidly firing off all around him, powerful enough that he felt his bones shake.

With two hands gripping the handle, he held Yamato out it front of him. He could still feel the vestiges of the Master Emerald's power flowing through it, still plentiful but ebbing away at a rapid pace. He'd moved quick, not wanting to find out if the Yamato on its own would be sufficient in this undertaking or not, not wanting the energy to run out because he'd been too slow.

"Separate this time anomaly that's wrecking everything from this zone." Blue arcs of electricity began flowing down the blade in response to Sorun's thoughts. *"You don't even need to put it in another zone. Just put it in the empty space between universes where it can fizzle out and die or just exist without hurting anyone. Just get it out of here."*

There was a pull, the sword responding to the request as it locked onto the target. Through the blade Sorun could feel it - the time

anomaly itself. A force, not quite defined in shape or design but by mere existence, permeating not just the skies but the world. Spreading at a rate that almost felt exponential. At its size now it only encapsulated the planet Mobius, even then just barely.

But through the sword he felt it. Its growth, how it threatened to swallow this world. Would it go beyond the planet? Consume the solar system, then the galaxy, grow beyond that and consume other galaxies, not stopping until the entire zone itself shattered? Likely. It was the scenario Tails had pitched, the reason Sonic was forced to alter the timeline in the first place.

The sword was interfering, though. Not just the blade and its power, but the waning Chaos energies from the Master Emerald, intertwining with something as abstract as the time anomaly. Working in congruent with the Yamato: filling in voids where the sword was slowly peeling away the time anomaly from the fabric of reality.

It was... fixing it? Why? Because Sorun simply wanted it to?

Bolts of lightning passed by Sorun. He grit his teeth as he fell, arms shaking as he maintained his grip on the blade. More lightning striking out from the clouds, striking the blade itself as if in defiance for what Sorun was doing, for what he was *succeeding* at. Some of the lightning-

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The tower loomed in the center of the dead city, its highest point scraping against the clouds.

- struck Sorun, and he was assaulted by flashes and images that failed to take hold in his memory. Momentary glimpses that were completely forgotten. There was no time to think on the short blank in his perceptions he'd suddenly experienced or the fact getting hit by lightning should have hurt worse than that.

Was this even lightning? Some derivative? Time lightning? Was that even a thing?

Pointless questions. Didn't matter.

The storm only intensified the further Sorun went. By now the Yamato was a shining beacon, its glowing blue blade shining like a lighthouse in the midst of a dark fog. Continuous bolts of energy surrounded the blade, and by now Sorun couldn't even tell if those bolts was a result of the Yamato emitting energy or the storm striking the blade. Maybe both. He redoubled his efforts as more bolts-

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The white hedgehog kept pleading past it all. Being smashed through walls, limbs broken, stabbed and pinned to the floor with an eye gouged out.

- rolled off Sorun's body and caused more of those momentary lapses. Not enough to divert his focus from the task on hand. Nothing as important as this.

He felt it fading. The target of his sword, the time anomaly. Felt as it was extracted from the very fabric of the zone, like a scalpel being used to cut away a tumor. Could feel it as it was discarded in the boundaries between zones, left to whatever fate was in store for it now as the Chaos energies from the Master Emerald mended the leftover rifts.

That'd been the end of the Master Emerald's energies' rope, though. He felt it leave the sword as it set off to do its final requested task after the time anomaly had been discarded, and in the process Sorun's eyes had finally settled for their blue color. Relief, warm and inviting, washed over him as he continued to fall, as he felt the strain leave the sword as its work concluded. Almost enough he'd accidentally let go of it, but he'd managed a firm grip.

The dark clouds were beginning to clear away. From here Sorun was surprised to find it wasn't even night at all - the clouds had just been that dark. As he continued to fall through the sky, finally having passed the clouds, he saw them part from above him to reveal a deep, blue sky with a sun that shone down on him. The warmth was enough he could have cried. He'd let out an exhausted half-chuckle instead.

"Holy hell... I think I actually managed it..." There were no storms, no earthquakes, nothing. A clear sky above him, a shining city far down below towards where Sorun was falling. To him it may as well have been paradise. Anything would be if it marked the end of this screwed up journey he'd been set on. It was enough that Sorun would have kicked back while falling down in the sky, taken the moment to soak it all in, his victory and the sunlight, to enjoy the wind rushing past him as it finally sunk in that he *did it* .

But then he'd made the mistake of looking forwards.

His heart stilled when he saw it. White. As far as one could look up, stretching to every corner of the horizon. An all-encompassing white while of... well, just white. Washing over everything. Spreading. Getting closer to where he was, threatening to consume everything around.

The thought of what Tails had told Sorun about jumped out at him when he saw that white wall approaching. Time paradoxes, the danger of messing with time. The potential consequences. But Sorun had been so sure he'd done everything right, that he'd been careful enough to avoid something like this.

Had he been wrong? Did he mess up and now the whole zone was going to suffer for it? Was it something else entirely?

He didn't know. Sorun didn't even have time to think on it, not managing more than a startled gasp as the white wall reached him and overpowered him, overriding all his senses and filling it nothing but white and noise and everything was shifting and-

"Project Recursion... It's honestly the worst name for a plan I've ever heard of in my entire life."

I could see them all gathering below me, from the edge of the ship we were on. So far in the clouds it was hard not to see it all. Warships as far as the eye could see, all of various designs and models. Legions of machines gathered among some of the ships, while others were operated by more organic hands. Machines and Mobians and Overlanders marching side-by-side.

All for me.

His voice spoke out from behind me. "Perhaps if you'd been around more during the key moments of the planning phase you could have had a hand in coming up with a name." There was pride in his aged voice, but whenever he spoke to me it sounded like a mix of being playful and mocking. "Besides. It's as fitting a title as possible, and I fail to see how you could come up with something better."

"Well, you'll have to excuse me. I was a bit too busy running around following the plan we agreed on to waste time on a name."

"And I haven't been busy setting everything up? Can you even fathom the complexity of this undertaking? You should be overjoyed your place isn't at the technical end of things. I'd fear it'd be the end of us otherwise."

I rolled my eyes. "Then I guess we should count ourselves lucky you're not the one out there fighting, getting shot at. You'd be dead so many times over I couldn't count that high."

"Well, it couldn't possibly be that large a number if that's the case."

A momentary pause. A small, dry chuckle left my mouth, uncontrollable. A similar sound came from the man behind me, though the quick grunt I heard afterwards implied he tried to stifle it. Too late. I'd already heard.

"Forget the name for a moment," I said, "but can we actually talk about the plan itself and how horrible it is?"

"We're doomed otherwise." I turned around to the person standing behind me. That tall, rotund Overlander looking down at me. The wild mustache looked more frazzled than it ought to have, and the mouth attached to it was set in a deep frown. "This plan is all we have."

"It's still a terrible plan."

"May I remind you that it is your *mistakes that brought this upon us to begin with?" I managed a straight face, but inside I couldn't help but feel something ugly twist in me at that scathing tone he was using on me. Because of how right he was. "Your mistakes, your errors, your shortsightedness, incompetence and ignorance is what caused all this. You should be thankful my brilliance is sufficient enough in providing us a way out of this mess you've dragged us into."*

A wry grin spread over my mouth as I glanced off to the side. "I'll admit I didn't make the best decisions. Neither did you, but hey, it's all good. 'Cause we're gonna fix it all."

"Hmph." There was something clutched in his hand. A bundle of purple cloth. "Well, we won't be fixing anything if you get yourself killed out there. Here. Your battle coat," he said, tossing the item towards me.

"My battle coat." I felt amused on how silly that was. The name itself and the concept. I'd still caught it out of the air, giving the man a bemused look as I waved the coat around a bit. "You call it a battle coat. That's cute. I mean I'm insulted you think I need armor with all the things I'm capable of, but I'm willing to overlook that because you went out your way to call it a battle coat *."*

Oh, he looked irritated at that. I liked doing that, putting him outside of his comfort zone, making him act differently than his norm. Signs

of stress, that he only had the faintest bit of control over the situation, only putting up with me because he had to. I was in the same boat, granted, but in this situation he was out of his comfort zone. Me, though, at this point I'd learned to roll with it. He hadn't, and he was flustered. That look, that small bit of irritation, was proof of that. I'd keep irritating him as long as I could.

Plus it was funny.

"That battle coat is no mere coat *," he nearly spat out. "That exquisite piece of armor was weaved with graphene composite polymers and coated with a nanolaminate solution I personally-!"*

"Yadda yadda yadda, yeah, super coat, I get it." I grinned wider when he sputtered out at me, though the disinterest I'd displayed was feigned. The coat certainly sounded *impressive, at least. The way he hyped it up it was probably the sturdiest piece of clothing around even though it felt and weighed like a normal coat.*

When I turned the coat over, though, I found my smile dipping down a bit. Figures. He'd put his logo on the back of the purple coat, grinning out at me.

"I was fine with you giving me a purple coat, but this? You really had to put this eyesore on it?"

"Humph!" He crossed his arms and turned his nose up at me. "It wouldn't do not to sign my work."

"This isn't the time to be pushing an ego, and I really don't think anyone will care."

"If nobody will care then I don't see why you're protesting the matter. If you're that against it then you're free to design your own battle coat with your own bleeding-edge technology." A beat passed, and I nearly sighed knowing what he was setting up. "Oh, but you can't *."*

"Ah-huh. And you're so capable of doing at least half the things I can do?"

"..."

"Thought so."

"Just put the coat on."

Shrugging, I'd put the coat on. Immediately I found it was just a tad bit too tight. Not enough to inhibit functionality in any way, but juuust *enough to be noticeable.*

I didn't know if he fitted it this way on purpose just to annoy me or if he was just a shit tailor on top of being a mad scientist.

A passing gust of wind blew the coat's twin coattails behind me as I turned around and looked back down. My smile broadened seeing the legion of ships approaching closer to us. Just how much effort they were putting into all this. I really couldn't understand why they were fighting so hard for this. Out of spite? Blind hope where there was none? One or the other; couldn't be anything else, not with what was on the line.

"Looks like I'm super public enemy number one," I laughed out, nearly taken aback by the sheer size of the fleet below. "The entire planet is rallied against me, all just to stop me from getting to Silver."

"Are you going to be able to do this?" It was more serious than I'd ever heard him speak. "I mean, actually?"

"... They're stalling," I said, my own voice going serious and smile dropping off. I creased my eyebrows in concentration as I observed the scene down below, thoughts racing through my mind. "If they really *wanted to stop me from getting the thing, they'd just shatter it like I shattered all of Blaze's Sol Emeralds."*

"Yes, about that. I trust you've sufficiently recovered from that bout of yours?"

"Ah, from nearly getting incinerated? Yeah, just peachy." I wasn't really. It'd probably be a while before I'd manage going to sleep without seeing that deranged Mobian's face. "Pyrokinetics are a pain and a half to deal with, but the actual fire itself is still limited to conventional laws of physics. I learned all sorts of tips and tricks for dealing with that back where I'm from."

"And yet she still lives."

My back straightened a bit at hearing that. I felt my ego prickle at the words, felt my skin itch and fingers unconsciously curl. I turned my head over my shoulder to look at him and gave him an easy, lighthearted grin. "Hey, don't worry about it. One more Mobian in the pile's a non-issue.

"Anyways," I continued, turning back to look down at the coming fleet, "the way they're playing this is telling. If they're coming at me this hard, it's either out of spite or hope. Can't be spite, 'cause I don't know Mobians to be this petty. Everyone else, maybe, but not them. So they must think there's still a way out of this besides what we're planning, and since Silver's the only one that knows how to use it, they're-"

"Playing keep-away with Silver as they try to figure something out," the man finished. "We destroyed every means of getting out of this zone and finished off anyone with the ability, and you destroyed Blaze's means of traveling, so they're throwing everything and the kitchen sink at you while they themselves are probably scrambling to cobble something together to get Silver as far away from you as possible."

"... Yeah, my thoughts exactly." I felt a twinge of annoyance at having my own thoughts finished for me, but the sight below helped distract me. It was honestly impressive how something could unify a whole planet like this. The fact I was the cause was almost comical. I really

couldn't help but laugh at it all, because to not would almost be a disservice.

I spun around to address him, playfully kicking a leg back and forth. "But what I want to know," I said, eyes narrowing a bit, the corners of my mouth tightening to reveal the teeth in my smirk, "is if everything is set up on your end? Because this whole thing hinges on a lot of factors and the ones you're in charge of are arguably more important than mine."

He almost looked like I'd slapped him in the face. Like even implying *I doubted his ability was a severe slight against him. "Of course I managed everything on my end. Everything is set up and prepped, and all that's left is the final pieces. It's only after you pull your own weight the real work begins."*

I rolled my eyes again, not really knowing what else I expected. It was kind of refreshing, I realized. In a small way it was a bit of normalcy in the center of all this chaos.

"So, I feel it prudent I ask a third time," he continued. "Can you do this?"

Before I answered, I spun back around, to look out towards the sky. Up there, far above the fleet, was a massive floating island.

My smile broadened.

"Well, I'll need a new sword."

Sorun opened his eyes.

"... What even..." He made a groan and lifted a hand up to his head. His thoughts felt like a slurry, running slower than it should in the same way eyes were blurry when first awaking. There was a dull throb, too, though thankfully that was calming down over time. Slower than he'd like. *"Ugh, sheesh, the hell happened to me?"*

He thought back to what happened. Used Yamato on the Master Emerald, made it back to the right timeline, stopped the time anomaly, the white, waking up here-

Sorun bolted straight up. The white. Time paradox? Something happened, but a quick inspection of Sorun's own body revealed he was completely intact, much to his own relief. A bit more dusty than he'd like, but otherwise fine.

And then he blinked in question. Dusty? Why? And come to think of it, why was the air so stuffy?

He looked around, and then did a double-take. He was in... well, he didn't even know where. Some kind of bookstore? Except the shelves all around him were toppled or broken, with so many books scattered along the ground he couldn't even see the floor. There was a thick veneer of dust over everything, enough he saw dust motes floating through the air, and everything was dark, only the orange light of either dusk or dawn flooding through shattered windows and a broken doorway.

Also, the ceiling was caved in. Woods, metal girders, and other types of debris had seemingly smashed in through the center of the roof, punching through to make a pillar of trash in the center of the shop.

"What?" He shook his head and blinked a few times, but the sight remained the same. He noticed a glow in his peripheral, glanced down to see the blue Emerald sitting next to him, and snatched it up to transmute it into the Yamato before standing up. Maneuvering past all the books and debris found him to the destroyed entrance of the shop, in which he had to duck his head to make it through the partially-collapsed doorway just to make it outside.

It wasn't any better outside.

"What!?"

The shop had been a single building nestled between other, larger buildings in a packed city square. All the buildings around Sorun were in the same state as the book store had been in that they were just as wrecked. Every building was either halfway collapsed or completely destroyed. The streets were cracked with some segments missing entirely. Rusted out, hollowed vehicles were spread out there and there. But more alarmingly than that there wasn't so much as a single living thing in sight that Sorun could see.

He'd walked out all alone into what looked like the apocalypse.

"WHAT!"

Chapter 84

Recursion Error

Episode 84- Back to the past, Jack

Maybe there was a lesson to be learned from all this. Some sort of sign. That no matter what Sorun tried in life he was deigned to screw it up in some fashion.

Try to buy some orange juice at the grocery store? Get drafted into a freedom war in another universe entirely.

Try to make it back to Earth? Can't, dying.

Try to at least save Mobius in his final death throes by taking an evil despot with him? Messed that up.

Finally make it back to Earth? Guess what, it's dead. Granted Sorun realized this one wasn't his fault, but the loss still hit deep.

Try not to be a depressed douchebag that always made his friends worry? Yeah, that never took off.

Save the timeline?

Well, considering he was jogging around the wrecked streets of a destroyed city somewhen, he wasn't feeling too confident with this one.

"~Don't be so serious, brr brr brr brr brrr, don't be so serious, brr brr brr brr brrr...~"

In actuality it was less jogging and more Sorun kind of just hopping over pieces of debris in the street after he chose a nondescript

direction to wander down. The song felt appropriate given everything. That and he needed some sound other than the eerie silence all around.

"~Don't be so serious, brr brr brr brr brrr...~" This was probably the fifth car he'd had to jump over. The other side of the street was blocked by a fallen, rusted light pole and piles of rubble. On the other end of the debris was, shockingly, more destroyed city.

A short sigh left him. He shook his head, and the singing devolved into noncoherent mumbling as he kept moving forwards.

On the bright side he managed to find out where he was after a while more of wandering.

Downside was he wasn't sure it was a good thing.

It was in a city plaza Sorun had found his way into. Wrecked like everything else, with the exception of one single thing in the middle of it. A statue. And it just so happened that Sorun recognized the face on the statue, because Knuckles' daughter irritated Sorun so much in the time he'd known her that he wasn't sure he could forget her face if he tried.

What he couldn't puzzle out was why there was a statue of Lara-Su. What he *did* manage to figure out was that he must have been on Angel Island, because he couldn't see where else she'd get a statue for whatever she'd done to get it. Maybe in the future they'd renovated Echidnaopolis and it stopped being the ruined city everyone told him it was, like it was in that alternate timeline, but it seemed now it'd reverted back to being a ruin.

But there was still one problem with this new revelation.

"Why do I have to look up to see the clouds?" Sorun wondered to himself as he looked up. The sky was still orange, the few clouds floating up there being dark, but that was the thing. He'd been on the

island before, and he hadn't had to look up this far to see the clouds in the sky. In fact from this vantage point it was the same as looking up from the ground.

Which meant he *was* on the ground.

"The whole island got grounded? What the hell?" Sorun took another glance around the city. For as big as it was he knew it only made up a small portion of the island as a whole. So if the whole thing ended up falling out of the sky, well... honestly, in that case the city was actually looking pretty good. And now Sorun was left wondering where in the world the island was. More importantly than that what happened with the Master Emerald here that caused it to fall.

Or most important of all what happened in general.

"None of this makes any sense..." Sorun murmured to himself. He turned back to the statue, his frown deepening when he saw Lara-Su. That straight, noble pose she was striking, the strong expression she held.

He pulled Yamato out of its sheath and slashed at the statue once. The head was sliced off and fell down to the stone pedestal holding it up with a loud thud.

Pettiness, maybe. Probably wasn't even the same Lara-Su. But she'd rubbed him the wrong way when he met her.

Eventually wandering became too tiring. Especially when wherever Sorun went it was just more ruined city. He got tired enough that he found refuge on top of a relatively intact bus, where he was now lying with his back flat on top of it with one of his legs dangling off the side. Eyes staring up at the sky and arms spread out at his sides.

"I fucking miss Quiznos," Sorun said to himself. "Subs in that place, they were the best, you know? Yeah, totally. 'Specially the bread, know what I mean? Something about it, I dunno, it just hit differently.

Yeah, I know. Nothing really compared. 'Cept Blimpies, that place was pretty good, too. Oh, *duuude* , Blimpies, yeah, I almost forgot about that place. Fuck yeah, they rocked, too."

Mobian cuisine didn't quite cut it for Sorun sometimes. It was good in its own right, but it didn't compare to the food back home. Not in terms of quality, sometimes, at least, but more that it didn't taste like *home* . The homemade stuff, maybe, but the food from sandwich shops, diners, all the local places Sorun had frequented, nothing on this planet really compared.

Hell, he'd give almost anything to eat at a McDonalds again. Though on the other hand Sorun was technically the healthiest he'd ever been with the food he'd been eating since getting dragged here.

He wasn't sure if the health was worth it.

"Man, it sucks all my favorite food places are dead. Like everything else on Earth," Sorun grumbled to himself as he sat up. "Like everything else in this city, seriously where the fuck is everyone?"

Okay, by now he was pretty sure there was something wrong with the sky. There had to be. He'd been wandering around the city for hours now and the sky was still orange. He still saw the sun revolving around in the sky, so at least *that* was working normally. It was everything else that was wrong.

"Maybe that one song really was right and apocalypses just cause orange-colored skies," Sorun mused to himself. "... I don't even know if it's an apocalypse, though, for all I know it's just the island that got messed up. Still doesn't tell me what happened."

He groaned out and kept looking around. Still nothing but ruined buildings all around him. And this city must have been proper-sized, too, 'cause he'd been wandering for hours without seeing familiar sights. Or at least as varied as it could get seeing as everything had the same veneer of rubble plastered over it.

Still walking forwards, Sorun used his free hand to cup the side of his mouth. "HEY!" He called out, almost as loud as he could. Near-silence, the wind brushing past him.

"I'M SORUN!"

Nothing still. Another five minutes of blind wandering before he tried again.

"IS ANYONE OUT THERE!?"

Nada. Sorun had to wonder to himself if at one point he should give up and leave the island. Different time, but the overall geography of the planet should, hopefully at least, be the same. Maybe he should ditch the grounded island, try for somewhere more familiar? New Mobotropolis? The G.U.N. place, that base in the mountains?

Hell, he'd take the Mobians who spoke in that old-ass English that lived in Mercia over this silence.

"HELLO!?"

Sorun stopped mid-step. That hadn't been him.

He turned towards the sound of the new voice. Male, youngish. But it sounded far off, and when Sorun looked all he saw were more cracked streets lined with destroyed buildings and filled with rusted, burnt-out cars. Whoever this person was either was really far away or invisible and really quiet.

At this point Sorun would believe either-or, but he tried yelling back out all the same.

"HEY!"

"OH, HI! HELLO!"

Sorun squinted and leaned his head back a bit. "Okay, that was weirdly nice," he murmured to himself before he continued shouting.

"OVER HERE!"

"I HEAR YOU!" the other voice shouted back. It didn't sound any closer. "IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU!"

"Uh..." Sorun shook his head. "CAN YOU MOVE!?"

"YEAH!" There was a pause. "SO HOW ARE YOU DOING!?"

"What the f- MAN GET OVER HERE SO WE DON'T HAVE TO SHOUT!"

"OH! YEAH, SURE!"

Sorun's hand ran over his face as he made a small groan. *"At least this new guy seems polite, but goddamn..."*

He decided to just stand there and wait for whoever it was he'd found. He didn't much know what to expect. To see someone walk or run around a building's corner and make their way to Sorun was the most likely event, but he'd prepared himself for pretty much everything at this point.

So when he saw a white figure floating off the ground fly around a building's corner and then proceed to float towards Sorun, he wasn't surprised. Much. He at least managed to keep his face straight.

The Mobian, clear enough to see he was one even at this distance, finally got close enough that when he settled his feet back on the ground he was standing right in front of Sorun. Another hedgehog, he'd noted with some weariness settling into Sorun. Mobian standard of boots and gloves, had cool, glowing teal lines going through them Sorun tried not to pay attention to. Mostly because this Mobian's fur in particular was such a vivid shade of white that contrasted so sharply with everything else Sorun actually had to blink a few times until his eyes adjusted.

But those were only passing details Sorun noted. The main thing Sorun was focused on was his head. His spines were mainly clumped into two spikes curving from the back of his head to his lower back, but Sorun wasn't even looking at those. Around the top of the hedgehog's head were five long, waving locks of hair, standing up straight in a peculiar pattern. A very peculiar pattern that was very reminiscent of a plant Sorun knew of on Earth.

"Weeeed head..."

"O-oh, wow, I really didn't expect... um. Gee." The awkward greeting from the white Mobian made Sorun stop focusing on his hairstyle so he could focus on what sounded like a teenager around his age standing in front of him. "Hhhi there, uh, you."

Sorun blinked a few times, continuing to stare at the Mobian. He hadn't expect him to look so nervous, to be twisting a foot back and forth so awkwardly. And he was struggling to even meet Sorun's eyes.

It was odd to him.

He started to shy away even further, causing Sorun to realize he'd just been blankly and silently staring at him for a solid minute as he parsed his thoughts together. He mentally berated himself and shook his head a bit, and then decided to go with introducing himself.

"Hey, I'm Sorun," he lamely greeted. "Uh... yeah. That's all I got."

"Oh, alright." Just that small introduction alone seemed to gain the Mobian back a majority of his confidence. He managed to still his body and meet Sorun's eyes again. There was still a bit of shyness in his expression, but beyond that was... excitement? Maybe even a bit of joy? "It's great to meet you! I'm Silver."

Not the worst name Sorun had heard come out of the mouth of a Mobian. Hell, it was actually up there with the more sensible ones he'd heard. He saw movement, and noticed the hedgehog extended

his hand out to Sorun, waiting for something. The Earthling extended his own free hand, inches away from the gloved hand. Sorun's fingers rapidly flexed and wiggled around as he contemplated what to do.

He decided to mess with him a bit by softly slapping Silver's palm with the back of his hand, then slap the back of Silver's hand with his palm, and end it with a fist bump that Silver hadn't reciprocated because he'd been too confused to react. Sorun, by contrast, maintained his straight face as he pulled his hand back.

Silver pulled his hand back, looking at it with a quizzical expression as he flexed his fingers. His yellow eyes darted up to Sorun. "What was that?" he asked.

"That's how people say hello from where I'm from." Kind of a half-fib, but it didn't matter all that much.

"Oh. Huh." He looked back at his hand. "My master said people are supposed to greet people with a handshake."

"His master?" Sorun filed that detail away for later. "He an old-fashioned kind of guy?" he guessed.

"I mean, probably? I wouldn't really know," Silver said. "So are handshakes really not a thing?"

"Yeah, nobody does them anymore. At least where I'm from."

"Oh, okay." Silver shrugged, and then lowered his hand and looked back at Sorun. "You're really weird-looking, you know? I've never seen a Mobian without fur." He paused and glanced to the side. "Granted I've only ever met the other two, but still..."

A lot of red flags popped up in Sorun's head. "I'm not a Mobian."

"Huh?" Silver blinked. "Oh, wait, he told me about these. Those, uh, the other people that existed way before, over-something, right?"

"Overlanders," Sorun corrected, his worry steadily increasing. "I'm not one of those, either."

Silver's confusion grew. "Then... what are you?"

"A human."

"... And what's that?"

"They're like Overlanders but better."

"Better how?"

"Just are," Sorun said. "I'm... getting the feeling it's not just Angel Island that's completely wrecked."

"What do you mean?" Silver asked. "Of course the rest of the world looks like this place. The apocalypse, you know?"

And just like that, a pit sunk down in Sorun's stomach. An apocalypse. The world ended. Something happened and the world ended.

"Why?" Sorun's mind whirled, but he couldn't think of an answer. Things were supposed to be fixed, he was supposed to be brought back to where things were before Sonic used the time machine to combat the time anomaly. From everything he heard the world was in a good state at that point in time. It shouldn't be in ruins. Everything was supposed to be *fixed* .

Why, why, why did things keep going wrong...?

Silver seemed to pick up on Sorun's sudden, visible distress. " *Oh* , wait, are you... are you not from here?" Silver asked. "Like, *from here* from here?"

Sorun didn't get his meaning entirely, but nodded all the same. "Yeah, I'm lost. Like... I'm super lost, man," he replied, his shoulders dragging down. "Like, I was here then I was there then I did some

stuff and was supposed to go to one place but ended up here, and I don't... I just don't know anymore." He shook his head. "I don't know what's going on."

"... That sounds pretty bad," Silver quietly admitted to Sorun.

"It's pretty bad, yeah," he agreed.

"Yeah." Silver paused. He looked over his shoulder, and then back at Sorun. "Hey, um, you maybe wanna come back with me? You can talk with my master and, you know, he can maybe help you out. Probably."

The suggestion only needed a moment's consideration. Sorun didn't have many other options. "Yeah, sure."

It was weird, somehow, walking around with Silver, to the point that moving around in an apocalyptic city was starting to register less with Sorun the longer he was with him. Any kind of company would have worked, but in the short time he'd known him, all of ten minutes, Sorun found Silver was nice enough to get along with.

Chatty, too. Wasn't at first, but after a while the few words being passed between them were growing with time. Something Sorun barely noticed, but he didn't pay it much mind. It was nice talking with someone he didn't want to strangle.

"So your master, he's, like, a cool guy?" Sorun asked as the two of them maneuvered between a pair of destroyed buildings.

"Master Mogul?" Silver asked as he ducked under a fallen beam. "Yeah, he's great."

"Why does that name sound famili- fuck me it's the elephant guy."

"He's kind of been the only person I've ever known, you know?" Silver continued, oblivious to the fact Sorun was glancing between

him and the katana he was carrying. "Well, him and Edmund. He taught me a bunch too, whenever I come and visit here."

Sorun hummed. "Oh, so you don't live here?"

Silver shook his head. "No, I just come and visit Edmund from time to time. Taught me stuff like Master did, and he's got this really big library he lets me look at sometimes. I usually just come here by myself, but a while ago Master was really insistent on both of us coming here for some reason, so we're visiting."

"Mm." Sorun gave Silver his full attention. "No parents?"

It took a moment for Silver to respond. "No, nobody. Just my master. I've been around a lot of places, Sorun, and honestly I'm pretty sure we're the last three people on the whole planet. Well, four now that you're here."

Again, Sorun felt his heart sink at hearing that. A true apocalypse, then. One that'd taken the life of nearly the whole planet. All except this hedgehog, an evil elephant person his friends warned him about long ago, and some third guy. He felt like kicking something.

"But it's not so bad," Silver continued. "Er, living with Master Mogul, I mean, not, you know, the whole world being the way it is. That's terrible. But he's nice."

Sorun's grip on his sword relaxed somewhat. "Oh, really?"

Silver nodded. "Yeah, I mean he was pretty strict at times with all the teaching, but... well, he's the only family I got. And he makes nice-tasting food and helped me out with my powers."

The white Mobian lifted his hand up. A teal glow surrounded the hand, a similar aura surrounding a couple of displaced bricks nearby. The bricks floated off the ground, formed into a circle, and started spinning around while Silver looked back at Sorun with a small grin.

"It's pretty neat, right?" he asked him. It didn't sound like how Sorun would expect it to hear, cocky and arrogant, like something that would fly out of Sonic's mouth and make him want to punch him. It was sincere and a bit excited, like a child trying to show someone something. It ended up putting Sorun a bit more at ease.

"Yeah, it's cool," he agreed. Silver smiled wide at that. "So your thing is telekinesis?"

"That's what my master calls it," Silver said, dropping the bricks. The glow left his hand at the same time. "Between you and me it kinda sounds like a mouthful, but I don't have a better name to call it. Better than just saying I can just move things with my mind, but, eh..." An airy sigh left him. "I never really had anyone else to talk to it about, so, well, yeah."

"I getcha," Sorun said. "You know, I'm technically an orphan, too."

There was something odd about the way Silver looked sad and excited about that at the same time. "Oh, for real?"

"Yep." Sorun nodded. "If you wanna get real technical I'm an extinct species. You'd think that'd get me put on a list somewhere."

"Aren't... aren't we all technically extinct?"

"... It's complicated, man, I'll fill you in later," Sorun promised.

Silver looked a bit disappointed at that, but he'd still remained silent as they continued walking. A few minutes later he glanced up and called out, "Oh, hey, we're here!"

As the hedgehog ran ahead, Sorun had to slow down to examine the place they'd come to further. It was... well, there wasn't much to say about it. It was just another destroyed, half-collapsed building, virtually indistinguishable from all the other ones they'd passed on the way here. It put Sorun off a bit; he'd expected something *more* ,

seeing as Silver and his master were supposed to live here. Maybe the apocalypse didn't let them be picky.

It was odd overall, but he still followed Silver into the building. He'd used his powers to float up a bit, towards a higher floor in the building - what was left of it, at least. Fortunately for Sorun the interior stairwell was still intact, as well as the building's front door and entrance lobby. Surprising, given how everything else looked. He'd managed to spot what floor Silver had floated up to and decided to hold off on commenting to Silver about making him climb up to the fifth floor alone when he caught up.

Getting off of the stairwell and ducking into a hallway nearly sheared in half made for a short trip, as Sorun could already hear a pair of voices the closer he got to them, past rooms closed off by debris or wrecked doors. Most of what he heard was Silver's own excited voice. The other one he couldn't make out, too quiet and deep.

The first thing Sorun saw was the room itself. Larger than most of the other rooms he'd crossed on the way here, and mainly intact. That said a lot for the rest of the place seeing as one of the walls was completely gone, giving a nice view of the rest of the destroyed city. Other than that the rooms distinctly looked lived-in: More cleaned and furbished than everywhere else, less debris. Little things like stacks of books or food here and there, some bedrolls, a literal campfire in the center of the room.

Then there were the occupants. They were both at a far corner near the back of the room, around a surprising number of stacks of books. He made Silver out immediately, talking excited and animatedly to someone. He'd saw Sorun walk in and turned towards him, smiling and waving.

The one sitting in the corner of the room talking to Silver was the one Sorun had been worried about. He didn't know much about Mogul outside of what he heard from others. He didn't think he'd be so *huge* , either, dwarfing Sorun by three, maybe even four times just sitting

down, hunched in the corner, wrapped in a brown cloak that almost blended into the brown fur covering the mammoth's body.

It was the face that gave Sorun pause. *"This dude looks fucking* old *,"* Sorun thought. It was hard to see visible age past the fur covering his face, but there wasn't hiding that look in his blue eyes as he looked towards Sorun. Half-lidded to the point of almost being closed, the way his shoulder and the rest of him was so slumped, the deep, tired look his eyes and mouth held. The slow breathing. Hell, he even *smelled* old if that musty scent said anything to Sorun. It felt like he was standing next to a relic.

What really put him off was the look he was directing at Sorun, specifically. He couldn't place it. Like, at all. Just that Mogul was giving Sorun a certain *look* , and he didn't know what that look was. Appraisal, maybe? He more than likely knew about Sorun since the Earthling was around back when he was a prisoner in New Mobotropolis, before that breakout he'd heard about. But no, there was something more there, beneath that initial, acknowledging glance. For the life of Sorun he didn't know what it was. But oddly enough the one thing Sorun *didn't* see in his eyes was surprise at seeing him.

Whatever the case, it caused Sorun to grip Yamato just a bit tighter. He did his best to keep as relaxed a composure as possible, but his hands were ready to snap the sword out at a moment's notice. Just in case.

"- And then I found him wandering around so we talked a bunch and you know Sorun's really neat," Silver was telling the mammoth, without seeming to take a breath, "and I was thinking maybe-!"

"Calm yourself, Silver." The baritone voice that came out of Mogul's mouth was so deep Sorun could have sworn the building rumbled under his feet from it. "I would think it prudent our guest introduce himself first, hmm?"

"Oh! Er, right." Silver stepped away, looking sheepish. "Sorun, this is my master," he said to the Earthling, and then gestured to the mammoth. "Master Mogul."

"... I know of him," Sorun said, making Silver blink in surprise. "A little, at least."

"Huh?" Blinking again, Silver looked back and forth between the two. Neither Sorun nor Mogul stopped looking at one another. "You do?"

"Yeah," Sorun said. "Sonic always described Mogul as one of the rogue's gallery villain nutballs that gave him and the others trouble in the way of petty villain nonsense."

He'd hoped to glean some reaction out of Mogul with that. Granted, he did, but not the one he'd expected. The mammoth had just heaved a heavy sigh and seemed to slump even further. Almost in a *sad* manner. "I've no doubt the me of the past would have demanded swift retribution for such an insult."

All of those words flew over Sorun's head with the exception of a few. "'Me of the past', huh?" he muttered. "The you of the now, then?"

"Would simply correct you in that calling my actions petty would, as you would most likely phrase it, 'undersell' it."

This time Sorun was the one to sigh. "So I'm in the future? That it?"

It was Mogul's turn to blink. "You don't seem surprised."

"Man of the world like me? What's even left?"

Nearby was the remnant of what had one point been an office rolling chair. The back of it was missing but the chair itself and the wheels seemed intact. Sorun sat down in it and turned the chair to face Mogul, who continued sitting where he was at while looking at Sorun.

Silver had backed up some to sit down, keeping quiet while continuing to glance between the two.

Sorun took in a deep breath as he thought. With all the burning questions he had, Mogul was probably the only one around who could answer them, tell him just what the hell was going on. Given what little he knew of him he wasn't completely sure if he could trust every word that came out of his mouth, but he'd suppose he'd just have to judge that for himself.

"Do you know me?" Sorun asked. "Like, me specifically? Who I am, what I did?"

"The wayward youth, plucked from his own world," Mogul answered. "You aided the Freedom Fighters of old."

Sorun released a breath, and made a small nod. In a weird way, it was comforting to hear Mogul say that. He'd *existed* here at some point; had to if Mogul knew all that. Which meant this was the right timeline. The original one, the one he'd strived to get back to. That answered the question of where he was. Now he had to figure out *when* the hell he was.

Which brought him to his next question. "How far into the future am I?"

"I assume you wish to know how far from the point you were entombed in the Master Emerald? For reference?" At Sorun raising his eyebrows, Mogul raised his eye ridges. Not a smile, his mouth didn't even move, but for him it was probably the closest he could get to a smirk. "No need to give me that look. I've shared in the experience."

The statement made Sorun relax somewhat. He'd heard as much. "Fine, sure. How long since then?"

"Two hundred years. Approximately."

He probably said more after that. Sorun hadn't heard him.

It just went to show how almost nothing ever seemed to go right for Sorun on this planet. All he'd done, everything he'd gone through, only to end up here. Right timeline, wrong time. Two hundred years too late in the timeline. And then even worse was the sight he saw outside - that apocalyptic vista of a dead world. He'd already had to suffer through one of those, but seeing it again, it was wrenching at something in his chest.

There were so many feelings welling up in Sorun there was no way to articulate them. Frustration on such a massive scale that he'd come so far only to find this and end up here, so far in the wrong point in time everyone he knew would be dead, end of the world or not. Hopelessness over *this* being the fate of the world he'd worked so hard to set right. All that, everything he'd done, just for this. A dead world. Anger, not even the kind he could aim something at, just blind fury with no identifiable target. Aimless, all-consuming.

More than all that he just felt tired.

Silently, Sorun rose up out of the chair. It was a toss-up whether he wanted to throw the chair as far as he could or just crumple onto the ground right there, and ended up doing neither. Mogul was giving him a critical eye but was otherwise saying nothing. Silver had been silent throughout the entire exchange, listening to every word while looking towards Sorun with increasing surprise. But now he just looked worried.

Sorun turned from both of them. "I'll come back. I need a bit." There were still more questions he had, things he *needed* to know, but he couldn't right now, not in this state. Needed time for... for even what, just to calm down? Get into a state where he could hold a conversation without being liable to fly into a fit of rage or something else?

He didn't know, except that he just couldn't do anything at this moment.

Silver had opened his mouth to say something. A sharp look from Mogul made him pause in whatever he was gonna say, followed by him shaking his head at the hedgehog. Sorun missed all this, having already half-walked, half-stumbled out of the room to make his way towards the stairs. Nobody followed, thankfully.

"What the fuck was the point?"

It was the single question that kept burning inside Sorun's mind as he was lead back here, once again navigating broken streets in a dead city. Silver and Mogul's home, the location, was kept somewhere in the back of his memory, somewhere for him to return once he was ready, because where the hell else was he supposed to go?

But company wasn't something he was concerned about. It was the everything else.

He'd sagged onto the side of a nearby, fallen lamp post, sighing out loudly while glancing around at the destroyed buildings. Part of Sorun wanted to take Yamato and go to other parts of the world. Not to verify if the rest of the world really was dead; he trusted Silver on his word, and destruction on this scale was something Sorun was familiar with, even if he'd only ever caught a glance. He didn't need to see the rest of the world to know. No, just to see if New Mobotropolis and his old house was still there. He decided he couldn't bear the answer of if it was or not, or what state it'd look like.

Sorun didn't even know how the apocalypse began to begin with and he felt defeated. The mere knowledge, simply looking out and seeing that at some time, within two hundred years of the time he was *supposed* to be in, the world ended.

Another dead world. Another moment where he got to be the last one standing in what was left. He felt so useless.

He'd dipped his head down towards his feet to let out a loud sigh. When he looked up, he saw that, somehow, he'd circled back to the plaza he'd been in way earlier, where that statue had been. And, surprisingly enough, he saw that there was someone there. Standing in front of the statue. His nose wrinkled a bit when he saw it was an echidna, red like most others, and the fingers holding the sword tightened a bit, but he held off on doing anything and just chose to observe.

Observing wasn't doing much considering the echidna wasn't doing anything.

"That the Edman person Silver mentioned? Gah, fuck it." Sorun pounded a fist against the fallen lamp post, pushed off it, and then walked towards the echidna. Halfway there he saw the "clothes" he was wearing, if it could even be called that, looked more like a poncho than anything else. And he was old if all the wrinkles Sorun saw just from a back view said anything, plus the walking stick in his grasp. The old Mobian still didn't react even when Sorun stopped right next to him.

Sorun found himself blinking a few times when he realized the echidna was looking down at the decapitated head of the statue.

"It's a cryin' shame," rasped out the echidna. His voice sounded brittle and aged. "This statue stood the test of time 'til now. I always figured it'd outlast me, but it seems it wasn't meant to be."

Unconsciously, Sorun hid the Yamato behind his back. "Yeah, man, corrosion's no joke," he agreed. "I actually knew her for a bit. Didn't really like her. She had this... *smile* that bugged me."

Did more than bug him. It pissed him the hell off. Particularly after she'd disabled King Shadow, she'd stood there with that wide smile on her face. Sorun sure hadn't felt like smiling at the time, even after that ordeal was over with. Not after what he'd gone through, was still going through. Not after what he saw them do to that other Rotor. Nothing about that situation suggested a smile was appropriate. But

yet she'd stood there, with that wide smile on her face, like nothing was wrong with the world while Sorun's whole world was falling apart around him.

The old echidna next to Sorun made a hum. "Is that so?"

"Yeah." Sorun glanced to the side at him. A wrinkled, bearded face with a small set of glasses met him. "Why? You know her?"

"Mm. She was my mother."

There was a moment of awkward silence. For a single second Sorun felt bad, but then it was overrode with his previous feelings. He leaned in a bit closer to look - the echidna's eyes were a familiar shade of purple, if not a bit faded. "You certainly have his eyes," Sorun mumbled, leaning back so he stood straight. "Well, I'm not taking back what I said. She was irritating and I didn't like her."

Surprisingly, the old man just laughed. "There's a strength in that, not backing down even after being tripped up. Something I can respect." His eyes glanced up to meet Sorun's. "You could at least say you're sorry."

"To say I'm sorry is to admit I made a mistake and promise I won't do so again. I didn't make a mistake by saying I had a poor opinion of your mother."

"No, I meant for cutting the statue. Corrosion doesn't make that fine a line where the head separated from the neck."

"Sharp for an oldie." Sorun didn't so much as flinch at the accusation. "Fine. I apologize for defacing a historical monument. In my defense there aren't many people left to appreciate it."

"There's truth in that." A withered sigh left the echidna in recognition of Sorun's words. "Well, regardless of your feelings she was an excellent Guardian, just like her own old man. And a good mother, along with my croc of a pops father."

"... Wait, what?"

"My pops. Old man. Dad, daddy, father." Edmund rose his tick up and poked Sorun in the chest with its tip. "What about this ain't you getting?"

"No, I got that part," Sorun said, slapping the cane away, "I meant... croc as in crocodile? Really? Your dad was a crocodile?"

"Mhm, and he saw fit to remind me of it whenever I asked him," Edmund grumbled out.

"... By any chance do you know *his* dad's name?"

Edmund shook his head. "It's been so long by now I just plain don't know. Best I can do is remember what it sounded like. Had a kind of... vvv sound at the beginning."

That was enough for Sorun to go on. *"Vector managed reproduction? How the hell he'd pull that off?"* He shook his head. Not the time to think about that. "That's cool and all, but... that doesn't, you know. Seem physically possible?"

"Eh?" Aged eyes ogled at Sorun as if he'd just gone insane. "What you mean by that, youngin'? What, your own ma never tell ya how child-makin' works?"

"Way too vividly," Sorun sighed out with a slight shudder. "But, like... crocodiles are cold-blooded reptiles, and echidna are... I'm assuming not so cold-blooded." After an uncomfortable silence Sorun began idly tapping Yamato's scabbard. "I'm not getting how that's possible."

"What's to say it ain't possible?"

"I don't know, biology?"

"Look, sonny, what'd you say your name was?"

"Sorun."

"Sunder, listen." Once again he jabbed Sorun in the chest with his cane. He had to resist knocking it out of the old man's hand. "Dunno how it works with your kind, but Mobians're special. If cross-species compatibility weren't a thing we wouldn'ta made it as far as we did before the big end." A third jab with his cane. "Heck, maybe if your attitude weren't so sour you could get yerself a lady friend of your own and see with your own eyes. 'Least if there're any left."

"Yeah, I think I'm good there, old-timer." Once more Sorun batted the cane away. "And as relieved as I am that my humanity didn't automatically lock out my ability to have kids on a planet full of not-humans, I've been nuked more than microwave popcorn, so I don't think it matter- actually, Devil's Body would've probably fixed that," he suddenly realized.

"Hmph." Edmund clacked the tip of his cane on the ground. "Whatever that means, Souther."

Sorun's eyes narrowed at the echidna. "You know, believe it or not you're only the second decrepit old man I've met that couldn't pronounce my name right. And you know what, it's not getting any less annoying."

"Feh!" Edmund gave him a displeased look." You know, back in my day people respected their elders."

"Back in your day there actually were elders and people to respect them."

"... You're not a very likable person, Soujourn."

"I wouldn't go that far. I knew your grandpa, Knuckles. He liked me, at least during the times he wasn't possessed and trying to kill me," Sorun said. "At any rate I liked him more than his daughter."

At hearing that, the old echidna gave Sorun a curious look. "Really? You knew him?" he asked. "And who did you say you were again?"

Letting out a mirthless laugh, Sorun shrugged his shoulders and stepped forwards a bit. "Oh, I'm all sorts of things. Sorun the Gamer, Sorun the Freedom Fighter, Sorun the Delivery Boy." He turned around and sat down on the statue's head while looking up at the echidna. "Right now I guess I'm Sorun the Time Traveler, and right now I'm lost by about two hundred years."

The echidna didn't respond at first. He let Sorun's words sink in, and then closed his eyes to give a brief nod before opening them back up to look at Sorun. "Alright. Well, back when she was alive my mother called me Edmund. I suppose you could call me the last echidna. And the last Guardian, or a failure of one at any rate."

"Hey, from one failure to another, could be worse. I think," Sorun said. "What makes you such a failure?"

"I inherited the position of protecting an island halfway sunk into the ocean. So far, not too great," Edmund informed him. "I've long since learned not to worry about things I cannot control."

"I hear that, man." Sorun blew out his mouth, shook his head, and then turned back up to Edmund. "So you think- huh?"

Something had gone wrong with the echidna's face. He suddenly seemed more distant, eyes glazed and staring off in a random direction. His mouth was moving up and down, as if he were whispering something, but nothing but airy sounds were coming out of his mouth.

"... You alright, man?" Sorun hesitantly asked, resisting the urge to reach over and poke him. A few seconds later the old Mobian seemed to snap awake.

"Oh! Er... right." Edmund blinked his eyes a few times and looked over at Sorun. "What were we talking about again?"

"For the love of- another friggin' one?" A sort of sad frown found its way onto Sorun's face, and he shook his head. "No, uh... just

thinking," he said. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do now."

Because what was left for him? He couldn't go backwards in time to before all this, back to the others. He *could* , technically, but using the Yamato to go back presented the risk of time paradoxes and the likely death of everyone in the whole zone as a result. He was effectively stuck here in a dead world with someone he was honestly okay with, someone he didn't really trust or like, and a third guy who looked like he wasn't long for this world anyways.

None of that even covered the world was dead. There was just too much to unpack in that bit of information alone and Sorun was still coming to terms with it, all the implications behind it. It was bad enough he was sitting here airing out all his grievances to an old man halfway to being senile.

"You said you were a time traveler, didn't you?"

Sorun glanced towards the speaker. "A fairly lousy one, but yeah."

"From where, may I ask? Time from my grandpops?"

Sorun nodded. "If the elephant dude is to be believed, I'm two hundred years too far ahead of where I'm supposed to be," he answered. "World was still alive back then. Seeing it now, it's..." Heart-wrenching? Nauseating? Awful, horrifying, grim, hopeless? "... It sucks."

Edmund made a hum of acknowledgement. "I can sympathize with that. Somewhat. Never really got to see the world in its old-world glory, if you get my meaning."

That caused Sorun to raise an eyebrow and fully turn to the echidna in question. "Mf. Really? Just how recent was all this, anyways?"

"Hmf. Couldn't tell ya. Might have to ask that 'elephant dude' of yours if you're so inclined to wonder," Edmund suggested. "Think I know

who you're talking about. That old sad sack of bones lookin' after Slither."

Sorun made a withered sound. "Silver?"

"Yeah, Simmer. Good kid, real bright. Let him poke 'round my library some whenever he comes visit. Good heart on that one. Nothin' like that mentor o' his, an' the only reason I tolerate his ilk lookin' after the boy's 'cause of how well he turned out," Edmund said. "But, given how long that codger among codger's been kicking, well... goodness. He'd be your best bet on answers unless you wanna go digging up the past along with Shiver, but the man's an honest downer to hold a conversation with."

"Yeah, immortality'll do that, I guess," Sorun dryly remarked, though his voice was quiet as he pondered the suggestion.

To be completely honest, he didn't want much to do with the guy because of how the others described him. Power-hungry blowhard that used big words to demean people was the basic gist of the accounts he'd been given. Admittedly he hadn't seen much of that meeting the man in person, but then again maybe time and/or the apocalypse changed that. Or he was that good a actor, but with how everything was dead Sorun honestly didn't see the point in him going that far.

And he still did have questions, and there were a scarce amount of people around to answer them. Mogul was in all likelihood the only one. And it wasn't like Sorun had anything better to do.

"Fine. I'll go talk to him." Sorun stood to leave, but then stopped and looked back down at the head. "Er... you know, the world's supply of duct tape and glue's probably all bad by now, but I could probably... uh..."

Sorun trailed off when he saw Edmund had that vacant, unfocused look on his face again. The sad frown returned to Sorun's face, after which he turned the other way and began backtracking the way he

came from. He could swear he still heard the old man muttering behind him as he left.

He'd gone back to the building Silver had lead him to previously, but Mogul wasn't in the same room he'd been in prior. Some searching around eventually found Sorun on the roof of the building - what was left of it, at least, though compared to most of the other roofs around this one was mainly intact.

He found Mogul there, resting against one of the large ventilation units one would typically find on top of tall buildings. There were more books scattered around him, and he had another one in his hands. His eyes were still down reading the pages, though he still spoke up as Sorun approached him.

"Finally found a moment to compose yourself?"

"Still had questions that needed answering," Sorun said. "Good book?"

"A difficult question. I'm fairly confident I've read every single book on the entire planet by now," Mogul rumbled out as he turned a page. "Whatever ones survived at any rate. I've found myself rereading a vast majority of them. Even before that, with my age, the plot of many a tome became rather predictable."

"Yeah, I've heard being immortal has a way of sucking the fun out of everything after a while."

Though Sorun had said it with a bit of snark, Mogul didn't stir in the slightest. "Not inaccurate," he simply replied, and then turned a page.

The response threw Sorun off for a moment, going as far as to make him stop for a second, but after he continued walking until he'd made it to the mammoth's side. A few more seconds passed, after which,

without making a sound, Sorun decided to sit down next to the mammoth.

Minutes passed with them just sitting there, Mogul silently reading his book while Sorun stared out into the destroyed world beyond, the hollowed buildings and orange sky. From this high up he could see that the city itself was off-kilter slightly, like the whole island was slightly tilted. Questions whirled through his mind, but he didn't even know where to start, what the ask first. What *to do* , even after this. He could barely even figure out his own feelings on what was happening and could scarcely keep up with it all.

"It's supremely tragic, isn't it?" Mogul asked, breaking the silence without even looking up from his book. "The state of the world?"

"... I remember back when I was with a bunch of people that tried their best to save the planet," Sorun answered after a few seconds. "Started as early as five, most of them. Was even with them for it for a bit of it. Them, foreign governments, everyone trying to make the world a better place. I even went forwards far enough to see them pull it off, even after Sonic-"

"Irrevocably damaged the time-space continuum in his youth and was forced to alter the stream of time in order to rectify it," Mogul finished.

Slowly, Sorun turned his head towards Mogul. "How do you even know about that?" he asked. Nobody but him alone should even be aware something like that happened. Mogul wasn't even there for any of that.

The mammoth simply turned a page. "Some knowledge has a way of burdening those who shoulder it. Some would curse others with knowledge out of simple spite or greater machinations. A few passing words to shatter the psyche. I like to consider myself above such pettiness. As such, Sorun, I'll do you the benefit of not answering that question." He sighed a deep breath. "If it will ease your mind, however, know that I'm unique in this regard. Nobody,

back when everyone was alive at any rate, was ever aware of any changes or alteration in the timeline."

"But how do you *know* ?" Sorun pressed. "It shouldn't be possible."

"Indeed. It shouldn't. But what I encountered long ago was an impossibility unto itself." A page in Mogul's book was flipped. "How I wish I never encountered it. That cursed abomination."

The teen's grip on the sword's scabbard tightened. "Did this 'abomination' of yours tell you something about me? Because you sure didn't seem surprised to see me walk in with Silver."

"I couldn't comment on that. I also couldn't comment on us meeting when I just so happened to have asked Silver to transport me here along with him on one of his voyages to the island. Quite the coincidence, two relics of the past meeting during our little vacation here." His voice lowered a few octaves. "I would *strongly* recommend you disengage from this line of questioning."

Sorun scoffed at his refusal to answer, but didn't comment further on it. "Fine, be that way," he muttered. He was still interested, didn't care enough to press it at any rate. Not without risking making him upset enough he'd stop talking. "So I really did fix it? Time, all that? Considering we're two hundred years past the fact I imagine the time anomaly isn't a problem since we're alive and talking about it?"

"A hundred and seventy-five years past the fact," Mogul corrected him as he turned a page, his voice returning to its normal, albeit it baritone, pitch. "It didn't make itself evident until twenty-five years after you were locked aw-"

"Whatever. You know what I mean."

Mogul made a hum. Sorun couldn't tell if it was in displeasure or indifference. "The results speak for themselves, do they not?" he asked. "That event never occurred in this time. I'm admittedly not privy to *every* detail, but my knowledge of time and its workings is

complete enough that I know multiple streams of time in a single zone is impossible. I don't know anything pertaining to the alternate timeline you went to, but as we're here now, discussing it, it is more than safe to say that alternate world is no more."

Despite it all, despite everything being displayed to Sorun, it still managed to make him give a sigh of relief. The alternate history with King Shadow was gone and dead. Deleted. And seeing as Mogul had knowledge of Sorun before they'd even met, it meant this was the original one Sorun had strived to return to after all.

So in the end he'd managed it. He'd did it. He came back.

Fat lot of good it did.

It left a bittersweet taste in Sorun's mouth. Everything he'd done to get back here, everything everyone had done to set the world right... "Everything my friends did to try and fix the world, only for this to be it's fate," he mumbled out, looking at the city beyond. He could swear from this high up he could see the outermost edges of the island, and the glistening surface of water beyond its border. "Was there a point to it all? Any of it if this was the end result?" He looked up at Mogul. "What even happened to the world?"

Because he had to know. If this was manmade, Mobianmade, whichever, or if it was some kind of natural disaster. If whatever *invalidated* the efforts everybody had put in to save this world could have been prevented or not, if it was all in vain or not. If it was even worth trying when the world was just going to end anyways no matter what. If it was all a waste of time.

He wasn't sure he wanted that answered after all when Mogul spoke. "A cataclysmic event two hundred years ago wiped out civilization. Some survived and managed to carry others further, but the conditions of the world proved too harsh to sustain anything long-term. Silver is the last generation of sapient species as a whole on Mobius."

The world got wiped out two hundred years ago.

That couldn't be right.

"But... but that's before the time anomaly almost destroyed the world."

"That is correct."

"And I got rid of the time anomaly. It's gone, never happened. It shouldn't have posed a danger to anyone because I made it so that time anomaly never happened to begin with."

"That is also correct."

Sorun's voice became frustrated. "So then why did the world end up getting destroyed anyways!?"

Calmly, Mogul flipped a page in his book. "Because the cataclysm that destroyed the world and the time anomaly you discarded away with were two wholly unrelated events."

So it was something else after all? "That makes even less sense," Sorun argued, shaking his head in denial. "You're saying this all happened *before* the time anomaly. That doesn't make sense, because nothing happened! I wasn't there for long, but I talked with people during that time. I talked with Tails and Sonic while he was king, and they never mentioned anything like this! The world never ended, it didn't... everything was peaceful! So why did it get destroyed this time? Because this timeline, it's the original, nothing should have been altered except for the time anomaly disappearing. You said so yourself! So why did something change?"

Why did something cause the world to end when it didn't the first time? What changed when the only thing Sorun did was get rid of the time anomaly so there could be a future past that point a hundred and seventy-five years ago? What happened?

"Who can say?" Mogul wondered as he turned a page.

"..." Sorun's eyes narrowed in Mogul's direction. "You were there," he pointed out. "You must know something."

"I wasn't in the direct vicinity of the event."

"What do you- the *whole world* got destroyed, so doesn't that mean the entire world is the vicinity!?"

Mogul didn't answer and instead just turned a page.

Irritated, Sorun stood up. Half of him wanted to cut that book in half just so he could gain his attention, and the other half wanted to chop a limb off to get the point across. When he had questions he was desperate for answers for and the only person who could give them to him was ignoring him. He was already reaching for the Yamato's handle when the mammoth finally spoke up.

"Do you honestly think a show of bravado and violence will get you far in life?" Mogul asked him, baritone voice as calm as could be. He didn't even look up from his book. "Believe me and my millennia of experience when I say that intimidation can only get one so far before they encounter those immune to its effects for one reason or another."

"Yeah, you would know that, wouldn't you?" Sorun bitterly remarked. "What with all you were doing back in the-"

"I find it amusing, you choosing to judge me for my actions when you yourself were present for precisely none of them," Mogul interrupted. "You've never met me before now. You were never victim to any of the consequences of my actions. So why the hostility against an old man you've only recently acquainted yourself with?"

Sorun huffed out a breath. All the same, his right hand dropped away from the sword's handle. "You gave my friends a hard time back in the past. That's all," he answered in an honest tone.

"What would you have me say? Profess my deep regrets for my past actions? Prostrate myself before you? Spare me," Mogul rumbled out as he turned a page. "I'm not ashamed to admit my wrongdoings. Yes, I heavily interfered in the lives of your friends in the past all for the sake of what amounted to petty power plays that ultimately proved futile in the end."

"... Why, though?" Sorun asked, now more genuinely curious than anything else. "You... you're... I knew you were old and immortal, but you're seriously thousands of years old?"

"Thereabouts. Quite honestly the number becomes meaningless at a point."

"Yeah, I imagine, but..." Sorun shook his head in confusion. "Seriously, *why* ?"

"I've come to understand that no amount of age and wisdom is sufficient in resisting foolish temptation in the pursuit of one's ambitions," Mogul told Sorun. "You couldn't fathom living a life as long as mine. I saw Mobian civilizations rise and fall. I'd risen to the pinnacle of power in some ages only to fall back to rock bottom when those ages crumbled. I'd taught wizarding arts to Mobians only to see those techniques fade and die out with age as their practitioners perished with time." Mogul paused, and though it was hard to make out, Sorun could have sworn he heard the mammoth's voice grow quieter. "I believed it to be my right to stand above all others."

"Just because you were the oldest? The most experienced? Because you had powers an abilities nobody else had?" Sorun questioned.

"Yes to all that and more," Mogul answered. "I won't get into specifics, but you understand the barest gist, I see. I very well am one of the, if not *the* , first fully sapient Mobians to walk the surface of this planet, mainly due to my exposure to a Chaos Emerald in my 'youth'. So believe my words to be true when I say that the Kingdom of Acorn was by far the most successful and largest Mobian

civilization that had ever been erected. At the time I thought it logical and prudent to engage with them."

"Sure, but what did you actually do?" Sorun asked. "All I ever got told by the others was that you did some villainous junk that got you thrown in jail."

Mogul turned a page. "Employed the services of mercenaries in the efforts of purloining an artifact of great power that had been held in the Acorn family for generations to usurp their position of authority. Kidnapped that prodigious two-tailed child and replaced him with a perfect double for a time before his speedy friend rescued him. Became a god incarnate utilizing the energies of Chaos and wreaked havoc across the worlds."

That last one threw Sorun for a loop. "Ah... huh. You really did all that, huh?" He gave the mammoth a quizzical look, but he didn't budge in the slightest from it. "Became a god?"

"In the basest sense of the word, yes. A being so omnipotent in power that I'd crushed entire zones in the palm of my hand." Mogul blinked. Sorun wasn't sure if that'd been the first time since he arrived on the roof if the Mobian had blinked or not. "The young fox had thwarted those efforts as well. Undid my actions and stripped my power. Those events among other, less-important recollections are the primary reason those in that kingdom-turned-republic viewed me in an unfavorable light and why you evidently dislike me so."

The mammoth turning into a mad god that honest-to-god crushed whole universes in his meaty, furry palms should have been a more nerve-wracking piece of information. It wasn't, not to Sorun, at least. Not at this point. He was actually more focused on the part where Tails had been the one to stop him. He'd somehow beaten a multiverse-level god and saved everyone he'd destroyed, if Mogul's words were true. And they sounded very true.

"Listen, when you fight a guy radiating so much power the air around him is literally *boiling then you can fucking talk. 'Til then you can't*

say shit about what I did, so shut the fuck up about it already."

Well, apparently Tails had done that after all. That and so much more. Sorun wasn't even sure him beating Enerjak measured up to that. And he didn't even so much as bring it up with Sorun when he'd said that to him in the other timeline after he'd killed King Shadow. Why? To patronize him? No, even worse: he'd been trying to be humble and sympathetic with someone being open hostile with him. Someone who'd later on threatened his family.

And honestly, Sorun hated that. Because he didn't think he would have done that. He didn't like how Tails ended up being the better man after all. How he'd been in the right.

"Fucking Prowers," Sorun thought as he shook his head. "Wow," he ended up mumbling out, halfway between sounding impressed and scathing. "You wanted to be the top guy so bad you went around killing an uncountable amount of people to make a point? I'm not even talking numbers in the quadrillions or quintillions, like literally I'm talking an unquantifiable number because you were destroying whole *universes* like it was nothing."

"They were restored upon my defeat," Mogul pointed out.

Sorun breathed out in disbelief. "I really don't think that matters."

"Then does you erasing an entire timeline just to preserve this one not matter?"

"..." Once more, Sorun felt his eyes narrow. His breathing intensified slightly. "Don't you dare start this. Did you go on this whole tirade about past regrets just to make a point?"

"An intriguing word, 'regret'," Mogul said, ignoring Sorun's question. "I used to think myself above such a word. I'd considered it such a paltry emotion, something to be discarded in the pursuit of something greater. A useless crutch for the weak. I was mistaken, of course. It was only after the entire world was lost and I was left with

nothing but time to reflect did I realize just how far I'd erred. But it's a fault I believe anyone is susceptible to - losing sight of what's truly important in pursuit of personal goals." For the first time since Sorun stepped onto the roof Mogul tore his eyes off his book to look at Sorun. "Or am I wrong? Is you destroying a timeline for personal reasons not the same as my abusing omnipotence out of a foolish and selfish desire to be recognized as the most superior being in the cosmos?"

It was more similar than he'd care to admit. True enough that he felt his arms go slack, all the hostility washing out of Sorun. "Sure. I had to do things. I had to hurt people to get here. Back in that other timeline," he quietly admitted. "Break one woman's jaw, completely cripple a man. Kill a king, kill a friend, threaten another friend's family. Tell myself that none of it matters since all those events got erased, never happened, that all those people got replaced with this time's versions. Lives getting brought back, others being snuffed out and erased, everybody changed but me. It all sticks to me regardless.

"I don't know. I didn't kill anybody in the end, since those actions and consequences were deleted, but..." But it still unsettled him, somewhat. Back then he'd been so laser-focused on his one goal, "get back, get back to the true timeline, get back," that nothing else had mattered. Not events, not people. He hurt and threatened without a second thought. Killed and shrugged it off, like it didn't matter. It technically *didn't* , not really, but something about how Sorun had still managed to do it with borderline casual ease shook him somewhat.

Nevertheless...

"Where'd that get me? Here?" Sorun quietly scoffed. "I set the world back to the way it's supposed to be, and for what? Just for it to be destroyed anyways?" He made a breathy laugh, and then collapsed back into a sitting position next to Mogul. He lifted his free hand up, and let it fall down and slap against the concrete roof. "Where'd it all

end up getting me in the end? Talking about all of this to some sad old guy on a roof somewhere."

"And yet," Mogul drawled, "you look down on me for committing practically the same crimes."

Sorun clenched his teeth. "It's not the same."

"Isn't it?" Mogul challenged. "Lives rewritten. People and their very existence simply vanishing without so much as a memory to fit the events of this timeline."

"Lives saved. Lives brought back. Lives that would have remained gone if I did nothing," Sorun argued back. "You did what you did because of a power high. Your words. I-"

"Supplanted the lives and memories of every single being in this world, irreversibly altering an inordinate number of beings throughout this world. Trying to weigh the lives you changed versus mine on a scale seems quite pointless when the numbers become so large it's arguably arbitrary. What use is there?"

There wasn't any. Sorun would be a hypocrite to argue it. "I just wanted to go back home," he mumbled out. "Nothing else mattered but that. I didn't care if I actually had a right to make that choice. Just that I *could* make that choice. Just me and my special sword." He shook his head and glanced up at Mogul. "But you're wrong to compare us. Even if there are people in that other timeline that would have never been born in this one, if they never get to live now solely because of me, there were people that got to live here that were never even born there. I did what I did to save people. I stand by my decision. That timeline wasn't even supposed to exist to begin with; I arguably did nothing wrong but make everything how it was supposed to. *You* -" he said, pointing at Mogul, "didn't save anyone, going around squeezing whole universes like they were stress balls."

At the end of the day, he refused to be put on the same pedestal as an egomaniac like that. Even if what he did was selfish, at least

some good came out of it. Not like what Mogul did. Nothing like what he did.

"There's truth to that," Mogul admitted. "In the end it is us who are left to wrestle with the consequences of our actions when no others remember. Or the lack thereof consequences, in our unique circumstances."

Sorun would amend that he had a point there, and made an agreeing grunt in response.

Mogul continued. "With age and experience comes wisdom, or so they used to say. To that I say you could have thousands of years of experience sccrued wisdom. Without perspective, though, what use really is all that knowledge?" he wondered. "I'm... simply ashamed it took the end of the world and the pending isolation for me to realize what I lost sight of. Perhaps my gifts are to blame. More likely it's me searching for excuses."

"Okay, but why are you telling me all this?" Sorun finally demanded. He'd tried going along with the old man's ramblings as best he could, but the teen's patience had finally wore thin. "Are old people just that compulsive towards imparting wisdom on the youth and long-winded speeches about morality because of how screwed a past they had?"

"I'm afraid Silver's already taken my focus in that regard," Mogul informed him. "It's as I said. I'm bereft of distractions." Again, he flipped a page in his book. "And perhaps I wanted to see just what kind of individual you are."

"... Why do you even care? We barely know each other."

Mogul didn't answer him. He just continued reading his book.

After rolling his eyes and muttering under his breath, Sorun tried changing the topic. "Okay, fine, speaking of Silver," he began, "what's his whole deal? I don't even mean the whole telekinesis thing. Powers, sure, it's whatever at this point, but how do you go

from..." He almost asked him "how do you go from being a power-mad schemer to someone's caretaker?", but with his previous words Sorun already managed to figure that out on his own. Instead he asked, "Why'd you decide to look after him?"

"In this desolate, lifeless world, it seemed too cruel to abandon a helpless child," Mogul answered plainly. "A combination of me learning from the errors of my past, a desire to atone for my actions, and perhaps a chance at adding a bit of good in a world I'd fostered so much bad. Among other reasons I'm sure I'm not even aware of, and a small few I won't divulge to you. So between leaving a babe to die of exposure and raising him, yes, I took him in, formally educated, and trained him to the best of my abilities."

His mouth moved. It seemed impossible, but Sorun could have sworn that may just have been the smallest of smiles on his mouth. Or a wince. Hard to tell, really.

"..." Sorun wasn't sure of how he was supposed to respond to that at first. "He doesn't seem like you. At all," he pointed out.

Mogul made a "humph" sound. "I'm beginning to suspect that you don't think I sought repentance at all for my past deeds. I didn't indoctrinate the boy, as your accusing tone would insinuate. I taught him. That's the limit of my influence over him. That old Guardian he oft visits certainly colored his view some." Something shined in his eyes. Fondness, maybe? "And... perhaps some of him rubbed off on me. I'm not nearly as verbose as I once was in life."

"This is you at low-level verbosity?"

"Yes."

"... Alright." He would believe that much. About his use of words and actions with Silver. With how Silver's demeanor was a near polar opposite of Mogul, he'd be hard-pressed to think otherwise. "So what's his deal? Just trying to eke out an existence in this wasteland along with you?"

"Hardly," Mogul denied with a shake of his head. "Silver fancies himself... hm. 'Historian' is too strong a word, unbefitting. He oft spends his free time exploring, digging through old ruins. Seeking answers."

"Answers? To what?"

"The world before this. What happened and how it happened." Mogul paused, eyes pausing in his reading as if he was contemplating something. "It isn't immediately obvious, but the state of this world burdens him greatly. It's a burden that grew the more he learned of the old world, through either my words or Edmund's teachings or from whatever documents he managed to dig up. Either in the library here the old Guardian cares for or elsewhere when he explores."

Sorun looked back out into the dead, slanted city. "I mean, I'd be pretty upset, too, if I had to grow up here."

"Quite," Mogul agreed. "In that respect, Silver is like you, albeit in the barest of senses. He has a desire to fix this."

If he'd been building to that the entire time, Sorun would admit, he was hooked. Intrigued in all possible senses of the word. Part of him didn't want to dare to hope that the desire to fix this world actually had a foundation, to not be disappointed, but he couldn't help it. He'd latched right onto that sentence.

"And just how does he plan on 'fixing' all this?" Sorun asked him.

"... This world was once home to many objects whose depths of power were limitless," Mogul began. "The Chaos Emeralds, for instance. In this age they, as well as the Master Emerald, are gone, but you understand my meaning."

"They're gone?" Sorun asked, confused. "Where'd they go?"

"They're not here," was the only response Mogul chose to give Sorun. He chose not to pursue the topic. "But very few knew that

other, similar objects existed. Objects labelled the Time Stones once existed, though all but one of them were lost." Mogul paused. "Silver has, in his possession, the sole remaining Time Stone in this universe."

Sorun's heart stilled. With a name like that... but it couldn't be true, could it? "And what," Sorun asked, swallowing despite having a dry mouth, "does the Time Stone do?"

"It allows its user to travel through time. Even backwards, if the user wished."

It was too good to be true. Sorun desperately hoped that wasn't the case. "But... but I thought that wasn't possible," he said, partly confused and partly hopeful. "You can't travel back in time because making changes in the past would break the whole zone, wouldn't it?"

"The Time Stone is unique in that any changes made to the past via traveling with the Time Stone retroactively reshapes the future," Mogul explained. "As such, the timeline is preserved, if not changed by use of the Time Stone."

"Aw, seriously?" With some annoyance, and a face full of disbelief, Sorun held the Yamato out. "I can't use Yamato to go to the past without incurring the wrath of horrible time paradoxes that would tear the zone apart, but this Time Stone thing gets a free pass? That's bull."

"It's by *design* ," Mogul said. "Would I be correct in assuming that sword's function was not intentionally designed to go through time?"

"No, I..." Sorun hedged, looking sheepish as he lowered his left arm, "well... kinda just used a loophole in its power to brute force my way through time travel."

A sigh left Mogul. He almost sounded annoyed. "As I thought," he rumbled out. "That sword is how you restored the timeline?"

Sorun nodded. "Needed the Master Emerald from the other timeline, but I made my way back here," he said. "Then there was white, and I woke up here. Still trying to figure out how that even happened."

"An impossibility in time caused by your meddling. Paradox, as you put it," Mogul asserted. "Fortunately enough it seems the only damage it incurred was correcting the fabric of space and time by wiping out that alternate timeline to preserve this one, likely through your own actions. It's not surprising such an... unstable method catapulted you here to this time by mistake," he explained. "You're fortunate this method even worked. It's miraculous you even survived the ordeal. But perhaps that was by design as well."

Sorun nodded at that, though with some hesitation at not understanding all his words. Even so, he wasn't feeling very lucky seeing as the world around him was the outcome. "So, Silver?" he pressed. "He wants to fix this? Un-apocalypse the world?"

Mogul's large eye ridges twitched, almost in pain at hearing the word "un-apocalypse" uttered. " *Yes* , quite," he replied in a clipped tone. "He's fully informed me of the breadth of his plan, and I've aided him in his pursuit by giving him whatever knowledge I can. He's been piecing as much information about the past as much as possible in order to be successful, but, regrettably, not much was recorded in regards to what happened it was so sudden."

"So Silver wants to go to the past and alter events so the world doesn't end." As far as goals went it sounded reasonable enough to Sorun. "And you're telling me this because...?"

"It was my assumption that you wanted to return to your rightful place in time. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but you'd rather not see the world in such a dismal state as this, correct?"

"No, Mogul, I am, in fact, not very pleased that I died a bunch of times and went through all these time shenanigans to save the world only for it to end up like this," Sorun said. "More than that I already

lost one planet. Not gonna lose another. And it wouldn't be fair to all the effort everyone put in to saving it. It's an insult."

"Then go," Mogul suggested as he flipped a page. "As he is, Silver... quite frankly has absolutely no experience whatsoever when it comes to a world completely different from the one he grew up in. Words can only do so much to prepare him of an age of thriving civilizations. It's familiar territory to you, and he will have enough to worry about without being lost in it all."

Sorun didn't respond, unsure of what he should say. He wanted to prevent all this from happening, yes, but he also didn't want to fight to save the world anymore. He'd lost count of the amount of times he'd said he wanted to be done with it all only to end up being dragged back into the fray over and over. Didn't help nobody knew what even preventing all this entailed - assuming it was even doable.

But... he also didn't want to see the world end. Again. And since nobody else managed to do anything it seemed it was up to Silver. And Sorun if he chose to help out. And Mogul was really making it sound like Sorun should help out. And with his first impression of Silver, he wasn't sure he should leave the fate of the world in his hands alone.

He made his mind up.

"... I mean Silver seems like a capable enough guy. But since he's my ride back and I'll owe him one, I guess I'll help out. You know, for the world," Sorun said. "Where is he, anyways?"

To answer Sorun, Mogul lifted a hand and pointed in a direction - towards a far-off, leaning building that was largely intact compared to the ones around it. "Before civilization fell that building was a housing complex comprised of rental domiciles."

"You could have just said it's an apartment building, dude."

Very slightly, Mogul scowled. "As of late Silver has taken a pension for exploring such places for documentation to give further details of the past. Newspapers and journals and the like. I imagine he's there in preparation for his journey."

"Alright, great." With that, Sorun finally stood back up to his feet. After taking a moment to stretch his legs out to wake them back up, he looked back up at Mogul. "Well, I'm off then. To go back home and potentially save the world, because for some reason it keeps falling down to me. And, uh, hey, it sounds to me like you did a lot of raw stuff in the past, but you seem to be doing good now, so... yeah. Good on you." He flashed Mogul a thumbs-up.

"..."

"... I'm gonna go now," Sorun said. "Good luck with all this." He gestured to all the books surrounding the mammoth, and then turned to leave.

He made if halfway across the rooftop before Mogul spoke up.

"Wishing me good fortune is irrelevant, Sorun," Mogul called out. "I surrendered to the inevitability of it all long ago. It doesn't matter, in the end. None of it does."

Confused, Sorun turned back around to face the Mobian. "Whazzat s'pposed to mean?"

"Nothing of importance to you," he said. "Just try to remember on what I said. Not to engross yourself in something so deeply you lose sight of what truly matters."

"I'll try not to, I guess?" It came out as more of a question than Sorun intended, due to his sheer confusion over the words. He would have spoke further until he finally saw that *look* Mogul was giving Sorun. And for the first time since meeting him Sorun was finally able to figure out what that look was.

The look Mogul was giving Sorun held nothing but pity.

"Do have safe travels, Sorun. You and Silver both." And with that, he turned back down to his book. Sorun finally turned and left.

For the life of him Sorun didn't know what he did to warrant that look.

It took some time to get to the apartment building. Didn't look like one on the outside, too tall and not wide enough compared to apartment buildings Sorun was accustomed to back on Earth, but he saw it for what it was once he entered through the entranceway that lost its door. Check-in desk at the lobby, wall of mail boxes, small map that was halfway gone near the stairs.

He didn't know where Silver was, exactly, so Sorun just started going floor-by-floor while poking his head in random rooms. Some were gone completely, fallen away from the building and piled into debris on the ground below. Others largely intact, some even accessible because the doors were unlocked, broken, or just gone completely. He might've even taken some time to explore them if he wasn't in such a rush to get to Silver.

It was just his luck he happened to be on one of the upper floors. Sorun had found him when he'd poked his head into an apartment's living room, seeing the white hedgehog surrounded by papers and notebooks. He didn't even notice Sorun had entered until he'd cleared his throat, causing the Mobian to jump a bit and drop the journal he'd been holding in his hand.

"Yo," Sorun greeted, giving him a small wave. "I calmed down, talked with Mogul. We, um, we gotta talk about some stuff, man."

"Er... yeah, I'd like that." He looked almost relieved that Sorun wanted to talk, and gestured towards a nearby couch that still seemed to be in one piece. They sat down next to each other, Sorun leaning back on the couch to be as relaxed as possible while Silver

was hunched forwards, hands clasped together as he thought, a foot tapping nervously.

Finally, Silver looked towards Sorun. "So you're really from the past?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yyyyep," Sorun answered.

"Okay, like- like how far? Master mentioned the Freedom Fighters, did you- he was talking about *the* Freedom Fighters, right!?"

"As far as I'm aware," Sorun answered again, waving his right hand in a circle. "I hung around them for a while."

"Oh my goodness, this is huge. This is amazing!" Silver'd gone from being nervous to being incredibly excited. Enough that he was slightly bouncing up and down while sitting on the couch. Sorun would believe he was vibrating. "Sorun, this changes everything!"

"Cool?" Sorun leaned up a bit so that he was sitting straight, finding it hard to keep looking towards Silver's white smile without being blinded. "I- it's cool you're happy an' all, but what's so important?"

"YOU!" Silver shouted, startling Sorun some. "I've been going left and right trying to get as much as I could to piece together *some* kind of picture so I had an idea of what I was getting into, but if you're from there then-!" He paused abruptly, and then gave Sorun a questioning look. "Wait, what are you even doing in the future, anyways?"

"I don't even know where to start with that one," Sorun told him. "Um... like, it's a lot, dude. I'm not even supposed to be in this zone technically."

"You're not?" Silver tilted his head a bit to the side. "Why? What happened with your zone?"

"Dunno about that universe as a whole, but my planet? Dead. Lot like this one," Sorun said. Silver flinched at that, and his smile dropped off completely in place of a sympathetic look. "Yeah, I don't even know why it died. I came to this zone, stayed a while, and when I tried going back found out it was gone so I just stayed. It's... it's not really related to why I'm here specifically, tell you later if you really wanna know, but it's part of why I'm really interested in your whole 'fix the future' plan. 'Cause this-" he waved a hand out towards a nearby window, "- this ain't cool." He leaned closer to Silver. "That's what you're doing, right?"

"Oh, uh, right. Yeah, yeah that's right." The saddened expression Silver held lightened up, and his ears perked up as he began to explain. "It's just... we have the Time Stone, and we could go back and fix this. Make it so the world never ended up, you know, like this." He nodded his head towards the same window Sorun pointed to earlier. "People would be alive, the world wouldn't be dead, my parents... I mean maybe I could finally meet my parents," he mumbled out. "And other stuff, I don't know. What did people back then even do, Sorun?"

It was too broad a question for Sorun to answer adequately, so he just shrugged. "Stuff?"

"Stuff," Silver repeated in a morose tone. "Yeah, I'd like to do stuff. Not the stuff I've been doing all my life, but... you get it."

"Yeah, I get it. I'm not exactly thrilled with how the world turned out either, Silver," Sorun said. "Believe me, I wanna fix it just as much as you do. It's all I've been doing is trying to fix the world."

Silver smiled at that. A small, easy smile that made him sag with relief as he gave Sorun a hopeful look. "Right, so... the thing is, I don't really know much about the past. Well, Master's told me a bunch and I've been reading some, but I haven't... it'd be really new for me," he explained. "So... you know, if you want to save the world as much as I do, well, er, you know your way around so maybe you could...?"

"You're going back two hundred years, right?" Sorun asked.

Silver nodded. "Yeah, two hundred exactly."

"Well you're in luck, Silver, because that just so happens to be when I need to go back," Sorun told him.

Silver smiled wider. "That's great!" The smile dimmed. "There's just, ah, one little thing."

Before he could ask what the hedgehog meant, Silver began digging into one of his gloves. He removed an object from the inner folds: something that fit in his hand and was glowing an intense orange color. He held it out for Sorun to see, who leaned in with interest as he peered down at the item in Silver's palm.

He almost mistook it for a Chaos Emerald, except the color was wrong as well as the shape. Where normal Chaos Emerald were shaped in the class round diamond shape, this gem was square in shape. Much like how a classic normal emerald would look, Sorun had considered with some amusement. Other than the shape and color it looked about the same: an orange gem pulsing with orange power.

But... there was something off about it, as well. It seemed dim, somehow, and its entire surface was marred with cracks, some pieces of its surface even chipped off. Like it'd been run over or dropped a bunch of times. Damaged. It made an unsure feeling pop up in Sorun, who glanced up at Silver with a quirked eyebrow.

"Looks busted," he observed, making Silver sigh and pull his arm back.

"Yeah, we don't know why. We found it like this," Silver said. "Master or Edmund could never figure out why, but somehow it got damaged. It's still good, in a sense that it works." There was an uncomfortable pause. "Once."

Sorun's face grew flat. "It's one and done."

"Yeah, as best as Master and I figure, it's gonna break completely after a single use."

"... Okay but you put a bit of practice into using it, right?"

"Sorun, I just told you it's gonna break after we use it."

"Fair point, fair point." A small, steadying breath left Sorun. "How confident are you about using it?" Because he didn't want something like Silver making a mistake and blasting them back too far or not far enough or something else. Not after he'd come this far. His heart couldn't take it all ending because of a stupid mistake like that.

The look Silver gave him, however, told Sorun that Silver was sure. "I've been training real hard with Master to make sure I get this right. Both with this and my powers," he said. "They help with using it. I'm telling you I can do this." He looked down a bit. "It's just... well, this is the only way back, you know? And if it breaks... sure, I'll save the future, but I'd be stuck in the past." His shoulders fell. "I guess I'd still be happy, but... well, I wouldn't be able to see Master again. Or Edmund. Or my parents, maybe other family I don't know about that'd come back. It's part of why I've been kind of dragging my feet on this, because I don't have a way back."

Sorun nodded. Made enough sense - *more* than enough sense, even. A large part of why he'd gone with setting the timeline back to normal was because of the people he'd lost. His... new family. He could understand how hollow a victory it'd be to save the future if Silver didn't even get to enjoy it afterwards. Hell, he sort of felt it right now with everything that'd happened.

The weight resting in Sorun's left hand offered him an answer, though.

"This day of yours just keeps getting luckier, Silver." When the hedgehog gave him a questioning look, Sorun held Yamato out.

"'Cause I got this."

Silver blinked. "Okay." He blinked again. "How does that help?"

" *This* is how I managed to even get here in the first place," Sorun answered him as he shook it. "It's a super cool sword that can do super cool things, bypassing time among them. I can't send things backwards without inviting horrible consequences, it's not the same as the Time Stone, but I'm pretty sure I can still send stuff forwards without anything bad happening." Made sense in a logical way of thinking. Couldn't cause a time paradox by just going forwards, right? At that point it was just time acceleration with a few less steps.

"So," Sorun proposed, "here's what I'm thinking. You use the Time Stone to send us back, and we undo whatever it is that caused the world to end. And once it's done, once we are a hundred percent sure we did it and the future is safe and secure, I'll just use the Yamato to send you forwards in time back home. It'll be one-way, but, well, them's the breaks." He lowered Yamato into his lap. "So what do you think?"

He could see the gears in Silver's head turning. The idea had merit, and indeed if they went through with this it meant Silver had a viable way of going back once the problem was solved. And though he seemed excited by the prospect, there was still a hint of hesitation in his face. "Yeah, but... b-but we don't even know how long this is gonna take. It could be weeks, months, maybe even years! And I don't know anything about living in the past, I don't know where'd I'd go in the meantime and what I'm supposed to-"

"Dude, just come live with me," Sorun deadpanned.

Silver went completely still. His eyes went wide. "Seriously?" he asked in a quiet, disbelieving voice. "For real? You'd do that for me?"

"I mean, I got a guest room at my house. Nobody else is using it. Might as well be you." Sorun gave a shrug. "It's not really a bother, and you're cool enough."

"Oh." Despite still looking somewhat shocked Silver appeared happy at the offer. "W-well, uh, geez, Sorun, that's... that's really great. Thank you, really. I'd be glad to if you'll have me" He turned away from Sorun when his eyes became glossy. "Sorry, I didn't mean... w-well, you're just a really nice friend, you know?"

"I'm throwing him out on the streets if he tries to hug me." He didn't fortunately, though Sorun was still ready to fend him away in case Silver tried. He sort of looked like he wanted to, though, a prospect which deeply frightened Sorun. He quickly tried to shift to a different topic to avoid this. "So," Sorun quickly said, "what are we actually working with towards the whole 'save the future' thing?"

"Hm? Oh!" Bolting up a bit straighter, Silver seemed to remember something and bent down. There was a leatherbound journal resting near his feet that the hedgehog picked up, and then sat back up straight while showing it to Sorun. "The latest info I've gotten is from the contents of this journal I found in Edmund's library. Lot of the pages were missing, though. Or destroyed. Some water damage, too." Silver looked at the journal with squinting eyes. "Penmanship's kina hard to read too, actually."

He opened the journal up to a random page and showed it to Sorun. The human tried reading the contents, but already he could tell that he wouldn't be able to read anything at a single glance.

"Oh, yeah, this got written in a really girly cursive font. Kinda familiar, actually, but I can't place it." He looked up from the journal and at Silver. "And what else?"

"Right, well..." Silver opened up the journal and began skimming the pages. "In terms of what actually happened to end the world, we... don't really have anything. I don't even know when it really happened, just when it started: sometime two hundred years ago."

"So it was a long process, or...?"

Silver shook his head. "No idea. I just know some threat showed up two hundred years ago to cause all this."

"Hm." Sorun gave a short nod. "So we know a bit of the when, but not the how, why, what, or where. Do we got a who?"

"That's actually our biggest clue," Silver informed him. "According to what the Master told me, and it's corroborated by some of the things in this journal, it was a traitor in the Freedom Fighters that caused all this."

Sorun's mind came to a screeching halt.

A traitor. In the Freedom Fighters. The same ones he was acquainted with. All of his friends. One of them caused the end of the world and the desolation he only needed to look out a window to see. One of his friends caused the extinction of planet Mobius.

He didn't believe that.

"You're mistaken," Sorun said, voice firm.

Silver looked a bit taken back by Sorun's tone. "Sorun, I'm pretty sure-"

"You're wrong. The journal's wrong. Mogul's wrong." He shook his head. His grip on Yamato tightened, his anger flaring at the mere *idea* one of them caused all this. It was a ludicrous idea. Ridiculous. There was absolutely no way, zero way whatsoever, this was all one of their doing. He knew them too well to know it was impossible. None of them would even consider harming the planet for any reason.

"Then how do you explain what the journal says, Sorun?" Silver asked. "It says that a member of the Freedom Fighters, the same Freedom Fighters that helped free the world from whoever this Eggman is, whatever an egg even is, turned traitor. Master Mogul

said this same traitor is directly responsible for causing the end of the world. I don't have much more than that because of how damaged the journal is." He flipped through some of the pages, and then stopped at a place. "The only detail it describes," he said, gloved finger running down a page, "is that it was a red-eyed Freedom Fighter that did it."

The anger and disbelief Sorun was feeling shifted into confusion. "Come again?" he asked.

"Yeah, says right here. Red-eyed Freedom Fighter," Silver repeated. He looked up at Sorun. "Can't be many like that, right? Maybe you could point them out to me?"

"Well, there's a serious problem with that, Silver."

"What's that?"

"There were no red-eyed Freedom Fighters."

Now Silver looked confused. "What? No, that... that can't be right." He went back to flipping through the journal's pages again. "None of them, really? Not this Bunnie person it mentions a lot?"

"Nope."

"Rotor, Tails, the guy who became the king, Sonic? The queen Sally?"

"No, uh-huh, nadda, none of them," Sorun said, shaking his head. "... Hey, am I in there?"

"Nah, I don't think... no, nothing," Silver said with a shake of his head after flipping through the journal once more.

An admittedly large part of Sorun was disappointed to hear that, and his head dipped a bit as a result. He'd figure him stabbing a god a bunch of times would only get a footnote in history, but not even that? With him making multiple sacrifices that cost him his life that

quite literally saved the whole planet he should have at least got a whole page for that alone. He felt insulted.

"Maybe you're in the missing pages, I don't know," Silver informed him. He still seemed troubled by the earlier detail Sorun mentioned about the red eyes, and looked up at him. "There seriously isn't a single one of them that has red eyes?"

Sorun cupped his chin in thought. "I don't think so, no. Sonic and Amy had green, Tails and Sally had blue... actually, I'm not even sure I know *anyone* with red eyes. Knuckles had purple, Charmy had yellow, Vector had yellow, Espio had yellow, Honey's are more of a gold than yellow, that one guy Razor I met had yellow... man, I know a lot of people with yellow eyes." Sorun glanced up at Silver, who blinked his yellow eyes at him. "It's spreading."

"Sorun, this is serious!"

"Alright, alright." He went back to thinking. "Nah, I'm not getting anybody." He thought harder. "Well, except Shadow, I guess."

Silver made a loud gasp.

"Nope, no no, it ain't him," Sorun instantly denied, shaking his head roughly. "Nope, no way, I already went through the whole evil Shadow thing. It ain't him."

"But if he has red eyes-!"

"Silver, he's not even a Freedom Fighter," Sorun informed him, making the hedgehog back down. "He's this weird secret agent guy for the Overlander government. He did some joint work with the Freedom Fighters back when I was with them, but that was it. He wasn't actually a member."

"Alright, then it isn't him. Master made it pretty clear it was a Freedom Fighter." Silver flipped through a few more pages, but

evidently didn't find more when he made a dismayed sound. "You really don't know anyone else with red eyes?"

"Other than him, no. And Eggman, with his weird black and red eyes, but I don't even need to tell you it ain't him. He's the exact opposite of a Freedom Fighter. He's a... Oppression Offender or something, I dunno."

Disappointment reigned over Silver's features. His shoulders fell, and a long sigh left him as he gazed at the journal's pages. "It doesn't make any sense, though. This is the biggest lead I have, and it's wrong?"

Sorun's mind went to work. "to be fair, 'traitor' doesn't really tell us a lot, because that could mean anything," he argued.

"I don't really see how that makes any sense."

"I don't know, man, it could be a number of things. Maybe somebody got brainwashed and it caused their eyes to turn red, or mind controlled, or it was an evil clone or robot doppelganger, an imposter, something along those lines." As Sorun rattled off possibilities Silver began to look up at him with wide eyes. "Geez, we don't even know who wrote that journal, so for all we know they were mistaken with something or some important detail was lost. You're seriously gonna put all your trust in an incomplete journal you just randomly found?"

"Wow, I... I didn't think about any of that!" The way Silver looked at him, he seemed almost amazed at Sorun. He was practically beaming at the Earthling with those bright eyes of his. "Sorun, you must be some kind of genius or something!"

The compliment did wonders for his ego, and Sorun found himself preening heavily under Silver's praise. "Ah, well, it's nothing too special, just some anime and video game logic," he said, rubbing his knuckles against his chest as a smile grew. "But the fact is," he continued, face turning back serious, "the only thing we have to go on is your master's word and a unreliable source of information that

isn't even complete, Silver. I'm not a detective and even I know that's not nearly enough."

Silver's features tightened. He looked like he wanted to argue, but didn't seem to be able to come up with anything. He slumped in defeat instead and dropped the journal. "You might be right," he admitted. "So what do we do?"

"Well, seeing as we have almost nothing to work with and don't actually know what we're doing..." Sorun made a short hum, and then nodded. "Yeah, I say we do nothing."

"..." Silver stared.

"What?"

"The future's depending on us, and nothing will change if we do nothing... so you want us to do nothing even though we want to save everyone," Silver said, flattening his hands so they were parallel with each other and bouncing them up and down with each point he made. "I'm really hearing that from you?"

"Well yeah, sure, we're gonna do something when something pertinent to the situation pops up, kind of have to address it at some point, but we don't know what we're addressing, when it'll show up, in what form, how to prepare for it, practically nothing unless this traitor thing of yours is legit. Which it probably isn't," Sorun said. "But, like, until then there's literally nothing we can do but just kinda wait around for something to happen. So we'll just do that and improvise along the way."

"The future's riding on us and you wanna wing it!?"

"Dude, you wouldn't believe how far winging it has carried me."

By now Silver looked like he wanted to tear some of his fur out. It wasn't out of frustration for Sorun, though. There was a flicker of understanding on his face, and after a few moment he slumped

forwards in defeat with a sigh. "Yeah, I guess you're right," he mumbled. "It just seems kind of reckless, though, doesn't it?"

"Well, there's nothing to do about it." It was incredibly reckless, but they were in the weeds, as it were. With all the nothing they had at their disposal the wait-and-see approach was really all they had going for them. Even Sorun hated the idea, except for the part where it didn't sound like it required much work, but he couldn't think of a better alternative. "So does that about sum up our plan? Or the lack of one? Go back to the past, do thing, save future, bunch of question marks thrown in? Profit?"

Silver opened his mouth a small bit and squinted a bit. "What?"

"Uh, we're good? Nothing else to talk about, go over? We're set to leave?"

He gave Sorun a nod. "Er, about as could be, I guess."

Grinning, Sorun slapped his knees and rose up off the couch in a standing position. "Well then pack your bags, Silver my man," he said, turning to the hedgehog, "'cause we gotta go back, back to the past, Samurai Jack."

"Again, what?" Silver repeated.

The grin left Sorun's face, and small, stuttering breath left him. "Just... how long until we can go?"

"Huh? What do you mean? We can go right now."

"Right now?" Sorun repeated in surprise. "Like, 'right now' right now? So soon?"

Silver stood up off the couch. "I don't really think soon is a thing with time travel."

"Probably not but, but I mean don't you wanna go say goodbye to Mogul or something?"

"Oh! Yeah, good call." Silver stood up off the couch, and then closed his eyes. After that he just continued to stand there, eyes closed with a slight look of concentration on his face as Sorun gave him an odd look. Before Sorun could make the motion to wave in front of his face he opened his eyes. "Okay, we're good. Let's go."

Sorun blinked a couple of times. He pointed at Silver. "So do you have a telepathy thing going on, or what?"

"Yeah, we- oh, you mean me. No, that's Master's ability. I can't, er..." Silver made a small grin, and began wiggling his fingers around his head. Then he stopped while looking a bit embarrassed. "Or, well, I do have mind powers, but they're not very good and kinda make me sick and-"

"You can only affect physical things, got it," Sorun finished. Silver gave him a grateful nod at the short explanation. "Mogul say anything important?"

"Erm, just goodbye. Safe travels and all that. We talked a bit about this beforehand," he confessed. He cupped his hands together, the orange gem resting in the center. "So... yeah," he said, quietly. "This is it. We're going right now."

"Uh, cool." A second of silence passed where Sorun rubbed the back of his head. "I was joking about the 'pack your bags' thing, but seriously is there anything you wanna bring with us? Memento, toothbrush? Anything?"

Silver shook his head. "No, I'm good." He looked up at Sorun. "What's a toothbrush?"

"God." Sorun lifted a hand and rubbed at his eyes. *"Maybe Mobians have freakishly strong enamel or something. Who am I kidding, I'm gonna have to take this guy to a dentist when we get back. Quack does teeth, right? He sets bones. Teeth are basically just bones on the outside, practically no difference-"*

"If you're talking about the tooth thing I do where I go like this-" Silver said, dragging Sorun from his thoughts. He took his hand away from his face and saw Silver hovering his index finger around his teeth. There was a teal glow around it, "- then yeah, I'm good. Master was... weirdly insistent about self-appearance and grooming techniques raising me. Especially teeth." He hovered his hand over the side of his mouth and leaned in closer. "I think it's because of the tusks he has. He's really sensitive over them," he whispered.

It was a unique person that could make Sorun feel so relieved and at the same time want to strangle them for making him worry so much. "... Silver, just... just do the thing with the crystal already."

Silver nodded. He looked down at the gem in his hands at the same time a glow started to emanate from the object. Soft, translucent coronas of orange, blue, and teal colors began to pulse out from the damaged gem, and a soft, orangish-yellow glow began to spread up his arms.

"Well, alright. Here we go. we're really doing this." Silver's voice sounded higher and more nervous than normal, and he'd made a gulp. "Um, you're gonna wanna grab onto my wrist so you come with me, Sorun. Or, you know, my shoulder. Anywhere on me, really, actually just go ahead and do whatever you're comfortable with-"

Without a word Sorun stepped to Silver's side and loudly clapped his shoulder with his right hand, and then squeezed tight. Silver winced a bit at the force used, but said nothing as he continued working on the Time Stone.

The pulses of light shining out of the gem began picking up in frequency. The orange-yellow glow by now had completely covered both Sorun and Silver, bathing them both in its glow as the gem brightened up the entire room, enough that it was too bright for Sorun to even see Silver's hands. He felt a small buzz humming through his body, like a current being run through him. And then, suddenly, there was a bright light that engulfed both Silver and Sorun.

And then they were gone.

A/N- Small changes to cannon here and there. If you're in the know with the comic lore you know, if not don't worry about it.

Chapter 85

A/N- A little hard confirmation from the author here, but in case there were any lingering doubts the alternate timeline really is gone forever. As in it really was obliterated and we're never, ever going back to it. That is all.

Yeah, I know that aside from the mental toll Sorun accrued erasing all the consequences he committed in that zone goes against what I'm going for here in this story, but that section in particular was always more for showing off the changes in Sorun's character and a vehicle to get to this point more than anything else, among other things.

Recursion Error

Episode 85- Not-So-Lonesome Road

The nice thing about time traveling with Silver and his mystic nonsense rock was how easy it turned out to be. No falling flat on his face after going through to the other side. No tumbling through portals. Not the sheer insanity of falling through whatever the hell that space had been when Sorun traveled back through time using the Yamato.

Nope. None of that with the Time Stone, apparently. Just a quick flash of light, a small buzzing sensation, and both Sorun and Silver were left standing in the same position they had been, with Sorun only feeling the sensation of light movement. It was truly refreshing, and he had half a mind to breath in a deep sigh.

The feeling was torn away from him when he looked around at where they were.

"..." Sorun blinked a few times to make sure he wasn't seeing things, but unfortunately the sight remaining the same even when he was done blinking. They were... he didn't even know where this was. An infinite, boundless space of soft blues, lavenders, and whites as far as the eye could see. No ground, no sky, no sun or stars, no anything. Not even any wind. Just an infinite space of these intermingling colors.

This was most certainly not Mobius.

"Hey, Silver." Sorun turned his head at the hedgehog, who was looking down at his palm. "Silver. Silver, hey. Hey. Hey, Silver." He began poking the Mobian with the tip of his sheathed sword. "Silver. Silver. Silver. This isn't Mobius. Silver what's going on. Silver. Hey. Silver."

Silver's other hand reached out and grabbed the covered blade before it could poke him again. "Please stop that," he requested, eyes still focused down on his open palm. The remains of the Time Stone were lying in his hand, orange glow completely faded and dull, the gem itself fragmented to pieces and its luster all but gone. He slowly turned his hand over to drop the fragments, and as they fell away they turned to dust and scattered away before they even reached his feet.

"Well, that's that," Silver said after a small sigh. "Time Stone's done."

"That's great and all, Silver, but there's the small matter of us being in the middle of what looks like nowhere-"

"Yeah, I know, Sorun, give me a minute." He let go of the sword, and Sorun, obliging the request, chose not to jab him again with it. A small, thoughtful frown overtook Silver's features as he examined their surroundings, and after a minute he made another sigh. "Yeah, I see what happened. This might be a bit of a problem."

A tinge of worry grew in Sorun. "How small's a bit?"

"It's... not too huge," Silver assured Sorun, though he still looked a bit worried. "I guess the Time Stone got a bit wonky since it was so damaged. I can tell you for a fact we *did* go back two hundred years, that's not the problem. It just... kind of screwed up on the location. Master warned me this might happen."

Sorun allowed himself to relax a bit. If it was just a matter of location then it wasn't nearly as bad as he'd hoped. Location they could do. Time was when it got tricky. "Okay, alright, so where are we?" the Earthling asked.

"Hmm..." Humming, Silver took another quick glance around. "Looks like we got sent to the world between worlds."

"The world between worlds," Sorun flatly repeated.

"Mhm. The world between worlds. The empty space in the multiverse where all the other zones reside," he explained. "Which means," he continued, looking down, "this... must be the Cosmic Interstate Highway! The highway that connects every single zone in the multiverse!"

"Wait, what?" Sorun looked down at his feet, and then nearly jumped in shock. The thing they were standing on was... it really was just a normal road one would see on a highway. Black paved asphalt with two yellow lines running through its center. When Sorun looked up the road seemed to go on for forever. Or at least as far as he could see.

Looking closer, he actually saw more of the road in the distance. For as far as his eyes allowed he saw the road winding everywhere, in a myriad of twists and turns and straights, branching off in seemingly infinite directions, so far away that, to Sorun's perception, it seemed impossibly thin.

"What in the... it's an actual, legitimate highway? I thought that name was just a metaphor," Sorun whispered in disbelief. *"Who the hell built a highway that spans a whole multiverse? Where would you*

even get the resources to build...? Sheesh, and I thought a Dyson Sphere would be an impossible thing to build, but shit, nothing's ever gonna top this."

"Well, duh. Of course the Cosmic Interstate Highway is a highway," Silver said, looking at Sorun like he'd just said something incredibly stupid. "What else would it be?"

The shocked, awed look Sorun had held was swapped out with a blank look as he met Silver's eyes. "... You know what, Silver, I really don't know," Sorun said before turning forwards. "So we just got shunted out of our own zone and onto the, uh, the highway?"

"Yeah, looks like it," Silver said with a nod. "... It shouldn't be too difficult to find our way back," he said after a moment's hesitation. "We just gotta follow the road back."

"Yeah, follow the multiverse-spanning road with an infinite number of branching directions, piece of cake," Sorun agreed, flatly. They both turned to look at each other. Silver had a nervous grin on his face while Sorun's own expression remained blank. "Silver, we at least know what zone we're supposed to make our way towards, right?" a hopeful Sorun asked.

The relief he felt when Silver nodded was overflowing. "Yeah, of course. Master Mogul taught me all about this kind of stuff." He looked back out into the infinite expanse. "Our proper zone- er, well, my proper zone, your... anyway, the zone we're shooting for is the Prime Zone."

"Huh. Sounds important," Sorun noted.

"It should. Master Mogul says that our planet is called Mobius Prime, since it's in the Prime Zone, prime meaning it's the zone all other zones are based off of," Silver explained, making Sorun's eyebrows rise. "You could say it's the first universe to ever exist inside the multiverse in that respect. All other zones in the multiverse branch off of that universe. It's the original."

Sorun couldn't even find it in himself to be that surprised. "Yeah, of course that place is the literal center of the multiverse," he grumbled under his breath. Somehow it made all the insane things that happened there seem more sane when put in that light.

Weird to think, though, because that meant even his own zone and Earth was an offshoot possibility of Mobius Prime in the infinite expanse of worlds and possibilities they found themselves in. Probably should have figured; there was a Statue of Liberty there, after all, and the geography was roughly similar. Then again Sorun's zone was so special it didn't even have a connection to the Cosmic Interstate Highway and no connection with the Chaos Force, so... who even really knew what the deal with that was? A cosmic fluke like Finitevus had hypothesized?

Eh. Sorun didn't care enough to dwell on it.

"Alright, well, if the universe we're aiming for is the centermost universe, then all we gotta do is follow the road back to it, right?" Sorun asked. "Theoretically speaking all the roads should lead back to it since it's so important, shouldn't they?"

"I mean, maybe? Can't really say," Silver admitted with a shrug. "I guess we should just get walking and see where the Highway takes us. Maybe we'll find a sign or something along the way."

"A sign. Right," Sorun muttered out with a roll of his eyes. Nonetheless, he fell in and began walking behind Silver. "So how far away do you reckon the Prime Zone is, anyways?"

"I dunno. Could be the next zone we run into, or it could be a few billion lightyears away."

All the breath left Sorun in a loud, wheezy gasp, and he'd stumbled so much he nearly fell flat on his face.

"Welp, guess we better get moving!" Silver proclaimed loudly, sounding awful chipper as he continued walking down the road.

"..." With a defeated groan, Sorun began following Silver again. "Silvs, wait up."

Sorun never expected to grow a liking to Silver so quickly as the both of them traversed an infinite interdimensional highway. He didn't know what to expect, really - the guy seemed decent; Sorun would go as far as to say charming with that "naïve, clueless traveler" vibe he gave off, no doubt due to his lack of contact with modern civilization or people that didn't talk like a living thesaurus. The way he'd flounder here and there and get embarrassed over little things.

More than that he was nice enough to talk to. Pleasant beyond normal standards, really, though Sorun couldn't tell if he was naturally nice or if Mogul raising him to be polite had a hand in it. Nature versus nurture was an argument never really solved, though in the end it mattered little when the end result was Silver was a nice person to talk to. And hey, to Sorun it mattered even less, because the hedgehog really grew on him. Maybe their personalities just meshed that well. Maybe Sorun was glad to finally have a friend he could relate with, what with the whole dead world thing. Glad to talk to someone he could be happy to talk to.

Maybe it was because Silver didn't have that little label that said "this person is directly complicit in abducting me from my world" hanging over his head like most of his other friends.

Whatever the case, Sorun quickly grew to like him. More than he'd expected given the short time they'd known one another. And when the two of them found themselves traversing a road of infinite length to a destination of dubious length, which Sorun was going to colossal lengths trying to ignore, they had little else to do but talk.

"- Wow, so you couldn't talk about it at all?" Silver asked Sorun with widened eyes. "Like, not anything? Words, writing, nothing worked?"

"Yeah, it wasn't a fun time," Sorun said. He'd unconsciously rose a hand to his throat while regaling Silver with his own origin story since

he got the gist of Silver's. Only seemed fair. "I tried so many ways of getting around it, man, but Aurora was really thorough with that curse. As such I was very thorough with the suplex I gave her later on. Among other things," he grumbled out.

"Wasn't that kind of mean, though? Beating them up?"

"Silver, I had a *lot* of stress at the moment."

"Sounds to me like being a Freedom Fighter in general was stressful."

"I retired for a very good reason," Sorun agreed with a nod. "Honestly, it still kind of freaks me out that I can put 'retired Freedom Fighter' on my resumé now."

Silver gave him a quizzical look. "How come?"

"The term 'freedom fighter' had a very different connotation back where I come from," Sorun answered. "Lot less, uh... campy than the experience I had." By a wide margin. Nothing he could ever tell the others, of course, because the details of that fell in the category of horrible shit from Earth Sorun would never speak about on Mobius.

"So your world was under siege by an insane tyrant, too?" Silver gasped out. "Wow, this must be more common than I thought."

Sorun almost laughed out, but then shook his head. "Nah, nothing like that. It's just humanity was all alone over there without any other sapient species, so we had to fight the only other thing there was to fight: ourselves."

"Huh?" Silver didn't seem to understand that. "I don't get it."

"Yeah, I don't really get it, either."

Silver accepted that answer, though he still looked a bit puzzled. "So what was life over there like, anyways?"

"..."

"Hey, Sorun, did you hear?"

Sorun looked up from the textbooks on his desk and at Dave, who was crouching besides his seat. "Hear what?"

"Y'know Marty?"

"That annoying fucking prick always going on and on about sports collectors cards? Had that giant binder full of them?"

"Yeah, him. Somebody robbed his house. He got stabbed and sent to the hospital."

"Oh." Certainly explained why he wasn't at school today. "Well, that sucks." A pause. "We still on for 'Ace Combat 7' multiplayer this weekend?"

Dave nodded. "Mhm, but we gotta invite Jamie to the lobby."

"Jesus fu- why- what the fuck, man, why'd you invite him?"

"What do you mean, why? We needed a third and I thought you liked playing with him?"

"I do 'cause he's a decent pilot in that game, but for fuck's sake, Dave, he's a plane nut. He goes on and on about technical specs for obscure plane shit I'm never gonna retain when all I wanna do is fly the planes I think look cool and have good performance."

"Hence why you fly a Berkut."

"Hence why I fly a Berkut," Sorun agreed. "You fuckin' F-22 main."

With a chuckle, Dave shook his head. "You're just hating because it's a better plane."

"It is not a better plane. I have a K/D ratio with the Berkut that says it is not a better plane."

"Okay, well, if we're basing which is better on that alone-"

"Dave it's too mainstream a plane and it doesn't even look that cool."

"What do you mean not cool? It's the most advanced-looking-"

"Not compared to the ADF-"

"I'm not talking about the fake sci-fi planes in the game, I'm talking about real-world-"

"F-22 doesn't have cool backwards wings, case closed."

"Listen here you little shit-"

A wistful smile had grown on Sorun's face as he contemplated Silver's question. "It was a pretty cool world," he said after a long moment of silence. "I mean, not everywhere, but my town was alright. Most of the time. Usually. If you ignored the bad parts."

"Um... so it wasn't so good?"

"It was home, Silver, and nothing's perfect."

"What you told me sounds significantly worse than a little less than perfect."

"I don't wanna hear this from the guy who until recently was living in the apocalypse."

"..."

"..."

"... Master Mogul told me Mobius' history, so technically speaking we're all living in a-"

" *Post-* post-apocalypse, big difference," Sorun argued. "Apocalypse would imply the complete collapse of civilization due to some major catastrophe. That's you and the future. Post-apocalypse implies the disaster passed and the survivors are picking up the pieces to restart civilization. Post-post-apocalypse is the complete reconstruction of civilization after the catastrophe that knocked out the world. That's the state Mobius was in before whatever happened destroyed the future, which we're trying to prevent," he explained. "So no, Silver, we are not living in the apocalypse. Assuming we ever find our way off of this road, how far to Mobius Prime, anyways?"

Silver, who had been paying rapt attention to Sorun's explanation, gave him a shrug. "I don't know. Maybe that sign ahead will help."

"Sign? What sign?" Following the direction Silver was pointing, Sorun saw what the hedgehog was referring to. He became bewildered at the sight. "What even...?"

There was, in fact, a sign at the end of an oncoming three way junction, the road stopping and going left and right. And posted at the head of the junction was a normal road sign in the form of two white arrows, each pointing down a different direction the road was going. And each sign had words printed on them in big, blocky letters, what Sorun assumed to be the destinations each road lead to. But the words themselves confused him immensely. They stopped in front of the sign, with Sorun reading the signs aloud.

"Rainbow Moon Paradise Zone..." Sorun read off the left arrow, eyes squinting as he moved on to the right arrow, "and... Mystery Noir Zone. What just came out of my mouth?"

"I think these are the names of nearby zones. Like how our zone is the Prime Zone," Silver supplied as he looked at the signs.

"Okay, but why are they named like this and not, I don't know, really long and complicated serial numbers or something?"

Silver shrugged. "I dunno. I guess you'd have to ask whoever's making these signs and roads."

"And who would *that* be?"

Again, Silver shrugged, eliciting an annoyed sigh from Sorun.

"Okay, you know what, whatever, doesn't matter." Sorun turned back to the sign. "So we got a road that leads into something that sounds like it came straight out of 'Sailor Moon', and another one that leads to something that come straight out of 'L.A. Noir'. I dunno about you, Silver, but one of these sounds really appealing and the other one doesn't."

Silver turned away from the sign to look at Sorun. "You wanna visit one of these zones?" he asked. "Why?"

"'Cause... you know, maybe they know the way back?"

A fair amount of doubt settled on Silver's face. "Sorun, the way Master talked about it, zones aren't really common knowledge. I really doubt we're gonna meet someone that actually knows the directions we need just by popping into random zones."

"Yeah, but come on, the alternative is we keep walking on this road potentially forever, and I'm gonna be real honest with you here, Silver, I don't know if I have that kind of patience." Not only that but Sorun was starving and they didn't pack any food. And he didn't know when the last time was that Silver ate. And slim as it may have been, there was an off chance somebody actually knew the way back.

Plus, well... the concept of traveling to different universes sounded cool. Just a bit. And they were already here and lost so it wasn't like it could hurt that much.

"I guess..." Silver hesitantly agreed. He bit down on his lower lip and turned back to the signs. "So we're going left?"

Sorun did a double-take on Silver. "What? No. I wanna go to the noir place."

"But... but you said one was appealing and one wasn't."

"Yeah, I was talking about- Silver, one sounds like it has crime and gritty mysteries and the other one is... is rainbows and moons. And we're guys." It should have been an obvious pick. He didn't see what the problem here was.

But evidently there was a problem, because it looked like Silver disagreed with Sorun. Heavily. Enough that, with a disgruntled look on his face, Silver looked down to kick at his feet all defeated-like. "I don't know why you want to go to a place that sounds like it's filled with crime, but fine. Not like I wanted to see the cool rainbow zone anyways."

Seeing the look of slight disappointment on Silver's face had brought on unwanted feelings in Sorun. Mostly feelings that made him feel bad and feel like a jerk. So after mentally cursing at himself and making a quick decision, he asked, "Would it make you feel better if I let you pick the next world? If there is a next one?"

Maybe swallowing his guilt was worth it to see the hedgehog's face brighten up. "Can I!?" he asked excitedly.

"Er, sure. Next time." Sorun turned down the road leading to the right. "Now come on. Daylight's burning." As he continued walking, Sorun looked up at the infinite expanse of swirling colors above them. "Or... whatever constitutes for light and time in this place, given the, uh, the lack of a sun. And sky. Atmosphere," he muttered. *"The hell are we breathing?"*

His excitement not diminishing in the slightest, Silver fell in besides Sorun, the wide smile never leaving his face. "This is really cool,

Sorun! I've never been to a whole new zone before!" he nearly yelled out. "You think there'll be other people there!?"

Not nearly as excited as Silver, more contemplative as he continued looking up, Sorun gave a noncommittal hum. "Uh-huh, maybe."

"And things to see, and buildings that aren't in pieces like all those postcards I used to collect!?"

"Mmhm, mmhm."

"And maybe some food? 'Cause we've been out here a while and, well, I'm kind of hungry."

"We'll see when we get there."

"Okay, great, 'cause I was really starting to get worried about that. Hey, Sorun, you think when we get there..."

Hours later

Within the infinite expanse of this empty space, in addition to the infinitely vast, sprawling road that ran through it, were motes of light that ends of the branches of the road ran into. From a distance these lights seemed more like specks of white than anything else. Depending on one's position on the road most were so far away they were invisible. If one were to walk up close to one they'd be greeted by a great, shapeless barrier, seemingly with no definable end or shape. To those initiated these barriers of light were defined as the borders that separated and contained zones; impassable passageways that lead off to lands and worlds unknown.

Or at least as unknown as could be provided one decided not to read the signs on the Highway.

Upon one of these barriers walked two figures: a pale human in a blue coat and a white-furred Mobian, both laughing at something

said between themselves as they came to a stop in front of the barrier. Silver was hunched over forwards, laughing while holding his stomach while Sorun was laughing in a much more subdued manner, shoulders shaking with a moderate smile on his face.

"Ah ha ha... ahh, man, that's a riot," Sorun sighed out as they came to a stop at the end of the road. "Now what's this all about?"

The end of the road was just that: an abrupt end of the street, cut off and hanging in the vast space they were located in. Leading right into a giant, white pulsating barrier that looked like it was made of light itself. Massive in scale, enough that looking up or to the sides Sorun couldn't see where it ended or began.

Said a lot for how big this place was that they hadn't even noticed this thing until they'd gotten close. He didn't know if it was due to some optical illusion, or if space here was a bit jank in some way.

"So what's the deal with the giant fog gate?" Sorun asked once both his and Silver's laughter had calmed down. "Is this the entranceway into this zone?"

"Heh... entranceway?" Silver repeated, confused. "What entranceway?"

"Like... into the zone," Sorun elaborated, turning to Silver. "Doorway, gateway, whatever."

"Oh, zones don't have entranceways or anything like that, Sorun," Silver explained. He seemed a bit surprised Sorun was even asking the question. "People aren't supposed to do what we're doing. You know, traveling outside of zones, breaching other zones. Like, at all. Zones weren't meant to be entered and exited like a normal room."

"Well, I don't see a rulebook anywhere." Sorun walked up close enough to the barrier his nose was nearly touching. He reached his right hand out and poked it. A ripple of energy ran along its surface from where he touched it, like disturbing water, but the barrier didn't

so much as distend in the slightest no matter how hard he poked it. "We're gonna be inside a planet if we go in here, right? We're not just gonna end up floating in space?"

"Sorun, I don't know what's gonna happen if we go in there. I've never done this before," Silver said. "I'm not even sure we can do this. That barrier looks pretty solid."

In response, Sorun lifted Yamato up. "I got a pretty good key right here."

"Uh..." An unsure expression crossed Silver's face as Sorun unsheathed the katana. "Are you sure about this?"

"Nope." Sorun stabbed the blade into the barrier. It slipped in with no effort. "But I'm doing it anyways."

In Sorun's defense, if every zone had a barrier like this, then that meant the Prime Zone would have one as well. So they had to figure out right now if entering zones via Yamato cutting them a way in was even feasible. But Sorun didn't want to worry Silver by telling him all his fears about this going horribly wrong. Worry him that Sorun had no idea what he was doing and was mainly going off guesswork. Worry that they might end up walking into a sun or black hole or something, because he honestly had no idea what would happen by doing this.

No, Sorun wasn't sure about this at all. But he'd gone too far by now to be set back by things like being unsure.

The sword was sliced downwards, creating a large slit in the barrier big enough for the pair of them to enter. It'd only remained open for a short time, though. Around ten seconds later the slit made in the barrier closed in on itself and sealed back up. Sorun hummed at the sight, while Silver silently watched.

"Self-repairing, huh?" Sorun mused. "Alright, I guess we just have to jump in after I open it up."

The hedgehog made a quiet sound as he gazed at the fog gate. He was fidgeting slightly in place, glancing between the sword and the barrier with an uneasy look. "Sorun, I'm not sure-"

"Silver, odds are we're gonna have to do this to even get back to Mobius Prime when we finally find it." Once more, Sorun stabbed Yamato into the barrier. "Sometimes you just gotta take a leap of faith, you know? And also I don't have any better ideas. If you do then by all means."

Silver shook his head, making a defeated look as he stepped forwards towards the new entrance Sorun was making. "I guess I don't," he mumbled out. "You're coming in with me?"

"Of course I am," Sorun assured him as he pulled the sword out. He only managed to push it halfway back into the sheath before he noticed Silver holding his hand out to him. "Really, man?" Sorun asked. When the hand wasn't taken away, he made a loud sigh and grasped Silver's hand with his right one. He felt like making a snappy remark, but seeing Silver calmed down from the contact made Sorun hold off on telling him off.

After the two nodded at each other, they both leapt in through the hole in the barrier.

"Man, I'm on a roll with these portals," was Sorun's first thought as both his and Silver's feet touched down on what looked like a sidewalk. Traveling through that barrier hadn't even felt like going through a portal - there had just been a bright light that momentarily blinded him, some rushing wind, and suddenly they were here, standing on a side walk.

Relief was first. Relief they'd ended up standing on a planet, a civilized one at a momentary glance, and not somewhere in space or some barren wasteland. Sorun didn't know who to thank for that: his luck, the wonky rules these zones seemed to abide by, Yamato doing things with that portal to ensure they wouldn't be harmed entering it,

something else perhaps. Whatever the case, he was just glad they managed to live long enough to appreciate it.

Immediately familiar sounds hit Sorun's ears. Sounds he hadn't heard in what seemed like forever that caused a bit of nostalgia to well up in him. Distant, unintelligible chatter, the sound of cars, honking horns and distant sirens. All around them were tall buildings. Fully intact buildings, too, not the hollowed husks from Silver's future, and Sorun could actually see people in some of them through the windows. They'd found themselves right in the midst of a city. Even the smell seemed familiar to Sorun. Brisk air mixed in with the unpleasant aroma of the nearby cars.

Smelled like home.

Would have looked like home, too, if it weren't for one crucial detail missing.

"Why is everything in black and white?" Sorun asked, somewhat dumbfounded by what he was seeing. It was like something had sucked the color out of the world: everything from the signs to the traffic lights, to even the sky, the cars, and nearby Mobian citizens and their clothes. Everything in the world was grayscale, with not a speck of color to be seen except for black, white, and varying shades of gray.

It was extremely jarring to Sorun, to say the least, who was having a hard time not being freaked out at the sight. Even his own skin and clothes were grayscale now. Silver, meanwhile, didn't seem as visually concerned as Sorun as he examined himself.

"I don't actually think I'm seeing a difference," Silver said as he examined his own arm. His arm that, for all intents and purposes, was still the exact same shade of white. A flat look from Sorun, followed by him clearing his throat, caused Silver to look up at him. His now-gray eyes widened at the sight of Sorun. "Oh, yeah, there it is, I see what... you... mean..."

He'd trailed off once Silver had gotten a good look around at where they were actually standing. His eyes had widened up to the size of saucers, and his head was whipping left and right so fast Sorun was worried he was going to accidentally twist his own neck. But he seemed to be fine if the slow gasp that was slowly leaving Silver's throat said anything.

"Oh my gosh, Sorun, look at all this!" Silver exclaimed. He wildly waved his arm at the nearest building, looking like he was going scream in joy at one of the most mundane sights Sorun had ever seen. "The buildings aren't in pieces! And look how clean everything is!"

Sorun's eyes trailed down to a particularly grimy part of a nearby corner, near the ground. "Um-"

"And all the cars aren't covered in rust and they're moving around! The streets and sidewalks aren't torn apart, and- and look at that guy!"

With vigor that put even Sorun off, Silver pointed out to a Mobian in a suit on the other side of the street from them. He had a briefcase in one hand and was giving both Silver and Sorun an odd look.

Awkwardly, Sorun waved at him. "Hello there," he awkwardly called out, and then turned to Silver after lightly jabbing him in the ribs. "Silver, cool it, I'm pretty sure we just appeared out of thin air in front of all these people."

"But-but-but everything here is so *different* , Sorun," Silver reiterated as he turned to him. "It's- there's noise everywhere, and this really weird smell-"

"Smell's normal, don't worry about it," Sorun assured him, "but look, I get it, it's really exciting and new for you but we can't really focus on that, alright?"

The awed look Silver had on was shocked out of him by the reminder given by Sorun. The boundless energy his eyes had held left as abruptly as it'd came; sadness flickered over his features, and then he thankfully returned to having a normal expression while giving Sorun a short nod. "Yeah, I get it. It's just-"

"There'll be plenty of time to sort through this kind of stuff when we're back home, alright?" Sorun assured him. "But really, there's more important things to worry about. Like why everything is in black and white." Sorun looked back down at his arms. "Seriously, do colors just work differently in every single zone, or what?"

"I dunno. But, um..." Silver fidgeted around for a bit again, taking one more quick glance at their surroundings before looking back at Sorun. "Weren't we here for directions?"

"Directions. Right." Sorun gave a quick nod and looked away from his arms and at Silver. "Idea?"

Looking left and upwards, Silver pointed up at something. "Well, maybe this place can help," he suggested as Sorun looked towards where he was pointing. "It says it's a detective's office. From all the old books I dug up in the future detectives are supposed to be these weird people that talk in long-winded sentences in the rain and solve mysteries while breathing on sticks they set on fire, right?"

"I'd say that's a stereotype, but I'm pretty sure we just literally walked into one," Sorun said. His eyes narrowed at the sign they were looking up at. "Oh, you gotta be... Sonic's Detective Agency?"

That's what the sign said, at least. Emblazoned on the front a small, two-story building they were in front of. There was a logo of an eyeball next to the sign, too, but because color apparently didn't exist in this universe Sorun couldn't tell what color it was. Probably green.

He didn't know how to feel at this. He should have probably guess there'd be a Sonic here, but what were the odds they'd appear this

close to one? And of all the alternate versions of people he knew in Mobius Prime to become a detective in a detective-themed world if the name said anything why *him* ?

"Motherfucker, I can't get rid of this guy no matter where I go," Sorun silently seethed as he looked up at the sign. *"Guy gets to be a hero one place, king in another, now a cool detective?"*

While Sorun stood there, silently glaring at the sign, Silver spoke up. "I mean it's a good idea, right?" he asked. "Asking a detective for directions? If anybody would know it'd be this world's Sonic, right?"

"... *Mmm* maybe," Sorun breathed out, voice nearly a hiss. With how multiverse worked and how literally anything was possible there was no telling anything about this Sonic compared to the one he knew. If he was in the know about zones or not, if he was even as influential in world events as his- as Sonic Prime. Maybe he was a world-famous detective in this world or he was a no-name shamus. And either-or didn't tell Sorun if he knew about zones or not.

Well, no matter what the best way to find out was ask, and there weren't any better candidates standing around.

"Okay, uh... alright, here's what we'll do," Sorun began. A quick scan around revealed something about a block away that Sorun could see - a nearby petrol station with a convenience store. "Okay, Silver, I want you to go stay at that... it's called Schnell? Really? Is nothing sacred?"

"Sorun?"

"Okay that gas station over there, Silver. Need you to wait for me over there," Sorun instructed. "Just, um, just look around while I'm busy, pick out whatever food you want. Don't actually take anything, though, just look around and wait for me to get back and we'll grab some stuff for the road, alright?"

Right as Sorun finished speaking, Silver's stomach began rumbling. "I am getting kind of hungry," he noted as he placed a hand on his stomach. "Um, Sorun, what's past food like?" he asked. "Like, um... like what am I looking for? And what's... you know, the process for getting it? How does that work?"

"Don't worry about it."

"But don't we have to buy-?"

"Silver, don't worry about it." Sorun placed a hand on the hedgehog's shoulder and gave him an assuring look. "I'll be in and out, five minutes, ten max, come back to you and help out, alright? Just trust me on this."

"O... kay, I trust you." Nervously, Silver turned back towards the gas station. "Ten minutes max?"

"Maybe not even that." By now Sorun had already started climbing the steps up towards the detective agency's front door. He turned around at the doors to give Silver a small wave. "Look, it'll be fine, just take a look around in there. I won't be long."

Nodding, and it was a rather stiff nod mixed with an unsure expression, Silver turned back around and began to walk towards the gas station. He'd jumped when a car had driven past him on the street, and then seemed to give up on something and decided to just use his powers to float up and towards the store, garnering more than a few stares from onlookers. Sorun facepalmed himself as a result.

"Yeah, the flying hedgehog won't cause any questions, no siree. No questions at all, like how the hell I'm supposed to feed us when we're broke." Sorun's hand dropped away from his face. He stood there for a few seconds to think, and then made a heavy sigh. *"I'll figure it out, I'll fucking figure it out. Detective first."* He looked down at Yamato. *"Sword might be a bit too conspicuous."*

He transmuted the sword back into a Chaos Emerald. Due to where they were it'd lost its blue color and turned into a glowing, dark gray gem. It also didn't feel any less conspicuous than a katana seeing as it was a giant, glowing gem.

"... Fucking hell, fine, I just gotta be quick about this," Sorun thought to himself as he entered the building.

It wasn't that Sorun was paranoid. Paranoia would mean he was suspicious without good cause. And as Sorun walked his way through the short halls of the small building he was in, he was not filled with unfounded fears. Because the fear he was filled with was completely sensible and justified.

He was beginning to look at things in retrospective now, and already Sorun was questioning his own choices. He didn't know what conditions in this world were like, if powers were the norm and everybody would pass it off like in Mobius Prime or if here it would call down some government response because of Silver being so casual with his flying. Was there a government? They were in industrialized city, so maybe. Fears for if there were people here that could actually point them in the right direction or if this was a waste of time. If he was gonna walk outside and find the place surrounded b agents or something or if he'd go out to find Silver in some situation with someone.

This all took precedent in front of the fact Sorun was genuinely considering robbing somebody just so Silver didn't go hungry.

The fact remained there were too many unknowns. Literally, just too many unknowns because they were in a whole alternate universe they knew nothing about. Not the social customs, rules, history and behaviors to ignore, none of it. And with every second that ticked by Sorun was regretting his decision more and more.

"'Oh it'll be cool man, cool noir-themed world, it'll be neat to see we should really go check it out,' man what the hell is wrong with me?"

he mentally berated himself. There was a door at the end of the hall. It was made of frosted glass and had Sonic's name on it. Office door, had to be. *"No, we had to come here,"* Sorun reminded himself as he approached the door. *"Needed directions and food, remember? Should've listened to Silver and went to the 'Sailor Moon' world. Would that have been better or worse than here? Goddammit."*

He heard some muffled chatter as he approached the door. The door itself was unlocked, thankfully, though Sorun had only opened it halfway to peek into the room. It was immediately clear it was an office of sorts; he'd go as far as to say it was the most stereotypical detective's office he'd ever seen. Half-draped, open windows in the back, a cluttered desk, a ceiling fan that didn't seem to work, there was even a rack in the back full of trench coats and hats.

Of course there was also *him* . Even without the color to identify him Sorun could recognize that cocky look anywhere. Maybe it was universal. The trench coat and fedora was new. On him it seemed to magnify his smugness and the irritation Sorun felt just being near him. He was sitting behind that cluttered desk of his, the receiver of a rotary phone up to his head. He'd glanced up towards Sorun when he poked his head in, and then nodded to him before turning his attention back to the phone.

"Mm, yeah, that's real great. Say, listen, a client just walked into the office, and this one's lookin' a bit more off than normal. Just one of those things, you know how it is," the detective said into the phone as he waved Sorun in. "Yeah, I got it. Tell him I said hi."

The receiver went dead, and Sonic hung the phone up. He leaned back in his chair afterwards, steepling his fingers as he watched Sorun fully enter the room. "Sorry about that," he apologized. "Secretary's out at the moment. Family issues."

Well, there went half of Sorun's remarks he'd been planning. "'S alright, listen, I need help."

"Ha. You and half the city," Sonic said as he gestured to the empty chair opposite of him. "Someone walks into this office, though, and it's always more than a particularly peculiar problem they need help with."

"... Uh-huh." Sorun slowly sat down in the chair. "And I seem like one of those people, do I?"

"The look ya got on says it all. That doe-eyed look that's screaming at me you're lost and don't know what's going on, the nervous expression crying out for help, it's as easy to read as a book." Sonic clicked his tongue and, with his hands still clasped, pointed his index fingers at him. "The fact I don't even know what you are says a lot, too."

"Oh, humans not a thing here?" Sorun wondered aloud. "Whatever, doesn't matter, don't worry about that part. In all that nonsense word salad you just fed me you were right about one thing: I am lost."

"Aren't we all?" The chair Sonic was sitting in swiveled around so that he was facing the window. "It's not too uncommon a story I hear."

A sigh was growing in Sorun's throat as he pinched at his nose. "Please don't-"

"This is the kind of city where getting lost is more common than you'd think. Much more common." The detective rose up out of the chair and made his way to the window. Sorun made a sigh. "Whether it's loosing their way, or losing someone or something, everyone here gets lost one way or another. Seen it a million times in this line of work, like a bad show on the radio going on repeat." He dragged a gloved finger down the window's glass. "Just like the radio some stories end well, others not so well. Part of reality they managed to get right, I suppose. Trick I've found, though, isn't finding what you lost. It's about not losing yourself."

"It's fucking amazing how no matter what iteration of Sonic I meet I always wanna smack his teeth out." If he'd known he'd be walking into a cheesy noir detective monologue straight out of a trashy novel Sorun wouldn't have bothered coming in here. Even if he was desperate for those directions. It was getting less and less worth it by the second. *"Wait, what the...?"*

It was there. On the desk. A glass ashtray for cigarettes. Except instead of cigarettes and ash there was just a fucking chili dog sitting on it. Didn't even fit on the whole fucking ashtray.

"Alright, I might actually kill him," Sorun decided. *"Oh, wait, what's this now...?"*

Next to the abomination sitting on a glass pedestal it didn't even fit on was an open envelope. An envelope that had a notable stack of bills spilling out of it. Bills of the monetary type.

"Payment for a recent job? Something else? Maybe this wasn't a waste of time."

"- Sometimes I'd like to say there's nothing new under the sun with how long I've been on the job, but this city has a way of surprising you at every corner-"

"Christ, he's still going." A loud clearing of Sorun's throat thankfully halted whatever detective Sonic was going on about so he had a chance to speak. "Okay, dude, that's fascinating. I don't really care. I just need directions."

"Directions, is it?" He turned back to Sorun. "A strange-looking person walks in with the most expensive-looking beaut of a gem I've ever seen and asks the most renown detective in town just for directions? The case just gets curiouser and curiouser." He sat down in his seat and re-steepled his hands as he met Sorun's eyes. "So what's the story, huh? Alien, prince of a long-lost civilization with a mystical artifact, what am I dealing with here?"

"None of that, listen, can you just tell me how to get to a certain zone?"

Sonic leaned back in his chair. "Zone, huh?" he repeated. "Which zone? One of the internment zones, the demilitarized zones, radiation zones? Places like that are a world over, friend. Problems here are a lot more tame than the ones across the ocean. And as weird as you look you don't seem like a scavver digging around irradiated ruins for Yesterage artifacts to sell off," he said, taking a look at Sorun's coat. "Clothes are too fine."

"No, I- wow, there's a lot to unpack there," a stunned Sorun mumbled. "But no, not that kind of zone. I need to get to Mobius Prime."

Sorun's fear grew when Sonic's eyes grew confused. "Mobius Prime?"

"Yeah, Mobius Prime." Sorun waved his wrist around when the detective continued to give him a blank stare. "Uhhh, the central zone? Original zone? Prime Zone? None of this ringing any bells?"

Sonic shook his head. "'Fraid not, friend, 'fraid not."

"... You don't know what zones are," Sorun said with a defeated sigh. It was a long shot to begin with, he supposed. Silver himself warned Sorun zones weren't common knowledge and nobody probably had answers for him. And if this world's Sonic didn't know then nobody probably did.

So dead end, then. A waste of time. He couldn't point them the right way.

"Never quite seen someone so disparaged without even knowing what I said to put them off," Sonic said after noting Sorun's now-slumped figure.

"Yeah, uh... yeah, don't worry about it," the teen muttered out. He gripped the Emerald in his hand tighter. A few gray sparks danced over his hand. "Thanks for taking the time to hear me out, but there's nothing you can do for me."

"Huh? Are you sure?" Sonic asked. A gray phantom in Sorun's image appeared behind him. "Uh, okay, listen, I didn't mean to put you down so hard you'd try and drop the case altogether. Give me some time to ask around and-"

The Doppelganger reached out and pulled down the curtains on the window, disappearing in the same movement. The small ruffled, clattering sound they made caused Sonic to stiffen in his seat, and then turn around towards the window. The moment his back was turned Sorun reached out, grabbed a handful of the money sticking out of the envelope on the desk, and then quickly stuffed it into his pocket.

"Huh, darn curtain. Been meaning to replace that." Sonic turned back to Sorun, who was already halfway out of his seat. "Sorry about that. You sure you don't want to reconsider?"

"Super sure," Sorun assured him as he pushed the chair in. "If anything comes up though, I promise you I will not hesitate for even a moment to come back and see you. But that being said, my problems are a bit out of depth for a detective." He turned around towards the door. "It's out of depth for me, too, and I'm right in the middle of all it."

So the detective angle was a bust. Utterly and completely. Bad news for Sorun and Silver since it still meant they were hopelessly lost, but hey, at least now they wouldn't starve for the foreseeable future. However long that would last.

An admittedly large part of Sorun was intensely worried over the whole thing, but there wasn't much to be done about it. Right now he

was just worried about the fact he was about to open the front doors to Sonic's building and the men in black would swarm him.

He'd been ready to fight the moment he'd opened the doors. He had a firm grip on the Emerald, ready to stop time at a moment's notice the instant he saw anything even slightly out of the ordinary once he opened the doors. The fears turned out to be unfounded, though: there weren't any black vans and Mobians in suits on the sidewalk outside or the streets. No cops except for a traffic cop in the distance, nothing.

"Too paranoid? No." He'd breathed a sigh of relief at the sight, but he couldn't shake the wary feeling he felt. He couldn't stop his arm from shaking, either, or even still his rapid heartbeat. The urge to leave this place wouldn't leave him.

He began moving. According to detective Sonic, humans weren't even a thing in this world, at least as far as he knew. He was going to attract unwanted attention the longer he lingered here, that was just a given. And he and Silver didn't have time to deal with nonsense in a world they weren't even staying at.

So he'd went to the convenience store he'd pointed Silver to earlier. To Sorun's relief he managed to see him through one of the windows on approach. He almost laughed at the sight when he entered the store itself: the white Mobian still had that wide-eyed look and was going around the store like a kid in a candy shop with that amazed look on his face. He himself barely got three steps in before Silver was upon him, holding a prepacked sandwich.

"Sorun! Sorun, look!" He excitedly held the sandwich out for Sorun to see. "They got this stuff here called sliced bread! We don't have that in the future."

Sorun made a small smile, and it didn't even feel forced. Seeing Silver excited over bread of all things helped relieve the tension he felt. "That's great, man," he said, patting Silver on the shoulder.

"Yeah, Master always tried making bread but it never really turned out- wait, what happened with Sonic?"

Sorun's face fell, as did Silver's when he saw. "Yeah, he didn't know what I was talking about when I asked about Mobius Prime," he answered.

"Oh..." Visibly deflating at the news, Silver asked, "So what now?"

"We keep going, I guess." Sorun dug into his pocket and drew out the money he stole from Sonic. "The guy was nice enough to give us some money for food for the road, though, so there's that at least."

"That's great!" Silver's wide smile returned. "So, what should we grab?"

"Hm." Sorun looked down to the hand holding the money. It only now dawned on him it was bills stamped with hundreds that he'd stolen out of Sonic's office. If the fact all the cars outside looked like they were from fifties Earth said anything that was probably more than he thought it was. Assuming inflation was the same.

Too bad.

"Whatever you want, Silver."

"... This shit's real?"

He always thought it had just been a gag in a cartoon, but no, here it was. Sitting on a shelf right in front of Sorun, in all its canned glory. If that word was even applicable to this thing.

"Canned bread," Sorun mumbled out as he examined the can. "Does... does it at least expire slower than normal bread?" He grabbed the can and turned it around to examine the labels on the back. "Two years? Holy shit, that's pretty good."

Should he get it? Probably should. Not telling how long Silver and him were gonna be on the road. Better not be years, but normal bread expired in a manner of days whereas this would hopefully last them the whole trip. Plus they could afford it.

Boy could they afford it.

"Hey, Sorun, what about this?" The teen looked up from the can as Silver approached him with another can. "It says this soup-"

Sorun grabbed the can out of Silver's hand and put it on the closest available open space on the nearest shelf.

"Sorun?"

"Soup is a cardinal sin, Silver. We don't partake in it."

"What?"

"I don't like soup."

"... Okay, but can I at least have it?"

"No."

Silver gave him an odd look. "Why not?"

"I don't like it being near me."

"Oh, come on!" The odd look turned into a disbelieving, frustrated one as Silver threw a hand up. "Is this a past thing? Is food so common in your era that everyone's this picky about it?"

It kind of was, even in New Mobotropolis, but he didn't want to admit it. "Look, we don't even need the soup." Sorun held his own can up to Silver's eyes. "See? Canned bread. No insane mixing of solids and liquids and calling it food. Pure solid."

Silver didn't seem very confident about the can. He shied away from it and took a step back. "But it's not the sliced bread I want to try."

"It's totally sliced. Just, you know, cylindrically," Sorun said. "And we can take this and the sandwiches, so what's your problem?"

Silver's eyes lowered down, towards the plastic basket with its handles looped around Sorun's left arm that was carrying the Chaos Emerald. He gave a very questionable look at the contents Sorun filled it with. "My problem is that the stuff you're picking out isn't, well, the healthiest looking?"

Sorun took visible affront to the accusation that his collection of chip bags, candies, other assorted junk foods and soda bottles wasn't conducive to long-term survival. It was the glass kind of soda bottles, too. Much too fancy to pass up.

"It's to balance out all the long-lasting healthy stuff you're picking," Sorun defended. "Besides, I lasted on stuff like this for a large part of my life and I turned out fine. Also it's been like seven or eight months since I've had stuff like this and the withdrawals started coming back when I saw them." The Chao Cola had helped stave that off and ween Sorun off of those cravings, but by god did he miss Mountain Dew. Fucking nukes.

Silver gave Sorun a concerned look. "That doesn't sound healthy."

"It isn't," he agreed. "I don't care. And a single road trip's worth of junk food isn't gonna kill me." He tossed the canned bread in the basket and started walking past Silver. "It'll be fine, don't worry about it."

"Uh... if you say so." Silver turned around and started following Sorun. "But I was counting that money this zone's Sonic gave us and compared it to the prices to all the stuff we're buying and we're gonna have a lot left over, so maybe after we buy this we can go to a real store? Maybe even get some bags or something to help carry all this?" They both stopped, with Sorun turning to face Silver. "I just

don't want to be rude since I'm not very sure this currency'll be good in other zones," Silver continued, "and he gave us a lot and I don't want to send the wrong message by not making the most of it, you know what I mean?"

Sorun did, even if Silver was completely wrong. But he also did have a point. Even if Sorun didn't want to linger around any longer than he had to because he didn't know how long they had before Sonic called the cops. Or found them, which he very likely could since he was a detective. On second thought he wasn't very thrilled with this idea.

"Can't you just use your telekinesis to carry everything?" Sorun asked in a hopeful voice.

"No!" Silver shook his head. "You know how exhausting it'd be for me to lug all this stuff around for however long we're gonna be traipsing around the multiverse!?"

"I don't know, dude, I'm not a psychokinetic like you."

"Well, it's exhausting," Silver informed him. "I'm also kind of sure we can't keep these baskets since they're the store's, so we kind of have to do something about it."

Once again, Silver had a point. Sorun couldn't even find it in himself to be begrudging over it.

The backpack hung heavily on Sorun's shoulders. Mostly because Silver had loaded it down with water bottles they'd bought to stave off dehydration. Largely because since all the snacks Sorun bought were so light he got saddled with the water while Silver's backpack had all the actual food in it, and the emotional turmoil gained from the unfairness of it all still wore heavy on Sorun.

Thankfully the proper grocery store Silver had wanted to visit hadn't been too far away from the convenience store, so Sorun hadn't

found himself protesting all that much during the trip. Exiting the large store where they'd procured the backpacks, as well as the food and water, Sorun couldn't help but keep glancing down all the nearby roads.

Plenty of busy people. No cops. No hedgehog in a trench coat. World was still black and white and it was really starting to get on Sorun's nerves.

"Well, Sorun, I think we're as prepared as we're gonna be," Silver said to him as he readjusted the straps on his shoulder. "That being said, we still have a few coins leftover from Sonic. You think we should head back to his office to give them back? I at least want to thank him for all the help he gave us."

"I think he's busy with detective stuff. We shouldn't bother him." Sorun turned his head at Silver. "Keep the coins as a souvenir or something."

"Sure, I guess that works." Shrugging, Silver put the coins inside the cuffs of his gloves. Sorun still wasn't sure how he kept putting stuff in there, if there were pockets inside his gloves or some kind of trick he was using. "So now it looks like our only problem left is getting back to the Cosmic Interstate Highway."

"I gotcha." The gem held in his left hand transformed into his familiar katana. "Just one sec here."

"And you're sure this is gonna work?" Silver asked as Sorun pulled the sword out.

"Gone to more impossible places." Quite literally, in Sorun's case. With all the trouble he had to go through to get back to the original timeline, slipping into the world between worlds was practically nothing.

All that was needed was that Sorun had physically been standing on the Highway, after all, and because of that he could remember how

to make a portal to go back. Or maybe more accurately was that Yamato remembered how to go back if Sorun had been there; he honestly wasn't sure.

He had almost laughed out loud at the question, though. Could he get back to the Highway that was cut off from them due to universal boundaries? Things like that were nothing to the him and the Yamato.

"There we are." The portal was cut open and hovering in front of them. "Now can we please go back to the world of saturated colors?"

Silver nodded, and even grinned a bit at Sorun's words. He was a bit hesitant in entering it, though, but after poking a foot through the portal he'd taken the dive and stepped through it entirely. Sorun had taken one last glance over his shoulder at the black and white city, and then decided he couldn't get out of here fast enough and followed Silver through the portal.

There was no holding the sigh of relief Sorun felt when the familiar sight of the Cosmic Interstate Highway and the boundless space it inhabited and, most importantly, *color* flooded his vision. One for easing his worries for whether they could go to and from zones and the highway, and another for finally getting out of that zone. The zone that, as long as Sorun could help it, he would never, ever return to ever again.

Silver seemed to be in a similar state of amazement as Sorun, going as far as to look around with a wide smile, laughing a bit. He turned towards Sorun as he began hastily closing the portal, exclaiming, "Wow, you actually managed to do it!"

"What? You doubted me?" Sorun asked, mock hurt in his voice as the portal was closed off. "I told you I could do it."

"Heh, yeah. That sword of yours really is amazing. I wouldn't be surprised if it could..." Silver trailed off as his eyes turned down

towards the sword. A thoughtful look crossed his face. "Hey, Sorun? Why can't you just use the sword to make us a portal back to Mobius Prime?"

"Oh, because I..." Sorun stopped mid-sentence. He blinked. "Huh." He held Yamato up. *"Oh fuck, did I just rob somebody for no reason?"*

Dammit, he hadn't seriously made such an oversight, had he? He hadn't really forgotten... yes, he realized with a sigh, he had. He had forgotten he could probably just make a portal back home with Yamato.

It was with a barely-suppressed grumble Sorun held the sword back up. On the bright side their hopeless situation just got a lot more hopeful, but with it came the growing guilt Sorun began to feel over the money he'd stolen from detective Sonic. He wouldn't have done it if they could just go straight back home; hell, he wouldn't have bothered with them invading that zone to begin with. Maybe he could go back and dump everything they'd bought off at his office, it was mostly food anyway, so provided he ate it all it wouldn't *technically* be a waste-

Sorun frowned when he stabbed the sword forwards. Nothing had happened. No metal blade disappearing in the space in front of him as he breached dimensional barriers, no blue light or energy sparks. It wasn't working.

"Er, Sorun?" Silver asked as Sorun tried stabbing forwards again. "What's the matter?"

Eyes furrowed in concentration, Sorun tried stabbing forwards a third time. No luck. "I can't find it," he grunted in effort as he tried a fourth time.

"Er... try harder?"

With a frustrated growl, Sorun tried a fifth time. Still nothing. He didn't know what he was doing wrong - he was doing the exact same thing he always did whenever he used Yamato to teleport somewhere. Funnel energy through the sword, project his will onto it and think of where he wanted to go, let the sword do the rest as it cut through space and time...

He could *feel* the destination, too. It was there. He knew it was there; he'd physically stood in that zone. It was like trying to grasp at some intangible shape in pitch darkness, but he knew the destination was there. But he couldn't lock on to it.

With a defeated sigh, Sorun sheathed the sword. "It ain't working," he informed Silver. "I don't know what's going on. It's just not working."

Silver grew visibly disheartened at hearing that. The hope that had grown on his face had immediately fallen away. "Aw, man... is the sword broken or something?"

With a shake of his head, Sorun said, "No, I think... maybe there's something different about traveling to zones compared to traveling to different locations inside a single zone. Cutting through multiple planes of space instead of a single one, I don't..." Still frustrated, Sorun glanced down at Yamato. "I can *feel* the zone, it's there. It's definitely there. I can't feel any other ones except that one and..." He paused and let power run through the sword again. "... Two others, I feel two others. One really close by, I think that's the zone we just left, the other one, it's..."

Sorun's face screwed in concentration as he felt out the third location. He caught a glimpse of how far it was.

He nearly dropped to his knees.

There wasn't a scale to describe just how distant this third location was. It was a distance so vast it was nearly incomprehensible, and he felt his head throb from just trying to conceptualize the distance. It

was a place so far that Silver's earlier estimate for how Mobius Prime could be billions of lightyears away seemed like a joke; like it didn't matter. Because the location he was focusing on was such a sizeable distance away that the difference between lightyears and millimeters seemed negligible.

And more than that it felt disconnected. The pitch-black void he felt his mind feel around in, trying to connect to the Prime Zone and the Mystery Noir Zone, what Sorun assumed to be his power's and mind's best attempt at conceptualizing the multiversal space they all inhabited, it felt like this third place wasn't even inside that. That it was so far removed not even the multiverse itself housed it. A zone sitting in dead space, in endless void beyond the edge of nothingness.

"Is that where Earth is?"

He cut off the power flowing through Yamato. A few dull throbs still assaulted Sorun's head, though thankfully, it was quickly subsiding. He made a small groan while running his right hand through his hair, taking a shuddering breath all the while. He felt something grab onto his shoulder, and turned his eyes upwards to see Silver grabbing him while giving Sorun a worried expression.

"Sorun?" Silver quietly asked him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, fine," Sorun muttered out. It took a few seconds to Silver continuing to look to make sure before he released Sorun, after which the Earthling sighed out and shook his head. "I found out where my zone is. The one I was born in." He turned from Silver, covering his mouth while muttering, "Christ, Tails said it was far away, but man..."

"Your old zone?" Sorun ceased his muttering and turned to Silver. "What about it?" the hedgehog asked.

Sorun shook his head. "Silver, buddy, I don't think it's actually possible to go that far without using portals of some kind. Words...

aren't sufficient in describing the gulf between here and there. Hurts to think about.

"But enough about that. The good news out of all this-" he turned back around and pointed in the distance, "- is that I know the way to the Prime Zone. Even the distance. Which..." His shoulders fell with a sigh, "which is kind of an issue."

An unsettled sound came from Silver. "How far?" was his simple question.

Sorun bit his lip. He didn't want to say, more because he didn't want to hear the truth with his ears more than anything else. But he'd felt it with Yamato - the distance from here to Mobius Prime if they took the road. He was almost certain he knew the answer. And the answer scared him almost as much as Silver sounded wary of the answer. But it was too important to ignore.

He told him the truth.

"Well, if you use your powers to fly us straight there the whole time, we might make it back in about a year or two."

A/N- Listen, in my defense I'm not even making up the noir world and the implied Sailor Moon world. Those are all completely canon to the comics. If you really think about it I could technically do anything and say it's canon because multiverse, but you actually see evidence of those two zones in the comics.

Anyways, I know it's a bit weird I ended up going this route instead of straight back to Mobius Prime, and it might even feel like filler, but it's not. I try to avoid filler, and you wouldn't believe how much filler I've cut out of this story only for it to still be this long. Originally when Sorun came back to life the Chaos Emeralds were supposed to scatter for real and I was gonna take seven chapters just to go after them with different

characters in each chapter for this big extended goodbye arc, but I scrapped all that since it wouldn't have been a real goodbye to begin with since Sorun was staying anyways and it seemed like a bad idea to stretch it out that long for something that wasn't even gonna happen.

In this case I'm mainly doing it because it introduces details and bits of information that becomes relevant later and I need to introduce it to Sorun somehow. It's not too big a detour though - this chapter and two more after and we're back on Mobius Prime, promise.

I dunno, might not be so bad, but the next two chapters are pretty much centered around them visiting a single zone, and... yeah, I got no idea how people are gonna react to that one.

Chapter 86

A/N- Yeah, a windstorm knocking out the power to your block for a week ain't fun.

Recursion Error

Episode 86- Just beat up the elderly

Something to be said about potato chips from alternate dimensions. They were actually fairly decent by Sorun's standards. Either that or his tastebuds got resensitized to them after all this time, but he didn't really care about the details. Right now they were pretty good.

Though, maybe it wasn't the safest idea to be eating them here. Sitting at the edge of the cosmic road he and Silver had been walking on for a week, with his feet dangling over the side and above the infinite precipice of whatever the hell was at the bottom of this place. Forever, probably. Just forever down there. Forever of what Sorun didn't know. Made him wonder why the dumbasses that built this rode didn't install safety rails.

Didn't matter, though. He had his chips. He was happy.

"Agh, it's no use!"

Silver wasn't so happy.

He was stomping around behind Sorun, pacing back and forth on the road while running his hands through his quills. Sorun just continued kicking his feet while munching on chips from the bag he held, though he did note that Silver had been becoming more and more irritable as of late.

"You know, you keep saying that phrase," Sorun said, not even turning around to look at Silver. "You've been using it a lot lately."

"Because it's no use, Sorun!"

Another chip popped into Sorun's mouth. "Yeah?"

"We've been out here for a week, going from zone to zone hoping we can find a way back to Mobius Prime, but not a single person knows the way!" Silver fumed as he continued to angrily stomp around behind Sorun.

"I keep telling you the problem isn't the way back, the problem-"

"Is that it's too far away, yeah, I know, Sorun, but nobody can help us with that, either! It's no use!"

"What is that, the third time you've said that in the last minute?"

"Don't- don't you..." Silver whirled towards Sorun and pointed at his back, "don't you start with me. Why aren't you more worried about this!?"

"Silver, I try not to worry about things outside of my control."

"And that really helps calm you down?"

"No, never, I'm as worried about this as you are. I'm just so used to this it isn't showing," Sorun said as he ate another chip. "Won't stop me from trying, though. Even if our world is potentially doomed because we had to take a really long road trip."

That was the crux of the matter, really: unless Sorun and Silver, mainly Silver because Sorun didn't really want to get that involved with the whole "save the world" thing again, did something to intervene with *whatever* it was that caused the apocalypse that Silver's future fell to, it was fated to happen again. Due to using the Time Stone he and Silver were the only ones that could do that, but

if they were stuck outside the Prime Zone they wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

Silver's main worry was that they wouldn't make it back to Mobius Prime fast enough to save it. They didn't even know who was behind the catastrophe, after all, nor did they even know when exactly it all went down, which meant there was a large chance that if they really did spend years hoofing it back to the Prime Zone they'd miss their window to save the world. Which wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the fact they only had one shot at this.

Admittedly Sorun was worried about it, too, but he wasn't as outward about it as Silver was, who'd practically been pacing himself into a rut for the past week after they left that black and white detective zone. They'd been going in the general direction Sorun felt the Prime Zone was in, occasionally dipping into any passing zones they encountered in hopes of finding somebody that could help them. Or at the very least find somebody that could lend them a car or something.

But no. Nobody ever knew what they were talking about when they asked about zones. The most they could do was find a hotel or something to sleep at whenever they got tired. Sometimes while Silver was sleeping Sorun would have to go out to procure more funds for supplies. That'd been their life for the past week. Walk the road, dip into a zone, find a place to sleep, get food. It was admittedly fun for a while but after five days Sorun was starting to get sick of it.

"I just don't know what we're gonna do, Sorun," Silver mumbled out in a despair-filled voice. "You know what happens if we take too long to get back?"

"It's impossible for me not to know. You see fit to remind me every single hour on this trip, Silver." Sorun's fingers were scraping the bottom of the bag. Chips were almost out. Damn. "I know this is real bad, but hey, we at least keep seeing some pretty cool sights out here, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess," Silver agreed. "For as terrible as all this is we've seen some pretty neat things. That world full of the giant lizard things, the dino-whatevers you called them, the future-looking place with the people half made of metal, all the other sights. If we weren't so pressed for time I'd love to explore all these places. I don't think I can ever stop getting surprised by all the things we're seeing."

"I saw Shadow in a Hooters shirt in that last zone, Silver. Nothing can surprise me anymore."

"Yeah, I've been meaning to ask. What was that place, by the way? You took five steps in there then turned around and dragged me out of that zone."

A place Sorun really wanted to forget about. "I'll tell you when you're older."

"But... we're the same age...?" a confused Silver voiced.

"When you're older. Until then please stop talking about it," Sorun requested as he finished off the last chip. "Still trying to get the image of Antoinette out of my head. Guy's one of my best friends on Mobius Prime, I didn't need to see that."

With the bag thoroughly finished off, Sorun tossed the plastic bag into the vast unknown that stretched out before him. He watched it lazily float down until it fell too far for it to remain in his sight, after which he grabbed the nearby blue Emerald, transmuted it into the Yamato, and began to stand up.

"Um, hey, Sorun?" When the human turned to look at him he saw Silver had an uncomfortable look on his face. "I don't think we're supposed to throw our trash around like that," he said.

Sorun scoffed. "Or what? The interdimensional cops from Alpha Centauri are gonna come arrest me for littering?"

"I don't know. Maybe there are interdimensional police people. Somebody built this giant road and made all the signs."

"Yeah, but we've been out here for a week, man," Sorun reminded him, spreading his arms out to gesture to the road all around them. "You don't think if there were someone else on this road besides us we woulda found them by now?"

"... I mean, to be fair this road spans the whole multiverse," Silver reasoned. "That's a lot of ground to cover."

"Maybe, man, but I don't care enough to find out." With Sorun leading the way the pair began once again walking down the road. "And hey, listen, hypothetically speaking. The Time Stones in the future are gone, but the ones in this time period are theoretically still intact, right? If we do screw up and fail to save the world can't we just use one of the Time Stones from this time's set?"

"We could, but I don't know where they are," Silver informed him. "Master's the one that gave the one to me, and he'd only found it a few years ago. They could be anywhere on that planet."

Sorun frowned. That nixed that plan. "Well, we'll just have to do it in one, then."

"Assuming we actually make it back in time to save everyone," Silver sighed out. "Man, I feel like such a failure."

"Don't worry, Silver, I always feel like a failure. You get numb to it after a while."

Silver only seemed to wither further at that comment. "Maybe we should try some positive thinking here, Sorun."

"Maybe." There was another highway sign jutting out of the side of the road that the pair of teens had just walked past. Sorun craned his neck to read it as they passed, and then shifted his attention to

Silver. "Hey, maybe this upcoming zone will have something for us. Wanna take a look?"

"Unless we find someone willing to give us a jet or something for free, Sorun, I don't think we'll find much help," a glum Silver replied.

"I keep telling you we should just steal one. From past experience I can tell you flying a real plane is nothing like flying planes in games, but I'm good enough to fly in a semi-straight line."

"No." The word was punctuated by Silver stopping his movement on the road. Sorun had stopped, too, sighing while turning to see Silver giving him a stern glare. "I already told you we can't do something like that. It's not right."

"Yeah, no, fate of the whole world for someone's jet. Totally seems equitable," Sorun dryly replied.

"We'll find another way." There was a firmness in Silver's voice that had Sorun a bit surprised. Enough that he wasn't able to immediately respond as Silver walked past him. "Single jet wouldn't even carry us the whole way anyways before it ran out of fuel."

"... Could have just stolen another one on the way, but sure." Pocketing his right hand while the left still held Yamato, Sorun turned and began following Silver. "You know, there's gotta be a point where we gotta put our own needs over relying on the kindness of strangers from other worlds, Silver."

"We've gotten this far, haven't we? Every zone we've been to nice people keep giving you money so we can buy food and hotel rooms."

"... Mhm, yeah."

"Exactly. So we'll just have to keep doing what we're doing and hope something good comes out of it."

It was frustrating moments like this that made Sorun want to hit something. Part of him almost wished Mogul hadn't chilled out over the centuries and raised Silver to be a opportunistic douche just so they wouldn't have this kind of problem. He was admittedly glad Silver turned out this way, better overall, but Silver possessing good morals like most Mobians Sorun had met was proving to have its own problems. Like this. If it was just Sorun on his own he probably would have made it back to Mobius Prime by now. Would've left a trail of chaos in his wake, but hell, it wasn't like he would have killed anybody, and this was too important.

If only he could get the Yamato to transport them to the Prime Zone. He still couldn't figure out what was wrong, despite trying for a week now to fiddle around with the thing. As far as he could tell it was still functioning fully as always, so the only conclusion he could come to was that his previous assessment was right: there were more layers to traveling between zones than simply teleporting through universe-local locations. The Cosmic Interstate Highway seemed to be an exception to that, but maybe that was due to where it was. Not a "universe", per se, but the space between them.

He was missing something. What, he didn't know, but there was something missing in the formula that would allow the Yamato to transport them between zones. Simply having been there in person wasn't enough; it was a component, but not the whole picture. And until Sorun figured out what that was they were stuck with going it the long way.

Which wasn't ideal seeing as it would take them years to get back to Mobius Prime the long way.

"You know what, fine, why not? Let's visit that zone you mentioned," Silver tiredly flopped his arm behind him, in the general direction of the road sign they passed earlier. "Maybe this'll be the one that'll get us back."

"Maybe." Sorun doubted it, but kept his mouth shut as he grabbed Yamato's handle. The doubt hadn't faded even as he pulled the

sword free, but neither of them knew what else to do at this point.

As he used his katana to cut through the bundle of leaves in their way, Sorun came to the conclusion that he hated this new zone.

It was a jungle that the entranceway cut into this zone had spit Sorun and Silver out into. A jungle Sorun came to quickly despise as the pair of teens trudged through it. Not that there was anything explicitly wrong with it; the air was clean, the sky was clear and full of sun, and altogether everything was peaceful. There was even a large, naturally-paved path running through the brush that the two were following.

The heat, though, was a different matter. Sorun just wasn't built to handle a tropical climate, and he was cutting his way through a jungle with an afternoon sun beating down on him, not to mention he had a long coat on. He couldn't understand how Silver wasn't bursting into flames considering he was covered in fur, but for all intents and purposes he seemed to be doing fine.

Could have been worse, granted. At least there weren't any mosquitoes eating them alive. And the humidity was somehow bearable. But between the heat, the knowledge that they were potentially years away from getting back to Mobius Prime, and the fact Sorun's patience had been wearing down over the course of this week-long trip, the human was in a particularly foul mood.

Silver, by comparison, was ecstatic.

"Wow, just look at all this! I've never seen so much color in one place!" Silver marveled, his eyes sweeping over everything in front of them. He'd become momentarily distracted when a beetle with a shining blue-green shell buzzed past him. "This place is great!"

Sorun didn't comment.

"And hey, look at that up ahead! Maybe one of those people can help us out!"

That heavy sense of doubt that had been weighing itself inside of Sorun stirred when he saw what Silver was talking about. "I heavily doubt that assertion of yours, Silver."

The term "rustic" was the only word that came to Sorun's mind to describe the village they'd come across while traversing the jungle. It seemed reasonably sized enough, even though it seemed to be entirely comprised of wooden huts that used palm leaves for roofs. Even the people were dressed in little more than grass sandals, loincloths, and skirts.

More than a few eyes tracked the pair as they entered the village. They were clearly Mobians from what Sorun could see, but he couldn't tell exactly what they were. Bizarrely they all had varying shades of an off-white, light grayish shade of fur, and he would have called them rabbits if it weren't for the fact they were lacking the large, floppy ears he normally accustomed rabbits to. And they were all unusually skinny.

And they all looked... he wouldn't say vapid, but there was something off with their expressions. Maybe it was because two strangers of very different species just walked into their village unannounced, but between that and the fact it barely looked like these people were past the stone age, Sorun was quickly coming to the realization that he didn't want to be here.

"Silver, these guys don't even look like they know what a toaster is, let alone zones," Sorun said. "Let's just bail already."

"Without even talking to any of them? We just got here, Sorun."

"You seriously wanna waste time talking to a bunch of-"

"Hello there!"

Silver had jumped up in fright at the sudden new voice greeting them. Sorun had remained rooted to the ground, though his arms had twitched out of the urge to pull the sword from his side and swing at the source of the noise. He managed to hold off on acting on the reflex, breathing out slowly as both he and Silver turned towards their greeter.

He was one of the native gray Mobians in this village. Visually indistinguishable from the rest save for the weird headdress made of leaves and wood he had on. Probably an important person if that and his voice said anything, but Sorun honestly couldn't tell if he was old enough to have that voice or if he just sounded like that. White beard may have been a hint.

Somethin' was off about his expression, though, and Sorun couldn't tell what. Different and yet similar to all the others here. Not that it seemed too malicious or happy. It was blank, but not even on a disturbing level. Like somebody figured out how to turn resting bitch face friendly. An unholy fusion.

It was with dawning horror Sorun realized that was the same expression he wore all the time.

"Oh, hi!" Silver offered the stranger a smile and a friendly wave while Sorun regarded him with suspicion. "My name is Silver, and this is Sorun. Sorun, say hi."

"..."

"I think he gets shy around new people," Silver said, causing Sorun to give him an indignant glare. "We're new here and kind of lost. Think you could help us?"

"That shouldn't be too much of a problem, now. You just happened to walk into the friendlies village on the whole island." The old man shifted the green cane he was holding to the other hand while giving the two of them a kind smile. "Welcome to Gogoba village."

Sorun chose to speak up. "Gogoba village," he deadpanned.

"Yep. Gogoba village. Friendliest village on the whole island," the old Mobian repeated. "Usually I'm in charge of the going-ons here, being the chief and all. Say, you two seem like you've been traveling through the woods for a while now. You must be incredibly thirsty."

"Actually now that you mention it we ran out of water a while ago and-" Silver was interrupted when a pair of villagers walked up right next to them. They each had a wooden cup of water that was handed to the both of them. Silver had accepted it gratefully while Sorun had slowly and cautiously taken the cup. "Oh, wow, thanks a bunch!" Silver said as he began to drink from the cup.

Sorun, on the other hand, did nothing but stare down into the cup. It looked clean enough. He still didn't want to drink it.

"Yeah, that's the last thing I need. Fucking otherworldly salmonella from whatever hole these backwoods hicks drew this out from." Silver seemed to have the polar opposite of Sorun's thoughts, since he was still drinking greedily from his cup. It was enough that Sorun wanted to smack him in the back of the head, but he thought against it. If his own stomach killed him later that would be his problem.

The village chief seemed to notice Sorun wasn't drinking and spoke up. "Something the matter?"

"You know, believe it or not I'm not all that thirsty despite cutting my way through the jungle back there," Sorun told him. "I mean thanks anyways, but yeah, I'm good."

"Oh no, no, that's quite alright," the chief assured him with a small nod. "It's not as if it's an act of back-breaking labor to get whatever water we can back to this village from the source. Who could possibly be cruel enough to judge someone for not partaking in a gift we so generously took from our limited supply of life-giving drinking water we would all die without?"

"Sounds like a you problem. I didn't ask for the water."

Apparently that hadn't been the response the chief was expecting, which caused Sorun's eyes to narrow. He didn't like that tone he'd used. That overly-friendly tone that was just on the edge of being patronizing. He didn't like the way he ordered those words around, either. It just sounded inherently scummy to Sorun's ears.

"Come to think about it, how had those other two guys been so ready with the water so quickly when we've only been here for barely three minutes?"

"Er, Sorun?" Silver's voice sounded apprehensive. When Sorun turned to look at him, he was caught giving Sorun an uncomfortable look. "Do you really have to be that way? They went out of their way to get us this. The least you could do is say thank you."

A spike of irritation and anger rose in Sorun. He took a deep breath to calm himself, and against his better judgement he drank the water. If need be he could just swap out Yamato for Devil's Body later if it really did make him sick. What happened afterwards would depend on his mood and how close Silver was in direct proximity to the village.

At least he didn't feel like dying of thirst anymore.

"Yeah, alright, thanks," Sorun quickly said after finishing off the water. "Anyways, Mobius Prime. Ever heard of it?"

The dithering, confused look the village chief gave him was not comforting. "Nope, afraid I've never heard the term. Mobius?"

"Yeah. Mobius. Home of Mobians." Sorun gestured to the chief with the hand holding the empty cut. "You know... Mobians?"

The chief shook his head. "Never heard of that, either."

"Christ, they don't even call themselves Mobians here," Sorun mentally sighed out. Well, at the very least it confirmed Sorun was, in fact, right all along and this was a giant waste of time. With how he felt, though, he wasn't even in the mood to gloat about it. He just wanted to leave. "Alright, Silver, you heard him. Let's bounce."

His shoulders hanging in disappointment, Silver nodded. "Yeah, coming." He handed the wooden cup back to the chief. Sorun had thrown his own over his shoulder as he departed, though it'd been surrounded by a teal glow and hovered in place before hitting the ground. Silver shot an irritated look at Sorun's back, and then used his powers to slot the cup into the one the chief was already holding. "I'm sorry about him. He's usually not like this," Silver apologized as he began backing up. The chief was looking down at the cups with a contemplative expression while Silver began backing up towards Sorun. "Thanks for the drinks! Love to stay, but we really gotta go!"

"I realize Silver has a point in that walking all the way back to the Prime Zone is gonna take too long," Sorun thought to himself as he walked away, *"but for fuck's sake, we're not gonna find any help in places like this. Maybe I should just steal a hover car or something like that the next time he run into some futuristic zone. Silver'll give me hell for it if he finds out I stole it, but damn, at this point-"*

"Well, actually, before you go there is one thing."

Sorun's mind had come to a screeching halt at the same moment his body froze. Silver had merely slowed down to a stop, a stark contrast to Sorun just abruptly freezing mid-stride, but while the hedgehog looked curious Sorun's frustration just grew.

It was the old, frail voice of that village chief they'd just tried to walk away from. Still talking. Why was he still talking when all Sorun wanted to do was walk away from him? He would have figured him throwing the cup would have been a good enough message that he wanted to get the hell out of here.

"Yeah?" Sorun asked, miraculously keeping his voice level as he turned around. The old timer was standing right behind him. "What do you want?"

"Well, it's just... I noticed your friend there could move things. You know, with his mind," the chief pointed out.

Sorun's eyes snapped to Silver. Surprisingly Silver was giving Sorun an admonishing look. "You threw the cup. I didn't want it to get dirty from the ground. It's his cup."

"You serious right now, man?"

"Sorun, I get you're really crabby right now, but that's not an excuse to be acting like this!"

"I am *not* ...!" He couldn't even finish the sentence. Even just uttering the word "crabby" felt like silent admittance that he was, and his pride wouldn't allow it. Instead Sorun just sighed out loudly, and ran a hand over his face as he turned to the chief. "Question still stands. What do you want?"

The chief put his cane in front of him while resting his two hands above it. "Well, the reason water is kind of hard to come by right now is because the old well recently dried up," he explained. "We're working on digging a new one, but for the time being we have to settle with carrying it all the way back from a local source."

"Make an irrigation system. Or use a wagon." The way Sorun said it, it didn't even sound like a suggestion. The words came out too harshly and clipped. With how frayed Sorun's nerves were it wasn't hard to see why. "The wheel was invented for a reason."

"Well, we've been making do with what we have, but, well, a lot of the people here in Gogoba Village are just too exhausted to do it now."

"Mhm."

"So," the village chief continued, "the water is somewhat lacking right now. I'm sure it's alright, though. It's not as if the hot summer sun beating down on all the children and elderly living here is drying them out even faster. Dehydration is treatable anyways."

A few seconds passed of the village chief and Sorun silently staring at each other. "Sounds like you have it handled," Sorun finally said.

The village chief was a bit too quick on the draw for his response to Sorun's liking. "Oh, yeah, true enough, true enough. I mean, why would the back-breaking work of lugging all that water from there to here dehydrate all the villagers even faster? I'm sure nothing disastrous like the village consuming more water than it can bring in and causing a subsequent collapse of public health could ever happen."

"Yikes. That does sound bad," Sorun agreed.

Now the village chief's eyes were narrowing in the same way Sorun's eyes were narrowed at him. "Yes. Yes, of course it does," he said. "It would truly be a tragedy that of course could be completely avoidable."

"Oh, this motherfucker." Now it was becoming clear what this Gogoba-thing was trying to get out of them. Sorun had been around the block enough to know this particular hustle, at least back on Earth. It was common enough, though he hadn't thought the old man in front of him would be so brazen as to try one of the oldest tricks in the book from where Sorun was from. *"Well, I'm from Detroit. You can't get me with this shit."*

Two could play at this game. You couldn't out-lazy a lazy person.

"It sounds to me like with smart planning on your part a tragedy like that could never happen," Sorun said, plastering a faux smile on his face. The nice accent he'd adopted couldn't sound more fake, but he didn't care enough to try and fix it. "Good thing a responsible chief like you is all over that. People here should be grateful."

The hands gripping the chief's cane tightened. Conversely, he fixed Sorun with a warm smile. Unlike the human's his seemed genuine. "Oh, of course. I could never be so careless as to endanger my community here. We're all practically family, after all. We Gogobas are just that nice," he informed Sorun. "So nice, in fact, we'll even give precious resources we can't afford to squander to complete strangers just to show our hospitality, and I'm a firm believer in good karma being rewarded. I'm sure nothing terrible like *my own child succumbing to dehydration due to our unwavering kindness towards you* could never happen with such a belief."

"And you know what, chief? I believe you. Every single word, a hundred percent. Readily and completely," Sorun said to him.

"Well, thank you very much," the chief said with an appreciative nod. "I guess if worse comes to worse all the children can starting sucking on the morning dew leaves for moisture if things really do become that dire."

"See, look at you. With forward thinking like that this village'll last for generations." Before the village chief could get another word out, Sorun turned around, patting Silver on the shoulder as he passed him. "Alright, Silver, let's go. You heard the guy. All's well here."

"Sorun..."

"Sweet baby boy Silver no." He knew that tone of voice well. The sadness intermingled with an eagerness to help. That sympathetic voice was the last thing Sorun wanted to hear coming out of Silver's mouth, and his fears were confirmed when he turned and saw Silver's expression. He looked torn. *"No, no you can't be this naïve, fuck he would be, why am I even asking?"*

"Sorun, we have have to help these people," Silver decided. Sorun didn't like how assertive he sounded. "I know we're on a kind of time-sensitive mission here-"

"Never before has the time been so sensitive, in fact," Sorun agreed, "which is exactly why we need get going and forget these guys even exist."

"But-!"

"Silver, are we gonna stop and help every single person with a problem along the way? 'Cause we're gonna be on this trip a while if you say yes." He wanted Silver to see sense, since obviously he wasn't seeing what was going on, but maybe logic would win him over. That was Sorun's hope, at least, but the hard look Silver was giving Sorun wasn't looking positive.

"We can spare an hour or two to help out. It's not that big a deal." Before Sorun could argue any further Silver turned to the village chief. "If you guys really need help digging that new well I can just use my powers to lift all the dirt out of the way. If you give me all the tools and materials, too, I could probably build the thing way faster than you guys can. I'm really great at the fine-manipulation stuff my teacher kept drilling into me."

"That's just great!" Sorun wanted to scream out in frustration when two more, younger Gogobas just appeared next to Silver, having been standing nearby. Like they'd been waiting. Just like with the water. Sorun immediately saw it for what it was this time, but Silver was happy enough to just go with them as they lead the oblivious Mobian away. Presumably towards where that new well was they well they were making.

The village chief didn't go with them. With sheer *audacity* that even floored Sorun he turned towards the human with the plainest smug look he had ever seen in his entire life. "Well," he began, sounding much too pleased with himself, "what about you?"

It took a phenomenal amount of willpower on Sorun's part to not reach for the sword he was still holding. "Me?" Sorun repeated in complete disbelief.

"It's just that this drought we're going through has put a strain on me, and between being a loving family man and the chief of this village it's hard for me to manage my side business of running the village pawnshop."

"Wow, you run a pawnshop. Why am I not surprised?" Sorun asked in a dry voice. "That sure sounds like a lot of responsibility for one person."

"Oh, I do my best. It's the least this village of kind, caring folk just trying to peacefully live their lives deserves, you know." That tone of voice he had, that friendly, patronizing tone, was making Sorun grit his teeth behind his closed mouth. "And I was just thinking that while your friend is helping with the well you could come with me to the shop to help me unload a bunch of boxes of stuff we got from the bigger village down the way."

"..." His anger flatlining on a dime, Sorun tilted his head at the village chief. "There's nobody else at the pawnshop to help you?" he asked.

"Nope. Not a one." A sigh that even sounded genuine left the chief's lips as he averted his yellow eyes from Sorun's calculating blue. "Not that you have to, of course. I'm sure these old bones of mine won't give out while I'm moving something heavy, causing my family to have to take time out of their day to help take care of me. I've been at this for years just fine, and even if something were to happen surely the village wouldn't suffer for it."

"And I'm sure, without a doubt, all these terrible, hypothetical situations that are surely unlikely to happen could be completely avoided if I just went with you, and you alone, right now to the pawnshop to help out," Sorun summed up. "Sure. Why not? I'll help out. Let's go, right now. No strings attached."

For such man claiming to be a bit more brittle than he ought to, he sure could turn towards Sorun rather quickly. "I didn't want to ask since you and your friend seem so busy with something, but if you really insist. Are you sure?"

The smile that spread over Sorun's face was genuine. "Sure thing, buddy. Pal."

He'd seen the hustle before. Back in Detroit. Hell, Earth in general.

At the precipice of it was psychology. Genuine psychology, the kind somebody needed a doctorate to understand, the kind people dedicated a lifetime to study. The kind of thing that, if a person was experienced enough, they could use their knowledge to understand the person in front of them in just a few words and glances and have them do anything within reason with the right application of words. Having a fair amount of charisma certainly helped.

Before psychology was verbal sparring, the peak mode of debate practiced solely by philosophers and politicians. Understanding the enemy and navigating through a battlefield of words while dodging japes and barbs. Splitting your attention down the middle to defend your own viewpoint while dissecting your opponent's viewpoints and perspective while coming up with counters of your own. The kind of thing that bored most people to tears unless it was over something somebody actually cared about.

Before debate was gaslighting. Everything from little brothers lying and saying it was their bigger brother that broke the expensive vase while they were playing around in the house to assailants twisting words and making it out like it was the victim's fault in whatever crime. Juvenile if not effective, at least in some cases. Depended on the people using this method and who they were using it on, really, but more often than not anybody who'd mastered debate and/or psychology could deflect it well enough.

Before all *that* was the time-honored tradition of guilt tripping. The foundation for mental manipulation, practiced more often than not by children. Or really desperate adults if they were pathetic enough. Sorun would admit to being guilty to guilt tripping, mostly against his mother. Mothers were surprisingly pliable when it came to their kids, Sorun's especially when he put on a mopey face when he wanted a

new video game. He figured out why she was so susceptible to the guilt tripping when he got older. Regretted it immensely and started doing it less and less, but the habit had been hard to shake no matter how hard he tried. Even into his teens he'd caught himself doing it to her, particularly around birthdays and Christmases.

And now she was dead and he couldn't say he was sorry, so now it was one of his more greater regrets.

But he'd seen it used in other ways. Girlfriends at school acting all sad at their boyfriends so they'd buy them something. Friends who'd obviously been tweaking begging money from their friends because they felt like they were gonna die without their fix. The more crafty teens holding so-called "friendship" up above the head of clueless but rich acquaintances.

Oh, yes. Sorun knew the hustle well. It was primarily the reason why this was shaping up to be the worst day ever in the life of the Gogoba village chief who thought he was leading Sorun by the nose.

The worst part was Sorun couldn't figure out if he was a gifted manipulator or if he'd simply been coasting on his guilt tripping strategy due to easy marks. Mostly because he was new to this zone, and due to a lack of meeting the other locals he had no way of knowing how in the know people were to this kind of thing here. They didn't even use the term "Mobian" in this world, after all, but he wasn't sure how much the name actually mattered seeing as they were still animal people. And Mobians were naturally good-natured to a fault, so Sorun honestly wouldn't be surprised to learn such a transparent attempt at guilt tripping would actually be effective towards the common Mobian. Probably the same with the other residents of this island regardless of what they called themselves.

And Silver, who seemed to be the recent victim of this chief's fuckery, was possible the best possible person he could have guilt tripped. Mostly because, in addition to having a good heart, he had close to zero experience dealing with people and would have never developed the kind of mental defenses necessary to protect against

this kind of thing; he genuinely took the chief's words to heart. Sorun was the opposite. He'd seen through the bullshit immediately, but he couldn't well and go call him out on it, especially since it seemed Silver was actually worried about the people here. The problem with the chief's method of guilt tripping was he was putting truth and genuine reasons to be concerned in his words. That was the draw.

Well, he looked old enough, so Sorun would wager he had some experience in this. Lies were more believable the more truth was used, and this was an extreme variation of that. He could almost respect it if he weren't being affected by this. But he was. So it had to be rectified.

Fortunately it seemed that Sorun's theory that the chief had built his manipulating experience on easy marks was likely true, because otherwise he would never have dared to have lead Sorun to a secluded location with no witnesses. Would have had enough sense to at least notice something was wrong otherwise.

"So this is your pawnshop, huh?" Sorun mumbled out. He wasn't surprised to see it was one of the more furbished-looking structures in the village. Solid wood walls and all. Still smallish, about the size of one of the huts. Open window in the front with some shelves and just enough room for someone to stand in, though based on its size it seemed there was enough room for a second room in the back. Storage, maybe.

He equally wasn't surprised to see it was near the village entrance. Draw in visitors, no doubt. And it was a fair distance away from the homes and other businesses. How about that.

"Yup, indeed." The chief lead Sorun to the back of the shop. There were a number of boxes piled up behind it, near a backroom door that lead into the shop itself. "Let me just get the door open here."

Wordlessly, Sorun nodded as he ran a hand over the boxes. There were quite a few of them, piled up to near Sorun's height. Cardboard, too, and taped shut. Implied there was modern civility out

there somewhere and the low-tech look of this village wasn't the norm. Not too different from Mobius Prime now that Sorun thought about it. Either that or the logic in this zone was a bit jank. Sorun and Silver had been to weirder zones.

"You know, if you two are willing there's actually a whole lot of stuff here in the village you could help out with," came the village chief's voice to Sorun's ears as he examined the box. "Not that I'm implying you two should spend a week or two here helping out."

"Yeah?" Sorun brought his sword out halfway and pressed its edge against the nearest box. Blue energy briefly coalesced over the edge's blade, and then the tape sealing the box shut popped off in a messy coil. He touched the sticky side with his fingers, and nodded in satisfaction. Felt like all the adhesive was there. "Are you absolutely sure about that?"

"Of, of course. Not that you have to." The chief appeared next to Sorun and grabbed one of the smaller boxes with the hand not carrying his cane. "But it's just I noticed you had the sword."

Sorun turned around to stare at the chief's back. He was approaching the opened door to the back room of the pawnshop. A quick look around revealed there was nobody in sight. "What about the sword?" he asked.

"Well, it's just that sometimes we get trouble from one source or another, like that crazy guy with the robots. And I don't mean to sound presumptuous, but between your friend with the powers and you looking very comfortable with the sword you seem like you know how to handle yourselves."

"Your point? We're not staying around a couple of weeks to protect you from some nebulous threat." A threat that Sorun wasn't even sure existed. The robot comment had him worried, but it was pushed to the back of his mind with what was in front of him right now.

"That's your choice, I guess. But it'll probably be fine. Nobody in this village can really defend themselves and we'll be left completely helpless should the worst happen, but barely anything ever happens anyways so I'm sure I'm worrying over nothing." The chief stopped to glance at Sorun over his shoulder. "But that Silver guy seemed like a nice enough person, so maybe he'll think different."

At that moment Sorun made up his mind. "Nah, I get you. Pests. Can't help but hate 'em. Always getting in your way, and you can't help but just eradicate all of them so they stop bothering you." He began approaching the Gogoba's back as he returned to walking towards the open doorway. "You know, it's situations like these that I'm reminded of the lessons I was taught on the streets of Detroit."

Not wasting a breath, Sorun pulled the scabbard off of his sword. He flipped the blunt covering around, and then swung it as hard as he could to bludgeon the back of the Gogoba chief's head.

A short, pained yelp left the old man's mouth, and he crumpled flat to the ground. The box and cane fell out of his hands, the latter being kicked away by Sorun, who was now sheathing the sword while shaking his head.

"You'd think I'd feel bad for attacking an elderly person, but fuck, man, you're just a special kind of person, aren't you?" He turned around to the pile of boxes. "Wait right there, huh?"

He heard a soft groan leave the chief when he went to grab the bundle of tape he'd separated from the boxes. When Sorun turned back around he saw the chief trying to rise up to his knees while fumbling around for the cane that was nowhere near him. When Sorun returned he kicked him in the stomach, dropping him once again while making him elicit an airy gasp of pain.

"It's your own fault, you know. You know full well what you were doing. You know full well I saw it immediately. But you kept going and goading, knowing Silver didn't, to what? Fucking taunt me? Or were you just that oblivious? I bet you really are a fucking amateur

and got off on coasting on easy marks like Silver your whole life if you didn't see this coming."

The old chief tried struggling when Sorun began taping his mouth shut. A growl of frustration left the teen, causing him to momentarily drop the Yamato just to begin punching him in the face.

"Settle down, settle the fuck down! Fuck!" He stopped hitting at the same time he felt something crack, around the same time a stream of red began dribbling out of the stunned Gogoba's nose. After his mouth was successfully taped Sorun began working on binding his arms. "Thought about shattering your kneecaps, make you upgrade from a cane to a wheelchair, but I'm not gonna go and cripple somebody for life for trying to run a shitty con. But I still need to do something about you."

The arms were done. Sorun moved on to taping the legs. "It's Silver, he's- well, you saw him. He's a sweet guy. I honestly really like him. Bit- no, more than a bit, he is dangerously naïve. Nothing wrong with that. Everybody back home's kind of naïve like that. I had it my way they'd always be like that, but then pricks like you pop up out of the woodwork and I gotta deal with it."

By now the chief was successfully bound in tape. He was starting to struggle again, muffled sounds coming out of his taped mouth, but Sorun ignored the struggling as he picked up the taped body.

"Man, you're light," Sorun idly noted as he began carrying the taped chief into the pawnshop. He was even shorter than Sorun, about Tails' height, actually, but even so he hadn't expected the body to weigh so little that he had no difficulty whatsoever carrying him. Quirk of this zone, maybe. "You should honestly be ashamed of yourself. Old timer like you pulling juvenile hustles like this. You're old, you're responsible for all the people in this village, on your own words you're a father. You're supposed to be a fucking example people aspire to, not some guilt tripping moron."

Sorun tossed the bound Gogoba onto the pawnshop's floor. He landed with a muffled grunt and continued squirming as Sorun left to go retrieve the Emerald he'd dropped. A second later he returned, katana in hand, closing the door as he looked around. His previous assertion that this was some sort of storage room seemed to be true, because he couldn't see the open window counter in here he'd seen at the front. There was barely any light in here except for was little light was bleeding through gaps in the wall and through the partially-closed doorway.

He only needed to take a cursory glance around to see that there was a small closet nearby. Testing the handle found it was unlocked, and when Sorun opened it, he was pleased to find that it was empty save for a few hung clothing items. Good enough for his purposes.

"That's the heart of the matter, really. Your hustle," Sorun said, turning around and looking down at the bound chief. He'd stopped struggling and was staring up at Sorun with wide, fearful eyes. "Nobody likes being hustled, least of all me. Never did forgive the last guy that hustled me. But pulling that shit on *Silver* of all people?" Sorun shook his head. "He doesn't deserve to be taken advantage of like that. But that's not even the full issue, mister chief."

Crouching down next to the Gogoba's head, and staring down to meet his eyes, Sorun said, "The problem here is that this journey Silver and I are on? Hella important. Literally a matter of life and death, and we're pressed for time. So you can imagine why I take severe umbrage at you trying to guilt trip us, mainly Silver 'cause he's the only one buying your spiel, to stay here to help out with menial shit. There're lives depending on us. If those lives are lost 'cause you stalled us...?"

There was a soft, scraping sound. The chief's eyes shrunk to fearful pinpricks at the sight of a katana's tip hovering mere centimeters over his face, held there by Sorun who continued to regard the chief with an apathetic glare.

"That's on you," Sorun quietly continued. "As such you decided to make this a game of us versus you. I win games. And I could kill you really easily right now."

The chief's breathing began to pick up and become heavier. At least as heavy as he could make it due to breathing out of a broken nose, and he began struggling again as muffled, unintelligible pleas came out of his taped mouth. He stopped when Sorun pulled the sword away and sheathed it.

"... Problem with that is you're an unarmed old man that can't even defend himself right now. More than that you have family, and I'm daring to assume that just maybe you're actually a decent leader here. Even if I could get away with it, and I could get away with it pretty easily, I don't wanna ruin people's lives. That, uh... it wouldn't sit right with me." Not said was the paranoid voice in the back of Sorun's mind telling him what would happen if people he actually cared about ever found out he murdered a defenseless old man. He had no idea how they'd find out, but he didn't want to think about consequences like that. Easier and simpler for everyone if he just shoved the guy in a closet for somebody else to find once he and Silver were far away from this zone.

He wanted to stab him, though. He could do it right now with no effort. Nearly had before his conscience took hold and started whispering to Sorun on why he shouldn't go and kill an old man for something that barely even registered as a petty crime. So it was into the closet he went.

"Really, you're lucky that out of all the humans on Earth that got pulled into this situation it was me," Sorun grunted out as he positioned the chief's body in the closet. "There were some real psychos out there. All good in there?"

Muffled screams was the only answer given to Sorun after the bound chief was set in the closet. He was still struggling against the tape, sitting there in that admittedly cramped space, still looking towards the human as he grabbed hold of the closet doors.

"Just make a bunch of screaming and thrashing sounds and I'm sure somebody'll come around and get you out of here. Eventually. You know, by the time Silver and I are long gone from here." He began to close the doors, but then stopped halfway. "Oh, one more thing. Don't send people after me for this," Sorun warned him, making the chief freeze. "Revenge is a fool's game, but more than that you *really* won't like what happens if I have to come back to this dive."

Having said the final word, Sorun slammed the closet doors closed. It hadn't done all that much to muffle the sounds of struggle on the inside, but that was probably for the best. He stood up, making his way out of the backroom but deciding to leave the door behind him cracked open. Hopefully if the noise didn't clue anyone in then that would when somebody inevitably came around to investigate the missing chief.

"Why do people always feel the need to make my life harder? Sheesh." Taking one last look at the back of the pawnshop, Sorun shook his head and started walking away from it. *"Alright, now where the hell is Silver?"*

There was a sneaking suspicion Sorun had that some of, if not possibly all, and if that was seriously the case then Sorun worried for this place, the Gogoba villagers were in on the whole guilt trip thing the chief tried pulling on him before he shoved him in a closet. It was more than just how those two randos just happened to have been so close to he and Silver with that water so quickly when it'd been offered. Ones he passed had a similar look to that chief. Not the exact same, but close enough. Apathetic friendliness.

It was borderline shifty, and now that Sorun knew what to look for he really could see it on their faces. The chief hadn't nearly been as easy to read; maybe that was just age and experience, though Sorun didn't really know. It was almost enough to creep him out. He found his footsteps becoming quicker the longer it took to find Silver.

Fortunately enough he'd eventually found him. He was, thankfully, clear on the other end of the village from the pawnshop where he'd assaulted an old man. When he found him Sorun was shocked to find that the well, the entire well, seemed to already be built. The brick lining around the hole was even already done, with a rope, a bucket, and other miscellaneous parts to make a pulley sitting on the ground next to it.

Silver was nearby, too, looking no worse for wear, much to Sorun's surprise. He seemed to notice the human's baffled staring, causing him to wave and approach him.

"Sorun! Hey." He stopped right next to Sorun, smiling widely as he turned to look at the well. "It's pretty cool, huh?"

"... Silver, how deep is that well?" Sorun asked after a few moments of silent staring.

"Around forty meters. Why?"

With shocked eyes Sorun turned to Silver. "Dude I was gone for like twenty minutes. How'd you manage to build a well that deep that quickly?"

Shrugging, Silver said, "With my powers? It's not that hard when all I have to do is pick everything up and set everything in place with my mind. I had to dig a bunch of wells for Master and I back in the future whenever we ran out of water."

"... Wow, that's pretty good, man." Credit where credit was due, it was pretty impressive. Especially to Sorun, who doubted he could do such a feet even if he had all of his powers to work with. Said a lot about Silver, too. Sorun didn't know how much forty meters of dirt weighed, but it was probably a lot. "Anyways, seeing as the well's all built and everything, can we leave now?"

"Huh?" Silver glanced back at the well, and then looked back at Sorun. He had an unsure look on his face. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"I mean, I'm pretty sure the people here can handle the rest now that the well's there, but are you sure there isn't something else that chief guy wanted us to-?"

"Nope, just got done talking with him," Sorun quickly interrupted. He slinked right besides Silver, draping his arm over his shoulders while giving him a wide grin. "Silver, you should have seen it. That guy was so blown away by your generosity to help that I was worried he'd have a heart attack on the spot, bless his old heart. I think he even felt kind of bad he asked us to do this much. In fact I'd bet my boots he'd absolutely refuse to allow us to do a single other chore around this village he was so overcome with gratitude."

"W-whoa, really?" Stars were practically dancing in Silver's eyes. He looked awestruck. "Well, golly, Sorun, I didn't know he'd appreciate it so much-"

"The appreciation was out of this world. So much so I can guarantee you he will never ask us to do a single thing ever again." The arm around Silver's shoulder shook the white hedgehog a bit, after which Sorun disengaged and walked away a few steps. "But hey, now that this is all settled we should really get going. Got our own problems to worry about and all that. These guys should be fine now that the well's here."

For a second Sorun was worried Silver would disagree, and that for some inane reason or another Silver would want to stay for a bit. He'd already began brainstorming as many excuses as Sorun could think of in order to draw Silver out of this village so they could just get going already. He visibly sagged in relief when Silver nodded and began walking.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. This should be more than enough to help the people here out," Silver agreed as he walked alongside Sorun. "Maybe we should find that chief guy, though? Say goodbye or-"

"Nah, he said he'd taken enough of our time and not to worry about it," Sorun said with a wave of his hand. "Dude was really

understanding of our situation and felt bad enough as it was. I think we should just go."

"Alright."

The silent cheers Sorun's mind made were nearly audible as they left the village.

"Chalk up another place I can never again visit in my entire life."

This kind of thing seemed to keep happening the further and further along this trip went for Sorun. On the upside the sight of that accursed village slowly disappearing behind them as they left was a welcome sight; of all the locations he'd had to blacklist this was one of the ones he was more than happy to ignore forever. If not for the monumental waste of time than because of the people that lived there.

Could have been worse, Sorun supposed. At least Silver looked really happy with himself as they walked along the jungle trail. The well did some good for his morale, so at the very least there was that.

Sorun couldn't say he was in quite as high of spirits as him. Not because of the experience he'd had there - though in no small part did it contribute to Sorun's dour mood -, but because of something that chief said before Sorun wrapped him in tape. The "crazy guy with the robots" he had mentioned that Sorun had been thinking about in the back of his head.

He didn't want to think there was an Eggman in this world, but the problem with that was that Silver and him had run into alternate versions of Mobians Sorun knew in practically every zone they'd visited. At the very least almost all of them had a Sonic, and that was hard enough for Sorun to cope with. He didn't know why he of all people was so important to be virtually ubiquitous throughout the

whole multiverse, but he was. This weird, annoying blue constant Sorun had to deal with no matter where he went.

It was probably sheer luck the traveling pair had encountered so many Sonics or other alternate versions of Sorun's friends without encountering an Eggman yet, but that luck was bound to run out at some point. Sorun was tempted to just make them a portal right now so they could leave the zone and just move on. He nearly did, but an idea had been brewing in Sorun's mind.

"The fact is we're making no progress at this rate. Just walking back to the Prime Zone isn't feasible. It's doable, but it's gonna take too long," Sorun thought to himself as he walked alongside Silver. *"We need some way of speeding this along. A really fast ship or car or plane. A machine that can just make us a portal to the Prime Zone.* Something *. 'Cause at this rate... nah, it's just not working. And we'd need nothing short of a genius who can make technologically miraculous machinery in a shockingly small amount of time to get us something like that. Eggman fits, but, well... if he's anything like the one I know I can't just flat out ask the guy for help."*

Sorun's eyes trailed down. He was holding the Yamato with both hands, his fingers running along the dark scabbard holding his blade. A contemplative frown held his features.

"I wonder... do I really have to ask?"

"For example. If I stabbed you with the Yamato, I could use it to separate you from your ability to speak. I'm not saying that like it'd take your vocal cords or carve your speaking knowledge out of your brain or something like that; the idea, the simple concept of speaking, would be taken from you. Even if you were physically able to speak, and had full knowledge of speaking, you wouldn't be able to ever talk again. Because the Yamato separated out your ability to talk from you.

"Or I could separate other things. Separate out your intelligence, rob you of your genius status. Take certain memories away. Memories of your children, your family, but leave the intelligence. Separate out your inhibitions so you couldn't say no. I could wipe away your entire personality and lobotomize you into being a little genius slave. That's pretty gross, huh?"

Back then he really had been messing around with Tails when he'd said all that. Not that he couldn't do it, because his Yamato really was capable of that kind of thing, but because he'd been truthful when he said he wasn't someone like Eggman and would never use its powers for something like that.

It was more than principle; more than not wanting to stoop down to the same level as someone Sorun hated more than anyone else in the whole multiverse, which was saying a lot. It was because the idea disgusted him to no end. He couldn't help picturing himself in that position, some foreign power stripping him of aspects of his personality until he was nothing but a hollow slave. He felt even worse when he pictured it happening to people he cared about. It made him sick to think something similar along those lines happened to Mobians who'd been roboticized by Robotnik back on Mobius Prime; from what he'd heard people retained their memories of the experience and were fully aware during that time without being able to control themselves. Stuff of nightmares, really. Sorun himself couldn't imagine.

He didn't even know if doing something similar with the Yamato was worse or not since at least they probably wouldn't be aware of what he was doing if he did it right. Something as awful as this probably couldn't even be measured on a scale.

Simply rewriting someone like that, it was the ultimate violation of a person's dignity and individuality. The kind of thing that left permanent mental scars, assuming those alterations were ever undone. If it was permanent it was a fate worse than death; Sorun would go as far as to say, pragmatically speaking, it *was* death.

Death of the original person to be replaced by whatever was left, especially if it couldn't be undone. A concept that was more and more applicable the more severe the changes.

Brainwashing, mental suggestions, possession, whatever the roboticization process could even be classified as, all of it. Sorun hated all of it. Hated the idea of it being done to him, and it was almost instinctual how he hated the idea of it happening to anyone else because of how revolting he found it. It's why he never wanted to do it, even if he technically could with Yamato. He'd rather just kill someone than subject them to that if there really was no better alternative. No sapient being deserved something like that happening to them. Not even someone as horrible as Eggman, as weird as the sentiment felt to Sorun. To say nothing less of what people he cared about would think if they knew he ever did something like that.

But the problem was he was desperate for a solution. And the prospect was becoming awfully tempting to Sorun.

"Am I seriously considering this?" He found it disturbing how inviting the idea sounded. It would be easy. Stab this zone's Eggman and separate a few mental aspects out here and there and he'd have a miracle worker of a slave. *"I could just put him back to normal after, right? The separated aspects of his psyche'd have to go somewhere as physical manifestations, so I could probably put him back together- but that wouldn't change the fact I still fucking did it, would it? I'd still leave a man mentally scarred forever- fuck, what if this is the gateway to doing it again sometime down the line?"*

Maybe this was why the Batman never killed anybody. It opened up a dangerous line of thinking. "If it was okay that one time then how come it isn't okay this time?" Sorun could see it, except instead of just killing people it was using his magic katana he stole from a video game to mind-rape people out of convenience. How it could easily slip into becoming an excuse to do it again on someone else later, and he didn't trust himself not to abuse it. It honestly scared him how

easily he could see that slippery slope and how it could go so wrong so quickly.

He didn't want to consider it an option. He didn't even want to entertain the idea.

But Mobius Prime was potentially doomed if he and Silver didn't get back fast enough. To not have this zone's Eggman do something to get them there quicker was gambling on them finding a solution in some further zone. Gambling on lives. His friends' lives. All for the sake of a person who was probably as bad as his Prime variant.

"I mean, it's Eggman, would anybody really even care if I... that's not the problem, the problem is this is fucking wrong. If I just kill him after, maybe even just separate out the memories- no, that just justifies something than can't be justified. Does it matter if it means getting a way back? Does it matter if nobody ever finds out? But I'll know, and really that's what matters the most. Fucking fuck... maybe I can just threaten the guy at swordpoint?"

"Sorun? You okay there?"

Sorun's head shot up. He took a shuddering breath, and then looked to the side, where Silver was. The Mobian was giving him a concerned look.

"You looked really worried about something, Sorun," Silver continued. "Is everything alright?"

"... Yeah. Yeah, everything's good, Silver. Thanks," Sorun mumbled out. "Just thinking about something the chief said."

"Oh?" Silver's head perked up in interest. "What is it?"

"Hhhh... there might - I stress *might* - be someone here that can help us out with getting to Mobius Prime faster." Sorun's fingers ran along the sword's scabbard. "I'm thinking we should have a word with him."

A/N- Alright, fine, I'll admit it. I watched the cartoon. I Thought it was kind of good. We're spending a bit of time here before going back to Mobius Prime.

Chapter 87

A/N- This one went on way longer than I thought it would. I wanted to cut it into two chapters, but I made that stupid promise that I'd wrap it up in this chapter and we'd make it back to Mobius Prime by the next one, so here, you get this.

Recursion Error

Episode 87- The big weird

"..."

"Sorun?"

"I'm going to scream if they named the village after him."

Apparently there was a main, central village that most of the people on this island lived at. They'd asked around when they ran into some people while walking around the island. More animal people, because apparently the term "Mobian" wasn't used here despite the fact they seemed visually indistinguishable from Mobians Sorun had seen. Probably a quirk of this zone. Or maybe even a quirk of Mobius Prime in that the animal people there were called Mobians.

Sorun didn't know, nor did he care. He'd still call them Mobians, if only because it sounded more dignified than calling everyone an animal person.

Anyways, they'd been pointed to this village. It seemed rather large, at least compared to that *last village* they'd been to. The buildings from the outside looked to be of modern make and the handful of Mobians Sorun saw wandering around the inside had modern

clothing on. He even saw a cop wander past in police dress blues. It almost seemed out of place with all the trees around them.

It was a genuine breath of fresh air until Sorun looked up at the sign in front of the village and saw what the place was called.

Hedgehog Village

He'd shoot himself if he could.

"What's wrong with the name?" Silver asked. He seemed worried over the fact that Sorun was visually seething at the sight of the sign, and took a tentative step towards Sorun. "Seriously, what's wrong?"

"If there's an Eggman here, then it's pretty much a sure thing that there's a Sonic here, and the idea people here like him so much they named the village after him just- ugh, I can't even put it into words." Sorun spun away from the sign in anger, pacing back a few times while putting his free hand on his face to try and calm down the throbbing in his head. "It'd be just like him to let them, too, him and his ego."

"... Sorun, what's your problem with Sonic?" The question caused Sorun to turn back towards Silver, who was giving him a questioning look. "Every time we run into an iteration of him in one of the other zones you get this look on your face like you'd rather be anywhere but near him."

"That's mostly due to the fact I'd rather be back on Mobius Prime right now."

"Yeah, sure, but you always act differently around him no matter what version it is." The deflection hadn't worked, so Sorun had turned his back to Silver so he didn't have to address him anymore. But the white hedgehog kept questioning him. "Sorun, come on, I'm trying to help. What do you have against Sonic?"

What *didn't* he have against him? Sorun didn't really want to answer that question, or pursue the matter any further with Silver, but he could tell from his tone that he didn't want to let it go. A large part of him hoped that he could say the bare minimum and get Silver to drop it so they could keep going, but it hadn't worked. So with a deep sigh Sorun hung his shoulders and turned back around towards him.

"Our personalities just don't really mesh," Sorun answered. "Sonic Prime, guy I know, is a genuinely good person but the more I got to know him the more..." He trailed off, frowning slightly at his own words. "No, that's not a good way to put it. Back when we first met he..." No, he didn't want to get into that, either. "... It's complicated. I don't want to talk about it."

"Does... does he know you have some kind of problem with him?"

"No, I never told him. He thinks we're completely cool with each other." Sorun sighed and looked back up at the sign. "I mean for all intents and purposes we *are* , so I never really brought it up since I didn't want to cause problems, but it, uh... look, just leave it alone, Silver. It's nothing."

"Okay, I guess." Silver didn't look like he especially understood what Sorun was saying, but he'd shrugged it off when Sorun kept looking up at the village sign. "So are we going in?"

"Yeah, sure."

Walking into the village proper Sorun felt mildly underwhelmed with the place. Silver seemed to like it based on the way he kept looking around at everything, but he always did that no matter where they visited. Still overwhelmed by all the new sights despite them doing this for a week now, but the guy had been living in an empty apocalypse before now, so Sorun couldn't blame him all that much.

As for himself, he couldn't say much. Looked nice enough, but New Mobotropolis spoiled him on nice-looking communities. The tropical texture was at least a nice change of pace. The people seemed...

well, like people, not much Sorun could observe there. Seemed like overall a nice place.

"Fuck am I doing?" Sorun mentally sighed at himself. *"Trying to distract myself with the sights so I don't have to think about the fact I have to scramble somebody's brains? Still don't even know if I should. If it comes down to it I might gotta, but..."*

Sorun's eyes wandered over to Silver. He wouldn't approve. At all. Hell, he took aversion to just robbing people, so Sorun could imagine what his stance on a forced magical lobotomy would be considering how horrifying the concept was. In fact Sorun didn't think there was a single person he was acquainted with back on Mobius Prime that would agree with what Sorun was planning. Not even Shadow, and he was the only single person on board with the whole "hey why don't we just kill Eggman?" plan.

That probably said a lot for how bad an idea this was.

And this wasn't a crime he could just do behind Silver's back and then forget about when they left the zone like he'd been doing this whole time. If by some chance Sorun really did pull this off Silver would probably ask how Sorun magicked them up a way home, and he somewhat doubted telling him this zone's Eggman was feeling generous with their plight would quite cut it. He'd object, heavily, and even if they still got to the Prime Zone regardless he'd likely tell the others and Sorun would have to deal with that for the rest of his life. Best case was that Silver would shun him forever, worst case... well. The whole roboticization disaster made every Mobian over there skittish about things like this, so he could see how this could go so wrong so quickly.

And that was all assuming this Eggman even *could* get them a way home. For all Sorun knew he couldn't after all and he was stressing about all this over nothing.

Even still, if he had half the brain of his prime counterpart, that'd still more than likely make him the smartest person on this planet. A

chance at getting back was still a chance, which was a lot more than the whole lot of nothing they had otherwise. Push came to shove Sorun *was* getting this Eggman to get them a way back if it was in his ability, one way or another. He just didn't know how to mitigate the consequences yet.

"So what's the plan for finding this zone's Eggman?" Silver suddenly asked, causing the pair to come to a stop. He fully turned to Sorun, asking, "Are we just going to ask around or what?"

Sorun shrugged. "Probably will have to, yeah," he admitted. "I don't have a better idea, but if he's as infamous as the prime one then it shouldn't be that hard. Besides, I don't think we're gonna run into him just bumbling around town-"

"This is outrageous!"

If he was in a better mindset Sorun would have been startled over how the world was so quickly tuned out from his senses. How the edges of his vision darkened, how sounds became muted and his breathing became oddly even. He couldn't even take note of any of this because his entire being was instantly locked onto that voice he heard. It was almost an exact match for Eggman Prime's voice. Tiny bit different, maybe, but it was all too recognizable.

With a stiffened body, Sorun turned towards the source of the noise. Silver had turned as well, but at this moment his very presence wasn't even registering with Sorun. The only thing in the whole world that existed right now was that voice, the person it was attached to, and the sword resting in his itching hands.

He was there. A couple houses over, right there in the middle of the street. Standing out in front of a shop and in front of a Mobian. All the rest of the details flew past him when he saw the man himself. Tall, large, wearing red, bald head, the damn goggles on his forehead and mustache. An image that was superimposed on all the memories Sorun knew of the man, flashing in front of him and

blurring them all together into some twisted collage Sorun felt a burning hatred just witnessing.

At that moment, all the reservations he felt over using the Yamato so invasively on him faded in an instant. Sorun's right hand grabbed the Yamato's handle, with his eyes glaring scornfully at the man. Green began to flash in his blue irises as he made the motion to pull the sword out-

"I mean, come on! A thirty dollar late fee!? You're more evil than I am!"

It was almost like all of Sorun's anger was welled up inside a balloon, and hearing that sentence leave Eggman was like somebody popping that balloon with a needle. It all faded in an instant. The pounding rage in his ears, the muffling of sounds and tunnel vision he had been experiencing, and all the tenseness left his muscles so violently he was practically limp. His arms simply hung lifelessly at his sides as he stared with solid blue eyes at the sight in front of him.

"What did... what... fucking what *?"* He'd misheard. Had to have. The idea that this Eggman was even abiding by enough laws to be in a *position* to complain about late fees, implying he'd rented something through legal means, was mind-boggling enough. And then he focused on the actual issue. *"THIRTY DOLLARS !? That's highway robbery!"*

"It's highway robbery!" Eggman bellowed out. Sorun silently screamed as he stared on, completely baffled. "You're acting like I've been hogging the movie when I was only a day late on the return! You're really telling me 'Tale of a Troubled Tumbleweed' is so popular everyone here is chomping at the bit to see it!? It's a five-year-old movie, for crying out loud!"

"Dude, I just work here," the Mobian standing in front of him said in an uncaring, apathetic tone.

Sorun's jaw hung open. It was only through experience dealing with worlds' worth of nonsense that let him keep up, and even then he couldn't believe what he was seeing. *"... Where the hell am I right now?"*

"Hey, Sorun?" A small tug on his sleave caused a dumbfounded Sorun to turn his head. Silver was staring at the spectacle with what seemed as much confusion as Sorun held, though even while looking away he continued to tug on Sorun's sleeve. "Is that the evil egg person you keep talking about? He doesn't look like those egg things I ate for breakfast in that one zone."

"W-w... well he's not exactly Humpty Dumpty, but- wait, you're more right than you think." Upon further examination Sorun realized this Eggman didn't even look like the one he knew. *That* Eggman, Eggman Prime, had proportions that were borderline grotesque. Spindly arms and legs that were too thin attached to a spherical torso topped with an equally round head. Something that would have defied rational design if Sorun didn't know that the body he used had originally been mechanical in nature before being turned organic, though from what he heard the original organic body hadn't looked much better in comparison. Nobody ever took a picture for Sorun to compare. Probably for the best, really.

This Eggman wasn't at all like that. He wasn't even fat, not by Sorun's definition at least. Still weirdly disproportionate, maybe, but this one's limbs had actual meat on them. And his torso was less fat and more just large and extremely barrel-chested. There was still something distinctly inhuman about it, but it was less monstrously disproportionate like Eggman Prime and more being simply top-heavy.

"... Dude looks like a 'One Piece' character," Sorun muttered out after a few long moments of observation.

This time Silver did look towards Sorun when he spoke to him. "What's a 'One Piece'?"

A deep, heavy sigh left Sorun. "I'll never know now, will I, Silver?" he bit out angrily. Years of keeping up with that series and pirating manga chapters all for naught once life on Earth ended...

"Listen, man, I'm gonna level with you. Contrary to what the scale of some of my greater machinations would imply I'm not exactly rolling around in dough. You know how much it costs to ship materials all the way out here?" It was so odd to Sorun's ears to hear Eggman, even if it was alternate version of him, speak so casually. No condescending tone, no clever snark, no veneer of insanity. It almost sounded wrong to hear. "You can't let it slide just this once?"

The Mobian shrugged. "Store policy, man. Can't help ya."

Eggman crossed his arms. "Well maybe I just won't pay the late fee. What do you think of that, huh?"

"Then, uh... I guess I'm just have to call the cops."

"I should call the cops on you for price gouging! There's probably laws against this kind of thing!"

The two continued to argue back and forth, to a point that it just became incomprehensible jargon to the pair watching. Sorun himself was still stuck on the strange juxtaposition between the Eggman he was seeing now and the one stuck in his memories, and was barely even paying attention to what they were arguing about. Silver, on the other hand, was making a vested effort in keeping up, his head going back and forth to look at each speaker, but eventually he made a frustrated groan to signify him giving up, and then turned back to Sorun.

"Okay, I'm completely lost here," Silver said, throwing up his hands in the air while shaking his head. "What are they even arguing about?"

"Huh?" Sorun blinked his eyes a few times to give his brain time to catch up with the question. "Oh, Eggman's trying to weasel his way

out of paying a late fee. Guess he returned a rental movie too late or something."

The confusion on Silver's face didn't falter. It only increased. "And what's a late fee?" he asked in a lost voice.

With a completely straight face, Sorun answered, "It's an evil practice perpetrated by people with no compassion for the common man, Silver."

"Oh. Okay." Nodding in understanding, Silver turned back to the arguing pair. "So is the store clerk in the wrong here?"

Sorun followed Silver's gaze. "Nah, I think he just works there."

"Um... but wait, hold on." Silver eye ridges furrowed. "Why is a late fee a bad thing? Don't they need to give people some kind of incentive to return stuff they borrow?"

"Yeah, but it's thirty dollars, Silver," Sorun argued, gesturing out towards the rental store. "You know how much thirty dollars here is?"

"Well, no. Not really. We just got here. We actually don't know what the value of money here is," Silver reminded Sorun. "It changes every zone we go to."

"... Since when?"

"What do you mean, since when!? You should be paying more attention to it than me! You're the one that keeps buying us food every time we run out!"

Sorun made a sharp inhale, and then he quickly coughed. "Oh yeah, right, that, now I remember. Totally."

"Enough of this!" The indignant yell from Eggman nearby caused Sorun and Silver to look back over at him. Both did double-takes, with Sorun in particular stuttering a bit in confusion. He was more than sure there hadn't been twenty robots standing around Eggman

ten seconds ago when he'd been looking at him. Now there were, as if they'd been pulled in from the middle of nowhere.

If that weren't enough these weren't even the same robots that Sorun got used to in Mobius Prime. They still looked cartoonish compared to the ones he knew by heart, but somehow these seemed moreso. All painted red with big, blue eyes for visual sensors. And they weren't modeled after him. They seemed to be modeled after creatures. Bees and crabs. And ladybugs that had a wheel for a body for some weird reason.

It felt strange to Sorun to go from killer robots with guns and lances to these things. They didn't even seem half as threatening. Like downgrading from a Terminator to a little RC drone.

"People like you that are enabling these cutthroat business practices are part of the problem!" Eggman roared out. With a stomp of his foot the robots threateningly... or at least as threatening as they could look... advanced on the Mobian clerk. Apparently to him they were threatening because he'd gulped and taken a step back. "I won't let you maintain a stranglehold on my wallet any longer! You're going to void my late fee or else! Or at least give me a steep discount, I'm not unreasonable, because come on, man, really? Thirty dollars?"

Silver gasped out at the sight of the robots converging towards the store. "Sorun, he's going attack that guy with those robots! We gotta help him!"

"I dunno." Scratching the back of his head, Sorun gave the group of robots an unsure look. The next words that came out of his mouth pained him to say it, but he couldn't lie in this case. "I kinda agree with Eggman on this. Thirty bucks is pretty bogus."

Silver whirled to Sorun. He looked aghast at what he just heard. "That doesn't give him the right to attack someone over it!" he yelled out. "Why aren't you more worried about this!?"

"Silver, I grew up in a city where people shot each other for less. This isn't all that new to me."

The hedgehog flinched at that, but continued unabated. "W-well, we can't just stand here and do nothing!"

He had a point there, even if Sorun didn't want to admit it. He couldn't let this slide in good conscience even if he didn't want to get involved at all. It was a realization that made Sorun slump his shoulders and sigh out loudly as he lethargically turned back to the source of the impending attack where the robots were advancing on the store clerk. Still. They were still approaching him at an agonizingly slow pace.

"Okay they're going really slow for some reason, but whatever, let's go." It was probably the unenthused tone of voice Sorun adopted that made Silver shoot him a unimpressed glare before running off towards the robots. Sorun followed behind at a significantly slower pace, enough that his feet were dragging on the ground and leaving small trenches, with his sword bobbing up and down he had such a loose grip on it.

Silver had already planted himself between the group of robots and the store clerk by the time Sorun got close enough to matter. He stood just to the side of the altercation. Despite his involvement, he couldn't bring himself to appear that eager to be in the middle of this. He could practically feel the tired, I-don't-want-to-be-here-right-now expression dragging on his face. And he certainly felt it.

Then again, maybe in some weird way this was a good thing. It was technically an in with the Eggman of this zone, so now all that was left was getting around to coercing him for help. How that was gonna work with Silver so close was something Sorun had no clue on how to pull off. The wait and see approach it was, then, if only to see how this played out. Maybe he might learn something to help with their problem. That's what the shriveling optimist inside of Sorun hoped for, at least.

"Hey!" His arms and legs spread wide to act as a shield to the store clerk behind him, Silver had glared up angrily past the small legion of machines and up at Eggman. Unlike Sorun, he seemed fully awake right now, and more than that genuinely angry at what he was seeing. "I don't care what your problem is! You can't just attack somebody for charging late fee prices that might or might not be expensive!" He looked behind his shoulder and at the clerk. "Hey, is thirty dollars a lot here?"

"Yeah, it's a lot," the clerk confirmed with a nod.

"Oh." Expression cracking a bit, Silver whipped his head back towards Eggman. "Uh, s-still!"

Sorun scratched at his cheek. He wondered what the food here was like. *"Kinda hungry. Really hope they have fries here. Haven't had a good fry in- ooh, wait, this is a tropical island, maybe they have coconuts! I've never had one of- oh, wait, yeah I have. Back with Razor. They're shit."* His hand fell away from his face as he looked up in thought. *"Maybe mangoes? I've heard good things about them."*

While Sorun was preoccupied with lunch, Eggman had barked out a single, maniacal laugh while pointing at Silver. "Well, if it isn't my old nemes- hold on, something isn't right here." The wide grin on Eggman's face turned into a confused expression. He pulled his hand back and wiped at the blue lenses of his spectacles, as if attempting to clear something, though his expression only maintained being puzzled. "Sonic, did... did you bleach your fur and quills or something? And why does your voice sound really whiny now?"

"Huh...?" Silver reacted like he'd been slapped across the face. "H... hey, that's not a very nice thing to say..."

"Okay, I feel like I'm missing something. Are you not Sonic, or...?" Eggman's unseen gaze seemed to wander towards Sorun. His head snapped to him once he was noticed, and just like before Eggman

pointed towards the coat-wearing teen. "Aha! Well, if it isn't my old nemes- oh come on, you're not him, either. The blue threw me off." A beat passed. Eggman leaned forwards a bit to look at Sorun, and then reared back in shock. "Egads! Well, I'll be! Another human! And here I thought I was the last one in the whole world."

Sorun's face fell at hearing that. He couldn't even tell if he was feeling disappointment or resignation right now. "Seriously? Here, too? Why does humanity keep dying out wherever I go?"

"... I have multiple questions about that statement," Eggman said. "But enough about that. Have either of you two seen Sonic and his friends around? They're usually here about now."

Sorun tilted his head in confusion. "You're... expecting them? Why?"

"I don't know, this is just our thing, you know? I do something villainous, they fight to stop me, I mean we have a whole weekly schedule around it and everything," Eggman casually answered, causing Sorun to reel in surprise. "I had to drag out the ol' 'threatening advancement of my forces' thing really hard since they're taking so long." He gestured to his feet at one of his robots. "Poor crab-bot unit two-seven-three here's an old model. He can't menacingly snap his claws like he used to and these long engagements are murder on his servos."

In response, the crab robot nearest to Eggman hefted its pincers up in the air and snapped. Instead of making a metallic *tink!* sound, the claws made a loud, grating sound as they snapped closed, as if something on the inside was rusted. There weren't even any sparks when the metal pincers touched.

Sorun didn't have the words to encapsulate the inane display he was witnessing. All he could do was stare.

"Well, anyways, uh... hm." Eggman examined a digital, watch-looking device on his wrist. "Okay, listen, my shows are going to

come on pretty soon, so since Sonic's taking forever to get here you think you guys could sub in for him? You two are hero-types, right?"

Silver, discarding his previous hurt look, gave an enthusiastic nod. "Of course!"

Sorun couldn't have mustered a single shred of enthusiasm if he tried. "Eh... on a good day, I guess."

"Alright, good enough. You both are tagged in." After clearing his throat, Eggman began to suck in a deep breath. "Annnnd...!"

Sorun rose his right hand up. "Wait, hold on, seriously what's going on-?"

"ATTACK!"

Apparently that was the tolling bell for whatever insanity they'd been dragged into. The robots surged forwards, suddenly moving much, much faster than they had previously during their threatening approach on the store clerk. A majority of the robots were barreling towards Silver. In fact, all of them were going towards Silver. The only exception was a single robot that singled out Sorun for some reason, so it chose to go for him.

It was one of the ladybug-like robots that had a single wheel for a body. In terms of weapons all it seemed to have was two stubby, pointed arms. Sorun stood rooted in place as it converged on him, wheel screeching as it approached. Blue glowing eyes locked threateningly on him. Pointed arms were coiled back and ready to strike once it was in range.

He kicked it in the face.

The kick wasn't even that hard a one in retrospect. Sorun couldn't even call it halfhearted; he was so bewildered by what was going on that he couldn't summon up the effort. It was more a light punt than anything else. Even so, the wheel robot had fallen down on its side.

"Aww. It fell down." It didn't seem to have taken any visual damage, but it didn't seem to be able to actually get up, either. It just kept spinning its wheel, turning around in a circle as it tried and failed to right itself. It was actually kind of sad to see. *"Alright, well, they can't be that tough if a scrub like me can manage."* That actually caused a bit of Sorun's confidence to well back up. He'd actually began gripping his sword eagerly as he turned towards the rest of the robots that had swarmed Silver.

That confidence promptly deflated out of Sorun when he saw that every single robot that had gone for Silver was floating up in the air around him, each surrounded by a teal glow.

"Oh, you already- okay, that's fine. Cool." He'd been so excited at the prospect of fighting something marginally weaker than him that Sorun had already pulled his sword halfway out of its sheath. His mood had plummeted upon seeing Silver having dispatched them already, causing him to slam the sword back in the scabbard with a huff. *"Fuck me for wanting to do something I guess, Silver's got it."*

The white hedgehog didn't even seem the least bit winded by the exertion of lifting up over twenty robots with his mind. More than anything he just seemed confused, maybe even a bit irritated at Eggman, who was just standing there staring at Silver with his mouth agape. Sorun was pretty sure he couldn't add anything to this, so he decided to just look back down and watch the wheel robot spin around.

"So, um, hey, Mr. Eggman guy?" Silver tentatively asked. "Can you please not attack people with your robots? It's not a nice thing to do."

"... But that's what I do. I attack people with robots," Eggman argued in a weak voice. His entire posture screamed being defeated.

"Um... please don't?"

"This isn't even fair. How am I supposed to fight a guy that can move things with his mind?" He glanced off to the side and snapped his

fingers. "Knew anti-psychic tech wasn't a scam like business stocks. Should've invested after all." With a sigh, he turned back towards Silver. He seemed to visibly wither at the sight of his robots floating helplessly around Silver. "Fine. You win. Here."

Grumbling incomprehensibly under his breath, Eggman began stomping forwards while rummaging around in his back pocket. He walked past Silver, who followed the larger male with wary eyes as he stopped in front of the store clerk. A fistful of bills was taken out of Eggman's pocket, who subsequently threw the money at the clerk's face. He failed to catch the bills, which all slowly floated down towards the ground.

"There," Eggman growled out, rounding back at Silver while the clerk knelt down to collect the dropped money. "You successfully ensured unethical consumerism lives to see another day. I hope you can live with yourself, Not-Sonic."

"I... think I'll live?" The statement felt like it was asked by Silver, who was blinking very heavily at Eggman. "I really don't understand half of what you're saying, but thank you for paying the nice man. Here you go."

The robots floating around Silver were slowly lowered down to the ground. Once their feet found purchase on the ground the teal glow faded from around their bodies, and they began to move around freely. Even the fallen, spinning robot Sorun was staring at was briefly engulfed by that teal glow, only lasting for a couple of seconds to allow Silver to telekinetically right its position so it was back on its wheel.

"Huh?" For some reason Eggman seemed taken back by the gesture. His head was bobbing back and forth between the robots, who themselves seemed confused by the way they were swiveling back and forth at each other, and Silver, before he finally asked Silver, "That's it? You're not going destroy my robots?"

"No?" Silver answered/questioned.

"Give me some grandstanding speech or heroic one-liner?"

"I wasn't planning on it?"

"Humiliate me by using me as a volleyball?"

"No!" Silver seemed equally shocked and appalled by the mere suggestion. "Goodness, that sounds horrible! Why would anybody do that!?"

"Er, yeah, right, that does sound like something really humiliating to be on the end of. Not that I would know. Ahem." Eggman turned his head to the side and coughed, and then turned back to Silver. "Okay, seriously, what's the deal? My whole experience in this kind of thing is my robots get destroyed and I have to go off and sulk about it for five minutes before I get hungry and forget about it."

If any of that actually meant anything to Silver, he didn't show it as he shrugged up at the man. "Well, you're not attacking anybody right now. And you seem like you really care about these robot things you built." He pointed his hand at one of the crab robots scuttling around him while snapping its pincers up at him. "Like this crab thingamajig, so, well, I didn't want to break them and make you feel sad."

"... Huh." The combination of the mustache and the blue-tinted glasses covering his eyes made Eggman's current expression inscrutable. He was thinking about something, but what that something was Sorun couldn't parse standing so far away while silently observing. "You're a weird guy," Eggman concluded. He lifted his wrist up and pressed a few buttons on the device strapped to his wrist. "I'm gonna go home. See you around, White Sonic with the weird haircut." He turned to Sorun and gave him a single wave. "Other guy."

Sorun could only do as much as give him a stiff wave as he stared numbly at Eggman. Out from behind a few houses some floating vehicle - a white, floating chair inside a hemisphere that was disturbingly familiar to Sorun - floated over to the scientist. He'd

gotten in without another word, and the chair carried him off far enough that he was quickly out of their line of sight.

Noticeably he'd left the robots behind.

"That was whacked." Really the only way Sorun could describe the experience he just witnessed. He doubted even given sufficient time he'd be able to ever fully process what just happened. Maybe it was his personal experience that directly conflicted with what he just saw: a non-homicidal, non-genocidal, may-or-may-not be insane, Sorun wasn't sure on that one, Eggman. He wouldn't have thought such a thing possible; in fact, despite seeing it with his own eyes, he still didn't believe it. But the sight still gave him pause.

Something to think about for later. Maybe there really was something to this multiverse thing, but Sorun wasn't counting on it.

When Sorun approached Silver, he seemed to be at as much at a loss for words as Sorun. Not at Eggman, it seemed, but at the robots. How they were all still scuttling around, seemingly lost without their maker around. He was holding one of the crab robots in his arms. "I thought you said this guy was supposed to be a maniac?" Silver asked him upon approach.

The only thing Sorun could offer was a shrug. "Multiverse, man, I dunno." He looked down at the robots. "So, like... he just left them here?"

"Yeah, I think they're gonna have to walk their own way back. I guess he wasn't expecting them to make it this long." There was a deep frown settled on Silver's face. He was obviously displeased with the thought, and his feet were rocking in restlessness. "I think I should probably carry these all back to where he lives."

"You don't even know where that is," Sorun pointed out. "And also, seriously? Why?"

"Because it's the nice thing to do, and plus we need to ask him about helping us anyways."

Right, they'd forgotten to do that. The thought hadn't even come to Sorun's mind, he'd been so busy trying to understand what his eyes were seeing, and Silver had been as bewildered as him. He still had reservations over the idea, though. Regardless of what they just saw, it was *Eggman* . Sorun didn't trust him as far as he could throw him regardless of what iteration he was, and with his strength that was an effective distance of zero. Even factoring in what they just saw, because for all Sorun knew it was just a psycho that happened to be acting on a friendly whim at the moment.

Agreeable people didn't carry around attack bots with them. He was pretty sure, at least.

"You don't think we should be a bit more tactical with approaching him?" Sorun asked.

"Tactical? Wha- what does that even mean? Tactical? How much tactics can you stuff into knocking on a front door?" Silver questioned.

A flat look was sent to Silver by Sorun. "You wanna knock on his front door," he deadpanned. "Eggman's front door."

"It's polite! I don't wanna just sneak in through a window or someth-"

Silver's words died on his lips when something zoomed past their vision. Sorun hadn't been able to perceive precisely what it was that passed them, but he'd been able to perceive the *color* . That blue shape that'd zipped right past Sorun and Silver was recognizable enough to Sorun he couldn't not know who it was. That dark shade of blue alone was telling.

There was a small explosion besides them. When Sorun looked to the side at the blue leg stomping down on the remains of one of the robots, he had an uncaring expression. Silver looked shocked and

horrified at the person who'd just destroyed one of the many robots surrounding them that, for all intents and purposes, was yet another alternate universe dead-ringer for the Sonic he personally knew. Except for the brown scarf he wore, Sorun didn't know what was up with that.

"What is wrong with you!? Why!?"

That shriek had come from Silver, who looked torn between morning the nameless jobber robot that just died and furious over the fact this Sonic just killed it. Sorun himself didn't have enough skin in the matter to care, but while he was keeping up a bored, neutral expression, he was laughing on the inside at seeing Silver yell at Sonic.

"Uh, saving you guys?" Sonic turned to Silver and actually managed to look offended at the outburst. "You guys new here? Never seen you around before, but here you're supposed to stay *away* from the evil robots. You're welcome, by the way."

It was a level of condescension that was reserved for parents scolding children. It cut the amusement right out of Sorun, and now he was silently smoldering while keeping his bored expression. Silver wasn't nearly as successful at hiding his anger; he looked downright livid, and Sorun didn't even know if it was over the words or if he was still hung up on the robot.

"We aren't being attacked!" Silver yelled out. "Everything was fine until you showed up!"

Blinking, Sonic took a quick glance around at the robots surrounding them. They weren't even doing anything but standing around to witness all the shouting, though the one that had been in Silver's arms had scuttled off in a panic after its brother got stomped to death. Sorun didn't know why. If they were just that limited in programming that they didn't know what to do without Eggman around or if they were just intelligent enough to have some sense of

morbid curiosity and they were just sticking around to see what happened.

"You sure about that? Really?" Sonic asked, taking another quick glance around at the robots. "And where is Eggman, anyways? He's usually not off-schedule for this."

For the first time since he showed up Sorun spoke out to Sonic. "He does this regularly enough you planned a schedule around it?"

"Yeah, Saturdays, alternating Tuesdays and Thursdays, other days depending on the mood. He tries to be flexible with it. Unfortunately."

"..." What was he even supposed to say to that?

Another robot exploded nearby. When Sorun looked, he saw a robot completely flattened under the head of a large hammer. He didn't have to look past that and the patch of pink in his peripheral to know it was this world's Amy. "Hey, Sonic? What's going on with these guys?"

"They're being difficult is what's going on," he grumbled out as he turned back to Silver. "Listen, buddy, I'm trying to help you and your friend here, so if you would just step aside so that *we* , that is the heroes, could get rid of the robots-"

"You don't need to get rid of them!" Silver argued, voice so loud it was cracking slightly. "They're not even trying to hurt anyone! Just leave them alone!"

"Are- did you hit your head or something?" Sonic asked. "Dude, they're evil robots. Nobody'll care."

"Eggman will care! He put a lot of work into making these things, I don't want him to be upset!"

"What are you, some kind villain apologist?" Rolling his eyes and shaking his head, Sonic spun towards the nearest robot. "Whatever,

listen just watch. As soon as we clear out all these robots-"

Sonic's words ceased right there. All movement ceased the moment his entire body was enveloped by a film of teal energy. The same energy that was roiling around Silver's hands as he stared angrily at Sonic.

"No. No, let's try not doing that," Silver suggested, his teeth grit in bitterness. His voice had inversed him high and shrill to low and harsh, and all of his anger was being directed right at Sonic.

Now Sorun did actually laugh. It was a small, breathy thing, only done once and barely audible, but it was enough to get the barest of grins out of him at seeing Sonic frozen in place like that. Amy was less amused and more panicked by the sight.

"Sonic!" she cried out. Anger overtook her features as she swiveled towards Silver, who double-turned at her in surprise as she lifted the hammer up. "Why you-!"

She'd swung the hammer. It'd come within inches of Silver's face before freezing mid-swing, along with the rest of Amy's body as his power surrounded her. The swing itself had still managed to carry enough force to blow his fur and quills back despite the fact it didn't hit, something that seemed to rattle Silver. The anger was gone. Now he just looked awkward and unsure, standing between a frozen Sonic and Amy.

"U-uh, hey, guys," Silver timidly stuttered out, "listen I didn't mean to do this but seriously if you would just listen-"

"Sonic! Amy! No!" A third voice cried out from above them. Both of the teens looked up, but unlike Silver Sorun didn't look surprised at seeing a two-tailed fox dropping down on Silver with a wrench in his hands. And like the other two he got frozen mid-air before he even touched the white hedgehog.

"Okay this is getting out of hand, guys PLEASE-!"

"Don't worry, guys! There's no way he can do that four times in a row!"

Confusion settled on both Sorun and Silver's faces when they, and in unison the surviving robots around them, turned towards the sound of the voice. Sorun almost didn't recognize it because something sounded incredibly off with it, but the shade of red covering the fourth figure sprinting towards Silver gave away that it was Knuckles. At first Sorun balked at the idea that he would do something as moronic as charge somebody who just froze three comrades in close range. Then he got a good look at him and reared back in shock.

"Dear fucking god, why are his legs so much smaller than his arms?"

He was making somewhat of a joke before, but now Sorun was wondering if there really was some kind of 'One Piece'-esque irregular proportion thing going on with this zone. It was a good explanation for why Eggman had looked the way he had. It was the only explanation Sorun could think of for why this world's Knuckles had a chest and arms that looked five times larger than the rest of him, especially when all the other Mobians looked comparatively normal.

And apparently Silver could do it four times, because this Knuckles' war cry got cut off halfway when Silver entrapped him in a telekinetic hold like the others. He didn't even get the chance to try and punch him.

"Why do you people keep attacking me when I just want to talk!?" Silver yelled out. He made a frustrated sound, looking at all four of the Mobians locked in stasis, and then looked to Sorun for help. "Is this some kind of weird inversed zone where all the bad guys are good and all the good guys are bad? Is that what this is?"

Sorun shook his head. "Nah, that's Moebius. Or so I've been told, at least. I'm pretty sure everyone here's just a weirdo." Was that what this was? The weird zone? Was strangeness of this caliber out of the ordinary for the multiverse or did this kind of weirdness set a

standard for how ridiculous things could get? Did it even matter in a multiverse of infinite possibilities? Hopeless questions like this along with the experience was the main reason Sorun was able to weather all of this with relative ease. Enough to ask the hard question at least, like why the hell this version of Knuckles looked so top-heavy. Or what that wooden thing whizzing towards Sorun's face was.

"Huh?"

That was all Sorun managed to get out before his reflexes kicked in, and he reflexively managed to tilt his head far enough to dodge the spinning object. Unfortunately for Sorun, after passing him it'd curved and began sailing towards the back of his head. And Sorun, with his back turned to it, had no way of seeing its approach.

Everything went black after the thing struck him in the back of the head.

When Sorun woke up, the first thing he felt was an overwhelming urge to commit violence.

Of course the splitting headache he felt quelled those desires immediately, causing him to groan out and hold a hand to the back of his head where it was throbbing. Opening his eyes revealed blurry vision, but it was good enough that he could make out the living room he was in. And from how uncomfortable he felt he didn't even need to look to know he was laying on someone's couch.

More importantly than all of that was the bright, blue glow of the object resting on the foot table next to the couch Sorun was laying on. Without a thought he reached a hand out and brushed his fingers against the glossy, smooth surface of the Emerald. His hair shifted into a white color, and he breathed out a relieved when the pain instantly flashed away and his vision adjusted perfectly to his surroundings.

The urge for violence had come back as well.

Another quick glance around revealed that this was someone's living room. Decently furnished, obnoxiously bright from all the open windows letting in the clear, afternoon sun. Something else he just now noticed with his enhanced nose... something... briny?

Sorun vaguely remembered that smell, from when he'd crashed a plane on an island. That was an ocean he was smelling.

He sat up. There was a window nearby that he leaned towards, and looking outside revealed he was correct on what that smell was. There was a beach outside the house he was in, with an ocean just beyond that softly crashing into the shore. Although the sights were pleasant enough, for Sorun they were all spoiled by the sight of a nearby gathering of palm trees, the hammock tied between them, and the blue hedgehog sleeping in this hammock.

"Alright, might hurt him, might not, let's see how it goes." Exhaling sharply through his nose, Sorun pushed away from the window. He only had to turn around to see the front door to the home, and conveniently enough it was already open to him. His hair turned black and the gem shifted into Yamato as he walked out of it.

There wasn't hiding the pang of envy Sorun felt when he walked out of the home and turned around briefly to examine it. By all rights it was a fairly modest hut more than anything else, but a beachside house was still a beachside house, and he never so much as went to a beach growing up. His own house in New Mobotropolis was better than anything else he could have fairly asked for, but if this was Sonic's hut something in Sorun twisted uncomfortably knowing that, somewhere in the multiverse, there was a Sonic somewhere living with a beach view when he didn't have one. Not even that there was someone with a beach view when he didn't, but that it was a Sonic with the beach view.

Holding back his grumblings, Sorun stomped his way over to the sleeping Sonic. Either the sand muffled his footsteps sufficiently or he was just that heavy a sleeper, because he didn't so much as

rouse from the hammock when Sorun stopped right in front of him. He just continued sleeping contently in that hammock.

"How much of a dick could I be right now?" Pursing his lips in quiet contemplation, Sorun looked up. He only a moment to find inspiration once his eyes landed on the ocean. *"Hey, I wonder if this one's as hydrophobic as mine?"*

As quietly as he could, Sorun unsheathed the katana from his side. So far so good; Sonic hadn't woken up. He pointed the sword upwards and, very carefully, cut a cross into the air above Sonic which folded inwards into a portal a second later.

At the same time a similar portal appeared just below the surface of the water nearby.

A torrent of water poured out from the portal and directly onto Sonic. That had woken him up, sending him into a thrashing, screaming fit from the makeshift waterfall assaulting him. It was only after he was washed out of the hammock and fell onto the ground that Sorun closed off the portal and water, but by then the hedgehog was already sufficiently drenched.

Immediately he turned his green eyes up to Sorun's unflinching blue. He had an angry expression. "What the heck was that for!?" he screamed out at him.

"For somebody knocking me out with a boomerang. You guys are lucky I just happen to carry around the cure for brain damage," Sorun tersely answered.

"I try to make up for that by letting you sleep it off in my house and you thank me by dumping the ocean on me!?"

"... Well, yeah."

A drenched Sonic stood up to his feet. There was a slight tremor in his body, and he tried shaking some of the loose moisture off himself

to no avail. He was still wet. "You're a real jerk. You know that?"

"Only to you, Sonic," Sorun answered honestly.

Sonic's eyes narrowed. "I'm having a hard time believing that Silver guy when he says you're the nicest person he's ever met in his entire life."

"To be fair I've met the other two. It isn't that high a bar to get over," Sorun said. "What ended up happening after I got assaulted?"

"Whoa-ho-ho, hold up now, buddy. 'Assault' is a really strong word," Sonic said, holding his hands up in front of Sorun. "I think what you're looking for is 'lawful citizen's arrest'."

"I wasn't even doing anything. I was just standing there."

"... Yeah, well... you got better, so does it matter?"

He wanted to hurt him so badly. Somehow Sorun managed to hold off, inhaling a deep breath, keeping it in for five seconds, and then slowly exhaling. It was a good thing he did, too, since he got an idea that replaced his growing urge to do something irrational. "Alright, cool, so you wouldn't mind me getting a cop's second opinion?"

Sonic froze at that. "Huh?"

"Yeah, sure. I saw one or two walking around on the way into this village. Had badges 'n' everything. I'm admittedly new here, but I wonder what they'd have to say if I told them... who threw the boomerang?"

The hedgehog didn't look like he wanted to answer. He'd grown a resigned look in his eyes, and he visibly deflated and hunched over while muttering, "Sticks."

"Whoever that is. I don't imagine they'd have good things to say."

"They wouldn't- okay, listen."

When Sonic lifted his head up to Sorun, he was expecting a lot of things. A resentful look, maybe even a violent look. Something that suggested that Sonic was going to take action against Sorun for threatening a friend with the police. He already started preparing for it, ready to transmute the Emerald and have it stop time so he could break Sonic's legs while in the stopped time.

But instead of all that he had a pleading look in his eyes, and Sorun had to remind himself that, even if he looked a bit different and wasn't his Sonic, it was still a Sonic. And it seemed to be a near-universal constant that all Sonics were insufferable good guys of some sort, because it was the case for all the other Sonics he and Silver had encountered on the way here.

"Look, I know we just met and I know we didn't really hit it off alright, but Sticks has a... not the best reputation, okay, whole town knows she's kinda kooky, so the cops'll actually believe you and I'm pretty sure that video store guy saw the whole thing so-"

Sorun held a hand up to stop him. He made a small sigh, fuming at the fact he was starting to feel guilty over the guy. He just had to have the moral integrity to be truthful and honest with Sorun thus far and resort to pleading with him instead of doing anything else, and now his conscience was yelling at him again. He already felt bad over the whole thing.

"Alright, fine, just... forget the cops, just tell me what happened and I'll leave it alone," Sorun bit out, lowering his hand.

The amount of relief Sonic displayed right after was almost alarming. He'd snapped right up to a straight posture with a large smile on his face. "Whew! That's a real load off." At noticing Sorun's quiet gaze he cleared his throat. "Okay, right, so... Silver got really mad after you got hit and had us all frozen. He explained everything, and we all felt bad about the misunderstanding so I took you and your weird crystal thing that turns into a sword for some reason back here to sleep it off." He backed up a step when Sorun kept staring. "Seriously man, I'm sorry. We all are. No hard feelings?"

There was no visible reaction on Sorun's part when Sonic held out a clenched fist in front of him. It was obvious he was expecting a reciprocating fist bump, but Sorun was debating if he should. He didn't want to, but at the same time he didn't want to send mixed messages by not doing it. But then again he didn't really want to.

He settled for raising his hand up and tapping on one of Sonic's knuckles with a single index finger once, and then brought the hand back to his side. Sonic made an uneasy chuckle and lowered his own hand.

"Ookay, I'll take it. Eh-heh. *Weirdo* ." Sonic looked off to the side. Movement out of the corner of his eyes caused Sorun to look in the same direction, where he recognized the two figures walking towards them. Well, he recognized the Tails in this world, he looked about the same as his. He was still poorly coming to grips with how the Knuckles here looked.

"Sonic! Oh, hey, the guy Sticks knocked out woke up!" They stopped in front of them, with Tails being the one to displaying gleefulness for Sorun's sake. But then he'd looked over at Sonic and began to look puzzled. "Did you just get out of the shower? Why're you all wet?"

"Yeah, I wonder why," he bit out, turning his gaze to Sorun. "How'd you even do what you did, anyways?"

"Hm?" Sorun feigned confusion. "Do what?"

"Don't even play like that, you know what I mean! The whole water thing!"

"I have no recollection of the event in question." He, of course, did, but seeing the incensed look on Sonic's face was more than worth it.

"Aw, don't worry, new guy." This came from the disproportionately-sized Knuckles. "I forget stuff all the time, too. You get used to it. At least I think you do. I might have forgotten that."

Sorun blinked. Slowly. Then, with even more painful slowness, he turned towards Knuckles, who was giving him a dopey smile with an otherwise vapid expression. He tried not to let the pain he felt hearing him speak show on his face. "Is... is that so?"

"Yeah. Oh, and, uh, guess we should say sorry for the mix-up earlier." Knuckles made a light laugh and rubbed the back of his head. "So yeah, sorry for thinking you were the bad guy. I kinda thought all humans that wore coats were evil."

Sorun glanced down at his coat, face impassive. He looked back up at Knuckles' face. An eye twitched. "We are not."

"Okay, cool." The echidna's purple eyes lit up in realization. For all Sorun knew that was some kind of miracle. "Oh, wait! Did you get your big glowing blue thing back? That other guy who wasn't Sonic or the other mean striped guy that isn't Sonic said it was important."

"Uhh... yeah." Sorun lifted his katana up and lightly shook it. "Got it right here."

Knuckles squinted down at the sword. He pointed at its scabbard for some reason. "You put it in there?" he asked. "How the heck did you manage to fit something so big in something so tiny?"

For the first few moments Sorun struggled to understand what he was even asking before realizing Knuckles was under the impression he somehow fit a Chaos Emerald inside of a katana's scabbard. He didn't know how to respond to that. Literally. He'd never in his life ever had to think up a response to something so absurd and he was left silently staring at the echidna. Besides him, Tails just looked tired at hearing that question.

It was Sonic who broke the silence by groaning out quietly while pinching the space between his eyes at the same time. "No, Knuckles, the blue crystal thing turns into a sword, remember? It happened when he dropped it after he got hit?"

Knuckles didn't even so much as respond to Sonic. Like Sorun he'd resorted to blankly staring at the blue hedgehog, only unlike Sorun he seemed completely unresponsive and his face was blank. It was something that genuinely disturbed Sorun, enough that he'd risen a hand up and waved it in front of his face. He only became more alarmed when there was zero reaction.

"Does... does he have brain damage or something?" Sorun hesitantly asked as his waving became more frantic. "'Cause if he does I'm sorry, but that cure for brain damage I mentioned only works on me."

"No, he just needs a minute or two to process things sometimes," Sonic answered. "Your Knuckles isn't like this? Silver told us about the whole 'from another universe' thing."

"He's, um, no. He's normal. Most of the rest of his kind ain't but the less said about that the better."

"Oh, there's more echidna where you're from?" Tails asked. "Knuckles is the only one we've ever found."

"Yeah, you're probably better off for that." Sorun turned away from Knuckles and to Sonic. "So Silver told you? It doesn't freak you out? Us being universal aliens?"

Sonic shook his head. "Nah, believe it or not this isn't the first time something like that's happened around here."

"Ah, I see." Sorun nodded, taking the information in stride. "Sounds... exciting?"

"It's exhausting, that's what it is," he grumbled out, bending forwards a bit. "I just wanna take a nap but I can't go a week without something crazy happening around here. It's a serious pain."

That actually drew some amusement out of Sorun. "You're a snarky one, huh? More than my Sonic, at least."

Sonic straightened up. "Oh, yeah? What's that guy like?"

The question made a small jolt go through Sorun. A hundred thoughts and opinions raced through his mind. None of them were positive. He shook his head as he tried to think of something appropriate. "Uh... his arms weren't blue?"

Green eyes glanced down at their owner's arms. They rose back up to give Sorun an unimpressed look. "Seriously? That's all you got?"

"What do you want from me? You're not exactly the same but in broad strokes, yeah, I'm not seeing much of a difference. Only difference is that guy thrives on the whole hero thing and sucks at video games," Sorun said, the last sentence coming off sounding bitter.

"Ha! Figures me from another world isn't even better than me," the hedgehog boasted. "None of my friends are ever able to beat my scores, even in the new games that keep coming out. Kinda wish they'd stop pumping out so many zombie games, though. Feel like it's sorta being overdone."

Sorun made an agreeing nod. "Yeah, they were kind of oversaturating the market back where I'm from, too. Few bangers here and there, but most of them were a solid meh. Last one I played, 'Dying Light', was pretty great, though. Do not think that sequel will be coming out due to recent events." Sorun pointed at Sonic. "Actually you kinda sound like the main character guy in that game."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, not like the Sonic I know. *Urkel-soundin' motherfucker* ..."

Wasn't exactly the same, and Sorun attributed the fact his Sonic's voice was at least tolerable was due to him being sixteen and puberty having done something to smoothen his voice out. But by

god, did Sorun not want to know what he sounded like when he was younger.

"Snorkel-muffin what?" Sonic repeated in a confused voice.

Quickly clearing his throat, Sorun said in a slightly louder tone, "Hey, you know what, it's been great meeting you guys but I gotta get back with Silver and we really gotta go, you know? Real, er, 'portant stuff to do. Getting back home. So... yeah." A beat passed. "Where's Silver?"

"Oh, Amy took him back to her house," Sonic answered. His face screwed in concentration as he tried to remember. "Something about... wanting to talk about his hairstyle? Called him a walking fern? Eh, I don't know. I wasn't paying attention." He shrugged. "He's probably still over there. You need directions?"

He probably did, but he didn't want to be around these people longer than he wanted to. "No, thank you. I'll find my own way." He gave Sonic and Tails a polite nod, spent a second looking at Knuckles who still seemed to be thinking, and then turned around and began walking off. "Been an experience. Bye."

Sorun barely made it ten meters before he heard Knuckles' voice loudly proclaim behind him, "Oh, I get it! The thing covering his sword turns into a rock! But... wait, then where does the sword come from?"

His footsteps quickened.

After ending up needing to ask around, he finally found the house this world's Amy lived in. Somehow it was even nicer than Sonic's house; it was in a section of beach closer to the village, enough that there were other houses in sight and the village proper was not even a minute's walk away. It was over water, connected to a large, spanning wood platform that held the house up and acted as a walkway.

In a word, it was nice. Pretty, even. And Sorun tried not to act jealous over it as he stopped in front of the door and knocked on it. *"Why'd I have to get dragged into the war-torn world and not the tropical paradise world?"* Sorun wondered as he took a quick glance around at some of the other houses. *"Shit ain't fair."*

He knocked on the door again, louder this time, and then leaned on the door frame while waiting. He heard soft footsteps on the other side, and after a few more moments he saw the door open up. The pink hedgehog he'd come all the way here for was on the other side, and had frozen in the middle of opening the door the moment her eyes fell on Sorun. Then recognition flashed through her features and she opened the door completely while giving him a wide smile.

"Ohhh! Hey, it's you!" she greeted him in a happy voice. Sorun flinched a bit; the Amy here was just as bubbly as the one back home and he hadn't been ready for it. "Silver was really worried about you after, um... you know. That."

"Where you people knocked me out for doing precisely nothing, yes, I remember," Sorun curtly replied. The smile Amy had withered significantly. "I fixed my broken head."

"That's good!" Amy quickly replied. He wasn't even sure she understood what he meant by that. "Please, come in! Sorry if the place is a bit of a mess I haven't cleaned it in two days and this season really isn't conducive for-"

Most of the words rattling out of Amy's mouth went ignored by Sorun as he quietly stepped into her home. It was certainly *bright* , what with all the colorful pieces of furniture and other odds and ends scattered around that were mainly pink with a few purple things here and there to break the color up. And the source of the strange floral scent was immediately identified when he saw a lit scented candle resting on a nearby nightstand.

Sorun scoffed. He'd fallen into that trap before.

"- and really I've tried the advice from that interior decorating magazine but really I find it disrupts the flow of the room whenever I try to rearrange- goodness me, I didn't mean to ramble so much. Did you want something to drink, Sorun?" Amy asked.

He turned back to her. She was looking at him expectantly, hands clasped behind her back and with a polite smile on her face. She dressed more conservatively than the Amy he knew, too, now that he looked. At least she went out of her way to wear leggings along with the pinkish short jacket she had on, unlike his who only wore that dress. Always made him uncomfortable, that.

"No, thanks. I'm good," he replied in an even tone. "Where's Silver?"

For some reason, Amy jolted at that. Like she had a sudden, uncomfortable thought that invaded her mind. "Right, that." She made a nervous laugh, glanced off to the side, and rubbed at her shoulder. "Really polite guy, but that haircut... sheesh. I offered to fix it for him and I think the poor guy was too nervous to say no, but, uh... yeah, I think that thing is just a part of him, 'cause I couldn't fix it," she confessed. "He left after. I don't know where."

"I guess I can see where you're coming from. Guy looks like a walking marijuana leaf with that haircut."

"Is that some kind of plant from where you're from?"

With a sad sigh, Sorun slumped his shoulders. "Yeah..."

"Ah." There was a pause of silence between them. Amy transition from rubbing her shoulder to the back of her head. "So, uh, other universes, huh? Cool, cool..." After a few more seconds of silence she asked, "So am I there?"

"Yeah, I know other you," Sorun answered. She brightened up at hearing that. "You're not exactly the same as her, though. You're... I don't wanna say more mature at a first glance, but she did this weird age thing and-"

"Uh-huh, great, sounds great, hey quick question," Amy interrupted. "Not, er, not to pry into not-me's private life or anything, but since you know her, just, erm," she trailed off, bringing her hands together to poke the index fingers together. "You wouldn't happen to know if alternate universe me and alternate universe Sonic ever, you know, hooked up? Like, in any capacity?"

"..."

"So I take it by your silence that's a yes?"

"Never mind, your personalities are pretty one-to-one," Sorun sighed out, turning his head away from the pink hedgehog, who made an unsatisfied huff at him. *"Goddammit, why can't things just be normal for one seco-?"*

A nearby rattle in what Sorun assumed to be the kitchen startled him and drew his attention. He couldn't see due to a wall separating the two rooms, but the rustling was a constant noise now. It was a sound like somebody was shuffling a bunch of glass bottles. When he looked back at Amy she seemed nonplussed at the noise.

"Oh, that's just Sticks," Amy explained. "She's visiting and wanted something to drink from the kitchen."

The name was unfamiliar to Sorun at first until he remembered Sonic with a brown scarf mentioned her. "You mean the one that-?"

"Amy! What is this!?" Sorun actually winced when he heard that voice hit his ears. Like somebody gargling shards of glass. He couldn't understand how somebody's voice could sound so scratchy. There was movement off to the side and when Sorun moved to look, he saw a Mobian poking her body out of the kitchen holding a carton of milk. "I told you to get the organic kind of milk that comes in the glass bottles, not this store-bought cardboard crud! You know what they put in-!?"

She cut herself off when her eyes locked onto Sorun. For his part he reamined completely still, mainly due to trying to figure out what he was looking at. Some blend of orange and brown... thing that looked like she was wearing scraps of clothes. Torn cloth covering her waist and a cloth stripcovering her chest. He couldn't even discern her hairstyle, much less her species. It was just tied off into to giant masses that jutted out to either side of her head.

Blue eyes narrowed at Sorun suspiciously. "It's *you* ."

"That's quite a tone to take with someone you knocked out. I'm practically a victim of assault here, lady."

"Oh yeah, sure, that's what it *looks* like," she said. "But how do I know you didn't intentionally take that hit, huh?"

The audacity alone made Sorun's eyes widen a bit. "Because unlike most of the people around here, present company included, I have common sense, you..." He looked to Amy for help. "Ferret?"

"Badger."

"Every time!" he grunted under his breath before turning back to Sticks. She seemed to have visibly bristled at that last remark he made. "Look, I don't know what your problem is, but I want an apology."

The carton of milk was set aside near the scented candle. The badger fully stepped out of the kitchen and crossed her arms. "Oh, yeah?" she challenged. "Well I want an apology for sayin' I ain't got common sense."

"You'll get one the moment I see evidence of such a miracle."

Her face visible wrinkled in anger. "You tryin' to go for round two, pal? That what you're going for?"

"Hm. Why not?" Sorun's thumb pushed his sword out of the scabbard. "Fair's fair. I'll just win an apology out of you if you're really going to be like that." It wasn't his fault she was being so confrontational. It was bad enough he'd gotten knocked out in front of a friend; he already couldn't stand the hit his dignity took for that. He thought the least he was owed in the face of that was an apology, but not only was he not getting a sorry, but this badger had the utter gall to act this way when it was her fault?

No, forget Silver and getting back to Mobius Prime for the moment. He could spare a minute for this.

From *somewhere* , Sorun wasn't sure where and was becoming increasingly annoyed at how this was becoming a common thing in this world, Sticks pulled out a large stick that he assumed was whittled down to be a sort of makeshift staff. The sight of the weapon only spurred Sorun forwards, with Sticks matching his footsteps as they approached one another.

He really would have struck out at her with his sword if Amy hadn't wedged herself between the pair of them.

"Whoa whoa whoa, time out!" she yelled out, holding out a hand to each of them to stop them. "First of all, this is my house and you two aren't gonna start something and end up breaking something, and second of all you two should be ashamed of yourselves!" Her head whipped towards Sorun, who visibly flinched at the glare she was sending him. "What are you thinking, being so hostile like that!?"

"She was being mean," Sorun weakly argued, though he did shy away from her glare and push the sword back fully in the scabbard.

"And Sticks," Amy growled, turning to the other occupant, "you don't knock people out and then be rude to them about it afterwards! We talked about this!"

"He's wearin' a coat, Amy!" Sticks loudly argued, pointing her staff at the now stilled human. "Ya know people with coats can't be trusted!

Especially the long ones..."

If he didn't have more self control, he would have dropped his sword over hearing the reason the badger lady was acting this way towards him. He almost looked back to Amy again for more help, but he was shocked to find she didn't even seem surprised at her reasoning. Tired and upset at it, yes, but there wasn't so much as a hint of surprise in her eyes.

What she said next only cemented it for Sorun. "Now Sticks, exactly *how many times* have I told you we do not judge people by WHAT THEY WEAR!?"

"Of all the inane- you don't like me because of the coat!?" Sorun yelled out. He didn't even know what he was feeling anymore, if it was anger at her or frustration over this whole situation or anger at feeling so ignorant right now. He didn't know anything except he wanted to pull the sword back out. "You really are an idiot!"

Sticks' grip on her staff redoubled. "Why I oughta-!"

Before any of them could make a move Amy's hands snapped outwards. Her left hand gripped one of Sorun's ears, who hissed out loudly in pain, while the right hand gripped one of Sticks' ears, who made a more feral sort of sound. Amy, by contrast, simply had on an irritated, fuming expression as her eyes darted back and forth between the two.

"Now then, I want both of you to *simmer DOWN* ," she all but commanded, pulling on their ears tighter and causing them to stumble. "This is a safe place, we're all friends and friends do not hurt each other at all. Do they?" She was apparently expecting an answer, so when none came she screamed out, "WELL!?"

"Y-yeah, 'course," Sticks stuttered out. Amy made a "hmph" noise and released her ear.

When Amy looked to Sorun, he said, "I'll stop egging her on." The face she made afterwards didn't leave the impression she was satisfied with the answer, but she still released his ear all the same. It left Sorun rubbing at his sore ear and a burning sense of more of his dignity flaking away, but seeing the heated glare the pink hedgehog was sharing between him and Sticks made him ignore this for the moment.

Without another word, she slapped a hand on both of their backs and spun them towards the nearby couch. She pushed them towards it, and Sorun found himself lacking the will to actually try and resist her. "Couch. Plant 'em," she ordered. They both sat down on the couch, albeit at both ends and as far away as possible while trying their best not to look at one another.

Satisfied, if barely from the sigh Amy made, she then reached over and grabbed a nearby stool. She all but slammed it down on the floor in front of the couch, making Sorun and Sticks jump, and then sat down on it so she was facing the two of them. She closed her eyes, took in a long, deep breath, held it for ten whole seconds, and then slowly exhaled. At the end of her breath she opened her eyes again.

"Okay, then!" Sorun was nearly floored at the sudden shift Amy's personality had taken. With that single breath she'd gone from the demented tyrant that'd screeched his ears off seconds ago to a smiling, happy-looking hedgehog. She even sounded cheery now. "I think we got off on the wrong foot, guys, and I'm sensing some communication issues here. I think we need to have a talk."

Sorun groaned and sunk further into the couch. And now she was talking like a therapist. Or even worse somebody who'd read through half a psychology book and suddenly thought they were a qualified therapist. He wanted to leave right then and there but at this point he wasn't even sure Amy would let him until she was done tormenting him with talks about feelings. And he didn't like his odds fighting her. Not with the damn hammer. So, with a resigned sigh, he accepted that Silver was going to have to wait for a bit.

At least the couch was comfortable.

"Now, first thing's first," Amy began, crossing one leg over the other while clasping her hands together in front of her. "Sorun, Sticks is a dear friend of mine and I won't tolerate you insulting her. Say you're sorry."

Lazily, Sorun shifted his gaze to the right, where Sticks was sitting. She met his gaze with her own eyes, somewhat reluctantly. He considered saying something witty and spiteful, but he didn't want to risk incurring the hammer-wielder's wrath. "I maybe-"

"Maybe?" Amy repeated in a warning tone.

"I said things I shouldn't have and said untrue things about you," Sorun quickly amended. "And for that... I am..." he had to swallow something in order to actually get this out, "sssssorry. Sticks. For all that."

Sticks glared at him, but otherwise said nothing. Seeing this, Amy loudly cleared her throat.

"Okay. Sticks, Silver told us that he and his friend Sorun here are just trying to get back to their home. They'd completely de-escalated the problem with Eggman and that whole fight was a misunderstanding. You were there for all that. So, *yes* , you do owe him an apology for hitting him in the head with your boomerang."

The badger tore her gaze away from Sorun to look at Amy. "But he's got a *coat* , Amy."

"Why does me having a coat even matter?" Sorun asked as he flipped his free hand up. "I get it's not exactly the right thing to wear in this climate, but gimme a break, not every world I've been to has been all sunshine and palm trees."

"Sticks has a lot of... beliefs, we'll say, about a lot of things," Amy replied, though saying the word "belief" seemed to cause her some

pain to say. "And her opinion about these beliefs are very strong, so sometimes-"

"Oh no no no no *no* , it's more than just belief we're talkin' about here, Amy," Sticks denied. "Coats are the clothing of the enemy!"

"The enemy?" Sorun repeated in a bland, bored tone. "Y'mean Eggman?" From what he saw that thing this world's Eggman wore could barely even be called a coat. Was more of a red cardigan than anything else.

"No, not him! The *enemy* !" Sticks emphasized her point by leaning forwards on the couch. "The *spooks* . Coats are the main article of apparel of any agent from some shadow government sect sent in to infiltrate the population!"

Sorun loudly scoffed at hearing that. "Agents? What, like the Men in Black?" He lifted his right hand up and mimicked decompressing a button. "Do they go around hitting people who've seen too much with a neuralyzer to wipe their memories out?"

Maybe mocking her for this was going against what Amy was trying to do, but Sorun couldn't resist the joke. Though that joke suddenly stopped being funny when Sticks gave Sorun a shocked look.

"You've seen them too!" she gasped out, causing Sorun's hand to fall limply on the couch as he gave her a dead stare. "That's just one thing they like hidin' in their coats! They gots all sorts'a gizmos and gadgets like that an' they need the coats to hide 'em all!"

"God, it's like I'm talking to Crazy Ricky all over again. She's almost as bad." He should have just turned around and walked out of the house the moment Amy said Silver wasn't here. That's what Sorun should have really done, so he wouldn't have to sit here and listen to a conspiracy nut. He'd already had to deal with one during his life in Detroit, and that one was enough for a whole lifetime.

"And look! Just look!" Sticks pointed to the bottom of Sorun's coat. "His coat's got three tails! Three! You know what that means?"

Amy let out a very tired sigh. "He's not a Chupacabra, Sticks."

"Well, we'll know at a new moon, now, won't we?"

They weren't going to get anywhere at this rate. Sorun knew that. Knew just from dealing with her type before. And if there's one thing Sorun knew about Crazy Ricky it was that you just didn't win with these people no matter how hard you tried; it just wasn't feasible to keep up with all the nonsensical jargon they spat out.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say to you to convince you I'm an interdimensional traveler and not a shady something or other, Sticks," Sorun tiredly deadpanned.

"I never said I didn't think ya weren't from another universe," Sticks said back to him. Sorun didn't know how to counter that, so he just sighed and sunk further into the couch.

"Okay, guys, I think we're starting to get to the heart of the matter." Sorun didn't find himself appreciating how helpful Amy was trying to sound now. "You know what, Sorun, do you think you could maybe take the coat off just for a bit? For Sticks' sake?"

Immediately Sorun sat up ramrod straight on the couch, causing the two Mobians near him to start a bit at his speed. "Absolutely not. The coat stays on," he firmly stated. "I'm not taking it off just because you asked."

Sticks fidgeted nervously in her seat. "He ain't taking it off, Amy..."

"I know, Sticks," Amy said. She looked over from the badger to Sorun. "Do you mind telling me why you don't want to take it off, Sorun?"

Sorun's lips pressed together. He didn't want to say because it was so personal. He really just wanted to get up and leave since he had better things to do than assuage the paranoid fears of some badger he'd never ever see again once he and Silver left this zone.

But then there was that goddamn hammer.

"The coat was a gift from a friend," Sorun bit out at last, refusing to meet Amy's eyes, and expressly looking away from Sticks. "It's one of the few things I have left that I can actually call mine and it was from a very dear friend, okay? So I'm not gonna take it off when somebody I've known for all of ten minutes asks."

He could only see it from the corner of his eye, but he'd seen Sticks recoil a bit from the explanation. "Your, uh, your friend, huh?"

"Yeah, my friend Nic- oh my god Nicole. Oh my god what have I done?" The color drained out of Sorun's face when he remembered what he'd done the last time he'd seen her. "Ohhh *noooooo* ..."

He'd forgotten what he'd done. With everything that had been going on from the time travel to dimension travel to the mad kings and gods it'd been pushed to the back of Sorun's memories to make room for more pertinent priorities. He couldn't actually believe he'd forgotten about what he did until she was brought up in a conversation but now he remembered and *fuck what has he done* ?

The... the kiss. He'd done that. Before he went to fight Enerjak because he thought he was going to die after. Except Sorun didn't die. Sorun was very much still alive. Which... which meant that happened. Which meant Nicole... very much absolutely remembered, and...

Oh, what has he done?

"Fuck. Fuck, I forgot, I... damn, that kiss, I didn't mean, I mean... holy shit, what have I- what am I supposed to say- just- what- fuck. Oh fuck. Shit. Damn. Fuckshitdamn." He bolted right up to his feet, a

horrified expression on his face. Fuck the sorry excuse for a therapy session, his head was spinning and his heart was beating a thousand times a second and he needed some air *right now* because he was breathing hard and fast enough that it was starting to hurt.

"I- I gotta- I gotta go, get out of here," Sorun gasped out. He wasn't even able to register the worried looks present on both Amy's and Sticks' face. Didn't even feel it when Sorun brushed past Amy's arm when she reached out to offer him a steadying hand. It felt like his feet were on autopilot when he stumbled to the front door and nearly crashed out of it to the outside.

The air wasn't helping. The air was worse, making him feel like he was suffocating, making everything spin as Sorun came to terms with the fact he quite possibly had made the worst mistake in his entire life and was only now remembering it. He stumbled off in a random direction, towards anything, with no clear goal in Sorun's mind as it kept spinning around the same event he couldn't help but play in his mind as he was reminded of just what he'd done.

What had he done?

"- SO! STUPID! I'M SO! FUCKING! STUPID!"

Every single word was punctuated by Sorun bashing his head against a tree. He didn't even know where he was, some random part of the village, maybe, it didn't matter. He'd found a tree at some point. Or run into it, he didn't really remember. And what else was he to do but beat his dumbass head against the tree?

"Agh! Man..." But eventually the pain in his forehead had to beat out the turmoil he felt, so Sorun was left turning around and sliding his back down against the tree until he ended up sitting against it. And after that, all that was left to do was think.

Think about that stupid, stupid decision he decided to make.

"Fuck my life, I thought I was gonna die. I wouldn't have done that if I'd known- yeah, you know what, I don't think Nicole's gonna see it that way." His head fell into his open hand. *"She's gonna kill me."*

He didn't even know why he'd done that kiss. It was in the heat of the moment. One of those "never gonna have a chance to do this again" things that he decided to capitalize on at that moment. And... also to maybe stun her for a second so he could get through that portal because she was genuinely getting ready to physically restrain him, but that hadn't even been that big a factor compared to the fact he wanted to do it. He'd had the foresight to at least just make it a forehead kiss, something that *maybe* implied something platonic, that he hadn't thought of her in that way and just considered her a really good friend, but... well, now that he really thought on it he wasn't sure Nicole would take it like that. Would she? He didn't know. He didn't know what he left her feeling. Probably horrible, since for all intents and purposes she thought he was dead right now.

Somehow the knowledge everybody else was brought back after he did what he did wasn't comforting Sorun.

In a strange way he was relieved just remembering Nicole. There really had been so much going on he couldn't focus on her at all. All because of that alternate future, probably. Or almost dying a bunch. It'd all been such a jarring experience Sorun wasn't surprised she'd been the last thing on his mind, with how focused he'd been on fixing the world and surviving. And now that he thought about it older Sonic had never even mentioned her, so for all Sorun knew she probably hadn't even existed in that future. If that was true it just helped to reaffirm he'd made the right choice in doing what he'd done - he would have destroyed that whole timeline just for that one fact alone. But she hadn't been there, nor had there been any alternate zone versions of her while he and Silver traveled to remind him of how much of a fool he was. So the memory remained locked away.

But then by mere chance that stupid conversation with Amy and that stupid badger just happened to bring her up and now that her

memory was back on the surface of his mind Sorun didn't know how to deal with it.

How was she even going to react once Sorun returned? He didn't know. Literally, he had no idea what Nicole would do once she saw him. Probably kill him; he wouldn't blame her. He'd... performed the most dickish move in the world, and for what? Just to make himself feel better before walking off to his death? He hadn't even considered what state he'd be leaving her in, even if he'd made that kiss as chaste as possible, but damn, what did that even matter? After what he'd done? Sorun didn't even want to think about what he'd left her feeling.

It was bad enough that Sorun was feeling levels of shame he hadn't thought humanly possible before now. Just how strong the message of "I fucked up" was being beat into his head; something words alone couldn't describe. It wasn't even half the issue compared to how bad Sorun felt for Nicole, for how she undoubtably felt over the whole thing. When he'd promised her he'd stop doing risky things that would worry her.

And then he'd gone and died. Practically walked off and committed suicide from her point of view.

"In fairness to me it was to save the world. Aaaand there's no chance that'll actually matter." Sighing, Sorun lifted his head up off his hand to look at the sky above. *"This isn't something I can ever take back, is it? Man, I've screwed things up with her forever. I'm never even going to be able to look her in the eyes again."*

He couldn't. Not after what he'd done to her. After *that* . Which would be real hard considering his house was in a city she was omnipresent in.

"Well, I guess there's only one thing I can do."

"Uh... Sorun? What are you doing?"

He would admit it probably looked strange. Him, in a blue coat no way suited to this tropical climate, chilling out on a cheap, plastic lounge chair on the beach, facing the calm ocean. Umbrella stuck into the sand and providing him shade from the sun, thick, colorful sunglasses over his eyes, fruity drink in hand with a little umbrella. From a certain perspective this was a kind of fantasy Sorun always wanted to secretly live out, and while the circumstances leading up to it weren't ideal, fuck, he'd take anything at this point.

So Sorun could imagine when Silver found Sorun in this state, just lounging on the beach, he'd be confused. For Sorun it was the exact opposite. This was the most obvious move in the world, so much so he was almost impressed with how smart it was. Because really, what else was there to do?

"Huh? Oh, hey, Silver." He turned his head over to the white hedgehog and lowered the sunglasses with his left hand to meet his eyes. The blue Chaos Emerald sat next to him, half-buried in the sand. "Yeah, I live here now."

Silence for a solid five seconds before Silver spoke.

"You... live here now." The puzzlement on Silver's face worsened. He gestured to the umbrella and chair. "Where'd you get all this stuff?"

"Oh, people apparently just leave this stuff lying around," Sorun answered. He wasn't even lying. He'd just stumbled across all this stuff while wandering aimlessly on the beach trying to figure out what to do with his life now and decided to just go for it. And after a half hour of just sitting here in contemplation he decided... yeah. This fit. This felt right. Maybe he could just chill out here forever instead of going back to that mess he'd left behind.

Well, he'd found all this stuff except for the drink. He'd stolen that from somebody while they weren't looking, but honestly for how bland it tasted he was probably doing that guy a favor.

"... Okay, Sorun, what is this?" Silver asked. "I leave you alone to sleep off getting hit and when I find you you're... doing this." Once again he gestured to the chair and umbrella. "What's going on with you?"

Sorun took a sip of the drink. He decided banana wasn't that good a flavor for a drink. That fat monkey Mobian in the purple suit should be thankful to him for stealing this from him. "Yeah, I'm just done," Sorun answered.

"Done," Silver flatly repeated.

"Yeah, done," Sorun confirmed. "Gonna look around, maybe find an odd job or something. Even if I gotta get a labor job the Chaos Emerald pretty much just trivializes that. Figure I do that for a while then find somewhere to live here I can buy and go from there. They got video games here so I'm set."

Silver didn't say anything immediately. He just stood there staring at Sorun, face in a mixture of disbelief and confusion. Noises came out of his mouth, his hands flattened, raised with palms facing each other, fingers pointed at Sorun as he attempted to parse together what the human was saying. Evidently he failed, because then he asked, "What do you mean you're done?"

"Means just that. I'm done." The drink really was horrible, so Sorun shoved the glass halfway into the sand beside him, next to the Emerald. "Silver," Sorun began, "from minute one of getting dragged onto Mobius Prime it has been nothing but nightmare after nightmare. First I gotta be a resistance fighter and fight robots, then I gotta get cool powers that kill me so I can fight a literal super villain, then I gotta fight god, TWICE, mess with time, do all this zone nonsense with you, and Silver these are just the broad strokes, I'm not even getting into the fine minutia of insanity I've been having to deal with on a day-by-day basis.

"I never asked for any of this, okay? Not to be a fighter, not to save the world, not to save to future with you, none of it. I never wanted

the responsibility, or to risk my life, or to do any of this other stuff. I was supposed to be done a long time ago but my home world died so I had to make do and then do *more* of all this because that's my life apparently even though I don't wanna do any of this. I *don't want to be a hero* . I want to chill. I want to sit down, and chill. That's all I want."

With a final, deep inhale to replenish the breath Sorun had spent laying all that out, he used a single finger to push his sunglasses back up. "So yeah. I'm done. I'm callin' it quits and staying here, because guess what, Silver, I'd rather stay on a tropical island with a nice village community and a beach. I'd rather stay here and deal with an Eggman that's a goofball who, at worst, mildly inconveniences people on a weekly basis with zany cartoon schemes instead of the one on Mobius Prime that's a genocidal maniac who wants to conquer the world. That guy almost killed me! A lot! This one, I don't even know what his deal is, but at least he isn't committing robo-slavery and killing people, so you tell me, why *wouldn't* I want to stay here?"

Silver fists tightened at his sides. "Sorun. You promised you'd help me save the future. My future. My *home* . Did you forget all that?"

Leaning back into his lounge chair, Sorun waved a hand and said, "You got cool mind powers, you'll be fine 'thout me."

"Okay, and what about the fact I'm stuck in the past without you!?" Silver yelled out. "You said once we were done saving the future you'd use Yamato to send me back to my proper time!"

"I'll still do that, just come back and see me when you're done doing whatever."

"Come all the way back here from another zone!?"

Sorun shrugged and interlaced his hands behind his head. A frustrated noise left Silver, and his clenched fists began to shake. For a single moment his hands glowed teal, and the umbrella giving

Sorun shade twitched slightly. The pale teen had seen this coming and figured he was about five seconds from getting tossed by Silver out of anger.

But, that never came. To his surprise Silver had made a deep breath, and the glow disappeared from his hands. And then even more strangely, he asked in a calm voice, "Sorun, what's really going on?"

Now confused, Sorun turned his head to Silver. He wasn't upset like Sorun thought he would be. He figured he'd feel betrayed that Sorun was just giving up, leaving Silver to do everything on his own and make his own way back to Mobius Prime, and really he wouldn't have blamed him. Instead of that he saw the white hedgehog giving him a patient, but expectant expression. There was even a hint of worry behind his eyes, and Sorun already felt that look chipping away at his defenses.

"I just told you what's going on," Sorun attempted, but he already didn't sound sure of himself, and the short sigh Silver made told him he wasn't buying it.

"Sorun, this is the first time you've ever acted like this, and before this all you wanted to do was go back to Mobius Prime. I don't see what could have changed leaving you alone for a couple of hours," Silver said. "And you're way too nice a person to actually do something like just give up like this. So come on. Tell me what's going on."

It was a somewhat naïve observation, if not accurate. There were so many ways Sorun could have refuted it, but he just couldn't. Not with that soft glare Silver was giving him. Because dammit, he just liked him too much to lie so overtly. And after all they'd been through he at least deserved the truth of the matter.

Groaning out loudly, Sorun sat up and moved so that he was sitting on the edge of the lounge chair, facing Silver. He took the sunglasses off, stared at the colorful lenses for a second, and then

with a grunt threw them away into the sand somewhere before looking back at Silver.

"Okay, the truth." Sorun clasped his hands together and took a deep breath to steel himself before speaking. "I screwed up."

"As in...?"

Sorun grimaced and turned his head. "With a girl."

"Huh?" Silver looked to be at a loss for that explanation. "A... a girl? You're having a fit over a girl?"

"It's not just any girl," Sorun snapped out. Silver had jumped at the sudden tone change, forcing Sorun to take another deep breath before speaking. "Okay, so... imagine a girl, but she's perfect, right? Perfect everything, perfectly intelligent, perfectly compassionate, perfect... laugh and smile and..." He forced himself to stop and hung his head before the emotions could overwhelm him. "She was there, during the whole thing with Enerjak I told you about, before I went to the bad future. And at the time, I... figured what I was doing was a one-way street, that I'd be going to die, so... Silver, I did something colossally stupid, you don't even know."

"Oh, come on." How Sorun envied that casual tone Silver held. "It couldn't have been that bad."

"I kissed her before going off to die," Sorun bluntly stated, making Silver freeze. "We weren't... we were just really good friends but I thought I was gonna die and I wasn't thinking so I just... went for it. Then shoved her away and left in a portal before I could even figure out how she felt about it. Then, um, uh, here we are."

"O-oh." The gravity of the situation obviously wasn't hitting Silver, because if it had he would have had more of a reaction than that. "Like... like was it a on-the-lips kiss like in the books?"

"No, Silver."

"Did... did you want it to be on the lips?"

" *Yes* , Silver."

Awkwardly, Silver scratched the back of his head. "That sounds pretty rough, yeah."

"Oh, you don't say!?" Sorun yelled, lifting his head up to Silver. "I can't ever show my face around her again after what I did. I didn't have any right to do it, I-I did it just so I'd *feel better* before I died! We weren't in any kind of relationship or anything and I just...!" He groaned out and buried his face in his hands. It was an entirely unsalvageable mess. Completely unforgivable. There wasn't anything he could do to fix it.

"I mean... can't, can't you just talk to her about it?" Silver asked. "At the very least don't you think it'd be better for her to know you're at least alive? Everyone over there thinks you're dead right now, don't they?"

"That's the logical conclusion, yes, but fortunately, Silver, I have you to just go ahead and tell everyone I'm fine."

Silver looked uncomfortable at the thought. "Sorun, I really... you know, I really think it'd be better if you just showed up yourself." When Sorun didn't reply Silver made a small sigh. "Sorun, I'll be the first to admit I don't know anything about the person you're talking about, but you always talked about your friends like you really liked them. And for all you know you're overreacting."

Sorun shook his head. "Not with this one, Silver."

"... Okay, well, look, I asked around and it turns out that Eggman guy lives on a small island a bit offshore, so I'm gonna go ahead and visit him to ask for help," Silver said. "I don't really know what to say about this kind of thing, Sorun, and I don't know what you want me to say. But maybe think about what you're doing? Just try and figure

this out while I'm gone, and I guess I'll just come get you when I have news."

He couldn't see Silver when he departed. Only the soft sound of footsteps on sand let him know he'd left, as by now Sorun was so hunched in on himself he was staring at ground. As soon as he was gone that sound was replaced by Sorun's stomach rumbling. And he didn't know what happened with his backpack full of food after the boomerang knocked him out; he'd woken up without it.

He needed somewhere quiet to think. Somewhere with food.

The closest place in this village he could find that served food was some fast food joint in the middle. Quaint enough little place: large shack with a grill behind the window, some patio tables scattered around the front, nice open view of the whole village.

Sorun hadn't chosen to sit at one of the tables. He'd chosen to just sit at the... he hesitated to call a place so small a diner, the joint's serving window that folded out into a small bar. It didn't even have more than one employee, and that one employee was a teenager with a voice so badly cracked it made Sorun wince every single time he had to hear it.

Somehow it wasn't even the worst dive he'd ever been to.

"You really sure you just want fries and nothing else? We're running a two-for-one special on burgers for four times the price." Once again Sorun flinched at the sound of the voice of the person on the other side of the grill Sorun was facing. Some teal-furred, thin-as-a-rail Mobian mouse-ferret thing, he didn't know, he gave up on trying to classify Mobians on sight. The frankly oversized braces he had on combined with the cracked voice made Sorun feel a tinge of sympathy for the other teen. Then he'd seen the nametag he had pinned on his shirt.

Dave.

"... Yeah, it's fine," Sorun hollowly answered, folding his arms on the bar while leaning forwards on it. The guy on the other side shrugged and walked off to the side where a pair of deep fryers were. "So your name's Dave, huh?"

"Cha, that's me. Dave." He started raising baskets full of fries in and out of the oil-filled fryers.

"Mm. I knew a Dave once," Sorun said. "Realest friend a guy could ask for. Kind of guy that would have solved every problem I've had in a quarter of the time it took me if he ended up in my shoes. Man, I miss that guy."

Foolish of him to get sad from seeing a name alone, but he didn't care. He missed everything from his old life, and being here in some random fast food dive with someone named Dave wasn't helping his ill-timed nostalgia trip. He was one of the things he missed most of all.

"I don't know, I mean- you're friends with the coolest guy around forever, and then one day he and everyone and everything else is just... poof, gone, like that," Sorun mumbled out. "I'm not saying I'd wish what happened to me happen to anyone else, but at least then it'd be him alive when everyone else died, you know? And unlike me Dave could actually do things, whereas me I'm just- I'm just this idiot stumbling along barely managing to hold things together, and then-"

"Food's done." A plate of fries and a side of ketchup was placed down in front of Sorun. When he looked up from the fries he saw the teenage fry cook giving him an otherwise neutral look. "Sorry, but I wasn't listening. What were you saying?"

A heavy frown settled over Sorun's features. "Nothing. Forget it," he said. Worse Dave shrugged and went back to doing whatever he was doing while Sorun looked down at his food.

French Fries had been a staple of Sorun's diet back on Earth due to the fact they were goddamn perfect. Right size for maximum grip

stability, quick to eat, amazing taste, solid vector for ketchup transportation, and potatoes were a vegetable so Sorun was pretty sure they were healthy. More than that it was *the* food, the food he and Dave and any of their other friends would always eat at a diner while joking around about whatever.

Or he did, at least, because Dave always had to get those damn burgers.

It was a comfort food. A reminder of simpler times when Sorun's life and mental wellness wasn't hanging by a mortal threat. And that sorry excuse for a food vendor Chuck back on Mobius Prime didn't sell the damn things, jackass seemed to be under the impression hotdogs were the end-all be-all, so he was always pressed on finding some. Apparently this place had them, though, so in this time of great duress Sorun needed his fries.

So, without further hesitation, Sorun grabbed one of the fries on his plate. His expectations were already low from how limp the poor thing was, but he simply shrugged, dipped it in the ketchup, and ate it.

"... Somehow this is fry is soggy, burnt, and cold at the same time," Sorun said as he finished the fry. The ketchup was admittedly stellar, but by god that fry. He didn't even mention how it tasted like Worse Dave tried drowning the fries in salt.

Worse Dave didn't even seemed surprised at how unremarkable Sorun made the fries sound. "Yeah, we get that complaint a lot," he reported. "You don't like it?"

"Just the opposite. Tastes like home," Sorun said as he ate another fry. No matter where he went in Detroit for fries it was never consistent. Sometimes they were the best, or the worst, or were treading on some middle ground. Made the journey for fries somewhat exciting, Sorun supposed, since he never was able to guess what he was getting. Somehow this fry seemed to hit the same note as the worst he'd ever partaken in back home.

"Oh, that's great," the fry cook said. "My employer says I should try and not to feel self-conscious about the fact we use month-expired potatoes to save on costs, but so far all the complaints we've gotten have been all the normal complaints. You wouldn't mind filling out a performance review sheet for me, would you?"

"... No. Go away," Sorun requested.

Dave simply sighed. "Yeah, alright."

The Mobian went off to do whatever inside the kitchen. Sorun returned to his own fries, trying to get deep in thought but failing every time. Too focused on the fries and not wanting to focus on his problems. It was a dangerous loop, but the fries helped to take the edge off that.

He felt a presence sit down next to him. He knew who it was from all the orange and brown from the side of his vision, but she hadn't said anything, yet. She'd just sat down next to him.

"So, uh... hi." There it was. She'd started speaking after his fifth fry after sitting down. "Eatin' at Meh Burger, huh?"

"Is that really the name of this place? 'Cause I can believe it eating these fries," Sorun said as he downed another fry. "What do you want, Sticks?"

"Amy wanted me to apologize for being too, quote, 'me' to you," she explained, making Sorun snort in amusement. "Aaaand after I thought about it a bit I realized, yeah, I was wrong."

"Yeah? How's that?"

"Well, ya wear a blue coat. Everyone knows the reptilians can't see blue 'cause of their eyes, so there's no way you're with 'em. Even if you wear a coat," Sticks said. "And that Silver guy seemed pretty legit, so if he vouches for you, you're cool."

"... Ah, yes, it's so obvious. Of course." Fuck it, he'd take it if it got her off his back. "You come all this way here to tell me that or is there an actual reason you're here?"

"Just... y'know, just checkin'. Ya kind stumbled outta Amy's place in a panicked daze and she was kinda worried." She leaned in closer so her face was in his vision, eyes narrowed as she scrutinized his face. "You're looking fine now, though."

"Right, that." Sorun sighed. Both at the memory and the fact he was almost through the fries. "I suddenly remembered why I'm the biggest idiot in the multiverse and have been dealing with that. Nothing that groundshaking."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

He didn't really want to tell her, but Silver went off somewhere and there wasn't really any other sympathetic ears in sight. Not that Sorun thought he'd find one in Sticks, but upon further review, he realized he didn't have anything better to do right now than to air his dirty laundry out. So, rolling his eyes, he decided to go for it.

"As far as stories go it's about as sad and pathetic as you could get," Sorun started. "A fool of a fool decided to go on a suicide mission 'cause the whole world was doomed because of a guy in a stupid gold mask. But there was also this girl he had this super huge crush on, so, figuring he was gonna die within the next hour, he decided to go for it, kissed her on the forehead and then left without further explanation. Then the fool did his thing, stupid gold mask man was stopped, planet was saved."

"Okay?" Sorun was honestly surprised Sticks managed to follow along to the entire story. "So what's the problem here?"

"I survived."

Well now he was just impressed at how she was maintaining a straight face. "Were you not supposed to live or something?" she

asked.

"Sticks, at the time the method I was using to beat the guy had a hundred percent chance of killing me. I was dead-certain I was gonna die. Still went with it, though, 'cause one guy's life versus the whole planet, no-brainer, so I made a choice. Then a bunch of nonsense happened and I lived, so now here I am trying to get back with Silver," Sorun said. "It'd be great if it weren't for the fact I did the absolute worst thing possible by doing that kiss and then dip out right after."

"Why?"

"'Cause I never really told her how I feel, we were just really good friends, so what I did was really bad."

"Why?"

"Because you... because you don't just go and kiss someone without consulting their feelings. It's beyond rude, invasive even." Sorun rested his head against his palm and leaned his elbow against the counter. "I mean maybe she won't look too hard into it 'cause it was just a forehead kiss, I got that going for me, but god, man, I really don't think that'll matter."

"Why?"

"You say why one more time, Sticks," Sorun warned, shifting his torso so he was facing her. He probably would have lashed out if she was grinning at him, but her face was just that of a curious person. But instead of being angry with her he thought more on that question, on why, and he found himself coming up blank. "I don't know, Sticks," he admitted, "I guess I just don't wanna face the fact I did wrong by someone I respect more than I respect myself. In itself not that high a bar, but in her case she far exceeded that bar. I mean she does all these things for me, even gave me a house for crying out loud, literally a house, and how do I repay her? Doin' that? She

got devastated the first time I died, so I don't even know how she's reacting with this one."

Sticks leaned her head back in surprise. "Does... you dying over there happen a lot?"

"That's the thing, it's actually pretty common over there," Sorun glumly replied. "But in the end I don't know, except that I managed to hurt her one way or another. And I'm such a terrible person I didn't even remember doing it 'til that talk at Amy's house. 'Cause her name just accidentally came up. Maybe I subconsciously blocked the memory knowing how bad I screwed up, maybe I just had too much going on, I don't know. But it happened. And now I'm here."

"And your plan for dealing with that is eating the worst fries on the island?"

"It's gotten me this far," Sorun said as he ate his last fry. "I kind of just don't really want to deal with it. Think maybe I'll stay here."

At hearing that, Sticks snorted. "That just sounds stupid."

Tapping his empty plate, Sorun muttered, "Yeah, Silver thought it was pretty stupid, too."

"Ah-huh, I bet." Sticks shifted around in her stool a little bit, and then said, "Listen, Sorun, I ain't really good at the whole feelings thing, so everyone else usually just handles that for me. But even I can see running from your problems isn't gonna help you out that much."

"... Probably not, no..."

"Even then if you really like this girl so much don'tcha think ya owe it to her to at least let her know you're still around? Even if she smacks ya around for what ya did? You're bein' a moron, you should just go back."

She wasn't even wrong. He *did* owe that much to Nicole. And if not that Nicole at least deserved to know he wasn't dead. Good old Nicole, who always went out of her way to help Sorun when he didn't really deserve to be helped. Good old Nicole, who visited him every day when he was in such a sad state he couldn't even speak after seeing what happened to Earth. Good old Nicole, who was honestly the best video game partner and friend he could have asked for in that world.

He'd done a phenomenally shit job repaying all that kindness by doing what he did. The worst part was the more he thought on it, the more Sorun severely doubted, would stake his life on it, she'd go so far as to hit him over it when she didn't have a violent bone in her digital body. Sorun felt that made what she could do instead that much worse.

But... there was some truth in those blunt words of Sticks'. He couldn't leave it how he left it. And if he was being honest with himself, if he really did stay here Sorun knew he couldn't escape that damn question of 'what if he just went back?' for however long he stayed here. Could see it growing worse with every passing day until he eventually caved and just went back anyways, and made the situation all the worse for it.

"Fuck it, guess I'm going back after all. For Nicole." Surely a disaster waiting to happen, but he could accept it was a disaster of his making. Whatever happened was on him and him alone, and he could live with that. People that actually cared about him deserved to see him alive and kicking, anyways. "Guess I'll finish here and do what I need to go back," Sorun said, fully turning in his stool to face Sticks. "Thank you for... helping me with this, Sticks. You're not that bad."

She waved a hand at him, smiling slightly. "Eh, you're not so bad yourself. And hey, I really am sorry for the whole boomerang thing. Even if it kinda sounds like ya need some sense beaten into ya's."

"That I do," Sorun agreed in an amused tone, watching as Sticks pushed herself off the stool. "So what's next for you?"

She shrugged. "I dunno. Go home to my burrow, maybe. Got a pet that needs walkies. Should probably be heading home yourself." She walked off after speaking, turning around to call out, "See ya!" before turning back around to leave. Sorun quickly lost sight of her, and made a weak wave of his own at her back.

"Bye. Man, what a weirdo." With that done Sorun spun back around towards the bar to attend to his empty plate. And then he jumped in his seat when he saw the fry cook from earlier standing there. Just... staring, and not doing anything else. Sorun looked to the left and right, not seeing anybody else. He turned back to the cook and asked, "Did... were you just listening to that whole thing?"

"Pretty much, yeah. It's a slow day and I don't have anything else to do," he admitted.

"I really don't like you."

He didn't looked fazed in the slightest. "Yeah... I get that a lot, too. So anyways, it's five seventy-nine for the fries."

"Five seventy-nine!?"

"Yeah, you got the medium size which we charge for the same as a large but with twice the smiles."

"You... haven't smiled once during this whole thing," Sorun pointed out. When the braces-wearing Mobian just shrugged he sighed out and reached into his pocket.

It was only then Sorun realized that he didn't have any money from this world.

"Uh-oh." Shortsighted by grief yet again, it seemed. He slowly removed his hand from his pocket, asking Dave, "So any chance you

have a tab system up and running, or...?"

Sorun winced when he shook his head. "Uh, noooo, dude, you really need to pay or I'll call the cops."

"I see." Sorun swallowed thickly as Dave took his plate and walked it over to a nearby sink in the kitchen. He looked down at his feet, where the Chaos Emerald was resting against the stool he was sitting on. sorun then looked up and took a quick glance around the perimeter. There was nobody else around. "You know, it's situations like this that remind me of the lessons imparted onto me by the streets of Detroit."

"Um, whatever that is," Dave said as he ran the plate under the faucet. "I'm also gonna have to ask you to pay in exact change, the register hasn't been working for a month and I can't really-" When he turned around from the sink after dropping the plate in he saw the stool Sorun was sitting on was empty. "Huh?"

That was as far as he got before Sorun rushed in from behind him, sword in hand. He held the sheathed katana in front of Dave, grasped both its end and the handle, and pulled it towards himself and against Dave's throat.

The Mobian's eyes bulged out, and instantly he began making gagging noises as his airflow was cut off. The gagging noises soon turned into choking sounds, and his arms rose up in an attempt to try and pry the blunt implement off of his throat. This only caused Sorun to pull the sheathed sword harder against his throat, making him quietly wheeze as he attempted to reach behind him, though this was in vain as his arms couldn't reach Sorun.

Sinking down to his knees, Dave's wheezes and movements began to grow quieter and slower the longer the sword was pressed against his neck. His body began to list off to the side, eyelids blinking slower and slower as he began to still. It was after Sorun felt no struggling at all that he removed the sword from his neck, and then

pulled his body to the side so that his unconscious form was leaning up against the bottom of the grill on the other side of the bar.

"Man, that was... surprisingly easy, wow, you really must be the wimpiest Mobian around," Sorun whispered out as he finished propping up Dave's body. He'd only gone for the choke in the first place because he didn't want to cause too much damage with the Bringer Claws, but even then he'd expected more resistance than almost none at all from a Mobian. Maybe in this zone they just weren't all that up to snuff compared to Prime Zone Mobians. Or Dave was just that unfortunate, and after eating those fries, Sorun could believe it.

He got up, ready to make his egress from the stand to get away from his crime as quickly as possible. He bolted towards the back door leading out of the shack, but then froze halfway when he saw something sitting on a nearby counter. There, next to a bunch of other condiments. A nearly full bottle of ketchup. The same ketchup he'd had with those fries.

After a moment's deliberation Sorun backtracked, grabbed the bottle of ketchup, and then stuffed it into one of his pockets. And then he'd exited the shack and ran away from it as fast as possible.

"Alright, boat, boat, gotta find a boat, need a boat, where's a boat?"

If what Silver was said was right this zone's Eggman lived somewhere off the shore close to the island. And since he'd gone over to personally talk to the man, in theory, Sorun probably could have just waited for him to get back to Sorun on his own with news for whether he could actually help or not. But that was before Sorun decided to have lunch, so now he needed to expedite the process before somebody found Dave.

Since swimming around the island trying to find it wasn't ideal to Sorun, since he didn't trust himself to not get exhausted and drown at some point, he needed a boat to get there. He was planning on

stealing one from somebody, but he couldn't actually find a boat anywhere. Or even so much as a dock no matter where he looked. Everywhere he searched either lead to the beach or the forested areas outside the village. And walking along the beach just lead to more beach for Sorun.

Needless to say after ten minutes of walking along the beach without so much as seeing a single boat Sorun's patience was wearing thin.

"What the hell, it's a island people live on, there's not a single boat anywhere that anybody uses?" A frustrated sigh left Sorun as he kicked at the sand underneath his feet. He lifted Yamato up, looking down on it with a mixed expression. *"If I knew where the damn place was I could just make a portal there, but I can't- I can fly, goddammit, god fucking dammit."*

If it were physically possible he might have might have snapped the sword in half, he was squeezing down on it so hard due to the anger Sorun felt for himself. Wasn't the first time he could have solved a simple problem if he could only remember half the things this Emerald let him do, and dammit, he wouldn't be surprised if this wouldn't be the last time. His only solace was in the fact it was a rare occurrence when somebody else saw him make these mistakes. He wasn't so sure how far he could keep going otherwise.

In a flash of blue light and particles, the sword transmuted back into the Emerald. More blue light washed over Sorun's shoulders as blue, feathered arms appeared jutting out of his back, the clawed hands resting on his shoulders.

"Ten minutes of my life I'll never get back," Sorun spitefully muttered under his breath as the Bringer Claws extended outwards. The spectral wings flapped a few times, and Sorun felt his body lift off the ground as the wings carried him away.

He decided not to go too high. Sorun wasn't that knowledgeable about weather but he knew winds on large, open places like oceans were more intense than other places. That and looking out at all the

blue in front of him flying around was nauseating to Sorun. Fortunately enough he didn't even have to look that hard for what he was looking for after a few minutes of gliding around the outer perimeter of the island; it was right there. A rock island out in the distance so small it could barely even be called an island, not even a mile out. Almost the entire surface area was taken up by a large, round building with reflective, white walls. He could have taken the place for some kind of observatory. Or the lab of a crazy scientist.

Good enough.

He couldn't fly over to the place and land down on the ground fast enough, and he almost sighed out in relief when the spectral limbs were replaced by the familiar weight of a sword in his hands. Never could get used to the flying thing. Tried to avoid it as much as possible. Sorun'd prefer walking any day of the week as long as it didn't involve a headache.

There was, fortunately enough, somewhat of a path in the rocks that lead up to the... evil lab building thing he assumed Eggman lived in. On the way there Sorun expected something annoying to happen that he'd have to take five seconds to deal with. Sentry turrets popping up out of the rocks or a security patrol of robots he'd come across and have to cut down or something. Surprisingly he didn't encounter anything in the way of security on the way to the lab. There wasn't even so much as a wall surrounding the place, something that had Sorun slightly baffled as he walked right up to the lab's front door.

At least... he was pretty sure this was the front door. It was just a wall with an oval outline cut into it, so he assumed it was one of those pneumatic sliding doors. A rather imposing one too, he'd thought annoyed, since the door itself seemed to be about three or four times taller than Sorun himself. He almost cut the door in half just for that alone, but he managed to restrain himself as he thought about what to do.

"Okay, so... I thought I'd run into Silver out here but I guess not," he mumbled out, turning away from the door to take a quick glance around. Nothing but him and some rocks out here. "Eh, maybe he got lost or is already in or something, I dunno. Find him later if I need to."

He turned back to the door. A small, red button off to the side of the door caught Sorun's attention. On a first glance it might have looked like a doorbell, but knowing Eggman it probably did something else. Like open a trapdoor under Sorun's feet or something else like that, so he was hesitant to reach out and actually touch it.

Then again... that'd be something he'd expect of Eggman Prime. This was a different, and Sorun would begrudgingly admit this, more subdued Eggman. So for all intents and purposes it probably was just a doorbell, but he didn't know if it was trapped or not.

"I even wanna knock on the front door? I mean I can just... ugh, I don't know." Maybe Silver had a point and he really should just be straight with him and ask. It'd probably even go further than just fighting his way to him. But try as he might, Sorun just couldn't shake the fact it was an Eggman he was dealing with. Surely not as worse a one as his. But still. There was a principle to consider.

"... Fuck it, what do I have to lose?" Sorun asked under his breath. Silver wanted to play it peaceful; he'd get mad if he found out Sorun tried the violent route, and more than that he didn't want to accidentally jeopardize their shot of getting back home. So against his better judgement he decided to hit the doorbell. He still used the tip of Yamato's scabbard to hit the button, though, for fear the button really was trapped and would shock him.

Except it didn't. There was no electrical buzz, no traps, nothing. Sorun was almost shocked to hear the sound of a doorbell ring out once he hit the button, but was even more shocked when nothing else happened.

"Well... alright, then." He supposed he really was just going to go through the front door here.

The minute after hitting the doorbell was spent with Sorun standing there, softly rocking back and forth on his feet as he waited for something to happen. Halfway through he wondered to himself if anybody had even heard the bell ring and should try again, but he held off on not wanting to appear rude. He made the conscious decision to ring the doorbell again, though, if another few minutes passed with nothing happening.

Right as he made that decision, the front door slid open with a small *whish* noise. The thing on the other side that opened the door certainly was round, but it wasn't the tall scientist Sorun was expecting.

No, it was a robot. A small little thing that barely reached up to Sorun's knees, and he wasn't even sure what he was looking at. Its "body" was a red, floating hemisphere that was connected to another red hemisphere that had two blue circular lights for eyes and a bunch of rectangles for a mouth. Two hemispheres connected by a mechanical torso about as thick as one of Sorun's fingers, with two equally thin arms and hands attached to its midsection.

Seeing it, Sorun couldn't help but scratch his head. Somehow this robot looked even less threatening than the ladybug wheel thing.

"Oh! Hello there." The little robot waved a hand up at Sorun. He even *sounded* polite, with that quiet, refined voice of his. "I don't suppose you're here about that part we ordered? That's been due to arrive for a few weeks now."

Sorun's eyes glanced off to the side, and then looked back down at the robot. "No?"

"Ohhh..." The robot slumped forwards in visible disappointment. Sorun opened his mouth to speak, but was waved off by the machine. "No, no, it's quite alright. There's always tomorrow." The

robot perked up a bit, and then said, "I do have to say, though, that today is becoming an unusual one. It's not often the Doctor gets more than one visitor to his home. Actually, it's an odd day if he even gets one visitor now that I think about it..."

Sorun straightened when he heard that. "Was the first guy a hedgehog? White fur? Goofy haircut?"

"Why, yes, that's the precisely what he looked like," the robot confirmed to him. "A, uh, bit of an odd one, him. The way he talked you would assume he doesn't even know what a package courier is."

"Yeah I don't think he does, listen, you know where he is?"

"Ah, but of course. Your friend arrived inquiring about the good Doctor. Seeing no reason to object Cubot volunteered to show him to the Doctor. Though... hrm, that was admittedly some time ago," the robot admitted to Sorun. "It's very possible he may have gotten lost and lead your friend astray along the way. That tends to happen when I'm not around to correct him."

Sorun rose a questioning eyebrow. "A robot that gets lost, huh?"

"A number of his logic subsystems are faulty, but he tries his best all the same."

"Ah-huh. And you would be...?"

The robot seemed taken back by what Sorun assumed to be an innocent question. He floated back a couple inches and held a hand in front of his static, unmoving mouth that glowed brighter whenever he spoke. "You... you want to know my name?" he asked. By how reverent his tone was one would assume he was just given a marriage proposal.

The sudden shift made Sorun warily tilt his head back. "I *did* until you said it like tha-"

"Oh, what a remarkable day! Nobody ever asks about me!" the small robot gushed out, loud enough to startled Sorun. Apparently noticing Sorun's distress, the robot coughed - or at least attempted a cough-like sound - into his closed hand and seemed to compose himself. "Terribly sorry, sir, but nobody here or on the main island ever really talk to me. You may refer to me as Orbot."

"... Ahh, 'cause you're all round like an orb and a robot, so you're Orbot- ah, yeah, I get it," Sorun said with a nod. "So, like, you're a buddy Eggman made when he got lonely or something?"

"Oh, no no no... well yes, but no," Orbot denied with a shake of his head. "I'm one of... and decidedly the more intelligent and refined of the pair of us... two assistant bots the Doctor created to help with his daily going-ons. The other I referred to earlier, Cubot, would be the other."

Sorun made a half-nod. "So you help him make robots?"

"Well, somebody needs to hold all the tools and spare parts. Clean the lair, make the Doctor's breakfast, sort out his clothes in the wash because that blockheaded *simpleton* can't remember to separate the reds from the whites..." When he noticed Sorun's blank staring Orbot cleared his nonexistent throat. "But you certainly didn't come here to hear me ramble, please, come in, come in!"

So far the tiny robot seemed nice enough, and Sorun liked to think he had a good sense for these sorts of things. He was actually somewhat surprised one of Eggman's robots of all things was being so genuine and courteous with him, but, well... it was becoming increasingly evident this Eggman really may have been of a different breed. And even so it wouldn't stop surprising Sorun.

During his inner ruminations Orbot had said something and began floating down the hall. Seeing no reason not to Sorun decided to follow the little robot, taking the time to examine the inner surroundings of the "lair", as Orbot had called it.

Calling this place a lair honestly seemed disingenuous, at least in Sorun's opinion. The place was so clean and the lights were so bright that the place was practically shining white and chrome, and yet somehow it was just bright enough not to be nauseating to Sorun's eyes. If anything the sterile environment was almost pleasant, which was baffling to think considering an Eggman built this place. It was a total stark contrast to the interior of places Sorun had been in that had been designed by the Eggman he personally knew.

Dim lights. Cold, dark metal, uncomfortable angles, tight spaces, a dreary atmosphere, the heavy stench of metal and chemicals. Any place designed by that Eggman was by default gloomy and made Sorun want to leave as soon as possible. It didn't even fully encapsulate how terrible that man was, and they were still places Sorun could never stand to be in.

This place was so far on the opposite end of the spectrum that it was almost staggering to Sorun. He dared to say it was *nice* . Especially when Orbot lead him into a kitchen that for all intents and purposes just looked like a really well-furnished kitchen.

Afterwards Sorun slowly blinked in confusion as he wondered why he'd been lead into a kitchen.

"Um... hey, Orbot?" Sorun asked, making Orbot pause and turned back around towards him. "Why are we in a kitchen?" He took an appraising look around the kitchen, and then looked up at the ceiling. Again, he blinked. *"Man, the dude even has a skylight in here. I want a skylight."*

Orbot tapped his fingers together. "Oh, well, I'd assumed you wanted something to drink after taking a trip out here, and I took your silence when I posed the question as a sign of confirmation."

Sorun winced. "U-uh, right, sorry, man, I kind of spaced out and wasn't paying attention. And thanks for the offer, but I'd really rather- well, actually those fries were super salty and now that you

mentioned it I actually could go for-" He cut himself off and shook his head. "No, never mind, Orbot I really, *really* need to see Eggman, okay?"

"You... sound rather distressed," Orbot noted. "Heavens, I hope everything is in order."

"It's fine, I just need, well, it's, uh, you see, it's sorta complicated- look, man, can you please just take me to the guy?"

"Well... that in of itself may prove to be a difficult request to fulfill at the moment," Orbot confessed. "The Doctor is currently in the middle of his shows and doesn't like to be disturbed."

Sorun cocked his head to the side. "Are we talking cartoon-length shows here or something more along the line of a soap opera?"

"The latter."

"Aw Jesus, dude, I ain't got that kind of time," Sorun breathed out. "Listen, can you please, *please* just take me to him? I'll take all the heat for interrupting him, I promise, but this is super important."

It was a bit startling how a robot that couldn't change his facial expression managed to look so pensive. Mostly in the hand motions, the way he kept wringing his hands together while floating back and forth so nervously. The longer this went on the more Sorun was silently cursing Silver for ingraining the idea that a peaceful resolution was actually a viable option, which was the only reason he was bothering to go through this nonsense. But he'd gone too far and committed, and by now the sword weighing down his left hand was nothing but an uncomfortable reminder how things could go if he got desperate enough.

"Well... if you're completely sure," Orbot finally said, making some of the tension leave Sorun. "Very well, then. This way, if you would."

The small, red robot lead Sorun out from the kitchen and into more clean, white hallways. And through a couple more rooms full of technological bits and pieces Sorun couldn't even begin to classify. Some time later they wound up in what was, as far as he could see, just an ordinary living room. A living room that was about three times wider than Sorun's own living room in his house, a fact he had no choice but to begrudgingly accept.

And in the middle of the room was a sight that forced Sorun to blink his eyes a few times to clear out the obstructions that were surely messing with his vision. He didn't know how to feel when he realized he was seeing completely fine. The sight of Eggman just... sitting there on a couch. Watching TV. Eating from a bowl of potato chips next to him. Like a normal person.

"Man, this day is just weird," Sorun decided, shaking his head at what he thought was an impossible sight. The only way he'd be more baffled was if it was the Eggman he knew, and he suspected the fact he at least barely comprehended all this was because they looked completely different. But even so, it was a hard sight to accept.

"Um... thank you, Orbot, you've been very helpful." The way Sorun spoke made his voice sound distant, and he was so transfixed on the sight of Eggman he couldn't even tear his eyes away to look at the robot. "I-I'll take it from here."

Orbot nodded up at Sorun. "Of course, sir. In the meantime of you conducting your business with the good Doctor I think I will go search for your missing companion. If they haven't shown up by now I truly do fear he was lead astray by Cubot. *As if that would be the first time* ..." he grumbled out quietly, turning around to float out of the room. Sorun hadn't heard him, though, still so focused on Eggman as he was.

By now Sorun was contemplating how he should proceed from here. Go in with sword drawn, making demands right out the gate? Sounded reasonable, left the least amount of room for Eggman to make an aggressive act. He hadn't even noticed Sorun yet he was

so engrossed in his TV show; if he really wanted to Sorun could just sneak up behind him, stab him through the couch and separate things out of his brain. That was a guaranteed win.

Yet... he'd gotten this far being nice, and by now that last option, using a katana to rewrite someone, was growing increasingly unappealing by the second the longer Sorun was here, to the point he was trying desperately to not see it as an option. But yet again past experience, all those encounters Sorun had with Eggman Prime, was screaming at Sorun that trying to peacefully talk with him was a bad idea, that somebody would get hurt as a result and he needed to attack him now to mitigate the risk. His skin was itching just being in the same room as him.

"It's not the same person," Sorun reminded himself, breathing out slowly to try and calm himself. It was working, albeit barely. *"He's not an evil person, not like the other guy. Absolutely nothing about him screams evil like the other guy. And Silver's around, he wouldn't... fuck, fuck fuck fuck..."*

With great apprehension, Sorun took a step forwards. He clenched his right hand to stop it from shaking due to the anxiety, but he couldn't do anything to stop it from feeling so clammy no matter how hard he tried. His feet were automatically carrying him forwards, even if Sorun's mind was still in a whirl, voices arguing with each other over what he was supposed to do, how to go forwards, if he should just talk or not, voices yelling at each other over trusting the man in the couch even though every instinct Sorun had was telling him not to trust him.

He must have gotten close enough for Eggman to notice him, because eventually he turned his head from the TV to look at Sorun. "Oh, hey, other guy. How's it going?" he greeted, making Sorun freeze in his tracks. "Orbot let you in?"

"U-uh... yeah," Sorun stuttered, completely unsure as to how he was supposed to proceed.

"Cool." The scientist turned back to the TV. "You a big TV guy, Sorun?"

"Used to be," Sorun muttered.

"Ah, well sit, sit! You caught me in the middle of a commercial break, show'll pop back on any second now."

Sorun had doubts Eggman was being serious until he actually scooched over to make room for Sorun on the couch. He'd barely even made the conscious effort to move forwards and sit on the couch next to him. It was more an automatic reflex made out of morbid curiosity than anything else, the same kind of fascination that lead people horrified at the sight of a dead body to poke it. He couldn't understand what was going on but some baser, curious part of Sorun compelled him to sit down on the couch.

And so he did. Against all his better judgements. Against all the fears and warning voices. And once he did Sorun considered how terrible of a choice it was that he just made, that any second now a bunch of mechanical hands would pop up out of the floor to restrain him, or the couch would mechashift into some sort of stupid containment cell, the TV would start broadcasting some mind control beam, Orbot was just being so courteous to lull Sorun into a false sense of security because he was a robot and that was what Eggman programmed him for and now Sorun was fidgeting and breathing heavily, he made a mistake, he should have just attacked when he had the chance.

None of that happened. The commercial ended and the program switched to a bunch of Mobians on-screen talking. Eggman shifted his attention back to the screen and started eating out of the chip bowl. Sorun couldn't find it in himself to pay attention to the particulars of the show, what the characters were talking about or even the broad points of the plot. He'd noted a canned laugh track but nothing else. That and the soft crunching sound from Eggman eating the chips next to him.

It was such a surreal experience Sorun felt like he was in a fever dream. The voices warning of him danger devolved into a sputtering, confused mess he couldn't make sense of; his whole mind was like that. Stunned and confused at what was happening, shifting between states of disbelief and bafflement, drowned in incomprehensible noise.

He... really was just sitting around and chilling out.

"So you're not from around here, huh?"

The fog of confusion around Sorun only lifted up enough for him to hear, process, and respond to the question Eggman asked him. "Huh?" was all he could manage to say.

Eggman popped another chip in his mouth, and then said, "I thought about it for a bit and realized it's impossible for another human to be here. Trust me, I've looked. So you're either a time traveler from back when they were around or you're from another universe. Or a shapeshifting alien, I guess, but I mean come on, what are the odds of that?"

Somehow he couldn't fault the logic. "I'm, uhm, from another universe. Silver, too."

"White hedgehog guy?"

"Yeah."

"Called it." Eggman celebrated by throwing another chip in his mouth. "So what's your deal? You guys just going around visiting places or what?"

"No, we're... we're trying to get back home. We accidentally got dropped out of it when... well, it's Silver's home, technically, I'm not actually from there," Sorun corrected, "but I live there 'cause... stuff happened, and... uh, yeah. That's the long and short of it."

"Huh. Alright."

And that seemed to be the length of interest Eggman held on the subject, because he went right back to watching the show right after. Sorun blinked heavily, switching back and forth from the TV to Eggman, and then, fed up with feeling lost, he asked, "What is this?"

"What's what? The show?" Eggman shrugged. "It's only been running on for two seasons now but personally I feel they nail a lot of the characterization with the core cast-"

"Not the show, *this* ," Sorun nearly hissed through grit teeth. "This, this whole thing, what is this? What are you doing? A random stranger comes into your house and you invite them to watch TV with you?"

Sorun nearly lost it when Eggman slumped down in the couch a bit. "I don't have any friends so I thought it'd be nice, err... never got your name, what was it again?"

"I-I'm Sorun, I..." At a loss for words, Sorun tiredly mumbled out, "Aren't you supposed to be an evil scientist person?"

"I *am* an evil scientist." The amount of pride he had in the statement mixed with the utter lack of evidence Sorun saw on his part made him not believe him. "I got everything an evil scientist needs. Sweet evil lair, army of henchbots, I even have my own nemesis and his team of friends to contend with. What more do I need?"

"And you're evil 'cause you, what? What do you actually do?"

"Depends on what the mood is, I dunno, Sorun, I'm a mastermind. I have to mix it up every time or I get stuck in a rut," Eggman said as he ate a chip. "I enact some diabolical scheme on the town, Sonic and his friends stop me, I go out to the village every once in a while to catch lunch or a movie or something but that's about it. Otherwise I'm just kicking my feet up in my lair."

And just like that the paranoia and fear was rapidly draining out of Sorun. The slight shaking stopped, his breathing normalized, everything ceased. Now it was just Sorun staring up at Eggman in pure contemplation, followed by him making up his mind, scoffing, and sitting back against the couch.

Different zone, different rules. Something Sorun kept trying to remind himself of, but past experiences colored his perceptions too much that he couldn't help but be biased. Sitting next to the man of his ire, though, hearing him talk and what he does, it finally painted a clear picture for Sorun. He wasn't "evil" by any standard. Or if he was this whole zone's standard of "evil" was wildly below what it was on Mobius Prime, and that world's standard was already wildly, wildly below what was considered "evil" on Earth. With that kind of thinking now Sorun couldn't help but feel silly over being so worried with this Eggman. Different zone, different rules.

Hell, the multiverse was a multiverse for a reason. Infinite possibilities, he had to remind himself. For all he knew there was actually a good Eggman out there that wasn't evil in any capacity. Maybe in that Moebius place where everything was backwards.

A small shake in front of Sorun drew his attention. It was the bowl of chips, being held out to Sorun by Eggman. There was only a small amount of hesitation when Sorun took a chip and ate it. The chip was pretty good.

Well, that settled it. No person truly evil would ever offer another their share of chips.

"You're not sho' bad," Sorun said through the munching of the sole chip he'd taken from the bowl. After swallowing, he said, "Unless you're gonna tell me this is all some façade and you get off on putting people in the hospital with your robots?"

"What? Of course not!" Eggman shouted, sounding affronted. "What do you take me for, some deranged lunatic? I'm a evil genius, not a psychopath."

"Mm." Sorun's eyes drifted off to the television screen. "I really do hesitate to call you evil."

"Oh, really? Then by all means, tell me. What's your definition of evil?"

"Why ruin a good thing and tell you?"

He decided to drop the subject there and just watch the TV. Eggman didn't seem very satisfied by the answer, but he seemed to acknowledge Sorun was done with the topic, because he, too, turned back to the TV and went back to eating his chips. Once more they were left in silence, with only the odd crunching of chips to break up the sound of the program.

He disagreed with Eggman, though, now that Sorun could actually focus on the show. Characters were halfway decent, plot was shit. Once again he found himself missing Earth entertainment.

"Saw that twist comin' a mile away," Sorun thought to himself, slowly starting to mentally tune out the show the longer he watched. The movement of something slightly slipping in his grasp made him remember the katana he was holding, making Sorun turn his attention down to it. Yamato, of course, was still there in his grasp, patiently waiting. His eyes flicked back and forth from it to Eggman, and immediately new emotions welled up in him. Shame and guilt, mostly.

"I can't hurt this guy with the Yamato. I just can't. He's too nice." This was the man he'd come in here with plans to threaten, hurt, violate and irrevocably damage. Intent on twisting his very being by carving out pieces of memory and personality. He would have hesitated in doing such a thing with even Eggman Prime, to the point Sorun still doubted he'd be able to commit such a thing to that man. But this one? This Eggman? Someone who shared chips?

No. Couldn't be done. Sorun just plain refused to do it. And the more this went on the more he realized that Silver was right and they really

should just ask nicely. Maybe once he actually found him they-

"Oh, hey, Sorun!" The familiar voice made Sorun's head snap up. In the entrance of the living room was Silver, who was standing there and waving at him. In front of him was the little red robot, Orbot, from earlier. And he was carrying in his arms a yellow, less round and more square counterpart whose mouth and eyes were completely dark.

Coincidentally, this was when the credits to the show on the TV began to hit. Eggman chose that time to look away, and then, upon seeing Orbot carrying the defunct cube-like robot, he set down the empty bowl and stood up from the couch.

"Orbot, there you are! What's wrong with Cubot? Don't tell me he's been sticking his finger in the electrical sockets again," Eggman groused, all but completely ignoring Silver as he stomped in front of the robot, who awkwardly shuffled off to the side near the couch where Sorun was sitting.

The small robot let out a sigh. "No, sir, according one of your guests Cubot got lost while attempting to lead him to you, and then summarily shut down all on his own. It's quite fortunate I managed to find them when I did, I assure you. The yellow fool almost wandered into the munitions vault."

"What!? I'd threaten to scrap him for parts if he was conscious enough to forget my threat! Let me see him." Eggman bent down and snatched up the yellow robot in his hands. He turned him over a few times while examining him, and then began feeling up his head. He opened a small hatch on the front of his face, peering in for a few seconds and then recoiling. "Ugh! Smells like a landfill in there. Why is there so much acid damage?"

"I believe Cubot has been getting into the battery packs and consuming them in an attempt to power himself, sir," Orbot replied.

"Again!? I ordered that childproof lock specifically so he couldn't get into the cabinet where I keep those batteries! That was weeks ago! Why haven't you installed it yet!?"

"We're still awaiting for it to arrive in the mail, sir."

"Grrr, the one time I don't pay for advanced shipping. Curse you, Stork & Co. Courier Service!"

Somehow it was more fun for Sorun to watch this exchange than the trash that was playing on the TV earlier, so he'd moved to the edge of the coach to watch Eggman and Orbot bicker over the yellow robot. Silver, who didn't seem nearly as interested, slinked closer to Sorun's side and tugged on his sleeve.

"Oh, hey, Silver," Sorun greeted, tearing his eyes away from the spectacle to face Silver. "You doing alright?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, fine. Thanks," Silver said. "What are you doing here? I thought you wanted to sit on a beach forever because you were scared of your friend?"

He wasn't even being facetious when he said that - nothing but straight honesty poured out of Silver's mouth with that statement. It felt like a punch to the gut for Sorun, but somehow he managed to soldier on with a straight face. "I changed my mind, okay!? What, I'm not allowed to do that, change my mind, well I did, I do that a lot, my mind changed, Silver, okay, alright, I changed my mind!"

"O-okay, alright." Chuckling nervously, Silver backed up a step while facing his palms at Sorun. After, he said with a sincere smile,"Thanks for coming, Sorun."

"... Yeah."

"Confounded robot, I swear, you try to cut corners on programming an AI and this is what happens," Eggman grumbled out, stepping over to where the two were. Orbot floated a ways back, holding

Cubot in his arms. "Take it from me, kids, it doesn't pay to rush these things."

"I will definitely take your word for that, Mr. Eggman," Silver promised him. "Is your friend going to be alright?"

"Eh, no, probably never, but I can fix him so it doesn't really matter," Eggman answered with a wave of his hand. "Now, why don't we get down to talking about why you two are visiting me? Not that I'm unhappy to have the company, but if you two are looking for a place to crash because you just came to this universe then you can forget it. Orbot has enough chores having to wait on one person."

"Oh, no, we're not looking for that, mister," Silver denied, shaking his head. "We... well, it's actually pretty funny, you see me and Sorun are trying to get to this specific universe, but it's, well, it's kind of far, actually, and since you're such a big genius we were hoping you could, you know... help us get there faster...?" A large, hopeful smile spread over Silver's face as he looked up at the Doctor's blue spectacles. "Pretty please?"

Eggman made a humming sound, examining Silver with a hidden expression who continued to smile at him. Then he glanced up at Sorun, who was looking at him with an otherwise impassive face. In a move that surprised both of them, he shrugged and said, "Yeah, sure, here, gimme a second."

Before any of them could respond he reached forwards and grabbed one of Silver's quills. The Mobian cried out when he plucked one free, and then turned around and walked out of the living room with Sorun staring after him and Silver rubbing at the spot his quill had been yanked out. The silent *whish* of a door closing marked his departure, leaving the two alone with the floating robot.

Nothing was really said between the three of them. Sorun didn't have any words, Silver looked like he wanted to start some conversation but seemed unsure of what to say, so his eyes just kept drifting between the other two. Orobot was just hovering there silently, still

as a statue carrying the other robot. It was a rather uncomfortable silence, only broken up when Silver had cleared his throat at one point. Meanwhile Sorun was silently hoping Eggman actually did have some solution for them and that he and Silver would be gone before the cops found that guy he knocked out.

A few minutes of anxious waiting later and Eggman returned, holding a machine in his hands. A white, metal, box-like thing that barely fit in the two hands he was using to carry it. With a loud huff of exertion he set the metal box down on the floor, causing a loud *clunk!* to be heard, after which he stood up and straightened his back out, eliciting a few cracks.

"Ahh, oh yeah, there we go," Eggman groaned out. "Orbot, plug it in, would you?"

Wordlessly, the red robot hovered towards the boxy machine, and while balancing the body held with one hand reached with another to grab at an electrical plug sticking out of the side of the box. He pulled it away, revealing an extending cable spooling out of the box that Orbot carried to a nearby electrical socket. After plugging it in, a heavy whirring sound was heard from the box as it started up, and the few gaps and lines in the box's surface began glowing an intense purple.

"So... what's that?" Silver asked, eyeing the machine with interest while Sorun silently observed.

"Eh, dabbled with going to alternate universes once. Didn't really end well. Made this during one of my late-night benders before I realized going to other worlds often ends horribly so I just chucked it in my broom closet. But hey, if you guys need it I can break it out for a few minutes," Eggman explained.

"That's great, mister Eggman, but why did you pull one of my quills out?" Silver asked. He was still rubbing at that spot. "It kind of hurt."

"Different universes are beholden to different laws of physics. Usually these differences are so minute as to not matter, but it's a large factor in explaining a particular universe's makeup," Eggman said. The top of the box opened up, and a small funnel extended out from the opening. Eggman dropped the white quill in the funnel, after which a purple, holographic keyboard and screens were projected up from the box and in front of Eggman. He fixed his covered eyes on the screens and began typing on the keyboard while continuing to speak. "Every single universe has its own completely unique energy signature, and matter is really just energy with extra steps. It's like using a dosimeter to measure background radiation, and *everything* emits radiation, even if ninety-nine percent of it is harmless. So if I have a sample of matter from a particular universe, I can read that signature and pinpoint where in the multiverse is a universe that registers that same signature using this machine. Any evil genius worth their salt can do it, really, it's not that hard."

With skeptical eyes trained on the box, Sorun asked, "And... you can power a machine able to do all that by plugging it in a wall outlet?"

"The cold fusion reactor I have powering this place can do a lot of things, Sorun."

"Eh, alright." Sorun decided to leave it there. It seemed if there was one commonality among Eggmen across the multiverse it was that he had no idea how their inventions worked, but if it got them home he didn't really care enough to know the details.

"Mmhm, just a sec, and... wow, really?" Eggman seemed taken back by what he was reading on one of the floating screens in front of him. He turned his head to look at Sorun and Silver, visibly surprised. "You guys are from that big universe that's smack-dab in the middle of the multiverse?"

"Yep," Sorun confirmed, nodding. "That a problem?"

"Well, yeah. Now I get why you guys wanted help getting there. That place is forever away."

"You said you could get us there," Sorun reminded him, voice a tone lower.

"I thought when you said that you just needed directions or something! I didn't know it was a matter of distance! You weren't specific!" Eggman argued out. "I can give you a precise set of coordinates to where in the multiverse it is but that's the best I can do for you. This thing can't actually make a portal to other worlds. Had to trash the last invention that could because it almost blew the world up."

Coordinates. That single word alone made Sorun sit straight up on the couch he was sitting on. It was like a switch in his brain was suddenly flipped on from hearing that word; suddenly it made sense why he wasn't able to just use Yamato to cut a portal to the Prime Zone. That was it. The missing piece. Knowledge on where *exactly* in the big, wide multiverse his destination was.

While Silver seemed crestfallen at the news, Sorun was the exact opposite. He felt an immense wave of relief wash over him as he dared to hope that finally, *finally* he could get home to sleep in his own damn bed. "Oh, that's actually perfect. I can work with that," he said, sliding off the couch and walking towards Eggman. "Just gimme the coordinates and I can do the rest."

Eggman looked at Sorun oddly. "Um... if you say so." A sound was emitted from the machine, like an old printer going off. All eyes present turned towards it as a slip of paper was slowly ejected out of a slot on top of the machine. When it finished Eggman tore the slip of paper out and gave it to Sorun. "Here you go. Dunno know what exactly you're planning with it."

Taking the piece of paper in his hand, Sorun looked down at it. He didn't know what he expected; it was just an incredibly large string of numbers that was otherwise incomprehensible to his eyes in how they related to anything. A random mess of nothing, really, at least to someone like him that didn't know what he was looking at.

But knowledge of function wasn't a requirement, just knowledge of the numbers themselves. Because they clicked with him. He felt something, like a small pulse or harmless static shock from the Yamato he held trail up his arm and to his brain, and suddenly he just knew. Or more accurately, he knew he was suddenly able of doing something he previously couldn't. Something he couldn't do but had attempted. Now he could. It's what the sword was telling him.

He could open a portal to Mobius Prime with these numbers.

"... Why help us with this?" Sorun suddenly asked, looking up from the paper to Eggman. He may have been relieved beyond all relief to finally put this damned trip to an end, but it didn't help quell that question burning in his mind. "I mean don't get me wrong, I'm super grateful, but why?"

"Uh... it's not really that big a deal. Really, it's, like, five minutes out of my day," Eggman answered. He glanced up at Silver, and then leaned down closer to Sorun's face while holding his hand to the side of his mouth. "And also between you and me, Sorun, we're cool, but that Silver guy stopped all my robots with his mind and he comes off as a kind of goody-goody guy. I got enough on my plate dealing with a blue hedgehog that can run faster than sound, I don't need a white telekinetic one running around, too. That's too much work even for me, so if you could take him with you when you leave that'd be great."

"Ah." That Sorun could actually buy over Eggman doing this out of the kindness of his heart beyond it not costing him anything more than a few minutes. Accepting the answer, Sorun nodded up at the Doctor. "Sure, I get it. You don't have to worry about him much longer."

He was given a grateful look by the Doctor, who went as far as to flash him two thumbs-ups. Ignoring him, Sorun turned to Silver, who was looking at him expectantly. "Silver," he announced, "I got what I need. We can get to Mobius Prime now."

"Wait, what? Really? Really!?" In a blink Silver's eyes lit up in excitement, and a wide smile broke out on his face. "You really can now!?" he nearly screamed. His body was nearly vibrating he seemed to excited.

"Yeah, assuming I didn't get anything wrong." After pocketing the slip of paper, Sorun grasped Yamato's handle with his right hand. The sword was pulled out of the sheath, glimmering slightly in the light. Silver looked on with anticipation while Eggman and Orbot watched with curiosity.

A blue cross was cut into the air. For Sorun, it was just like opening up a portal anywhere else. He felt the location, the destination locked on as the cross folded inwards to form a blue portal hovering in front of him. That was it right there. The way back home. All that was left was to go through.

"So, uh... yeah. That's it," Sorun said, turning to Silver. "It's through there. We just need to step through and we're good."

"Wow, uh... just from the paper thing Eggman gave you?"

Sorun shrugged. "Apparently."

"Oh..." Hesitantly, Silver took a step towards the portal. He seemed just relieved as Sorun felt at the news, still smiling widely as he let out an light chuckle. "Well, that's it, then." He looked towards Eggman, smiling wide enough to show teeth while waving at him. "Thanks for everything mister Eggman and mister Orbot! We never would have made it back home without your help!"

"Er, yeah, sure, don't mention it." Visibly off-put by the compliment, all Eggman could do was awkwardly wave as Silver stepped through the portal. He watched him go, then turned his head down to Sorun. "So you just carry around a magic sword?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Sorun said. His mouth thinned a bit at the sight of the larger male, and the gratefulness he felt made him look away

and towards the portal. "I can't really overstate how much you've helped us out here. It's something I can never repay, mostly 'cause I don't want to, but... yeah. Thanks. You're one of the good ones." He turned and made his way towards the portal. "Better than my Eggman at any rate."

"You know, the other guy that just left is way better at compliments than you," Eggman remarked with a dry voice.

One foot already in the portal, Sorun couldn't help but chuckle. "It just ain't my style. Neither is the long goodbyes." Taking a final glance back at Eggman, Sorun held up two fingers and flashed him a V symbol. "Been an experience. Seeya."

And after that, he disappeared through the portal.

Chapter 88

Recursion Error

Episode 88- The finish line was somehow reached

Sorun didn't really know why that portal spit them out here of all places.

By all accounts the place was completely and utterly unrecognizable to him. A shingle beach on the edge of a freshwater lake so large and vast that from just standing there he wouldn't be able to differentiate it from an ocean if it weren't for the different smell. Thing was there were precious few lakes in the world on this sort of scale. So he hadn't had to think too hard on what this place was within a second of seeing it. And there was no shaking off that sense of familiarity he felt just seeing it. The lake.

The lake...

"Well... there it is," Sorun said, mostly to himself, Silver standing behind him and silently watching. He bent down and picked up one of the numerous rocks composing the beach they were standing on. "The last piece of evidence that even some alternate version of my home ever existed. Gone."

He threw the stone. It'd gone further than he would have thought it'd gone, given the amount of strength he put in it. He watched with a lost expression as it hit the surface of the lake and sunk into the water.

It wasn't much of a surprise. He knew from reading a map, way back when Sally showed him one of the world. He'd always known it was gone here on Mobius, but it was another thing seeing it in person. Having visual evidence drive home the fact that Sorun was the last

living testament that his people and culture ever existed, that, even if it would have been different in some sense, this world's version of his home hadn't even survived in a physical capacity.

Because this world's Detroit was gone. Obliterated. Annihilated. At least his was still out there. Dead and hollow, but there were still *things* there, things he wanted, pieces of culture that solely belonged to him now as the last living human of that zone, and now that he knew the key components to traveling between zones with Yamato he'd been silently debating grabbing the numbers to his home from Tails or Nicole and going back there. One day. Maybe. If he ever worked up the nerve.

But this Detroit, or lack thereof, was here. Or more accurately the evidence that it no longer existed was here. And all it served was a reminder to Sorun for how alone he really was.

"I don't get it," came Silver's voice, who stepped besides Sorun. He was giving the lake a confused look. "It's just a bunch of water."

"Before aliens came into the picture and the humans of this world thought it'd be the greatest idea ever to dissect their ambassador this lake used to be split up in five parts," Sorun explained as he reached for another stone. "It was a part of a country called America. Two peninsulas called Michigan that broke the lake into the five Great Lakes. They were the biggest freshwater lakes in the whole world." He threw the second stone. "My home was there. Detroit. It was the biggest city in Michigan.

"Of course then the aliens bombed the whole world with gene bombs. And either those gene bombs completely destroyed Michigan or thousands of years of continental drift and shifting tectonic plates just caused it to sink into the lakes. Or maybe some combination both, I don't know." Sorun bent down for a third rock while Silver silently listened to him, shifting his attention from the water to Sorun. "Either way it's gone, and now the five Great Lakes are this... Super Lake, I guess, that feeds into the river cutting the

American landmass completely in half. Or what used to be America, at least," he mumbled, rolling the rock around in his hand.

"That's... huh," Silver said, watching as Sorun threw the rock. He turned back to Sorun and tried to give him a helpful smile. "I, er, bet it was pretty neat living next to a lake this big, huh?"

His efforts didn't bear any fruit, but Sorun breathed heavily out of his nose for the effort Silver put in anyway. Even if it didn't wipe the frown off his face. "Well, that's the thing, Silver. In all that time I never actually looked at the lake. Like *really* looked at it. Few passing glances, maybe, but that was it. Seeing it now, I dunno. Just feels final."

"Final?"

"I just thought... there was maybe something here, you know, something I'd recognize, the tiniest shred of something that connected me to the life I used to have before coming here." Sorun gestured out to the lake. "But there's nothing. Just a bunch of water. It's all gone."

Silver winced, and then made a sad frown as he stared out into the water. "Well, uh... maybe there's still something there?"

"Hm?" Sorun bent down to pick up another rock.

"You know, under the water!" Silver replied. He tried to sound helpful, but the forced smile he held was wavering. "You don't think we could just go down there? Maybe look for something you recognize? Hey, maybe you had a Sorun Prime that lived here and some of his stuff might be there!"

"Who cares about that guy?" Sorun asked. When he turned to glance at Silver he saw him surprised and a bit stunned, forced smile frozen on his face with wide eyes. "In all honesty I doubt there ever was a Sorun Prime. My zone was pretty unique, wasn't even connecting to the Cosmic Interstate. Don't even know if that place

could be considered part of the multiverse. The Eggman from that last zone said the laws of physics are slightly different in every zone, but mine must have been really out there with no Chaos energy. Then again there is a Statue of Liberty here..."

"Eh, maybe you're right," Silver said. "We saw a bunch of different versions of Sonic and other people in those zones, but we didn't see any other Soruns."

"Mm." Sorun ran his thumb over the latest stone he'd picked up. It was flatter and more smooth than any of the other ones he'd thrown so far. "Well, in any case, even if the city did just sink into the lake it's been thousands of years. Doubt there'd be anything substantial left at this point. Worst part is Michigan didn't even get the worst of it. A bunch of island nations like the Philippines and New Zealand are straight-up gone. The only islands on that side of the world that still exist is Australia and Japan, and that last one got turned into a giant geode inhabited by rock-eating birds. I still don't know how that last one happened."

He threw the stone at the water, and in the same motion turned to Silver. Due to how quickly he'd turned Sorun wasn't able to note how the stone he'd thrown had skipped across the water's surface fifty times before sinking in.

"Anyways! I gotta announce my return. And that's... yeah, that's gonna go great," Sorun mumbled out, shoulders falling at the realization. It was only now that he was about to actually do it that he realized how nervous he was over the whole thing. What people's reactions would be, what he was even supposed to do or say, how to act. He felt anxious just trying to keep track of it all. Almost sick at the thought.

"So do you have any idea what you're going to say to them?" Silver questioned.

Shrugging, Sorun wondered, "Maybe I can go in and just act like nothing happened? 'Ah, hey guys, how's it going? Huh? Enerjak?

Yeah I dunno. Why? What's new with you?'"

Silver struggled to maintain his helpful grin. "I, um... don't, really think that'll work, Sorun. And they'll ask about me."

"Ah, yeah, you and the whole future thing." Sorun rubbed his chin in thought. "Speaking of which, should we actually tell them about the whole 'we need to prevent the apocalypse' thing?"

"Why-why wouldn't we?"

"I mean if we bring awareness of the problem to everyone won't it make it harder to predict- eh, on second thought we're already butterfly-effecting everything just by hanging around, no getting around that, I guess," Sorun reasoned with himself. He put five seconds of thought into the matter and then pointed out, "I don't really want to panic them. Plus they got their hands full with the Eggman thing-"

"So you want to lie to them?"

"Nnnno," Sorun answered with a heavy amount of hesitation. "If they ask tell them, I just don't want-"

"Well they're gonna ask where I'm from and why I'm here, Sorun, there's not really any getting around that."

"Okay, alright, we'll play it by ear." In hindsight they had a week of preparation. They probably should have used it to actually prepare for this thing, and now Sorun was finding that he felt like kicking himself for never doing so. But planning was never his strong suit anyways. "Just maybe, eh, maybe keep the traitor thing quiet? It'll do nothing but cause problems and I'm still not convinced that's actually real."

Silver made a small nod. "Okay. So where to first?"

"Where, indeed?" He gripped Yamato's sheath with both hands and stared down at it in thought. There was one place that immediately stood out to mind. "Their war with Eggman's still going on. Gotta be at least one person at the old HQ."

"Sure, but wouldn't it be easier if we just went back to the city you live in?"

Nope. Couldn't do that. Nicole lived in that place. "U-uh, well, you know, there's a lotta people there and I kinda wanna ease into this, so I say we go to the HQ first."

"Oh, okay." To Sorun's relief, Silver made a shrug of acceptance. "So we're going right now?"

Sorun's hands tightened around the sword's sheath. He looked behind him, at the lake and the horizon filled with nothing but water. The sun had just now set completely on them, and his nerves were making him on edge for this. Nevertheless, he still pulled the sword out. "Yeah," he said, his voice nearly a croak. "Sure, let's go."

"Alright. Hey, one more thing?"

Sorun looked up. "Hm?"

"I, um... so I left our backpacks back in that last zone by accident, so could we-?"

"Nope. Can't. Need the numbers and it's too far to walk."

Silver deflated at the news, but gave an accepting nod anyways. Sorun hadn't noticed, too focused on the current task at hand. It was taking him longer than usual to cut a cross into the air so it would fold into a portal. His hands shaking so hard from fear was making it more difficult than normal.

Sorun didn't have fond memories of the Freedom HQ. Fond memories of the people, maybe, but that was it. He just didn't like being there.

It was the place that he first arrived into this world from, after he'd been dragged against his will. It was the place he had to resign himself into being a Freedom Fighter in, back when he was one and hated every second of it. Just being near it was a reminder of those times, and he tried to think as little about the place as possible.

So naturally he'd do everything in his power to avoid ever going there again. But the alternative was going back to New Mobotropolis and seeing Nicole, so it was off to the HQ they went.

He didn't have a plan for what he was gonna say. Zip. Zero. Zilch. And for how nervous he was over this whole thing, when he stepped out of that portal and in that first millisecond caught a glimpse of the old HQ and was reminded how much he hated it, he realized he was about as tired as he was nervous. Maybe even more tired than nervous. Because quite frankly he was just done at this point.

With all those emotions causing a turmoil in Sorun, he hadn't stepped through the portal normally. Not with confidence, not with nervousness, eyes darting around fearfully, not even in anger at having to step foot back in this place. No, when Sorun walked through that portal his entire form was hunched forwards, sword and scabbard held so loosely they were scraping against the ground, with a facial expression that read "I don't fucking care about anything right now".

Oh, but Sonic was there, so that was good. Sitting on the couch. Holding the most comical expression of shock on his face when Sorun walked through that portal, eyes practically fixing to pop out of his head. A face that at any other time he would have laughed at, but right now Sorun just couldn't bother. So he'd only regarded the wide-eyed, frozen hedgehog sitting on the couch in front of him for a second before lazily swinging his sword behind him after Silver walked through behind him to close the portal.

"Hey, I'm back." That's all the energy Sorun could spare to say before stepping over and collapsing into a sitting position on the couch next to Sonic. He dropped the implements in his hands on the ground, causing them to flash and converge into the Emerald, and then slumped forwards on the couch while staring at the ground and hoping, praying, Sonic would just roll with it and treat his sudden resurrection like normal.

The stuttering from the other teen sitting next to him was telling him it just wasn't so.

"Uh- wha- you- Sorun, you- y-you're- holy- WHAT!?" That final exclamation from Sonic didn't make Sorun so much as flinch. He did, however, heave out a heavy sigh while Sonic continued to yammer on. "S-Sorun, you're here! You're okay!"

"Evidently." Sorun glanced to the side, half-expecting to see Sonic attempt at poking him to make sure he wasn't a ghost. He wasn't, thankfully, but he sure was looking at Sorun like he was one. "What's with the look? I just got stuck in a giant crystal. Not even the first time that happened to someone."

"No, Sorun, you... what are you talking about, you disappeared when we stuck you in that thing!"

"Ah, really? Alright."

Sonic nodded so quickly it hurt to see. "Yeah, after Knuckles and his dad magicked you in that thing there was this big flash of light, and poof! You were gone!" he quickly exclaimed. "We- we all thought you died, Sorun! We tried everything but nobody could find you! We couldn't even figure out what actually happened! Where'd you go?"

Sorun responded by clapping his hands together, fingers pointed forwards. "Time travel, Sonic. It's... *complicated* ." That last word was hissed out venomously. He should have figured something wacky would happen to him with all the time shenanigans he'd been pulling, but at least it meant Silver was at least somewhat accurate in getting

them into the right point in time. To some point after he got sealed in the Master Emerald. He didn't want to imagine what things would be like if Silver messed up and sent them to before that, if he'd have to deal with some time clone or something. He had enough problems.

The answer Sonic received caused him to recoil back, and his face twisted in confusion and surprise. "Time travel?" he repeated. "What?"

"Yeah, I don't really wanna talk about it," Sorun said. Frankly speaking he wanted to recount that specific tale as little as possible. And things like all the robbery and murder would have to be omitted forever. "I, uh, I went here, then there, then I was all over and now I'm back." He bent down and picked up the blue Chaos Emerald. "Was walking all over the mega road- the ultra freeway- whatever that road connecting the multiverse together is called, I was going left and right using Yamato to cut into different worlds trying to find this pla-"

He paused when a sudden thought struck Sorun. One thought specifically aimed at the Chaos Emerald he was holding. His thoughts ran through a couple of loops, and after coming to a final conclusion he made a small hum. "Huh. Guess there's just eight of these things now."

"What?"

"Yeah time travel's nuts like that, don't worry about it," Sorun said, dropping the gem back at his feet. "How long have I been gone, anyways? Few days? A week?"

"Uhh... no." Sonic didn't look at all satisfied by the answer given by Sorun, and looked like he wanted to fire off about a million different questions, but thankfully he managed to restrain himself to answer Sorun's question. And the human teen did *not* like that awkward look Sonic was wearing. "You, um... that was a few months ago, Sorun." He grimaced a bit, glanced to the side, and then looked back at Sorun. "Like, winter ends in a week."

"... Ah." Yeah, that would make it awkward. Also made the situation with Nicole significantly worse. His heartrate was spiking just thinking about it, and Sorun's face made it look like he wanted to die for real at the moment.

"Yeah..." Sonic exhaled through clenched teeth, rubbing a hand behind his head while making it a point not to look at Sorun's face. "Guess we're, uh, gonna... gonna have to get rid of that grave, huh?"

Sorun shriveled a bit more. "I got a grave?"

"Mhm, we, er, there was a whole funeral and everything." When Sorun didn't respond Sonic tried putting on a forced smile to cheer Sorun up. It didn't. "If it makes you feel any better there were tons of times they had to get rid of statues of me when people thought I died, so I know how you're feeling right now."

Sorun glanced at Sonic. "Did I get a statue?"

The hedgehog flinched. "N... no, it was just a headstone."

He glanced away. "I see how it is." Fucking guy had to one-up him in everything.

"So yeah, that's... yeah..." Sonic finished, voice trailing off.

"Mm," Sorun sounded out.

"..."

"..."

"... Honey didn't hire somebody to replace me, did she? Because I really need that job-"

"Hey, when are you guys planning on restocking the fridge?" came a new voice from off to the side. The owner of the voice stepped within Sorun's peripheral view, causing him to look towards the source of the noise. "I don't want to be that guy but-"

The voice cut himself off the moment he spotted Sorun, and then stopped mid-step. Sorun was equally stunned when he saw Knuckles walk into view for completely different reasons. He'd wager Knuckles was shocked seeing somebody that was supposed to be dead suddenly completely fine and sitting on a couch. There was even the beginnings of a smile growing on his face.

For Sorun it was the complete opposite. He saw Knuckles standing there. He also kept seeing flashes of gold superimpose themselves over his image, saw his growing smile flicker between a kind one and a cruel, manic one. He kept imagining that helmet flickering over Knuckles' head and was even unconsciously reaching towards the blue gem sitting near him. And then Knuckles spoke out, and the illusion shattered. Sorun shook his head and it was just Knuckles standing there. Speaking normally. Not like a maniac.

"Sorun! Buddy! You-you're back!" Knuckles happily exclaimed. He stepped forwards, continuing with, "You have no idea how glad-man, I can't believe-!"

When Knuckles had moved forwards, Sorun had slid further down the couch, away from him while making sure the blue Emerald was still in his vision. Knuckles froze at the movement, and at the wary look Sorun was holding on his face. The smile dropped off his face and he lifted his mitts up in a reassuring manner.

"Um... everything okay, man?" he hesitantly asked Sorun.

"I don't know, Knuckles. Is everything okay?" Sorun asked back. "No deific brain worm parasites here to ruin everyone's day?"

Knuckles winced at that. He felt Sonic shift around uncomfortably at the mention of Enerjak. Silver was mainly just standing off in the corner silently watching the whole exchange, but whereas the other two Mobians were exuding an aura of awkwardness he just seemed mainly curious and seemed satisfied to just observe.

"Umm, Sorun?" Sonic asked from besides Sorun. "You do see it's Knuckles, right? You can relax."

When Sorun answered, he didn't turn his head to Sonic. He kept his eyes trained on Knuckles. "I know for you guys that was months ago, but for me that was literally last week. The experience is still a bit raw."

Knuckles recoiled at that, going as far as to take a step back. He didn't seem overly hurt by the statement, but his expression visibly fell all the same. It did nothing to change Sorun's attitude or mood, who only kept glaring at him.

He nearly lashed out when Sonic touched his shoulder, though he did draw his hand back when Sorun flinched at the gesture. "Okay, Sorun, I get it, but Enerjak really is gone-"

"I know it's gone, Sonic, I killed it myself."

For some reason Knuckles looked off-put by that statement, and it was reflected in the expression he made. Sorun grew confused at that expression, and when he turned back back to Sonic he was even more surprised to see Sonic was holding the same expression.

"What's with those looks?" Sorun looked back and forth between the two, and then focused on Sonic. "Did you... what, did you not see me cut the thing in half?"

"No, we did," Sonic assured him, glancing at Knuckles and then back at him, "we just, you know... we just didn't expect it is all."

"You didn't expect it?"

"Well he was-"

"It, Sonic, it was an it, it barely even had an identity of its own," Sorun snapped.

Rolling his eyes, Sonic amended, "Fine, *it* , we just assumed you would use your sword to separate it from Knuckles like you did the first time. You know, just send it back to where it lived."

Sorun was more surprised that that was the conclusion everyone came to out of any other. "... No, dude, it's dead. The forever kind," he said. "I mean the original idea was I was gonna separate out Enerjak's Chaos Force link with Yamato, but when I tried it didn't work. It can't cut those links that give powers. And I could separate them, yeah, but there wasn't much stopping it form re-possessing Knuckles and I didn't have any other way to deal with it."

He would have thought that explanation would be satisfactory. There weren't any other options and it was an insane god parasite that wanted to ruin the whole world. What other choice did he have at the time? He would have assumed it'd be enough of an explanation, but when he looked at Sonic's face Sorun just saw a pensive, unsure expression on him. Like he didn't fully agree with Sorun's reasoning.

"It's just..." Sonic began, a bit quiet, "did... did you really had to go that far with Enerjak?"

It took a few moments for Sorun to even comprehend what Sonic was asking. "It... It soul-snatched the whole world, why is this even a question?"

"I get it, but-"

"No, Sonic, you don't. You keep saying that but you don't," Sorun interrupted. The feeling from being shaken at Knuckles' mere sight wore off in an instant as anger began to worm into Sorun's tone. "I was *alone* during that whole fight, do you even get that? You know what was going through my head the whole time, hearing the things it was saying, that I was fighting a god knowing no matter what I was gonna die in the next five minutes with all your bodies strung up on the wall behind it-!?"

He would have went even further than that if Sorun hadn't become aware of how loud his voice had grown. Or grown aware of how concerned Sonic's face had grown, which only served to irritate Sorun even further. It was more difficult than he would have liked, but he managed to calm himself down with a deep breath.

"... I did the best I could with what I had, alright?" Sorun finally muttered, leaning forwards on the couch while looking down. "I thought it was the only way to free you all. For all I know it was. So yeah. When I couldn't cut its link, I just cut it. None of you were there. What was I supposed to do?"

Because he really wanted to know if there was some magical solution the whole time he could have used to solve that problem without nearly killing himself. Was waiting for Sonic to give him some kind of grandstanding speech and to be lectured why he shouldn't have ended the existence of what basically amounted to a parasite. But when he glanced up at Sonic all he saw was that conflicted, sympathetic look he was giving in lieu of the previous look. Less apprehension and more understanding.

Somehow that was even worse, and Sorun didn't know why. Like arguing the point with Sonic would have actually made him feel better.

"No, Sorun, I didn't mean... everyone's grateful for what you did," he said. "I... yeah. I know you tried, Sorun. And I get you wanted to be done with the whole fighting thing and that whole experience must have been terrifying for you, so... just, thanks. For saving us."

It'd been more than he was expecting, and he sounded genuine. Which wasn't all that surprising to Sorun. In the whole time he knew Sonic he only knew him to be genuine, teasing, or sarcastic. Rarely ever actually upset. But he'd take the thanks if it meant an end to any and all topics surrounding Enerjak. He'd leave that topic alone in the past forever if he could.

But he probably couldn't. Not when Sorun lifted his head up and saw Knuckles, and wondered if he'd be reminded of that thing every time he saw him or heard his voice. Not when he was wondering if there would ever be a time he wouldn't have to pause to remind himself it was just Knuckles and he didn't need to attack him.

Probably never, really. But it would be fine as long as he just maintained the outward appearance that everything was fine. No problems that way.

"It's fine, whatever, don't worry about it," Sorun assured them. He leaned back into the couch and stretched his legs out, doing his best to appear as casual as possible. He asked another question that'd been bugging him. "Speaking of which, everybody's okay, right? There wasn't anyone left out or anything? All the souls got returned back to their bodies?"

"Yeah, all of them," Sonic confirmed. The answer and change in topic made some of the tension leave his body and he slacked further into the couch. "No husked-out bodies with unaccounted souls, nobody getting body-swapped, none of that. Whatever you did really did fix everything."

Sorun made a small nod. "Alright. Alright, yeah. Yeah, that's good. That's good to hear." Of all his screwups in life at least that was one thing he could put on the list of "things I haven't screwed up". That one could probably go on the top of what was admittedly a depressingly short list, even. And relieved him a bit in that, whatever fallout he was going to have to endure as a result of all this, at least it'd been worth it. He wasn't so sure how long he'd be able to hold that sentiment.

"Guys, did you already clear out the fridge? We just stocked-"

The new person that just walked into the room cut themselves off when, Sorun presumed, she saw him sitting on the couch. He already knew it was Sally from how the voice sounded, and based

on Knuckles' reaction earlier he had a pretty good idea of what her face would like like when he glanced over at her.

Yeah, it was about what he expected. Stunned silence and an admittedly more subdued look of surprise than what Knuckles and Sonic had worn. Her expression still made it seem like she was looking at a ghost, which, to be fair, wasn't completely out of the ballpark. She opened her mouth to try and speak, but at first only a stuttering sound came out. Then she shook her head, blinked a few times, and tried again.

"Sorun. You're... you're alive."

"Despite the world's best efforts it seems," Sorun replied. "And believe me, it tried really hard."

"I... will take your word for that." Her eyes shifted upwards towards the shy-looking white-furred hedgehog standing near the back of the living room. "Who's he?"

"Oh, that's Silver. He's, like, from the future or something, it's not really all that important."

Almost robotically, Sally turned back towards Sorun. The surprise had already worn off, and she seemed shockingly calm at the moment. "The future," she dully repeated.

"Mhm, yeah."

"..." She sighed out and reached up to pinch the point between her eyes. She held the position for a few moments and closed her eyes, seemingly thinking about something, and then lowered her hand while asking, "Right, Sorun, could you and I talk in private for a moment?"

That hadn't been a request Sorun was expecting to hear. Granted he hadn't been expecting anything, and yet still he was taken back a bit from the request. Sonic and Knuckles looked equally off-put, though

Silver just seemed nervous and was making it a point to shy away from people's looks.

"Okay?" He didn't really know why that was the first thing she was asking, but Sorun didn't really see a reason to refuse. "Silver, I... I'll be back, I guess?" he said, giving a shrug to the hedgehog who only sent a confused glance back his way. Sorun didn't know how to respond to that so he just turned to Sally. "So, like... off to the side private-private, or-?"

She'd turned around before he even finished. "Just follow me," she said. She walked off in what Sorun vaguely remembered was the direction to the lab in this place. All he could think to do was follow her as he tried to figure out what was going on.

It was, indeed, the lab Sally took him to. Was about the same as he remembered: a well-lit, metal-lined room full of computers and machines that looked out of place in an underground bunker with dirt walls. He didn't know what needed to be discussed that they needed a whole room in private. So private she made it a point to close the door behind them so they were sealed in the room. Really, he couldn't imagine what she could possibly have to say to somebody she thought dead five minutes prior.

Even stranger was that, after she'd closed the door and walked back in front of Sorun, who was so bewildered he could do nothing but just stand there, she just... stared at him. No blankly - her face was continually shifting through a myriad of emotions the longer she examined him, but for the life of him Sorun couldn't figure out what they were, or what was even going on in her mind that *this* was how Sally was reacting to his sudden resurrection.

Really, it was so strange that he couldn't help but comment on it.

"So, uh... you didn't pull me to the lab just to make sure I'm not some kind of robot doppelganger Eggman made or something, did you?" Sorun awkwardly asked. She didn't respond at all. She just kept

staring at him, expression locked in... concentration? Confusion? Utter loss at what to say? "'Cause I'll freely admit that sounds like something he'd do, so I'll do an x-ray test or whatever, but-"

"No, Sorun," she interrupted, voice completely calm, "I believe it's you. You're the only person I know that'd be so flippant after coming back from the dead."

"... I mean I didn't *technically* die, but thanks, I gue-"

"It wasn't a compliment."

Sorun's mouth clamped shut, and then his lips thinned as he thought over Sally's words. He wasn't able to come to a conclusion and only became more confused. "Uh... so what-"

Slap!

The weirdest thing was he'd seen the hit coming. He didn't know if that meant Sally'd been holding back or something else was going on, but he'd been able to perceive her flattened hand racing towards his face. Sorun still hadn't been able to dodge despite that, though, because he'd been so astounded by what she was doing that he literally didn't know how to react. He'd registered the slap coming. Was even able to identify that the slap was indeed a slap and that he should move. But the idea that Sally, who treated him more nicely than most others, was doing this after learning not even minutes ago that he wasn't dead after months seemed so wrong, so alien and backwards, that Sorun just didn't know how to react.

As a result he'd eaten the hit. Felt her hand smack him right across his face with enough force to whip his head to the side. He could tell just from the burning sting in conjunction with the dull throb there was probably a large, angry red handprint on his face. But the pain just barely registered above Sorun processing that Sally just slapped him, and it took a few seconds for the message to actually get through.

It did get through, though, and he didn't know whether to feel angry over the fact she just slapped him or completely lost over the fact why he just got slapped. He'd inhaled deeply and looked back at her, and he legitimately couldn't believe she had the audacity to look upset at *him* .

"Why... do you keep hitting people, Sally?" Sorun asked, doing a remarkable job of keeping his voice level and calm.

"Do you have any idea what you did?" she asked him, voice low and angered. "Any at all, Sorun?"

He threw his hands up. "No, none," Sorun replied, voice becoming bitter as some of his growing anger leaked through. "Enlighten me. Enlighten the guy who just finished the worst road trip in his life what he did, Sally, do it, enlighten me."

"Nicole! The kiss!"

"Oh, that." Yeah, now he understood why she was so mad. And now suddenly all the anger and bitterness was washing out of him and the burning sensation on his cheek was all but forgotten when he was reminded of that particular event. Where he was once upset at her now he just felt slightly fearful, and was suddenly finding it extraordinarily difficult to hold eye contact with her. In fact he failed and found his eyes drifting down towards the floor. "She... told you about that, huh...?"

"No, don't do that, look up. Look at me," Sally snapped. Sorun did so, albeit with great difficulty, and he visibly flinched back at the angered glare she was giving him. "Do you have *a single notion* of how much grief you put Nicole through with that stunt you pulled?"

He didn't really want to answer that question. More because of the intense guilt he was suddenly feeling more than anything else. And that he couldn't even think up of a good excuse for why he'd done it other than "I needed a pep boost", because he sincerely doubted Sally would take that as an excuse. Hell, he wouldn't even take it.

"Well!?"

Sorun shuddered at Sally's raised voice before asking in a quiet voice, "What do you even want me to say? I thought I was gonna die again, there was nobody else-"

"I do not believe for a single second that you decided to kiss her because she was the last available option on the planet, Sorun, so don't you even-"

"It wasn't even a mouth kiss, why are you getting on my case with this!?"

"Because I have never so much as seen you *hug* someone, Sorun," Sally ground out, causing Sorun's voice to go silent. "You're just... not physically affectionate. At all. So you can imagine how even that kind of kiss looks for you."

He couldn't even deny it. It showed as much when he turned his head away from Sally's glare. "What would you even know about how I feel?" he asked.

She made a short sigh. "You're really gonna make me do this?" she asked. When Sorun didn't respond, she made another short sigh. "Alright, fine. I know about that letter you wrote to the newspaper."

The last time Sorun felt such blind panic it was when, for a split second, he thought he'd died when King Shadow cut his head off. He snapped his gaze back to Sally, eyes as wide as they could go and face pale, and his panic only increased when he saw the completely serious look on her face. She'd only make that accusation that was completely correct if she knew it was correct. And that damn confidence she was exuding spelled out that she knew she was right. Which she was. Which terrified Sorun, because that letter was supposed to be a secret nobody but he knew about because he wrote it and Honey because his boss was nosey.

"How?" he asked. More demanded, with the frantic tone Sorun had taken. "H-how could you possibly know that?"

The angered look on Sally's face was transitioning into frustration. "Do you think, and I want you to think real hard on this one, Sorun, that it's a very strange coincidence that Aly's name and my name sound suspiciously similar to each other?"

"Wait, hold on, give me a minute." He actually looked down at his hands, like he was counting off fingers, and for a moment Sally's expression was replaced by one of complete disbelief as Sorun began sounding it out to himself. "Sally... Aly... both have an A in them, I guess, L and a Y, too... kind of in the same position but it's missing another L... Sally, Sally, SSSS... aly? Saly!"

His head snapped up, and a loud, audible gasp left Sorun when he finally figured it out. He didn't want it to be true, but the logic was sound. And it was the only explanation for how she could possibly know he wrote that letter when he'd used such a clever pseudonym. But unfortunately, when this revelation came to mind only one single response managed to rise in Sorun's mind.

"Oh my god, Sally, your romance advice sucks!"

The remark was apparently so unexpected that she became flustered upon hearing it. "W-what!?" And now she looked insulted. "What is that supposed to mean!?"

"Man, I read your response to my letter! 'You might be looking at a game over otherwise if you do nothing,' what was- what even was that, huh!?"

"I was trying to be relatable to you by using a bunch of game terms! I was trying to help you!"

"By using a bunch of cringey wording I had to fight to read through!?"

"Do you want another slap!?"

Sorun shut his mouth at that. Sally crossed her arms in response, giving him a pointed look while saying, "And I'll have you know many people find my column and advice laudable. It's not my fault you chose quite literally the worst time to enact on it in what was equally the worst way possible, Sorun."

Shoulders slumping downwards, Sorun asked in a defeated tone, "But how did you even know that letter was mine? I used a really clever pseudonym and everything."

He didn't know what to feel when she gave him an almost pitying look. "Sorun, I... I just read it. I figured it out."

"No. That's impossible." He shook his head, refusing to believe it was something as simple as 'she just figured it out by looking at it'. Not after all the work he put into crafting it. "Nobody could have possibly cracked that code, Sally, there's just no way."

"A four-year-old could have cracked it, Sorun, it wasn't that hard!"

Sorun made another loud gasp at hearing that, and then wilted when he realized, yeah, she was definitely smart enough to piece it together on her own. Hell, if he'd known it was Sally behind that whole column he would have never made that letter to begin with for fear she'd figure him out. How was he supposed to know?

"... You still don't know for sure who I was talking about in that letter-"

"Sorun."

"Fine, Sally, evidently you have the entire narrative already, so what do you want out of me?" he asked her. "I-I-I like her, there, I admit it, you Columbo'd your way through the whole mystery."

She gave him a glare through narrowed eyes. "And you really thought the best way to display those feelings was to-"

"I made. An irrational. Decision," Sorun bit out through grit teeth. "I make a lot of those. It's not like I'm trying to be a screwup here, Sally, these things just happen."

"Sorun-"

"And-and you know what, you weren't there! Alright? Lit-literally the whole world's population got their souls sucked out by that thing, I had to be the guy to do something about it because Nicole couldn't and the other guy wasn't up to it, I wasn't thinking, okay, I was freaking out and it was a gut reaction I don't know okay I don't know why I went and did that I just did-"

"Sorun!" The yell caused Sorun to stop mid-rant, startled from the way Sally had suddenly raised her voice. She'd also clamped her hands over his shoulders to hold him in place. He hadn't realized how hard he'd been shaking until she'd physically forced him to become still. And now he saw a majority of the anger that she had held was being replaced with concern.

"Look, Sally, just- listen, look, I, look, listen it's, look, I, I... there was, there was nobody else. You were all supposed to be there to fix everything like you usually do but you weren't there so I had to do it and-and I can't do it like you guys can." His hands were still shaking despite Sally holding him in place. He wished they weren't. "And she was the only bright part in all that, you know? And then I got thrown into a giant crystal while crumbling into dust and got spat out in some messed up alternate future, and you guys *still* weren't there so I had to fix everything again and I did so all that stuff never happened but I..."

He turned his head away. He didn't want to get into all that. Ever. If he had it his way that whole event would be buried forever for how much he detested his time in that alternate future.

"I'm... but I found Silver, and that was all a week ago, so... yeah I'm, he's, he's a great guy, you know, you should really introduce yourself to him sometime," Sorun said. "I'm over all that, everything is fine,

I'm just, I'm, I'm attempting- this is my attempt- what I'm trying to say is, back then, the kiss with Nicole, I, um, I wasn't really in a good headspace. At the time. 'Cause things were bad. But it's fine because we're all here now and all the problems are gone forever. I made them gone forever."

Sally didn't look like she believed him so much. Concern had bloomed into worry, and while she'd let him go, she was making it a point to continue to stand close to him. The next words she spoke were made and spoken in extreme care.

"Sorun, are you sure you're doing okay?"

He probably would have laughed if he was in the mood. But he wasn't, because the current mood he felt didn't allow it. He didn't even know what the mood was, what he was feeling. This nervousness eating away at him, and at this point he wasn't even sure what he was nervous over, just that he was, and somehow that was more maddening than the nervousness itself. "When even was the last time I was okay?" he asked her back. The response hadn't made any of her worry fade. "I'll be fine, I just... you know, barely managed to get past the whole Earth thing, then this all happened and I... would, just like some time. To come down from all that."

Because really that just what he wanted most. He just wanted to go back home and go back into the routine he had before the Enerjak incident. He wanted his steady days and casual postal job back. Just to hang around town and with friends without having to worry about anything. He'd gotten there, just for the briefest time. Gotten to a point where everything was fine, like back on home, and he just wanted to go back to that and stop thinking about all the things that happened back then.

"How is Nicole, by the way?" he asked her. Because as much as he just wanted to forget all that and move on there was that one, single mistake following him and he needed to address it.

Sally glanced to the side and grabbed at one of her shoulders. Not an encouraging reaction. "Well, you saw what happened the first time."

He internally winced, but on the outside Sorun just looked sadder. "So that bad?"

"Not... as bad as then," she hesitantly added, though the pensive look Sally had on her face told a different story. "She's just been really withdrawn. Runs the city and doesn't do much else. I stop by her servers to keep her company sometimes."

"Oh. Um. Thanks for that."

Her blue eyes shifted back to Sorun, and now he couldn't read her expression at all. "I'm her oldest friend, Sorun. Of course I wasn't going to leave her alone with sometime like this." When Sorun didn't respond Sally's features furrowed and she spoke again. "It's part of why I'm upset at you. I get it, before you start I get it," she said when he opened his mouth to speak. He paused, and then closed his mouth to allow her to continue. "I know the whole fighting and saving the world thing just isn't for you, Sorun, and I know you've been struggling with a ton of things ever since coming here and your original home and everything. I understand the situation with Enerjak must have been extremely stressful on you, and I get with all that and you thinking you were going to die again you were prone to do something rash. I can't even be that mad at you since your actions lead to everyone being saved, so thank you, Sorun. Sincerely, thank you.

"But you need to understand that what you did to Nicole? Sonic did the exact same thing to me before getting stranded in space, so more than anybody I sympathize with what she's going through. And no matter the reason I can't say I appreciate what you did, Sorun."

He probably deserved feeling like somebody just punched him in the chest. It never even dawned on him that she went through the same thing. For a moment Sorun was even furious he did something as

egregious as make the same mistake Sonic made once. But it was all lost in all the mixed emotions Sally was sending him. Thankfulness, sadness, bit of anger. All justified and warranted, he would admit.

"I just want to fix it, Sally." It was the honest truth. As honest as Sorun could get, at least.

"Then go fix it," she said. "To tell you the truth I always just thought it was Sonic but now that you did it, too, I can't help but wonder if every guy is just as hopeless when it comes to these things. Honestly, do you all think we like getting our hearts broken? Seeing people profess their feelings for us before going off to die?"

This time Sorun did manage crack a wry smile. It was so small it was nearly imperceptible, but it was there. "Well. A man oughta be a little stupid once in a while."

"Clearly." Sally palmed her own face and shook her head. More in bemusement now. "Just go. You're competent when you try to be so I'm trusting you can't possibly make this any worse, Sorun. Just go home and talk to her."

"Yeah, I'll... I'll go ahead and go do that." He gave a stiff nod. Part of him wanted to comment further on the slap, but he decided against it after figuring he probably deserved it. "I'm off, then. So... be seeing you, I guess?"

"We still live in the same town, so yeah, I'd imagine."

He turned to leave at that. Out of a desire to go back home and a desire to go see Nicole and fix what he did. Or even just to see her again. He didn't know which desire won out over the others, just that he needed to go back to New Mobotropolis.

"And Sorun?"

He was halfway to opening the lab's door when he heard Sally call his name out. When he looked back she was wearing the first smile he'd seen since coming back.

"I really am glad you're back," she said. "And I meant it when I said thanks. Just go home and stop worrying about saving the world, okay? We'll take care of it."

He mirrored her smile. "Yeah. I'll do that."

When he exited the lab and made it back to the HQ's living room he was met with the sight of Sonic standing in front of Silver. The former had crossed his arms but was otherwise standing casually while looking at the other Mobian with a relaxed, if attentive, look. The latter seemed to have lost a majority of his shyness from earlier but still looked a bit nervous standing in front of Sonic.

"So... the future," Sonic said.

"Mhm, yeah," Silver confirmed.

"Huh." Sonic tapped his foot a few times. "So how's it look over there?"

"Oh, um, well... not, uh, not good." Silver's eyes shied away from Sonic's. "Pretty bad, actually."

"Aaand you're here to fix that?"

"Yep! Yeah, I'll, I'm gonna make sure none of that happens, so please don't worry."

"I wasn't?" Sonic saw Sorun enter and shifted his attention to him. And then he made a heavy wince when he saw the slowly fading red mark on Sorun's face. "Eesh. I know that handprint anywhere."

"Hardy har, shut up." Sorun bent down to pick up the blue Emerald. It shifted into Yamato upon contact, after which Sorun stood up. "You know, I got my sword back. I can still turn you monochrome until a new set of blue fur grows back in."

"You can only make that threat once before you sound like a jerk saying it, Sorun."

"What does that tell you about me?" Sorun pulled the sword out and cut a cross through the air. "Silver, come on," he said as the cross folded into a portal. "We're going home."

"Okay!" Silver nodded at Sorun, taking a double-take at the half-faded mark on his face but seemingly shrugging it off, and then turned back to Sonic. "Hey, it was really nice meeting you!"

After giving Sonic a parting wave Silver walked out through the portal. Sonic watched him depart, and then turned to Sorun while quirking an eye ridge upwards.

"So that's your new friend?" Sonic asked.

"Yeah, picked him up from the future."

Sonic shrugged it off. "Alright. Future really that bad?"

"Literally apocalyptic."

He tensed up a bit at hearing that. "But he's gonna make sure that doesn't happen?"

"Yeah, it should be fine. Don't worry about it, Sonic."

"I'm not, I'm not. Just... tryin' to look out for everyone," he coolly replied. "Um, is this something we need to be involved with?"

"Kinda would prefer you didn't actually, so his future knowledge doesn't get messed up," Sorun said. "He actually doesn't have much to begin with, but too many changes could skew things. Really just

ignore him and keep doing what you guys do normally and it should work out."

Sonic accepted the answer with a nod. "If you say so. You gonna be alright?"

"I mean, hopefully." Sorun turned towards the portal. "Have a good night."

"Yeah, you too."

As Sorun left through the portal Sorun couldn't help but note he'd actually managed a cordial conversation with Sonic despite all the stress he was undergoing. He took it as a good sign.

The portal hadn't taken the pair into New Mobotropolis. It'd taken them just outside the city proper. In the woods near the wall surrounding the city. Just seeing it brought on an assortment of emotions in Sorun that made him queasy, just seeing those immaculate, off-white walls. And terrified. Because no amount of mental preparation could prepare him for this. Strange to say because it literally became worse the longer he waited. Ideally he'd just rip the band-aid off and go right in.

But at the moment it felt like Sorun's boots were full of concrete and he couldn't help but become completely frozen at seeing those walls and be reminded of what was inside. *Who* was.

"Wow, so that's the place, huh?" Silver observed. "I'd, well I'd say it looks nice but the, eh, the wall there is kinda... kinda in the way of the view. Sorun, how come we're outside the city and not inside it?"

"I change my mind, Silver," Sorun answered in a level tone. "Let's just live out here."

Silver turned his head to Sorun in confusion. "Huh? For how long?"

"I don't know, forever?"

Silver's expression flattened. "Is this about that girl?" he asked.

When Sorun's head whipped to the side to meet Silver's gaze, his expression tightened with anxiety. "Of course it is, Silver, I'm freaking out here what am I supposed to even say!?" he hissed out.

He took a step back before responding. "Sorun, aren't you overreacting a bit here?" He had the gall to flash Sorun a reassuring smile, like his whole world didn't feel like it was collapsing in on itself at the moment. "From everything you've said about her she sounds like a really understanding person. Won't it all be fine if you just talk with her?"

"... MAN, WHAT WOULD YOU KNOW!? YOU NEVER EVEN MET A GIRL BEFORE IN YOUR ENTIRE LIFE BEFORE YOU STARTED TRAVELING AROUND WITH ME!" Sorun yelled out. "Understand, she'll understand, oh, yeah, she'll understand something alright, she'll understand I'm the worst person in the world and I'll honestly be surprised if she ever decided to look me in the eye again!"

"Uh, so, so she won't understand?"

Visibly deflating, partly out of exhaustion, Sorun ran a hand over his face and turned away from Silver. "I don't know, maybe, she might, it's hard to know what she's thinking most of the time and her being an AI that thinks on a completely different level than us doesn't help."

"... She's an A-what?"

Sorun turned back to Silver in surprise. "I forget to mention that detail? Eh, whatever, it's not important." He waved off Silver's confusion and turned back to the walled city. "I just don't know what I'm supposed to say. Dunno if there even is a right thing to say in this situation. I mean, do I just go for it? Say whatever's on my mind? I'm coming up with nothing but blanks, here, Silver, how'm I supposed to say what's on my mind when I'm getting nothin' but static here?"

"Yeah, I don't know, Sorun." Silver looked up into the night sky. "What I do know is that it's the middle of the night and I'm tired. I want to sleep in a bed. If you don't make up your mind I'm just gonna float us into the city."

Feelings of betrayal tore through Sorun as he faced Silver with an appalled expression. The hedgehog stared back with a bored, somewhat serious look, which Sorun could only take as Silver telling the truth. So he made a mental curse and turned back to the city.

"Alright, fine, we're going," he grumbled out quickly, removing Yamato from its sheath. "I'll teleport us outside my house and just... deal with it in the morning and hope beyond all rational thinking she just doesn't know I came back."

It was a plan that might be in futility, something he realized as he cut a second portal in the air. Seeing as she quite literally had her eyes on the entire city via the security surveillance network. He didn't think even a miracle would allow him and Silver to slip into his house and spend the night under her nose without her catching on. There was a spark of hope there in Sorun that they could, though. That spark that knew, in actuality, it was really hopeless but the reality of the situation was too terrible to face, so it latched onto an unreasonable, false hope.

But yeah, he was pretty sure they'd be able to pull this off.

Walking out of the new portal Sorun was instantly hit with the familiar smells of New Mobotropolis. Certainly smelled nicer than Detroit, that was for sure. Cleaner and fresher. He recognized the section of the residential district he lived in and all the houses next to his. Most of the lights were out due to the time of night, barring a couple, but he was less focused on that and more on the structure standing before them.

His house.

... No, yeah, it was just his house, nothing about it had changed since he left.

"Alright, there it is, go go go go!" Sorun quickly whispered out, gesturing forwards in a rushed manner after swiping the portal closed. Silver turned around to give him an odd look, but the white-furred Mobian stalling only made Sorun gesture more frantically. Silver flinched away from Sorun as a result, and then shook his head as he walked across the small lawn and stopped in front of the front door.

It all went wrong when Silver tried opening the door. With dawning horror Sorun realized he *couldn't* open the door. Because it seemed beyond all belief to be locked.

"Hey, Sorun, the door's locked," Silver blandly stated as he attempted to turn the door's knob to no avail.

"What!?" Sorun stepped behind Silver and peered over his shoulder to ensure he was telling the truth. Maybe he was just turning the knob the wrong way. But no, when he looked he saw the knob was turning just the barest amount. It was indeed locked. "That-that's impossible! I didn't even know my door had a lock!"

Silver paused in his futile knob-turning and glanced over his shoulder at Sorun with an incredulous look. "How could you not know your door has a lock?"

"It's a nice neighborhood, okay!? I never needed to lock my door!"

"Oh, well, maybe that lady standing behind you can help us out!"

He honestly could have shot him and it would have alarmed Sorun less than the sentence that spilled out of Silver's mouth. He'd frozen, completely, hard enough that it felt like his heart had skipped a beat. In fact it probably did. His hands became clammy and moist, enough that it felt like Yamato would slip out of his grasp. And no matter how hard he tried he couldn't figure out what he was supposed to do.

"Maybe it isn't her," he reasoned with himself. *"Maybe it's just someone else. Someone who isn't Nicole decided to stand outside my abandoned house now of all times. Yeah. That's gotta be it. There's no way she managed to catch us this quickly. It's just someone else here for some inexplicable reason."*

It had to be. Couldn't be Nicole. Not a chance. All he'd have to do was turn around and confirm his completely rational explanation and he'd see that-

Sorun didn't even managed to turn around all the way. He hadn't even seen her face. All he saw was a single brown and black arm and a bit of her purple dress, and then he turned back forwards at Silver, who currently looked like he didn't know what he was supposed to do, standing there in front of Sorun's door. But as far as Sorun was concerned Silver didn't even exist right now because Nicole was standing behind him and holy fuck he did not know what he was supposed to do.

"Hey, I could really use some advice right now. Yeah, man, I got nothin', you're on your own. MAN, FUCK YOU." Sorun inhaled deeply to calm himself. It didn't work. *"Alright okay okay alright alright okay. I got this. I don't got this. Go for it. Go for what? Go for go. Go? Goooo...!"*

Fortune favored the bold and the virtuous. Sorun wasn't either of those. He didn't think so, at least. Did it matter? He didn't know. He was just standing there with his back to her like and idiot and he needed to do something but he didn't now what to do. Just turn around and start saying words. Without even thinking, to just go for it. His only chance at salvation was to do this and hope for the best.

"Heeeey, Nicole-" came Sorun's near-casual greeting as he turned to her fully. But he'd cut himself off and froze yet again when he was able to see her fully and see her reaction to seeing him.

He remembered the first time he'd done something like this. When he'd been resurrected from death, and she'd literally tackled him to

the ground and had been overcome with so much relief she'd been crying. It was an oddly fond memory of Sorun's. That somebody cared about him so much that *that* was their reaction to seeing he wasn't dead. He truly didn't think he was the kind of person that warranted that kind of response, yet he'd got it. Because she was just that kind of a person, maybe. He'd been expecting a similar reaction this time around.

This was most assuredly not the same reaction as last time. There wasn't any tackling Sorun to the ground. No tears of relief. None of that. She was just standing there. A few meters away from Sorun. Face completely devoid of all emotion. Completely. She was just staring at Sorun with a completely blank expression, almost robotically. With Nicole that was probably an accurate term.

Sorun had no idea what the hell this meant. His mind whirled and ran with wild theories, but none of them had any substance or grounding with the reality of the situation. And the reality was he was flying blind without a map and had no idea what he was supposed to do in this situation. So much so he just stood there, unsure of what to do as he stared at Nicole, who was only blankly staring back.

Click!

Sorun jumped slightly when he heard that sound, along with a small creak afterwards. He turned around and saw that the door to his home behind Silver had opened. He weakly pointed at the opened entrance while turning back to Nicole, uttering a small, "Uh-"

"The door. For your friend." He didn't like how eerily calm Nicole sounded. He didn't like that at all. "I assume you want the conversation we are about to have to be a private one."

"That'd... be ideal, yeah," Sorun quietly replied. He turned to Silver and made a shooing gesturing at him. "Silver, go. Go in the house. Go."

"Yeah, sure." He awkwardly looked between the pair of them, and then made to enter the house. He only got a single step in before stopping and turning to ask Sorun, "Which room is the guest-?"

"The room at the end of the hall is mine, literally just go into the other bedroom!"

Silver made a rapid nod and retreated into the house, nearly slamming the door behind him. That left Sorun alone with Nicole, a prospect that never before had sounded more terrifying. And as he turned back to her he realized just how far out of his depth he was, and how his mind was just utterly blank with how he was supposed to handle this. So he took to following his own advice and opened up with the first few words that fell onto his tongue.

Unfortunately it turned out to be a poor choice in the end, as he'd opened up by saying the stupidest thing imaginable.

"I can explain-"

"You can explain." Her interruption was made so abruptly Sorun nearly bit his own tongue. "You can explain why you disappeared when they locked you in the Master Emerald. You can explain why you've been away for months. You can explain being gone for such an inordinately extended period as to make all of us think you had perished. You can explain making me think you were gone forever yet again. You can explain all of that."

"Yyyyyyes."

"Then by all means. Explain."

Sorun gulped. Here went everything. "So I went to the future, right, and-"

Nicole turned around. "Good night, Sorun," she said. He genuinely didn't believe she was going to leave it at that, but to his shock she was actually starting to disappear. And it was with panic and dread

that he realized she probably actually didn't believe him when he said he went to the future.

"Wait-wait-wait, hold on, I'm being serious!" he yelled out in alarm. He refrained from sighing out in relief when Nicole's body reformed, but he nearly lost his already crumbling composure when she turned around and he saw that slowly darkening expression she was wearing. "I really did go to the future, okay?"

"You truly expect me to believe you being locked inside of the Master Emerald somehow lead to you experiencing something as ludicrous as time travel?"

"What- how is time travel any more unbelievable than all the other stuff that's happened?" an exhausted Sorun asked as he thrusted his hand out to the side. "From the aliens to the crazy genius guy with the robot army to gods to all this Chaos junk that, for all intents and purposes, can literally do anything as far as I can see." He held Yamato up, which at the moment felt like it weighed a million pounds. "You don't even *know* the things I've been doing with this thing."

Perhaps a poor choice of words, because Nicole's expression was darkening more quickly. He tried backpedaling on his words to try a different approach. "Would I seriously make this up? With this context?"

"..." She glanced away from him, which for all Sorun knew *might* have been a good sign. "No. You're not that dishonest."

"'That' dishonest?"

"You frequently lie by omission. I overlook it because I trust you have your own reasons." She looked back at him. Her face was still set in a heavy frown, but it wasn't as dark or hostile as it had been before. "But no, you would never lie about something as serious as this."

Sorun wasn't even surprised she knew him that well. "Okay, so... yeah. That's what happened." When her expression didn't change he

added, "Nicole, I got back as soon as I could. It's literally only been a week from my perspective. Time travel isn't the most accurate thing."

He noticed some change in her when he said that. It was nearly imperceptible, and her facial expression didn't change in the slightest, but it was there. There way her posture just ever-so-slightly straightened and how her eyes suddenly became just a bit more attentive of him.

"Is that so?" she asked.

"It's... it's so, yeah."

"It's so," she quietly repeated. Her green eyes swept over the yard they were standing in, and then fell back on Sorun's blue eyes. "Sorun, there are a number of things we need to discuss, and a great many of those things I would prefer to speak of in a setting that provides a greater amount of privacy than your front lawn affords."

Sorun tilted his head in a questioning manner. "I, uh..." He pointed his thumb behind him at the house. "We... could talk inside...?"

"No. Not with your friend there." Her eyes glanced down a bit and she grabbed at her arm. "More than that, this is a great deal of information. I need some time to process all this and figure out just precisely what I want to say. And I imagine you're exhausted from your... trip." She looked back at him. "So please just go to sleep. And in the morning come to my servers in the science center. We can talk there."

"Okay? I mean, yeah. That sounds... yeah, sure, yeah, totally. Absolutely. I will, I will do that. Yes." He'd maybe been a bit too quick in agreeing, had barely even thought about it, but he couldn't help it. As far as he was concerned her wanting to talk to him later was the greatest victory he could have asked for given the circumstances, and he'd take what he could get.

He didn't know if that was the reaction Nicole was looking for, though. Or even if she was looking for anything in particular. She just looked conflicted at his answer. "Sorun, please don't take this the wrong way. I really am happy that you're back. Happy beyond words. This is just... a lot. So I need some time."

"Yeah, no, that's... I get it."

"Alright." Nicole's body began to fade away. "Welcome back, Sorun. We'll speak further tomorrow morning."

"Tha-" She disappeared before Sorun could even get the full word out, "-nks... huh." He blinked at the spot where Nicole had disappeared, leaving him alone in front of his house, and thought back on the conversation he just had.

Overall, it could have gone worse. So much worse he'd been genuinely terrified of what was going to happen. He'd expected some kind of verbal assault that would have shredded apart his very being, or even just cold dismissal of his presence. The fact she just wanted to talk... well, he didn't actually know. It spoke volumes either how big of a chance he had at saving this whole mess or how mad she really was at him, and Sorun honestly couldn't tell which reality he was dealing with. Somehow that was even more scary - not knowing anything.

A drawn-out, tired sigh left him, and he slumped his shoulders. Whatever. He'd deal with whatever it was tomorrow morning, and it was only now he realized how right Nicole he was. He was wiped, physically and mentally. He plain doubted he could have a drawn out, highly-likely emotional discussion in this kind of state. Not without screwing something up even further.

So he entered his house, closing the door behind him. He flicked on the nearby light switch and was reminded on just how depressingly barren his house looked. How... blank it all was. He never bothered to decorate in any capacity. Not even so much as a throw rug. It was a dismal sight to look at.

"Christ, I almost forgot I lived like this," he muttered out as he approached the kitchen. He set Yamato down on a nearby counter and dug into his pockets to bring out the only two items he'd manage to save over the course of this entire trip: the space fork he'd stolen from the ARK and the bottle of ketchup he stole from that one guy.

Shaking his head at the souvenirs, he tossed the ketchup in his vacant fridge and tossed the fork on the kitchen counter near where the drawer containing his other utensils were.

Having access to free water out of his faucet again was great. Being able to use his own bathroom again was great, too. But after all that he really just wanted to crash into his own bed and go to sleep. It was bad enough that he was actually excited about the prospect of waking up in his own room knowing he was finally back home.

So he'd trudged into his abysmally barren room, dragging the katana behind him. He shut the door and approached the side of his bed, holding the sword up with both hands. He unsheathed the sword halfway to look at the flat of the blade. Blue eyes briefly shimmered in the sword's reflection as he stared.

"The ability to go to any zone as long as I know the coordinates, huh?" Sorun thought to himself. *"They probably still have the numbers to my old home sitting around, so... could I?"*

He genuinely didn't know. It was a universe not connected to the multiverse proper they needed seven Chaos Emeralds just to access, but Yamato circumvented a lot of those rules due to its nature. He managed to get back here using it, so Sorun was left wondering if it really was possible. For him to go back to Earth via the same method with Yamato.

But Sorun wasn't sure he wanted to. For sure if he could there would be things he'd want to collect. His gaming PC and other consoles among them. Other pieces of media. Pieces of a lost culture he missed. But the problem with that was that he'd have to go back home and see the ruins. Confront the fact that everything and

everyone he knew back then was dead. And he had a hard enough time seeing it the first time without needed to add the image of dead people in the streets as he walked through it. People he would probably know.

"I don't even know if it'd work," Sorun thought as he pushed the sword back in its sheath. *"Even if it could, I don't... maybe. Maybe one day. But I'm not ready for that. Probably'll never be."*

He set down the sword on the nightstand next to his bed. It transmuted back into the blue Emerald the instant his hand lost contact with its surface, and Sorun was left grimacing a bit. He wasn't sure he wanted a blue nightlight shining right next to his head the entire night. So he picked it up and threw it in the farthest corner of his room so the light didn't hit him as much.

Good enough.

He barely registered his body hitting the bed before he fell asleep.

Chapter 89

A/N- Look, I'll say it as it is. I have a hard time writing the mushy feelgood stuff like what's coming up. Like, straight up. I have to fight myself to get the words out. When it's things like conflicts or fights or people shouting at each other or whatever, I got that, that stuff flows. This? It just doesn't mesh with me.

Recursion Error

Episode 89- The big confession

It was a great feeling for Sorun. Waking up in his own bed, recognizing where he was and realizing he was *done* . Done with all the world-threatening threats and the time travel and going around to different universes and all the fighting. All that bullshit. Over and done with. He was back home and didn't have to deal with that anymore. He could chill. It was liberating, like he was taking his first breath of fresh air in years, like life itself finally had meaning. He hadn't been happy since he didn't even know but Sorun would daresay that, when he woke up that morning... he was almost happy.

Then he remembered he had to go and talk to Nicole about everything and his mood came crashing down. As per usual.

On the upside he felt refreshed. Between being able to sleep in his own bed and finally being able to use his own shower, mentally, he was probably about as good as he was going to be. He'd be even better if he could get some breakfast, but when Sorun went into his own kitchen that morning to look around he realized somebody had cleaned out his pantry. Probably because he'd been gone for months and any food would have spoiled, but goddamn, it meant he didn't have any food.

He heard a yawn from behind him, and instantly recognized it as Silver's voice. He turned around and saw the hedgehog standing behind Sorun, rubbing at bleary-looking eyes with his stance slightly hunched over.

"Hey Silver," Sorun greeted with a small wave. "I don't have any food here, so yeah, no breakfast."

A disappointed sigh left him. "Aw, really?"

"I haven't been here for months, man, what do you want from me?" Turning around, Sorun opened one of his kitchen drawers. After opening the drawer completely he reached underneath it, where he then proceeded to feel around for the piece of paper taped to the bottom of the drawer. He found it and ripped the paper away, lifting it up. The rows of coins taped to the paper, covering its whole surface, glinted in Sorun's eyes, after which he turned around and gave the paper to a slightly-bewildered Silver.

"Here, do us a favor and go to the market and buy us some food so we don't starve," Sorun instructed. "I, uh... got some stuff I gotta go do."

"... Sorun, what...?" Giving the paper a confused glance, Silver looked up at Sorun and asked, "What is this? Why did you just have that there?"

"Oh, I keep stashes of money hidden throughout the entire house. There's more in little bags behind the light switches if you need it."

"... Why?"

"I'm from Detroit." With how crime-free this city was it was a habit Sorun probably didn't need to practice, but it was just that. A habit. And without many other things connecting him to her Sorun didn't really feel like letting a skill imparted to him by his mother go to waste.

"I don't know what that means, but alright." Shaking his head, Silver accepted the money taped to the paper. "What do you have to go do?"

"Super personal stuff I don't want to talk about."

Silver tilted his head a bit to the side. "So you have to go talk with that girl again?"

He honestly would have preferred getting slapped again over the brutal truth that was in that question, and it made it worse Silver had asked it all innocent-like. Sorun couldn't even think up of a clever comeback for it. Or even any kind of cover for it in order to deny it. Instead Sorun just took a shuddering breath and turned around towards the front door.

"I'm... I'm going," he said, making his way to the front door.

"Okay." He could practically feel Silver wave at his back as he called out to Sorun in a cheery voice, "Hey, good luck with everything!"

Sorun slammed the door behind him.

The only other times in Sorun's life where he felt this tense were times when his life was potentially in danger. Something that'd been happening more in this one year of his life than at any other point in his existence, and something he detested greatly, but it was what it was.

For some reason, beyond any sensible rational, explaining himself to Nicole was bringing about that same feeling of tenseness and dread. He'd gone to the science center, to the room where the servers were. And she'd been waiting for him there. Had simply ushered him into the room, closed the door behind him, and then had him sit in a chair sitting across from a chair she was in so he could simply tell her everything that happened after he left to go fight Enerjak.

Of course he'd told her everything. Almost. Everything from the fight itself to the alternate timeline, the future, him traveling with Silver just to get back to this zone. Some things were left out, course. Threatening Tails' family, the two murders, the robberies, assaulting an old guy. They weren't important details anyways. He gave her everything else that happened, which is what really mattered.

And Nicole just sat there, listening to him attentively and patiently. Part of why this seemed so tense to Sorun, he suspected, was that she wasn't showing much outward emotion or reaction to anything he was saying. Just listening. It'd be easier if he could gauge *something* out of her, some sign he could read so he could have some idea of what she was feeling, but there was just nothing. He didn't even know if she was doing it on purpose or if it was just something else, and what that something else potentially was Sorun was equally clueless on.

It was all he could do to just explain himself as best he could and hope for the best after.

"... So then he gave us the coordinates and I was able to get us back here with the sword," Sorun finished. "I would have gotten back here sooner but Silver could only be so accurate with his time travel trick. He never had much practice with it. I guess we're lucky we managed to get here and not somewhere way later down the line."

"Yes. I suppose so." Still no outward reaction from Nicole. She was just sitting in that chair, calm as could be, hands clasped together and resting on her lap as she looked at Sorun, who was finding a hard time to meet her gaze.

Eyes drifting to the side a bit, Sorun remarked, "You're, um, taking it well."

"Yes." Well, he was glad they could at least agree on that. "You're quite confident this issue with the future can be resolved by Silver?"

He offered her a shrug. "I mean, he's got a pretty okay PK powerset. Should be able to. Being completely honest with you he's probably in the top five of strongest people on the planet with the stuff I've seen him do."

"I wasn't asking if he was equipped or not, Sorun, I'm asking if you think he can."

To that, all Sorun could give was a sigh and another shrug. "It's tricky, Nicole. We've got hints of what happens, but just that. Hints. So he's gonna stick around and try to fix whatever happens so that future doesn't happen. The fact the Time Stone lets changes in the past affect the future means it's at least guaranteed there's a chance for change." Sorun leaned a bit back in his seat and flipped his hand up. "If it's a question of commitment he's got his whole home and a family on the line with this. Granted a, uh, family he's never met, but he'd really like to. If not letting the whole world be a wasteland wasn't enough."

Nicole looked believing, but not completely satisfied by the answer. "I'm sure, but all the same I can't help but feel concerned. You do realize how troubling this all sounds."

Rubbing a hand through his hair, Sorun said, "I know, Nicole, but there's not a whole lot to do about but wait and deal with it when it comes. Whatever 'it' even is." He blew out and let his hand flop to his side. "So yeah, I'm trusting Silver to handle it. He does that, I send him back home, life goes on. Doesn't have to be more complicated than that."

"You're trying to oversimplify a complex problem."

"'Cause it *is* simple, I'm not- why are- why are we even talking about this?" Sorun asked, shaking his head. "I don't even wanna talk about the future stuff. I didn't come here to talk about it beyond explaining where I was all this time."

"Then why did you come here?"

"Because you asked!" Sorun exclaimed. When Nicole showed zero visible reaction, he continued with, "I don't even know what's wrong, Nicole. I thought you'd be happy over the fact I wasn't, you know, *dead* , but ever since I came back you've... I don't even know."

She didn't respond. Not immediately, at least. Her head tilted down so her eyes were at her lap, and Nicole's body became completely still. It carried on over long moments, long enough for Sorun to grow uncomfortable. He was about to say something before she finally spoke.

"You did it again." Somehow those four words had more emotion in them than Sorun had heard out of Nicole since he came back. He hadn't known what to expect, but hearing her sound tired, maybe even frustrated or upset, hadn't even been considered by Sorun. He was taken back by her tone, leaning back in his seat in surprise as he continued looking at her. "You keep doing it."

"I... have no idea what you mean."

Nicole's head snapped up to look at Sorun. He flinched when he saw she actually did look upset now.

"Do you recall," she began, "after that debacle of you stealing Tails' plane in an inebriated stupor-"

"That wasn't a hundred percent my fault-"

"Be. *Quiet* ."

Sorun closed his mouth and silently waited for Nicole to continue with a nervous expression.

"... I'd aired grievances about how you had been acting. Specifically how you had been treating yourself," she calmly continued. "I understood the issues you had been going through, Sorun, but these... self-destructive tendencies of yours, you apologized and said you would stop them in an attempt to get better. But soon after

you decided to undergo what was quite literally a suicide mission against Enerjak, and it is only because of an extraordinary amount of fortune on your part that you're even here for us to discuss it."

Sorun's mouth dropped open a bit in disbelief, and he even flipped his hands up in indignation. "The whole world was at stake and we had zero alternative options. I even gave you a chance to give me another solution before I fully committed."

"But you already *did* commit to the decision beforehand. You did that knowing full well there were no other options after you had already made up your mind," Nicole argued. "You acted like you barely even needed to think about it."

"Hey, that's not true, I... took a solid couple of days to mull it over," Sorun weakly argued. "Why are we even talking about this?"

"We're talking about it because of that kiss."

And there it was. The one topic Sorun knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was eventually going to come but was doing his damnedest, with little success, to ignore. The same topic that just now made him freeze in his seat the moment it was mentioned, and now he really couldn't look at Nicole, doing his best to maintain eye contact with the floor. Nicole had probably expected him to say something, even waited for over a minute for him to speak. When it became increasingly evident he wouldn't say anything she decided to speak up.

"What are we, Sorun?" she asked him. A simple four-word question he had no idea how to answer.

"Friends. Or so I thought."

Nicole looked taken back by the answer. "We still are, Sorun. I just want to know why you did... that."

"I... I, uh... well, it's..." Sorun's mouth thinned as he glanced off to the side to think. No thoughts resulted from this, so he breathed outwards and looked back at Nicole. "I don't know what you want me to say or even how I'm supposed to say it, Nicole. I don't hang out with you more than anyone else just because you're the only one I like playing video games with," he said. "Don't get me wrong, it's a large factor, just... not, you know. The only one."

"..."

Never before had such a calm, patient stare made Sorun want to break out in a sweat. "Which is to say that... the, the kiss, it, um, may not have, well, not have been as platonic as it implied."

"There were no platonic implications whatsoever in that action, Sorun."

He looked surprised, maybe even a bit affronted, at that. "Wait, seriously? Even though it was on the forehe-"

"You have never once in the entire duration I have known you ever displayed such behavior, Sorun. You, in fact, came off as taking measures to avoid such interaction. With anyone."

"Alright, that's on me," he admitted. After a period of uncomfortable silence Sorun began drumming his fingers on his thigh as he attempted to gather his words. "I don't really have any excuses or anything like that, it's exactly what it looks like," he said. "I can't tell you when I started having those kinds of feelings, I just did. And I never knew what I was supposed to do because I've never felt this way before, and at first it was a combination of me not wanting to do anything with it because I was under the impression I was dying and me thinking I could never actually make it work, after that I was a wreck and trying to pull my life together, and then at the end there with Enerjak I figured I didn't have anything to lose so I just, uh... went for it. Probably shouldn't have but I did 'cause I wasn't really thinking."

Somehow beyond all reasonable belief he'd managed to get the truth out. After this point Sorun didn't know what to expect, how she'd react, if he'd even be leaving this room in one piece. Part of him was in disbelief he'd even managed to get this far and lay it out as cohesively as he could possibly manage in front of Nicole, and more of him was stunned over the fact his nervousness hadn't caused him to pass out yet.

But she wasn't doing anything, and that was what was really weirding Sorun out. For sure she looked surprised, in the way her eyes had widened slightly. But otherwise she was just staring at him, and in what way he was having a hard time parsing together. Contemplation, maybe, or deep consideration. Or maybe she was deciding on which words to use to yell at him.

Yelling never came, though. He was even more shocked when the next words spoke by Nicole had come out as calm as could be. The contents of those words were another matter.

"Sorun," she began, "have you ever wondered why it is I go so far out of my way to spend so much time with you?"

"No, not at all."

Nicole straightened up a bit at that, staring owlishly at Sorun with a bit of confusion laced in her features. "Let me ask something else," she suggested. "Did you, by any chance, wonder why it was during that new years' event we all had why I specifically created a gift for you outside of that gift game we played with everyone else? You exclusively?"

After thinking for a moment, Sorun shook his head. "Nah, nah, not really."

The beginnings of frustration played over Nicole's face, but was quickly subdued. "I was clearly wrong to try subtlety with you," she quietly whispered, and then said more loudly, "Before you came here

this morning I talked with Sally. And she told me of that letter you wrote to the newspaper."

He felt a bit of his face flush in embarrassment at hearing one of his deepest secrets revealed. "Okay, didn't think Sally would snitch on me like that, but what does this have to do with-?"

"Do you remember when you were reading her response to your letter in the newspaper that there was a second letter she had responded to?"

Sorun's eyes squinted in concentration. "Uhhh, yeah there was that one other one I remember. Kinda weird though, whoever wrote that one used binary to write out their handle- ohhhh..."

"Yes?"

"Ahh..."

"..."

"... Yeah I still don't know what was up with that-"

"I. Wrote. That. Letter. Sorun."

An audible gasp left Sorun. He felt himself physically recoil against the back of his chair as he stared out at Nicole, whose face looked nearly exasperated with her ears almost folded against her head. *"What? No, that doesn't make any sense, why would she-* because she's a computer lady *, ohhhh, yeah, that makes sense."* He blinked once as the implication of what she said hit Sorun. And then he blinked again. *"She wrote a letter to a love column?"*

He didn't know how to feel about it. He suspected he'd have a better clue if he'd ever bothered to read that other letter but he hadn't been bothered. He was more than a bit surprised she'd go and do something like that, it just didn't seem like her style, but more than that... well, he just really didn't know how to feel about it. The first

thing that came to mind was genuine disappointment, and it showed on his face. Nicole seemed confused by it.

"Oh. So, uh... y-you, you wrote that. To her," Sorun muttered out, looking away from her. "Because you're... interested? In someone? In that way?"

"Yes, of course." Her next words came out as cautious. "Why do you seem upset by this?"

"I-I mean I didn't- I never would have done what I did if I knew there was someone else you actually..." Sorun stammered out. He was making such a concerted effort to look away from her, both out of shame and embarrassment, that he missed the way Nicole's ears flattened completely against her head. "I didn't- it's just that you never mentioned-"

"Why would you think it was referring to anybody except you?"

Hearing that sentence, the meaning behind it and how Nicole sounded about as confused as upset at him, was the equivalent of getting hit in the face with a hammer. For how hard and quickly Sorun's head snapped to her he may as well have been hit by a hammer. He would have thought he'd misheard her if it weren't for the way she was looking at him, with patience holding back frustration.

An extraordinary amount of mental effort was put into constructing Sorun's next words. "You... wrote that letter... in reference to me."

"Yes, Sorun, I did. I would have been completely upfront with this much sooner had I known you were going to make this so difficult." A majority of the frustration wore off of Nicole face, being replaced by curiosity when she asked, "Is it really that difficult for you to believe?"

"What do you mean? Of course it is!" Sorun exclaimed, startling Nicole slightly. "I-I-I'm not that likable a person, nobody, no one's ever, I, you, I can't believe anybody would ever..." His hands started

to uncontrollably wring together. Heartrate was spiking. Breathing was rapidly increasing as Sorun tried his best to comprehend what he was hearing. "Y-y-y-you really, that doesn't, I can't, I don't understand why would you ever-?"

He nearly jumped when he felt something rest themselves on his hands. They were Nicole's hands, he'd realized. He'd been so confounded by what was happening, his mind in such a haze from it all, he hadn't even seen her get get up from the chair to approach him. He was more focused on her presence alone and not the fact her contact with his hands stopped them from shaking.

"You should be more sure of yourself, Sorun. It's unbecoming of you," Nicole said in a quiet voice. She sounded almost sad. "If I had known you had so little confidence in yourself I truly would have been more straightforward with all of this. That's my fault and I apologize."

The polite thing might have been to pull his hands away. He didn't *want* to pull them away was the thing. Just having her touch his hands was more calming than he thought possible. "N-no, you shouldn't have to say that," Sorun mumbled out. "I... I just... *when* did this become a thing?"

Nicole paused for a moment before responding. "It's as you said. I can't point towards a specific point in time these feelings developed. It wasn't as if it was a spontaneous process, Sorun, it just... happened," she said. "I confess that I understand very little of it, but from what I've gathered understanding is somewhat irrelevant in this case." She looked down at their hands. "But in truth I've harbored these feelings for quite some time."

"How long?"

"... Do you remember that conversation we had on the roof of the hospital before-" Nicole froze to momentarily consider her words, "-*that* mission? The day before you... temporarily expired?"

He did. The memory came with a growing pit in his stomach, but yes, he did remember talking to her the day before he died. The first time. "You said that was just about the house."

"I will freely admit the house was only a small part of what I wanted to discuss." Her expression lowered further. "But then everything happened."

"She felt this way all the way back then?" Sorun looked forwards as he began thinking. He imagined a thought bubble appearing somewhere over his head. *"But... if she felt this way before the dying thing, and then I came back, but..."*

Gears appeared in the cloud. Sorun's brain churned harder as he fought to remember.

"She wanted to tell me something, but then I told her I was going back, and she got all weird after- ooh, wait..."

And now it was all clear. Why she'd seemed so hesitant on the roof that day. Why she'd been reaching for his hand like that. He'd shut it all down because he thought he'd be gone forever the next day. And then he'd come back, and she'd seemed so happy, like she could finally do something she couldn't because he'd died, but then right before she could tell him he'd... told her he was going to Earth and leaving forever again...

The gears turning in Sorun's thought bubble turned into a picture of a donkey.

"... Man, I'm a jackass."

"You tried to tell me on the roof. But I deflected it because I thought I was going to die," Sorun hollowly stated.

"At the time I had thought you were too preoccupied with current affairs and elected to wait for a more opportune time," she

confirmed.

"But then I came back and... told you right to your face I was leaving again. Right before you told me how you felt." He really could have died right there for how he felt. He'd been pretty happy at the time, too. He looked up at her and asked, "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't want to stand between you and your home. And I had no way of knowing you reciprocated my feelings. Even then I doubt I would have said anything knowing how important your home was to you," Nicole answered. "But then everything else happened."

Somehow it was even worse hearing she gave up a chance at potentially being happy just for Sorun's sake, which just reinforced how much of a jackass he was. He didn't deserve someone treating him that decently. Hell, he didn't even deserve someone having feelings for him beyond friendship. It was such an alien experience all he could do was slump back in his chair while continuing to hold onto Nicole's hands like they were lifelines.

"... Nicole, I'm so sorry." Sorun couldn't even muster up the will to look Nicole in the eye. Not after becoming the biggest jackass in the planet to the person he liked most in this whole universe. "You... you didn't deserve any of this happening to you, I shouldn't have- I-I never wanted to hurt-"

Nicole gently squeezed Sorun's hands, calming him down. "I know, Sorun. I don't blame you for anything that happened."

Her words of assurance didn't do much in assuring Sorun, who had so many thoughts and feelings whirling through him he could barely keep track of it all. He had a hard enough time coming to terms that she liked him this deeply. Already he was going through life barely believing he had friends who actually liked him, but something like this was... so, so far beyond Sorun's ability to understand that he just didn't know. How something like this developed, why *him* of all people, just how much did he screw this up with his actions, how

much of this could have been avoided if he said something sooner. Or maybe it would have made it worse? He didn't know.

Not knowing where else to go with this, Sorun heaved out a deep sigh and asked, "So where does this leave us?"

"... Truthfully, Sorun, this is somewhat sudden given everything that has happened," Nicole said. "You were gone for months, I thought you were gone for months, and while you're back now it doesn't make all that time spent grieving just suddenly disappear. Not immediately." She ran a thumb over the top of one of his hands. "I wish it did, though. Because it's not as if these feelings for you have vanished."

So startled from hearing that was Sorun that he'd jolted right out of his chair. The sudden movement made Nicole let go of his hands and step back in surprise at Sorun, who had backed up a few steps from her.

"Y-you mean after after everything I did, you'd... you still...?" He couldn't understand it, couldn't understand *her* . Why anybody would ever think of him like this when he didn't deserve it. "No, you can't- you're one of the best people in the whole world and I'm one of the worst, you-you'd do so much better with literally anyone else...!"

All Sorun's words served to do was make a sad expression appear on Nicole's face. She took a couple of steps closer to him.

"And, and I'm a mess, Nicole, I'm- I can barely hold it together in high-stress situations, I had to use the sword to cut the stress hormones out out me while I was a Freedom Fighter because I just couldn't do it sometimes, I've been breaking down for months and I-I- I'm a selfish jerk that doesn't deserve-"

For the second time in the duration they'd known each other Nicole decided to go and hug him. He couldn't fathom why. Hell, he could barely even remember the first time. The shock from seeing what happened to his home had been so intense and everything felt so

numb that it barely registered in his memory. Just that it happened, but not much beyond that.

This was different. No shock, no worries, head... relatively clear. It felt different this time. Warmer. Safer. Like nothing could ever go wrong as long as she was there, if that made any sense. As if any of this made any sense.

"It's okay, Sorun," she murmured to him. He couldn't find the words to respond, too stunned to even try. "But things like that are why we need to talk." She pulled away from him, keeping her hands on his shoulders as she stared him in the eyes. "Beyond... wounding yourself like that. Which I dearly hope is a practice you put to rest, Sorun."

"N-no, I haven't... not since I died," he quickly told her, slightly panicked. He somewhat wished he hadn't let that part slip. It somehow felt liberating all the same, just getting it out. Less baggage to carry. "I never wanted... I was... I was just in a bad place. That's over. I don't need... need *that* anymore."

"Good. I won't hear any more of it." It was a tone of voice more firmer than Sorun was used to hearing Nicole speak in. "More than that, Sorun, it's how you treat yourself. I realize sometimes what happens is outside of your control, but other times you can be so reckless. And between you being gone, making me think you were lost forever multiple times over-"

"I know."

"I told you, Sorun, I *told you* after you woke up wounded from saving our friends and our people I didn't want a repeat of that experience, but... you keep doing it." Her grip on his shoulders tightened and she looked down. "And yes, Sorun, I realize a majority of the time it isn't your fault, I know it. But it's awful, these feelings of grief, always worrying over you and your safety and your health."

Sorun felt a pang of guilt hearing that, knowing everything she was referring to. "It's not as if I wanted to do any of that, Nicole. But I'm done with all that," he said with as sincere a voice as he could. "Really. All the fighting, the high-stakes battles for the world, all of that. I don't want to get involved in any of that; I'd rather leave it to all the others who do want tondo that stuff who actually have the power to do things. I'm fine with just living here in the city with a normal job and life. There's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be."

Where else could he even go? Life was pleasant here in the city. More importantly it was safe. All his friends lived here. Every single thing he cared about in the world was here. Nicole was here, and technically she *was* the city. It was home. His... new home.

And he didn't need to put himself in danger anymore. Not when there were others more willing and capable. He'd leave it all alone for his sake. And Nicole's too, apparently.

Her grip on his shoulder's lessened. "That is acceptable," She said, voice just a bit lighter. She let go of him and took a few steps back, folding her hands over her lap while looking hesitant, much to Sorun's surprise. "It has been more than I initially bargained for, Sorun, these emotions. Ever since I gained the capacity to recognize them. Even so, I'm... happy, to hear all of that." Her expression changed a bit, to one Sorun didn't recognize. He needed a few moments to piece together that, suddenly, Nicole actually looked *shy* now. It was as amusing to see as it was perplexing. "This relationship, the one between us. I will wholly admit to not being completely satisfied with it anymore. Not that our friendship hasn't been wonderful, Sorun, however..."

"You want to be more than friends?" It was honestly a miracle he hadn't stuttered that out. Nearly had.

"... I wish to make something like that work, yes," Nicole admitted. "I just think it's perhaps too soon."

"O-oh, yeah, absolutely!" The fact that an actual relationship between them had grown beyond a mere chance was something Sorun felt himself latch onto immediately, even if it wasn't something immediate. He'd take it. He'd take any condition Nicole would offer at this point if it really meant there was a way they could make this work. "I mean 'cause I gotta go and, you know, get my stuff in order. Get settled back in, talk to Honey about my job, you know I've been thinking about doing something with the house now that I've seen it in a new light and I realize it's kinda depressing to look at." Sorun's eyes widened. "Not that you did a bad job making it, it's beautiful, I just never bothered to decorate and you know what I think a rug would really tie the place together."

Nicole smiled a little. Solid progress. "It could do with a bit of color, yes," she agreed. "And I'm still in need of some time to process all this. Though, afterwards...?"

"Yeah, after everything, totally, we should..." Sorun hand began to rapidly scratch the back of his head. "That is to say, you, me, we should, um, want-want to... do you want go on a date later?" And there it was, the make or break question, the all in, the most definitively highest stress-inducing question Sorun had ever asked in his entire goddamn life.

And goddamn, he could have jumped for joy at that bright smile she gave him. "Yes, Sorun, I would very much like to go on a date with you when we're both ready."

"Okay. Alright." Considering he never once thought he'd ever get this far Sorun was at a loss for what he was supposed to say further in that regard. He knew one thing he wanted, though. "Can I get another hug?"

Some bemusement slipped into the heartwarming smile on Nicole's face, but she wordlessly agreed nonetheless and gave him another hug. It was a strange feeling. Normally he'd shrug away from anything like this. Physical affection that actually made him happy.

Or anything happy, really. And even now he'd still avoid it in public, if only for his image.

But... if it was just Nicole, that was okay. She could see this side of him. Only her. Preferably away from public eyes.

He really could get used to this feeling, though.

"Hey, can I get a third one?" Sorun asked after she pulled away from him.

Nicole's response was to lightly and playfully shove at Sorun's shoulder. "No. You'll be spoiled at this rate," she said. "In all seriousness, though, what did you have planned for today? Besides talking with me."

"Oh, right, I gotta go talk with Honey. You know, to make sure I still have a job," Sorun explained. "How's she been, by the way?"

"Her business is still fully operational as far as I am aware."

Sorun blinked. "Okay, but how is she?"

"I do not know, Sorun. I don't know her on a personal level," Nicole answered. "And last I heard she wasn't the most sociable of Mobians."

"Oh, come on, you're exaggerating."

"Sorun, you're the one who told me that."

He felt his brows furrow. Ah, right, he did. "... Well, whatever, I'm sure she's fine," he said. His head perked up as he remembered something. "Oh, yeah, and Virgil, gotta get him back. What happened with my pet?"

"Vanilla and her daughter elected to look after him," she informed him.

"Ah, alright, cool." A brief pause. "Is their own Chao still alright? What was his name? Butter?"

"Cheese, and yes. Why would he not be?"

"I think Virgil just hates Chao who aren't on his level. Or maybe he just doesn't like Cheese in particular. Dunno. Might be that red bowtie." Sorun stroked his chin in thought. "Ah, introducing Silver to him might be rough, too. Virgil might bully him."

The smile Nicole held withered a bit. "You are joking, correct?"

"No, I'm pretty sure he smells weakness. Not that Silver is weak, but for such a strong guy he has so little self-confidence, you know? I tried to help him through it, but sheesh, that guy..."

"Is that right?" Nicole glanced away from Sorun. "That certainly sounds like another I know."

"Hm? What?"

"Nothing." She looked back at him. "If you want I could go and retrieve your pet for you while you take care of the matter of your employment. I know you're busy trying to get organized, what with having just come back."

"Oh! Uh, well, that's..." Sorun quickly coughed into his hand to try and cover for the small blush he felt on his face. And he felt something flutter in his chest, too. Damn heart. "You really don't have to, Nicole-"

"I want to. And it's really no trouble, Sorun." She turned around halfway, raising her arms up as a pair of digital screens appeared before her. "There's a few things I just have to quickly check, first. I'll go right after."

"O-okay. Thanks." He didn't know what else to say to that, or even how to express his gratefulness. All Sorun could do was walk over to

the door to the room while keeping his eyes on Nicole. "I'll see you later, right?"

She tore her attention away from the screens to briefly acknowledge him. "Yes, Sorun, I'll still be here for the foreseeable future," she lightly remarked.

"Okay. Just making sure." He opened the door halfway, but stopped when he got a foot out the door. "Uh, bye."

"Goodbye." With their partings given, Nicole returned to her screens. She only managed to focus on them for five seconds before she'd noticed Sorun was still in the doorway, staring at her. "Was there something else?" she asked.

Sorun straightened. "No, um... thanks."

"You already thanked me, Sorun."

"Yeah, I know, but... thanks. Really." He felt more red dust against his cheeks. He ducked his head out of the room before she could see. "Alright, I gotta go, bye."

He couldn't have closed that door behind him fast enough. With his paranoid mind Sorun was worried she might have seen him blushing. Oddly, he didn't find himself caring all that much. Anybody else he would have been enraged, but with her it was... hm. He didn't know. He was still processing the fact she'd agreed to go on a date with him eventually.

Him.

Going on a date with someone.

"Somehow it feels like this is the weirdest thing that's happened to me all year," Sorun thought to himself as he walked away from the server room. He couldn't get over how floaty he currently felt. *"Man."*

There it was.

Honey's boutique.

Hell on Mobius.

Maybe it was too harsh of Sorun to describe it as such; the work was steady and easy and honestly the economy in New Mobotropolis was good enough that he never had money troubles once he started here. It was mostly its crazy boss that was the issue. His boss that really probably did care more about clothes than people and who might be bipolar. Or just whacked in the head.

Maybe Honey was just an example of what an unstable Mobian looked like, Sorun didn't know. Either that or it was one of those "this person is a genius with really quirky personality traits" type deals. It was hard to say if that was even a thing in this world, because on one hand there was Tails and Rotor, who as far as Sorun was concerned were both completely normal, and then on the flip end there was Eggman. Or maybe people were just too complex to try and fit them in labeled boxes and he was wasting his time trying to figure the crazy yellow cat out.

He got bored with this line of thinking very quickly and opened the front door to the shop.

"'Ey, Honey, I'm back!" Sorun shouted out into the shop. Looked about the same as he remembered - that was to say, populated by so many articles of colorful clothing he couldn't even see the walls behind all the racks, stands, and mannequins. More mannequins than he remembered, actually. There was even one that had more human-looking proportions than Mobian proportions. Actually, the more Sorun looked the more it looked like *him* in mannequin form.

Where the fuck had she even gotten that?

Eyes squinting, Sorun took a closer look at the mannequin. It was... startlingly similar not just to his proportions, but how he dressed.

Same black boots, same dark blue pants, same black turtleneck shirt. Only thing it didn't have that he did was the dark blue vest and the coat, both of which had been unique gifts.

Sorun looked down at his own vest, frowning slightly. It'd been a nice vest until fucking King Shadow decided to slash the shit out of it during that fight. The coat could at least fix itself because of Nicole's nanite magic, and he was thankful for that, but the shirt and vest were shot and he'd had to carry them around for a week now without any spares. The shirt was one thing; the vest was another since it wasn't as replaceable as the shirt. He'd say it was a lost cause if he didn't know Honey could probably just spit on it and it'd be good as new. Somehow.

There was movement to Sorun's right. He turned to it, his eyes revealing to him a pile of clothes crumpled up in the corner. He wasn't even surprised when he saw Honey's head pop up from the pile, eyes bleary and face half-awake with a sock hanging off her nose.

"... What even?" Sorun asked himself upon seeing the state Honey was in.

"Ugh. Sorun?" Her honey-colored eyes looked far more awake now. "You're here?"

"Wouldn't you know it, turns out humans have nine lives. The darnedest thing, really." He pointed to the clothes pile the cat was in. "'Nother late-night bender? Told ya that you had to watch out for that. Think of your health."

After making an unamused groan, Honey's eyes crossed to look at the sock on her face. She shook her head to get the sock free, and then stood up out of the pile, loose clothing falling down around her. "Egh, of course it's you, nobody else I know sounds as patronizing as you."

He didn't take that as personally as he felt he should of, even as he watched Honey brush the last of the clothing off her black and red dress. "It's actually gotten worse over time," he informed her. "You don't seem so shocked over my sudden resurrection."

"The novelty of it kinda wore off after the first time you pulled this."

"Meh. Fair." He looked to the left and pointed at the mannequin dressed like him. "You want to explain this?"

At first, Honey looked confused by what he was referring to. But then she saw the mannequin he was pointing at, and her eyes went as wide as dinner plates. Before Sorun could say anything further she darted forwards and smacked the mannequin off its pedestal. Which... didn't really do all that much, seeing as Sorun could still see it lying on the ground.

"... I mean I can still see it, Honey, that didn't-"

Honey bent down, picked the mannequin up, and threw it behind the front counter to the shop. Then she spun back to Sorun, hands clasped behind her back with a wide smile. Sorun's expression was flat.

"Okay, you realize you can't get rid of my memory of what I just saw, right?" Sorun asked. "Like, getting the thing out of my line of sight doesn't change the fact I saw it to begin with."

Honey's obviously-fake smile began wavering. "Sorun, it's... you... you were gone a really long time this time."

Sorun gestured out to the counter. "So you made a lookalike of me?" he asked, about as curious as he was disturbed.

"It's not a lookalike," Honey argued, "it's a... it's just something to help remember you," she fumed, stomping around towards the counter. "Because it turns out it's actually nice having someone here

regularly to talk at the shop and nobody else really does that and *you were gone a long time, Sorun!"*

He'd jumped when Honey slammed her hands on the counter. And then she immediately seemed to regret the action, because she took a few steps back behind the counter while sheepishly looking down. Sorun almost hadn't believed what he'd heard, but it'd just come out of the cat's mouth. And he couldn't help but note how endearing it was that she actually cared about him that much, considering up 'til now he thought she only cared about clothes that much. It was almost enough for him to forget the creepy mannequin. And as somebody who liked routine as much as she apparently did he could sympathize.

But Sorun being Sorun, he couldn't help but latch onto the opportunity to make fun of her for it.

"Wow, Honey, it almost sounds like you missed me," he pointed out in an utterly bland tone.

The glove that ended up sailing past Sorun's head was narrowly dodged.

"Did you come here just to mock me?" Honey asked.

"No, I came here because you're my one source of stable income in this world and I wanted to make sure I still have a job," Sorun dryly said.

"Hmph!" She crossed her arms and turned her nose up at him. "I see how it is. No heartfelt greetings, no asking if I've been alright, just straight to what *you* want. Well, if this is the way you're treating me after just coming back now I have to wonder why I should take you back." Her tone didn't imply she was as mad as her words said, which helped to put Sorun a bit at ease. More teasing than anything else, actually. It made him a bit more confident with his next response.

The pale teen's head turned towards the front window. "Noticed the 'help wanted' sign," he said, referring to the piece of paper taped to the window. "Also noticed it's still there despite the fact I've been gone for months," he continued, turning back to Honey. "So either coincidentally you got fed up with the work overload around the same time I came back and put the sign up recently or literally nobody's been able to hold the job in all the time I've been gone."

Honey's features tightened. Sorun didn't know if that meant she was irritated at him being right or if it was something else. "Nobody else ever taped the boxes shut right like you did."

"... What?"

"Or they don't stack the boxes neat enough, shipping labels are off-center when they tape them to the box-"

"Okay I was a bit OCD with all that, but seriously-?"

"-and a million other little things you did that they do *wrong* because I got used to how you did things and learned to like to work around it and- and they always look at me weirdly, like I'm weird, when I'm not weird at all," Honey seethed out.

Sorun's face was stone. "I really can't believe that. Can I have my old job back?"

"About that." Hissing through her teeth, Honey grew an awkward expression. "It was actually just yesterday somebody came in about it. Do you know Larry?"

Nope. "Nope. He a lobster?"

"No, a lynx."

"Larry the Lynx?"

"Yeah."

"Nope, not ringing a bell." He was pretty sure he'd remember someone like that.

"Well, he came in asking for the job. I was kind of skeptical about him, but he's actually pretty good at it. At least compared to everyone else. Actually listens when I tell him how to do things," she bitterly added. "Plus, you know, he's seems nice. Bit shy, but also really open and talkative! Unlike other people."

Sorun made an uncompassionate hum. "I see. But you're gonna tell him to hit the road and just hire me back, right?"

Honey grimaced. "I can't just promise someone a job and turn them down the next day because you showed back up, Sorun, it looks bad on me." He held her palms up at Sorun when she saw his face knit in irritation. "Hey, I'd love to have you back here, but I have my integrity to think of, Sorun."

"Yeah, well I got a sword that lets me teleport to anywhere in the world. What's Larry got?"

Her triangle ears going straight up couldn't have made Honey's interest more obvious. "You got that thing back?"

"Mhm, brought a Chaos Emerald back from the future, don't ask about it, seriously," he said when he saw Honey give him an odd look. "What are those mail couriers charging you to carry your stuff all over?"

"The fees are *exorbitant* ," Honey hissed out. "But, wait..." She blinked as she took on a thinking face. "You know, Sorun, if I just cut out the couriers entirely and just have you handle that whole process-"

"Don't like where this is going, Honey."

"Oh, come on, think about it! Once you have all the locations set up it'd take you, what, five minutes to drop stuff off potentially on

another continent? I can drop off all those courier services that are trying to bleed me dry and just hire you to put them everywhere and have Larry deal with the packaging and labels and all that." She looked to the side and began tapping on her chin. "Maybe have him unpack my fabric shipments and other supplies, too. Handle the inventory. Keep him busy so I can just focus on working. Look at that, everyone wins!"

Well, everyone but the couriers, but Sorun didn't comment on that. What he did do was make a hum of contemplation. He was annoyed about the fact this entailed changing what was already a job he liked by giving it to someone else... but then again, this new gig sounded even easier than that. Maybe even let him see some sights, travel a bit. Safely. In safe places. He doubted there was much danger to be found in Station Square. Portals meant he didn't have to worry about travel times. More importantly he got to keep his mailman shtick.

Even further was the fact it gave him an excuse to keep holding onto that Emerald in case Elias or anybody else on the Council of Acorn came asking about it. That alone made the offer enticing.

"... Long as I get the hat back, I guess," Sorun finally sighed out in acceptance. "This Larry guy's on the up-and-up, right? I don't wanna work with a weirdo." Present company excluded, but he'd already grown used to Honey's brand of weird.

She made a so-so gesture with her hand. "He's... nice, like I said. 'Cept that one thing..."

"Ah, here it is."

"He's kinda infamous around town for being a real bad luck magnet. I'm actually surprised you haven't heard of him before because of it; lots of people avoid him because of it."

Sorun's brows furrowed. "Okay, is he just extremely clumsy or does he legitimately have a bad luck power? 'Cause at this point I'll buy it if he does."

Honey shrugged. "Don't really have a clue, but if the rumor mill says he's cursed with bad luck, hey, I guess he's just cursed."

"And... you want him as an employee."

"Not like I keep flammable things around. And I don't really work with what you would call fragile material," Honey said. "But listen, if he gets on board we'll try it out and if it turns out it's not really working out I'll drop him and you can have the old position. You know, in addition to teleporting around to deliver stuff."

"Ah. I get a raise if that happens, right?"

One of Honey's eyes twitched. "A modest raise."

"I dunno, I've been known to stretch the definition of words like 'modest'..."

"We will *talk about it* if that happens," Honey said to him, sounding like she was straining to get the words out. She evened out a second later, asking, "So was there anything else or was that it?"

"Nah, I don't-" Sorun's head perked up in realization. "Oh, yeah, one more thing. Think you can fix this?"

Honey tilted her head in interest. Interest that was quickly growing into annoyance, annoyance that might have even bordered on anger, when Sorun removed the vest he was wearing and put it on the counter. His incredibly torn vest that Honey was overlooking with a discerning eye and a look that- oh, yeah, she was genuinely angry, her tail only swished around so quickly like it was now when she was upset at something.

Before speaking, she took in a deep breath. "This was a gift," she began, looking up at Sorun. "I poured my soul, sweat, and blood into this. Actual blood, Sorun, because I pricked my finger on a needle working on this because I was running on sleep deprivation."

"You comprehend sleep deprivation?" Sorun asked in surprise. The amount of times he'd known her to work through the night said different.

"Don't get smart with me," Honey snapped. "This was a completely unique piece I never planned on replicating. A genuine Honey original! A charge a fortune for things like this and I don't even offer it to just anyone, but when I give one to you instead of treating it like the priceless treasure it is you let it get ripped up like you threw it in a blender!"

"I practically was in a blender in the fight that caused that," Sorun bit out. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I'm actually planning on avoiding violence entirely in the future, so it's not like something like this'll ever happen again."

"Oh, so you say, but I swear the moment I turn my back you're getting limbs torn off, or impaled, or whatever even happened to this..."

"It's touching, you know," Sorun dryly remarked. "Knowing you care enough about my wellbeing to treat these very traumatic moments of my life so glibly."

"First off, glibly isn't a word-"

"It super is, what do you mean?"

"It sounds silly so I say it isn't, and second of all you told me you couldn't even feel it when you lost the arm that one time. I was even there! You barely even cared!"

"Yeah, it was still my *arm* , Honey!"

"You replaced it with a ghost arm! You acted like you liked that arm more than the real one!"

"Because my real arm is wimpy by comparison and the Bringer Claw looked cool- wait, I meant-" Sorun sputtered out, while Honey shot him a smug look. "... Listen, you, I'm not willing to let that last thing go. You can't just go and decide what words exist and what words don't."

"Well, guess what, Sorun. I'm your boss and I say I can."

Sorun breathed in deeply, and then exhaled in defeat. He didn't have a comeback for that. "Can you please just fix the vest?"

Thankfully, Honey nodded. "I can fix it, no problem. Even... try and get some of these spots out I'm pretty sure are bloodstains." She stuck her tongue out at seeing the darkened spots inside the vest, around the tears.

Sorun sheepishly turned to the side. "Yeah, I tried getting those out, but hotel washing machines ain't the best."

"It's fine," Honey said, waving his concerns away. Her eyes turned down to the blue coat. "Since we're on the subject, I gotta ask. Are you still going to wear that coat to work?"

"I wear it forever now, so yeah," he answered.

It almost looked like Honey was visibly wounded when she heard that sentence. "Why?"

"Because Nicole made it, and it reminds me of home." He looked down at the coat. "Why? You don't like it?"

"It's..." Honey hesitantly began, "well... fine. I suppose. Bit garish. Way too much of the primary color without enough contrast. The swirly details are... nice?"

Sorun didn't make an outward reaction. "It's my most prized possession, Honey, so can say you hate it if you want. I'm still wearing it no matter what."

"Alright, well in that case it's hideous," Honey stated with no small amount of relief.

He probably should have been mad at that. He just smiled instead. "Yeah, it's nice being home," he said under his breath.

"Hm?" One of Honey's ears flicked in interest. "What, no snappy comeback? No anger? Nothing?"

"I'm in a good mood. Turns out even I can get those. But thanks for everything Honey, seriously. Could never pay you back for everything you've done."

"Yeah. You can't."

"... I'm quittin' while I'm ahead." He turned his back to Honey, waving behind him at the cat as he made his way towards the door. "See you around, then. I'll come back on the usual schedule."

"Alright, bye." He heard ruffling behind him. "How dare he let this vest get hit so much..." he heard muttered out behind him. He shook his head with a small grin and pushed open the front door.

Sorun left the shop feeling pretty good about himself. Between securing his future and pulling off that miracle with Nicole, he dared to say he was feeling stress-free. A concept Sorun thought didn't even exist.

He was right. It didn't exist. The stress came back when Sorun exited the shop and then nearly ran face-first into a Mobian. The stress came when he realized it was a lynx that most certainly was not Nicole, eyes were blue and not green and the fur was a different, redder shade of brown. And Sorun's first thought upon seeing him was, *"Ah, shit, it's Larry."*

Coincidentally, Sorun finally learned if being attracted to Nicole would mean he'd begin leaking a mutual likeness towards Mobians

who were lynxes. It didn't. He wanted to punch this guy in the face within two seconds of seeing him.

"Huh? What the- OH, hey! It's you!" The-one-who-was-most-definitely-Larry exclaimed with a big, happy smile. "Sorun, hey, I heard you were back! It's great to see you!"

"This fucking guy." Sorun forced himself to maintain a neutral expression. "Hey. You're Larry, right?"

The lynx blinked. "Yeah?" he answered, confused. "What- of course I am. We were neighbors. ARE, again, I guess. You go back to your old house?"

"Yeah...?" Sorun tilted his head far to the right. Neighbors? He didn't recall. "Since when are we neighbors?"

Larry's visible confusion grew. "Since... you know, since we all moved here to the city? And you moved to your house? I wave at you sometimes in the morning!"

Did he? Sorun didn't remember. He remembered in the back of his mind that there definitely *was* someone who would regularly wave at him in the morning. He couldn't remember if he'd ever actually spoken to that Mobian. He might've, but he never cared enough to remember. Looking back at Larry Sorun tried searching his memory for a face that even vaguely resembled his, but then Nicole's face kept popping up and he kept getting distracted.

He squinted at Larry's face, attempting to think harder.

No, Sorun was pretty sure he'd never met him before in his life. And he had lots of neighbors besides. Waving guy coulda been anyone.

"If you say so, man," Sorun said. He'd play along anyway on the assumption he was telling the truth. Probably was. Seemed earnest. "Heard you're here to steal my job."

He could of sworn he heard glass shatter somewhere when Larry's face shifted from confused to shocked. "What!? No, I would never- er, well I guess- listen I d-didn't know that- nobody else would hire me!" Larry stuttered out, eyes suddenly wide and panicked at the critical glare Sorun was sending him. He made a "eep!" sound when Sorun slinked closer to him, their faces inches apart with Sorun maintaining that blank, staring face.

"Larry. Homie. Listen, I ain't holdin' it against ya," Sorun said, slowly and evenly, with the smallest of upturns on the corners of his mouth. "Desperate for a job, I get it, the market wasn't kind to me, either. Been there. But I smoothed things over with Honey. You and I, guy, we're coworkers now."

"R-really?" Some of the nervousness disappeared from Larry. Some. He still seemed marginally creeped out by Sorun's distance and tone. "You- you talked with her already?"

"You'll have to ask her about the details. I don't feel like explaining it." Sorun leaned to Larry's side, who stepped a bit away from Sorun with a wary expression. "So do you really have a bad luck power?"

Larry looked ten times more uncomfortable the moment the topic was brought up. "I don't think it is? I don't know, I- bad stuff just happens around me, alright, please stop staring at me like that!"

Sorun didn't. "Is that right? Well, it's not an ideal power, but I've seen worse. Like that guy with invisible skin."

"But wouldn't being invisible be cool?"

"No, it was just his skin. His muscles and organs and stuff were still visible."

Larry recoiled. "Ugh! That's awful! Was there really someone like that back where you're from?"

Sorun chuckled and leaned back away from Larry, who seemed to relax at the new distance. "Nah, I got that from a comic," he answered. The shock and horror Larry held was replaced by a small bit of amusement. His stature relaxed a bit more, even if he still seemed off-put by Sorun's presence. "Look, real talk. I managed to keep my job with Honey and I don't really care if you actually do have a power like that. Just don't do something stupid and we're cool."

He seemed surprised, at first. At what, Sorun didn't know, but the male lynx looked surprised at Sorun's words. Like he hadn't expected something he'd said. Words Sorun regretted saying when a warm expression grew on the Mobian's face. "Well, geez, Sorun, thanks. Nobody's ever really said that to m-"

"Bear in mind if Honey has to drop one of us you're on the chopping block, so it doesn't affect me much either way."

"You... yeah, okay." Larry sighed out and deflated a bit. "So, um. It's nice to work with you?" Larry tried, managing a wavering grin as he held a hand up for Sorun to shake.

Sorun looked down at the offered hand. He thought about it for a second.

"I'm going home." He shoved his hands in his pockets, turned around, and started walking away.

"Eh...?" Confused and a bit crestfallen, Larry's hand retreated back to his side as he watched Sorun walk away. "O-okay! So I'll see you around, then!?" he called after Sorun. When the human didn't respond, Larry sighed again and turned to the shop's door. "Yeah, um, we'll see each other again, I guess. Yeah..." he mumbled out as he entered the shop.

His parting words were already forgotten by Sorun by the time he'd gotten far enough away from the shop. *"Okay, slight wrinkle, but I guess it doesn't really matter long as La... fuck was his name, Lars?*

Yeah. Long as he stays outta my way I don't care all that much." He scratched at the back of his head. *"Kinda screws up my routine, though. Kinda liked it when it was just us two at the shop. Bothersome."*

Sorun supposed that maybe delivering packages via portals would be a bit more engaging and fun than packaging stuff and messing with labels all day. There'd been a sense of serenity, though, in how calming that work had been, and it bugged him a bit Lars had that job now even if he got a decent substitute. He still wouldn't be pulling for him to keep the job, though. Especially since it meant a potential raise for Sorun.

Maybe he could do something to sabotage him. Blame it on the bad luck so Honey would fire him so things could go back to how they used to be.

Nah, he didn't feel like being that much of a dick, and he didn't need the extra money, anyways. Lars could have his fair shake. Sorun didn't care.

But, these were all matters to consider for later. Right now Sorun had the rest of the day to consider. And as he stopped to take in the sight of the city in front of him, he realized, for once in a long while, he could finally just relax. The thought put a smile on his face.

It was nice being home.

A/N- You know, it really feels like I coulda ended the story right there and picked the rest up in a sequel. Try to break it up a bit since this story's already so long. Not gonna, but just a thought.

Chapter 90

Recursion Error

Episode 90- Worth

Usually the hard choices required people that actually knew what they were doing within the context of these choices. Sorun wasn't one of those people, but at the same time he was the only person in the whole universe in a position to make this choice. It had to go down to him. But how could anybody reasonably make this kind of decision? The kind of choice that broke lesser men?

Sorun made a frustrated sigh and lowered the fan deck of paint colors he was looking at. He didn't know what the hell he was doing. How was he supposed to know which color out of the literal thousands on these things he was supposed to pick for his house? He tried narrowing it down to something blue, but that still left hundreds. The only one he was dead-set on not using was cobalt and its derivatives since it looked too much like Sonic but that still somehow left hundreds more. He didn't even know where the lady running the paint stall in the market was finding all these colors.

In the living room, Silver started screaming. Sorun ignored him and looked back at fan deck.

Eh, cerulean seemed enticing. Maybe too bold, though...

He noticed something materialize besides him. Normally he would have been jumping for joy on the inside and would have warmly greeted Nicole, but Sorun's focus on this task was so intense all he could do was note her presence as he stared at the fan deck.

"Hello, Sor... un?" The screaming drew Nicole's attention and caused her to look from him to the entrance to the living room. "Sorun, why

is your houseguest screaming?" she asked.

"I think Virgil's attacking him again. They haven't been getting along," Sorun answered. He flipped through the fan deck.

"SORUN, GET THIS THING OFF OF ME!" came Silver's shrill scream from the living room.

She looked back at Sorun. "Should you go assist him?"

"Probably, yeah."

Nicole waited, patiently looking at Sorun.

Sorun did nothing and continued to look at the fan deck full of paint colors.

"Are you going to assist him?" Nicole finally asked.

"No. Cyan? No, no..."

After a few more moments of waiting, Nicole wordlessly turned around and walked towards the living room. Sorun, meanwhile, continued staring at colors.

"Turquoise? Nah, that's more of a green..."

She had a running hypothesis that the bond shared between Sorun and Virgil had caused something unnatural to form in the Chao's evolution. Humans and Overlanders weren't typically found in the same environment as Chao the way Mobians were, and in Sorun's case he wasn't even of the same world. There was no other explanation Nicole could see for why Sorun's Chao was so atypical compared to all other Chao. Generally speaking Chao were never prone to violence and otherwise friendly. Virgil was not. The new form a Chao took in its evolution was not supposed to detract too far from the Chao's original form. Virgil looked nothing like the Chao he

used to be, though Sorun had never seemed surprised by his appearance for whatever reason.

There had to be some cause behind it, but frustratingly Nicole's own data about Chao was sparse. In fact, there were no Mobians in the city that were interested in pursuing research on the species. She would confess she was among them; too many other matters to attend to. So she supposed it would have to remain a mystery.

When she entered the living room, she was greeted to the sight of Silver sitting on the couch, thrashing around and reaching up to his head. Virgil was sitting there, pulling on those strange, standing strands of hair of his. He at least showed enough restraint not to use those blade appendages on his arms. The only person she'd ever witnessed him try to cut with those was Sonic, and she suspected that was just because he knew he couldn't actually hurt him.

Restraint or not, though, this was still unacceptable behavior.

"I would kindly ask you immediately cease this at once, Virgil." The words were gentle. Her tone was not, matching the scolding glare she was sending the Chao. He'd frozen, blue eyes disturbingly similar to Sorun's meeting her own, his demeanor shifting towards looking embarrassed and angered. He released the white hair strands and allowed Nicole to gently pick him up and nestle in the crook of her arm without so much as a struggle. He'd never once been violent with her.

Silver made a relieved sound at his newly-liberated and shook his head. "Ugh, glad that's over," he muttered, and then sent her a grateful look. "Hey, thanks a lot, uh..."

"Nicole."

"Nicole, right. Thanks." He made a small groan and held a hand to his forehead, wincing slightly. "I don't know what's wrong with that thing..."

"What did you do to provoke him?" she inquired.

"I didn't do anything!" Silver exclaimed. "All I did was sit down on the couch next to him, and suddenly he started growling at me! And when I said I was sorry he went ballistic! I don't know why Sorun keeps the little nightmare around, all it does is hiss at me and-"

"Virgil is Sorun's companion and has every right to be living here," Nicole cut in, making Silver freeze mid-sentence. "How long do you plan on staying in Sorun's home?"

A nervous expression grew on Silver's face. "Uh, is- there isn't a problem, is there?" he stuttered out. "Because if there is, um, I'm sorry if I did something-"

"There is no problem."

The nervous expression became somewhat mollified, though Silver didn't look like he completely believed her. "Um, alright. Sorun said I could stay with him for as long as I needed to help fix the future. Hey, speaking of which, what did everyone-?"

"Based on the extremely negligible amount of data you have provided to us, about a nebulous threat you cannot identify in any shape nor even name, set to arrive at a time you have absolutely no indication of, with absolutely no evidence to support your claims other than the words of both Sorun and yourself, of which only one is credible, the Freedom Fighters have elected to follow Sorun's advice and 'let you deal with the future problem' if and when it arrives. They will provide support if available," Nicole informed him. "But at the moment they're occupied handling real, tangible threats putting people's lives at risk."

The white hedgehog didn't seem surprised at the news, but he looked a bit crestfallen all the same. "That's... pretty fair, I guess," he sighed out. "You guys have your own problems, I get that. I just really don't want to mess this up, you know?"

She didn't. Not really. All of the Freedom Fighters were incredibly skeptical of Silver's claims of a desolate future caused by a threat he came back to the past with the explicit reason of stopping. They only remotely believed it because Sorun supported his claims, even if Sorun himself had been sparse on the details.

Green eyes flicked down to Virgil. The Chao decided on sleeping, resting soundly in the crook of the lynx's arm. She softly ran her fingers over the silver, cylindrical horns on his head and looked back up at Silver. "I apologize if I have caused any undue stress, Silver. It wasn't my intention to appear antagonistic to you," she said. "I simply find it odd Sorun would extend such courtesy towards you."

"Odd" was a strong word. Possibly. It was hard to say with Sorun. He had a kind heart, even if he bizarrely refused to admit it. But she'd seen him interact with others, and how he displayed clear biases. How he showed more open inclinations towards those he would consider friends over strangers and neighbors. How he treated *her* differently than everyone else, how he acted around her. So it simply seemed strange he offered so much to Silver, but many things about him had changed since his return. She had hopes it was a positive sign.

Silver seemed confused by the question. "Why? Sorun's a great guy," Silver said. "He, um, took care of me while we were on our way here. In bigger places full of people and stuff I didn't, er... well, deal with well," he nervously admitted. "We looked out for each other. He's done nothing *but* look out for me. He's my best friend and I, well, I can't say it to his face but honestly it kind of feels like he's doing too much for me. Even if, you know, he did have the empty room to spare." He grew a bit stiff at the unblinking gaze Nicole was giving him. "Er, ma'am."

"Nicole is fine," she assured him. "You needn't feel this way, Silver. Sorun wouldn't offer so much if he wasn't sure." She made a small pause. "And I feel I must thank you personally. For being there with him to help him find his way home. I'm glad he had someone like you there to help him."

Someone there to help him when she couldn't. Somebody to help guide him back when she hadn't even known where he was. Stuck in this city while he'd been off risking his life against his will just to save everyone once again. Events and variables she knew were outside of her scope of ability to help in any feasible way. Thousands of simulations being ran that told her the events that transpired was the best possible outcome. Entire nights spent reassuring herself it was the best possible conclusion even if it didn't feel like it.

But, of course, Sorun was here now and promised to stop endangering himself. And she believed him, because she knew he genuinely didn't want to be in danger and that he would never commit such an overt lie to her. Things would be fine. More than fine, with how... events between them were progressing. It would be perfect if Silver and his "future issue" weren't the small wrinkle in it all.

"I would just ask that, whatever danger is inherently threatening the future, Silver, that you would handle the brunt of it, whether or not the Freedom Fighters are able to assist," Nicole said. "You're uniquely equipped to deal with the issue, while Sorun is..." Healing. Recovering. Mentally worn. Didn't need to be doing this kind of thing anymore, "... less capable than you, admittedly."

"Hm? Oh, yeah, I know," Silver assured her. "I mean he told me stories about stuff he did and everything, but, uh... I know he's got the weird sword that makes me feel tingly whenever I'm near it, but I'm not even sure Sorun's even good at fighting. I mean, the guy's so nice. I can't see him hurting anyone."

Nicole felt Virgil rustle a bit in her grasp.

"Hey may surprise you," Nicole said, laying a calming hand on the Chao. She made a smile. "But thank you for understanding. Has Sorun told you what the purpose of that deck of colors is? He seems to be struggling on deciding something."

"Oh, yeah, Sorun said he wants to paint the house."

"... Paint?"

He was still looking at that fan deck when Nicole re-entered the kitchen, sleeping Chao in hand. Sorun looked up briefly as she approached and then waved at her. "I have good news, Nicole," he said. "I've narrowed it down between colors C#182 and C#187."

"That's nice." And baffling, because this made absolutely no sense. "Virgil showed hostile behavior towards Silver for sitting next to him. And then he attacked him for apologizing."

Sorun's face wrinkled. "He *apologized* ?" he asked in a tone implying he thought Silver was foolish for doing something reasonable. "Ugh, that just made it ten times worse. Virgil isn't going to respect him if he keeps acting so timid. He picks on him 'cause he lets him."

"And what would you recommend he do to rectify this?"

"Dude can literally move stuff with his mind. All he has to do is float Virgil around so he can't touch 'im and they'll be chill in no time."

Interesting. He seemed well-versed in what had to be an aberrant mutation of Chao evolution. She filed the information away for later and shifted to a new topic. "Sorun, why are you consulting that fan deck for paint colors?"

"Because there's like a billion and a half choices. I went with cerulean after all but I still can't decide on which type-"

"Sorun, I can have the nanites composing your house change color at will. You don't need to paint it." It wasn't even that hard. It just involved shifting the external structure of the nanites slightly so the light bounced off of them at a different frequency. It'd take all of a second.

The human paused. She witnessed his face go through a series of micro expressions, but it was obvious he was struggling to keep

some sort of outburst contained. It took nearly fifteen seconds for him to calm down and take a deep breath before speaking. "Well, uh... it's good to support local businesses, Nicole."

"You never considered I can just change the color." It wasn't a question. It was a factual statement. The way Sorun winced slightly proved it. "Sorun..."

"Alright, I didn't think, but look, I already told the paint stand lady I'd be doing this and I don't wanna flake out on her now that I'm committed. I gotta walk past her stand every time I go to the market to buy food," he said. "Besides! It could be relaxing."

"Relaxing."

"Yeah, you know, painting. The house. Silver said he'd help." Sorun shrunk in on himself slightly, something Nicole immediately picked up on. "I've just never done something like this so I thought hanging around and doing a fun project with a friend would be nice, but I'm sorry if you-"

All of her previous objections were instantly deleted. "No, Sorun, it's completely fine," she assured him with a smile. "I'm sure a small project such as this can be fun." Something relaxing. Something constructive and mentally healthy for him to do. And the house could do with some work, anyways, she'd always regretted never furnishing it beyond the bare essentials. "Though maybe you could at least let me just change the color of the interior? You've never mentioned having experience in this type of work."

Sorun shrugged. "I filled out a coloring book when I was a kid, so I don't imagine it's much different than that."

This wasn't a sentence that inspired confidence in Nicole on Sorun's ability to do this. And sadly, she completely expected it. "Have you at least considered what type of primer to use for the house?"

After shooting her a questioning look, a rather worrying sign, Sorun looked back at the fan deck. "What color is primer? I already told you I'm going with cerulean."

Of course. "I will explain it to you on the way to procure the paint," she promised him. If only because she'd forgone the consideration to just undo his work once he was asleep and just use the nanites for fear of accidentally demeaning him. Even if it would be simpler.

The sacrifices she made for him.

"Alright, if you say so." Sorun put the fan deck down and grabbed a nearby kitchen knife. "But I think this'll be great," Sorun continued, making his way towards a nearby light switch as Nicole watched in curiosity. "There's another person that runs a curio shop that's been trying to get rid of these rugs. Might buy them since he's selling them for super cheap. Thinking of getting some furniture, too."

He put the knife in one of the screws holding the light switch to the wall and began unscrewing it with the knife. Nicole did not know why he was dismantling the light switch. "I can simply create furniture for you," she offered, unable to look away from what Sorun was doing.

"Aw, that's sweet of you, Nicole. Thanks." She didn't know why she felt so delighted to hear Sorun speak to her like that. It almost distracted her from the fact he was pulling the light switch off the wall, letting it hang by its wires. It didn't manage to distract her. "Hey, Antoine still knits, right? He had these really nice coasters at his house and I'm wondering if he'd make me some."

He pulled a jingling bag of coins out of the wall from where he'd dismantled the light switch. She was sure something in her servers short circuited.

"... Sorun, why?" Really the only query she was able to formulate at the sight before her. What else was she supposed to ask? Why would any decent individual store money in their walls?

"Hm?" Sorun looked from the money to Nicole, and then caught her staring at the money. "Oh, it's a stash. I stash things. My mom taught me to in Detroit."

Every single time Sorun mentioned his home Nicole wondered why it was Sorun wished to return there. Beyond the obvious of it being the home of his friends, family, and culture. Because sometimes he would say things like this that would paint that city as some den of debauchery and crime with a worryingly low life expectancy, the kind of conditions that would not be unheard of in the western desert lands such as Sandblast City, and Nicole continued to count it fortunate that Sorun didn't have to live in such a terrible place anymore. Because he truly made it sound like an awful place to live in.

Oddly, that assessment came into conflict with Sorun's own opinion of Detroit, because according to him it had been a wonderful city to live in. Nicole couldn't see how since in that same conversation he'd mentioned a stray bullet had gone through his window during a New Year's Eve event at his home at one point. And that he'd been acquainted with an insane homeless man. The fact there were even homeless there to begin with seemed appalling to her, not to mention the repeated mentions of crimes he had personally witnessed. But somehow, despite all the evidence to the contrary, he always praised the city as a fine place to live in. She suspected a variation of Stockholm Syndrome was to blame.

"Sorun, we have a bank," Nicole informed him, wanting to focus on the important issue of him storing money in his walls like some form of deviant. "I would like for you to start using the bank like a responsible person."

"But-!" He looked like he wanted to protest the request. All Nicole had done in response was give him a small look, something that could barely be called pleading, and he'd shifted his expression completely. From looking like he wanted to deny her to a shy and submissive face. "I-I'll make an account there when I can," he

mumbled, looking down. "I'll need to go through the fifty stashes I have around the house at some point."

Nicole's ears flicked. "Fifty?" she repeated, desperately hoping the audio receptors had incorrectly translated that despite knowing there was a near-zero chance of that.

Sorun nodded. "Yeah, behind the light switches, under the drawers, behind the freezer, under the bed, in the hollow spots in the frame of some of the chairs-"

"I think I see," Nicole interrupted. "Sorun, there are no criminals in this city. And even if there were my security countermeasures are more than enough to protect the people living here," she said. "You truly don't need to take measures like this. You know this." She gestured to the hanging light switch. "So why are you going through such ridiculous means of hiding your earnings?"

He nervously crumpled the bag in his hand. "I didn't mean to insult you, Nicole. It's just a habit. From my old home."

"You didn't insult me," she softly replied. "Were robberies something common where you're from?"

"Uh, well, n- I mean not my house personally," Sorun said. "Others, yeah. Neighbors a couple of times."

"And you enjoyed living there?"

"What? Yeah, of course. Detroit was a great place."

She didn't know why he kept saying that when it clearly wasn't true. "You repeatedly have told me that multiple times you witnessed grievous acts of crime being committed in your old city. You told me you saw police officers assaulting a man before arresting him."

"To be fair that guy was a pretty well-known local drug dealer. And he stabbed a cop with a piece of glass."

More conflicting information to his statements. "Did your mother not once ever think to move somewhere else?"

"Move where? Stuff like that was ubiquitous across the whole country. Besides, Detroit was home."

"... I see." Was he just so acclimatized to things of that nature it barely even registered with him? It was a concept Nicole had a difficult time processing, but it did line up with some of his more unusual quirks. How in the early days of being on this planet he'd never shown all that much outward reaction towards Dr. Robotnik's greater atrocities. There'd been disgust, over course, but the shock. He'd never overly displayed it. He'd simply "rolled with it," as Sorun himself would say. She'd wondered if all the various types of media he'd consumed in the past contributed. Now she had to wonder if simply his living conditions had... desensitized him, somehow.

There had to be something there. Perhaps relating to the reason Sorun very noticeably never went into much detail about the history of his planet whenever she inquired, just the broad aspects without specifics.

She cut off that line of thinking. Whatever the case, it was completely irrelevant. He was here now, in her city. Such things didn't need to be a concern for him anymore. But she could accommodate certain habits of his, if it was what he wanted. Within reason.

"I would still like for you to visit the bank," Nicole stated carefully. "But if you truly feel the need to, I will make a safe for you. To store a portion of your earnings. Because I refuse to have you continually dismantle the light switches." She made a small, displeased look. "And on the condition you stop calling it a 'stash'."

Sorun blinked. "Why?"

"I dislike how punkish it sounds."

Rolling his eyes, Sorun said, "Fine, emergency repository."

Nicole brightened up. "Yes, that will suffice wonderfully."

"If it makes you feel better, then sure. Ooh, but can we make it one of those wall safes behind the painting? Always wanted one of those."

She really did want to refuse what was clearly a childish request. But seeing the small twinkle in Sorun's eyes and the way he seemed so excited at the prospect forced Nicole to reluctantly agree. "You may have a concealed wall safe, yes," she assured him. Despite the fact such a thing was unnecessary since no thief would ever be able to get within even a hundred meters of this home. But if it was for Sorun's peace of mind, it was a small price to pay.

"Alright. Things are looking up. 'S this even enough? Never actually asked how much she charged for paint- eh, I'll work it out," Sorun muttered to himself as he put the bag of coins down. He then turned back towards the light switch, putting it back in place and re-screwing the screws with the knife while saying, "This'll all work out, you'll see. I don't see any way this can go wrong."

"No. Of course it won't." Nicole paused. "Perhaps you should allow me to change the interior of the house since you're so adamant on painting the outside."

"Hm?" Sorun turned away from the light switch. "Why?"

"You would have to move all the furniture around," she said, quickly. "This already seems like so much work and I wouldn't want you to overexert yourself." Nor did she want him to make a mess of the interior with what was glaringly obvious a lack of skill in this particular field. But she didn't have the heart to tell him she harbored doubts over his ability to do this, or to even correct what was clearly a misplaced sense of confidence. He had so little of it as it was she didn't want to make him dejected.

Thankfully, it seemed Sorun accepted the excuse she'd provided. "Ah. Alright, I guess that makes sense." He looked down a bit and

pulled the fan deck closer to him. "I actually wanted to keep the ceiling white but was thinking about a not-quite-white, kinda lightish-gray color for the walls. So there's like forty options for that, so-"

"I can change it on a whim, Sorun."

"Well in that case I was thinking..."

"Okay this whole primer thing's kinda thrown a wrench in the plan, guys, but I think we can pull this together yet."

Apparently there was this whole thing Sorun didn't know about where you were supposed to coat whatever you were painting with this weird preparatory paint. Which meant they were going to have to go over this house an additional time more than he'd planned for, but it wasn't the biggest deal. The house fortunately wasn't all that big to begin with, at least, and the fact it didn't have any hard edges or corners... maybe helped. Sorun had never done this before so he didn't know.

He looked to his left. Silver didn't have nearly the amount of confidence Sorun had from the hesitant look on his face. Virgil just looked more bored than anything. It was Silver's obvious concern that had Sorun's interest at the moment.

"Sorun, are you really sure we should do this?" Silver asked. "I mean... I mean the house already looks fine the way it is, doesn't it?"

"The house looks the exact same from the outside as every other house around here," Sorun said. "I need to do something that sets it apart from everyone else so I know it's mine. And it'd be nice not to have to count the houses so I know which one's mine." He'd gotten lost on more than one occasion trying to navigate his way back to his own home in the past. Never messed up as much as to go to the wrong house, thankfully, but it'd be a nice improvement all the same.

"Yeah, sure," Silver continued, "but... but can't Nicole just, you know, chance the color? With the nanite stuff?" He looked around a bit. "Where even is she?"

"Oh, she said she'd just change the color of the nanites inside the house so we don't have to paint the inside."

Silver whipped his head back to Sorun, stuttering out, "W- then wh- why are we doing this, then!?"

"Because it's my day off, we're bored with nothing to do, and..." Sorun trailed off with a sigh and hung his shoulders. "Look, man, I don't know, I already bought the paint and everything and I just thought it'd be a fun thing for us to do."

"I... I guess." He seemed to accept the answer, if a bit reluctantly, and bent down to pick up one of the paintbrushes. "Why'd you buy ten paintbrushes, though?" he asked, gesturing to the other nine spread out on the ground in front of them.

Sorun looked up from the brushes at Silver, saying, "Well, I mean, I figured, you know... we could do this a lot faster if you floated a bunch of the brushes around." He rose his fingers up and wiggled them at Silver. "With your mind powers."

The hedgehog opened his mouth a bit and squinted at the gesture, and then shook his head and looked at the brush. "Well, sure, I can do that, but... doesn't that kind of defeat the purpose of what we're doing?"

"I don't feel like spending all day on this." Because it's not like this would take more than a couple of hours. It was just coloring. Sounded easy.

"Well if you were gonna have me do that then why didn't you just buy a hundred brushes? We could have done this way faster."

Sorun blinked in surprise. "You can do that many?"

"Yeah? Why wouldn't I be able to?"

The human teen let out a light breath of surprise at hearing that. He'd underestimated Silver a bit there. "Alright, well I don't want to be the owner of a hundred paint brushes anyways," he muttered out. "'Sides, you know how much a hundred paint brushes cost?"

"No, but I get what you mean." Silver looked down at one of the paint cans. A teal aura appeared over the lid, and then the lid itself detached itself from the can and floated down onto the ground next to it. "How are we doing this?"

"I get a brush, Virgil gets a brush, you get the rest of the brushes."

Silver did a double-take on Sorun. "Your pet's helping with the painting? Why?"

"What, you thought I brought him out here just so he could watch the paint on the house dry?" Sorun asked. "He's got..." He stopped himself and looked at Virgil's arms. "He doesn't have fingers but he can still hold stuff. I dunno how but he can."

"Chao."

Looking back and forth between the two, Silver ended up sighing and shaking his head as eight paintbrushes were telekinetically risen up around him. "Alright, fine. So how do we go about doing this?"

"We take the brushes, we slather them in colorful gunk, and coat the house with the stuff. How hard can it be?"

---

30 minutes later

Half an hour into this project Sorun came to the sobering conclusion that he really should have just asked Nicole to change the color of the house. 'Cause this wasn't fun.

He'd thought there'd be at least an iota of enjoyment to be found in it. A nice day, good weather, small activity for him and his housemates to do. Chance to unwind for once, maybe clear his head a bit while getting the whole gotta-color-the-house thing out of the way. It was his one major hope because he hadn't gone into this actually thinking any of that. He'd only told Nicole all of that because he genuinely didn't consider the fact she could just change the color and made it up on the spot to try and claw back just a shred of his legitimacy. If this were actually an enjoyable process it would have been a flawless plan.

But he was starting to see why Tom Sawyer always foisted off painting a fence to some sucker. Because painting was boring.

By god it was boring.

And to think somehow people on Earth had made a living out of doing this. Madness.

"~Regrets, I've had a few...~ Yeah, I've had a few, alright. Few million's more like." After another brush stroke of this white stuff - the stuff you were supposed to cover whatever you were painting with before you actually painted it for some reason - he failed to repress a groan and looked to the left. Despite having the ability to use eight whole paintbrushes Silver wasn't making a whole lotta progress. Likely due to a lack of enthusiasm, Sorun reckoned, because he looked like he was halfway to falling asleep over there. Sorun couldn't really blame him.

Sorun looked to the right at the lone paintbrush sitting on the ground. Virgil got bored five minutes in and just left.

"Hey, Sorun?" Silver called out. "How much longer 'til we're done with this?"

An unenthused breath left Sorun. "'Til we're done, I guess."

"Well, how long's that gonna take? Because we're not even a quarter of the way done with this yet."

Sorun looked at the house. It honestly seemed like somehow they were making negative progress with how slow this was going. A few uneven streaks of white against the normal, off-white surface of the house. His estimate of this getting done by day's end wasn't looking optimistic. "I ain't gonna lie, Silver. I don't wanna do this anymore."

The white-furred Mobian looked incredibly relieved at that. "Oh, that's great. So we can stop now, right?"

"No, we're too committed. Gotta finish," Sorun mumbled as he slapped the brush back against the house.

"Agh, why!?" Silver cried out in dismay. So much dismay, in fact, the paintbrushes hovering around him dropped to the ground. "We're nowhere near even halfway done with this yet after all this time and you want us done before the sun even sets!? It's no use! So why are we doing this instead of just having Nicole take a single second to change the color!?"

"Because that'd be the easy way. And in any other circumstance I'd totally take the easy way, Silver, but this just happens to be the one where I can't."

"But *why* ?" Silver groaned out. "Just *why* , Sorun?"

With a sigh, the arm holding the paintbrush dropped down to Sorun's side. "Because if I quit now and go to Nicole with this then I look like an idiot for not coming to her first with this. And it'll also mean I just bought all these painting supplies for nothing."

"So we're doing this just because of your ego!?"

He didn't even have it in him to refute that. "Look, Silver, it's hard enough dating someone who's superior to you in every conceivable, feasible way imaginable and probably has an IQ with four digits,"

Sorun said with a glum voice. "Like, what do I have compared to that? I got a magic sword I use to deliver mail. That's it. That's my thing. It's not a whole lot."

"We haven't technically gone on that date yet."

There was a loud yelp from Sorun, followed by him spinning around. The paintbrush had been accidentally released in the process and flew off somewhere. And of course the owner of the voice he heard was standing there behind him, with her arms crossed. And with his luck Nicole heard all the words she was never supposed to hear.

She didn't look overly upset, at least. Just standing there, giving him a critical glare. And then her head turned just a few millimeters towards Silver. "Silver, would you mind leaving us for just a bit?" she asked.

"Does that mean I get to stop painting the house?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, Sorun, but I don't want to do this anymore." And with those words said, Silver turned around and made his way towards the front door of the house. Sorun'd be more upset if he didn't know he'd do the exact same thing, but most of his focus was on Nicole right now.

A few tense seconds passed. Sorun nervously tugged at his shirt's collar. "Uh... what's up...?" he tried.

Before responding, Nicole peered over Sorun's shoulder at the mess of uneven streaks painting the wall behind him. And then she looked down at all the paintbrushes Silver had discarded. Finally, she looked at him. "You didn't plan this with fun in mind," she observed.

"... Nah, no, no sane man would. If I'd known ahead of time you could just change the color with a thought I wouldn't have bothered. That was just a lie I made up on the spot," he confessed. With some

reluctance, but at this point there was no hiding it. He swore, she always somehow found out.

"But you went along with this anyways." She looked a bit sad and frustrated when Sorun's posture slumped even further. "Sorun, you don't have to try and prove anything to me. You're never not going to be good enough for me to hold you in high regard."

It was something that should have lifted Sorun's spirits right then and there, but he didn't quite believe her. "It's just... frustrating."

Nicole's ears lowered a bit. "You should stop holding yourself to such impossible standards," she said. "By our very own nature we're different. We have different limits and capabilities as a result. That doesn't detract from who you are as a person, Sorun."

"Yeah, but it's always kind of been like this," Sorun muttered, turning towards the streaked wall. "Like, with everyone. And I don't mean just the fact half my friends have cool powers," he admitted, turning back to Nicole. "... Okay, a bit of that, but because Mobians in general are..."

"More physically apt?" Nicole tried in an attempt to be gentle.

"Sure. Yeah. That. Geez, even in my old home it was a problem," Sorun said, trying and failing not to think of a time where his skill with video games was the only thing that'd set him apart in a world full of tall people. Being shunted onto a planet where everyone was physically stronger than him never changed the status quo all that much. "But there's nothing I can do about it, so eventually I stopped worrying about it, but now there's you, and us, and now the whole dynamic's... you know, different, and you're this amazing person that mastered nanite tech and built a whole city and transcribed all the books in the library and the textbooks and stuff and handle all the infrastructure and everything. And I deliver mail."

For better or worse, Nicole had given him an understanding look. "You're not satisfied with your position?"

"No, it's great, I'm just saying that the dichotomy between mail guy and what you do is substantially vast." He glanced over his shoulder at the wall. "So when I screw up something simple like this it... kind of just reminds me of that." The inequity of it. The difference of significance between them. How someone like him *really* had no business dating someone like her, but somehow that was happening despite the fact Sorun didn't feel like he measured up to an acceptable standard.

The ears on Nicole's head lowered further. "You're not an AI, Sorun. It'd be impossible for anyone not what I am to keep up with the things I do. Even other AI."

"I guess..."

"You 'guess' nothing. It's the simple truth," Nicole said. When Sorun's mood didn't visible improve she stepped closer to him. "None of that even matters, Sorun. All I care for is who you are as a person."

"... Thanks." He wasn't in complete agreement that the content of someone's character was the only sole thing that mattered, but maybe here in a place where most everyone looked different from one another it was different. A moot point. Either that or Sorun was too pragmatically shallow, he didn't really know. But he could drop the matter and just go along with it since the way he was acting was troubling Nicole a bit. The encouraging words helped that along.

The hug she gave him after helped a lot, too. He was almost surprised he wasn't fighting against it, what with being out in the open at the potential exposure of others seeing, but it was something Sorun was growing to care less about.

He tilted his head down a bit. Maybe she was right and it didn't matter. He had *her* . Somehow. That alone constituted as a win as far as he was concerned, and if him being on the bottom of the food chain didn't bother her in the slightest, then more power to him. He didn't *need* to be great, anyways. Not in this new life he was making. What he was right now was good enough. Good enough for her, at

least. Good enough he managed to hold onto friends. Good enough he was living.

Did he really need to worry about being inadequate when he had all that? Did it even matter? Nicole said it didn't. Sorun... wanted to believe her. Was starting to. The hug was helping.

"I'm also going to shift the color of the house later," she told him. Right when Sorun had almost forgotten about this disaster of a project he'd undergone. He was grateful nevertheless.

"Alright." He peered past her shoulder and at the paint cans lying on the ground. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do with all this paint now."

"One of the teachers at the educational center opened an arts and crafts program for the children. I can simply donate it to them if you want."

"Yeah, sure, kids love blue paint." They broke away from the hug, with Sorun shyly looking down while rubbing at his arm. "So, uh, house is done being remodeled, I guess. Except the rugs. Still waiting on those."

"There's still the furniture," Nicole reminded him.

"Oh, right." Sorun's head perked up. "So are we going with the kind of furniture we have to build, or...?"

She gave him one of those *looks* , the kind that said he should know better. "I can just create the furniture, Sorun. In fact it would take me longer to design furniture intended to be assembled by hand than to just create the furniture itself."

"Right, yeah, that makes sense," Sorun amended. The brief burst of embarrassment he felt was quickly washed off when he nodded his head towards the house. "Go right now?"

"Yes, let's."

A small hum left Sorun as he stared at the space, fingers arranged into the shape of a rectangle as he considered. It was an empty place at the corner of the living room that wasn't used for anything at all in particular, like much of the house before he decided to furnish it. He never had plans for it originally, like ninety percent of the rest of the house, but now that he decided to fill it with stuff he was trying to decide what to fill it with.

He was considering a bookshelf.

At some point a thought came to Sorun: he was in a new - well, not exactly new at this point, at least relatively speaking - world. None of the literature of his world existed here, unless the Overlanders on the other side of the world had old world books that survived thousands of years in time capsules or something, and even then jury was out on if the material was the same because different worlds, but over here on the Mobian side there was a whole of books written by Mobians he'd never laid eyes on. With the exception of a quantum physics book and Chao book. And only one of those had ever been useful.

Hell, there was even a whole library here, still run by the dalmatian guy. It wasn't the exact same as the one in Knothole, though: Nicole had apparently read a lot of books and indexed them in her memory, so when a new library had to be made with the rest of the city she thankfully had archives to recreate them. Most of them were informational books, though, and she'd hardly had an archive on *every* book in that library. And he knew some Mobians had gone back after that whole mess to try and salvage what books they could from the library, and surprisingly a large majority of them had actually survived. By some miracle the library hadn't tanked a direct hit from the explosive shells.

There'd still been damage, though. And not every book had survived. And from what Sorun knew pretty much all those books had been

copies taken from the original Mobotropolis, when the former kingdom had been a burgeoning society before the original Robotnik screwed it all up. That city was nuclear slag now, the Knothole library was gone, and no one knew if any other copies existed in the world, traded with other villages and such. And if said hypothetical villages were even around anymore outside of the ones people knew about.

But despite all that terribleness and yet another reason to hate Eggman, there was still a library here. Full of books Sorun had never, ever read. More than likely more in Station Square, and that was just a few footsteps away with Yamato. And if he ever got desperate enough for material, well, he doubted he'd have any problems visiting Overlander territory since he was human and looked enough like them. But that was a last resort.

The point was he had options. And before gaming had taken over his life in an attempt to "normalize" himself with his friends and peers, and he found out he was the best at it, books had been a hobby. And here, well... hanging out with friends was nice, but they had their own lives and weren't always available, especially with the Freedom Fighting. Video games with Nicole was always perfect, but even she wasn't free all the time and he couldn't coast on just a single hobby.

Books were... something he could do.

"Alright, that's it!"

Lethargically, Sorun turned his head around. He was greeted to the sight of Silver standing there, chairs in hand, staring forwards angrily at the floating Chao surrounded in a teal aura in front of him. "I've tried to be patient with you, but I've had it!" a frustrated-sounding Silver yelled. "No more!"

Virgil looked incredibly calm for being levitated off the ground against his will. He even seemed confused, blinking his eyes a few times and looking down at the ground. He struggled a bit in an attempt to try and get out of the field, but quickly gave up when he realized it was hopeless. And then he just went back to staring at Silver.

"Okay," the hedgehog slowly began, "now don't attack me again, alright? I'm letting you go now."

The teal aura dissipated. The v-shaped wings at the Chao's back kept him aloft in place, eyes still examining Silver, who seemed equally puzzled at the examination he was being given. And then the Chao moved forwards, startling Silver a bit, and then a lot when Virgil got close to him.

And then he froze in complete confusion when Virgil settled on the top of his head. And just stayed there.

"..." Sorun turned back to the empty corner. How big a bookshelf was he thinking about here?

"What just happened? What is this?" he heard Silver ask behind him. "Sorun, what is this?"

"You should have just floated him around with your powers way sooner so he'd respect you. Coulda solved this problem in five seconds," was the only response Sorun chose to give. Maybe something medium-sized? Or large? He had time and space. Hm...

"But why is he-!?"

"I dunno, he does what he wants." It wasn't like he was out to be some kind of book collector. Or maybe he would be eventually? Shit, if he ever got the nerve to figure out if Yamato really could get him to Earth and did so to scavenge for cool stuff he should probably bring some books back. Some Arthur Clarke, maybe some Jules Verne... he wondered if Mobius had any good science fiction lying around?

"I don't want him sleeping on me like this," Silver complained. Virgil didn't seem to care so much since his response was to roll over on Silver's head.

Sorun made a frustrated whine. "Silver, I don't know, chuck him through the window or something if you care that much."

"You had better not be considering breaking something!" a voice called out from the kitchen.

Sorun flinched at Nicole's voice and then whirled towards the white Mobian, bookshelf all but forgotten. "Silver, Silver don't break any windows, for god's sake don't break anything!" He didn't want to imagine what she'd do if that happened. Even imagining Nicole scowling at Sorun over a broken window was too much to contemplate. It was such a terrifying thought, in fact, that Sorun had rushed past Silver and towards the kitchen, ignoring the lost look the hedgehog had on his face as he looked up at the top of his head.

He'd rushed so fast he nearly stumbled into the kitchen. Nicole was there, staring at him, halfway done with putting down a candelabra of all things on the dining table. The table that had a cloth covering it now to give the room some color. A cloth that looked like it was worth more than Sorun's whole net worth in this town.

No, seriously, she didn't have to go so far out of her way on it. She embroidered the edge of the blue cloth with a spiraling green and purple helix pattern. And that candelabra looked too shiny for Sorun's comfort. Even the chairs he used to have that looked like they came straight out of a bulk warehouse somewhere were these elegant wooden things now, with filigree carvings and everything. He knew with the nanites it didn't really *matter* , at least in terms of raw resources, but there had to be some time investment on her part to make it look like this.

Ah, she was still giving him that warning glare of hers, and Sorun only now realized he should be standing really straight right now. Standing so straight at attention any drill sergeant would weep tears of pride. He did so.

"You had better not be planning on vandalizing your windows," Nicole said as she set the candelabra down, never taking her green eyes off him. She'd done it so softly there'd been no noise, and yet to Sorun's ears it still sounded like an explosion went off somehow, and he stood even straighter to the point his spine was protesting.

"I was not," he tried. "You must have heard wrong."

She didn't looked impressed with the attempt. "I don't mishear."

"Yet another shining example of why you're so perfect."

Instead of looking flattered at the compliment Nicole made a small, tired smile and turned to the candelabra to adjust it. "Just please don't do anything to damage your home. I worked very hard on it."

He could have pointed out a lot of things. How she almost definitely had archives of every single thing she'd ever made with the nanites and, if something did get damaged, she could just dissolve whatever was broke back into nanites and restructure it in an instant using the archives. Wasn't like the nanites were lost. Fixing damaged things was trivial for her. But Sorun had gone down this route before and it never ended well so instead he just nodded along.

"Of course, Nicole, I would never do anything to besmirch your hard work," Sorun assured her with as honest a voice he could muster. Maybe there was some nervousness tinged in it. She couldn't prove it.

She made a small, accepting hum. "I'll take your word for it. I trust everything is to your liking?"

It was actually too much for his middle-class Detroit city boy brain to comprehend. From the perfect paintjobs on the wall that perfectly mixed the whites and grays in a way that weren't too harsh on the eyes to the furnishings, while not looking like something that belonged in the castle at the center of the city, still looked like something out Sorun's purview, it really was too much. He was worried she'd start turning his utensils gold.

These were all concerns that would damn him if he actually spoke of them so he just nodded along. "They are, once more, perfect. Because you're a perfect person who likes to do everything perfectly like the perfect perfectionist you are."

Now she actually was looking abashed. "I would call it far from perfect, Sorun, but I do my best." She ran a finger along the top of the table. "And while I can substantially approve the aesthetics, it doesn't change the fact that this is still empty." She looked up and past the doorway. "Somewhat. Have those two finally gotten along? Silver isn't screaming anymore."

"Yeah, it's all great," Sorun assured her. "And, uh, well, the house is still kind of new, you know? You say it's empty, I say it's just a bunch of space for memories. Like photos or souvenirs or somethin', I dunno. But it won't be this way forever."

It was logic Sorun was pulling out of his ass because he didn't know what else to say to ease her worries. Apparently he couldn't have said a more right thing to her, because she looked satisfied with the answer. More than satisfied, even. Like she was completely at peace with the answer. He gave himself a mental pat on the back for saying such a right thing.

"Memories. Yes." Her smile grew wider. "You're right. There's time to fill the house out."

"Yeah, 'zactly. I was already thinking of putting a bookshelf up in the living room."

Nicole's ears perked up in interest. "A bookshelf?"

"Y-yeah. For readin'." He had to turn away from her, being unable to withstand that overly proud look she was giving him. Like staring into the sun, he swore. "Might take up reading just, you know, to do something in my off time."

"I'm glad." He didn't know why she had to sound so relieved over the fact on top of sounding so happy. It wasn't even that big a deal; in fact Sorun couldn't think of a smaller deal than he was thinking of getting books. "You were thinking of placing it in that empty corner of the living room, yes?" she continued, making to move past Sorun. "Allow me a moment to-"

A startled Sorun held up a hand to stop Nicole's advance. She sent him a puzzled look as he began to talk. "Nicole, you, you really don't gotta. Seriously. You've arguably done too much as it is." It was getting to a point where Sorun really was getting uncomfortable with how much she was helping out. He'd been okay with a few pieces of furniture, but now it was getting out of hand. He just didn't want to bother her, but she was practically jumping at the opportunity to just give him a bookshelf of all things. It was weird.

Stubbornly, she gently lowered Sorun's arm down. "Nonsense, Sorun, it's no issue."

"Nicole, seriously-"

"The bookshelf is already made, Sorun. My body doesn't physically need to be in the room."

Sorun blew out an exasperated sound at hearing that. "I mean... I was just gonna ask the carpenter guy in the market to make me one so I could buy it off him, but sure."

"..." Nicole tilted her head a bit. "That's the second time today you've mentioned wanting to support a local business."

"We all live in the same city, what, I'm not allowed to try and get people to like me?"

"No, of course not. But you never seemed to care too much about that."

"Not much, I guess." Well, maybe a little. Just a little.

"Then what is the issue?" Nicole asked him. "You wanted me to help furnish your house. That includes creating furniture. I would think a bookshelf constitutes as furniture, yet you're protesting now when you haven't previously on anything else. What changed?"

"It's just..." Not finding the words immediately, Sorun blew out a sigh, waved his hand, and let it fall and slap against his thigh. "You've just been doing an obscene amount for me. Like, a lot. This is a lot, Nicole," Sorun said to her. "Would you have put this much effort into remodeling a house if anyone else asked?"

It didn't even take Nicole a second to consider her answer. "Generally, no. It's one thing to ask for a small change or two, but otherwise I've my own duties managing the city occupying me. And more than that I don't want to interfere too much in the lives of others and have them grow too dependent on me, especially for trivialities such as what you're implying."

He rose an eyebrow up at her, already seeing the discrepancies with that statement. "But... you'll do exactly that for me. You are currently doing that for me, right now, as we speak." He pointed at the candelabra at the center of the dining room table. "I'm pretty sure that's silver, Nicole."

"Just because it has the same luster doesn't make it silver, it's merely shifting the nanites' structure to-"

"Okay, this is exactly what I'm talking about."

"It's not as if I'm extending special privileges to you," Nicole denied, much too quickly for Sorun to actually believe her. "If you made an outrageous request such as to make your home as big as the castle I would outright refuse. I made all the houses have the same sizes and dimensions to be fair."

"And yet you literally just made me a bookshelf. Like that. I wasn't even asking you to make me one, I just mentioned wanting one and you gave me one on the spot." This was one of those few rare occasions where it was *Nicole* looking away from Sorun, with a guilty expression of all things. Usually he was the one doing that. He would have taken a picture if he had a camera. Sorun doubted something as rare or magical would ever happen again. "Nicole..."

"... Maybe I am biased towards you some small amount," she hesitantly admitted. "I want to. It's not hurting anyone helping you more than I'd help most others."

"Hurts the carpenter," Sorun mumbled out. When Nicole looked back at him, he said, "I get it looks bad if you go too far, and I appreciate you going this far for me. And I'm not being facetious when I say that, like, *seriously* . Thank you for all this. And... well, I don't especially *mind* the extra attention since we're... y'know." He glanced away anc rubbed at the back of his neck. "But you really don't have to do everything for me. This's all enough."

It wasn't even the small hit to his pride for being showered with free stuff, because that was long since shot to oblivion. It was more people talked, and he didn't want her going too far for his sake due to Sorun worrying how people would react to that. Because Nicole was already something that pretty much had omnipotent ability within the city, and he felt like her coloring the house alone was toeing the line a bit. It was a lot of responsibility she had to shoulder, and he didn't envy her for that, even if she managed it all just fine.

Maybe he was just being a bit paranoid with it, though. More than likely people would acknowledge it for all of a second and move on with their lives without caring all that much. Because Mobians. And he respected her for wanting to keep things fair for everyone, and trusted her not to go too far, but that didn't stop Sorun from wondering how much of that bias towards him was skewing that mindset. Certainly not enough to be genuinely problematic; he gave her more than enough credit to do something like that.

But he still worried for her. Probably over nothing. Likely over nothing, actually. And it did feel a bit scummy getting this much free stuff from her when she likely wouldn't do this for anyone else if they asked.

Nicole looked like she came to the same conclusions he did when she looked back at him. "A few pieces of furniture and some color isn't an outright abuse of my privileges as the steward and

administrator of the city, Sorun," she said. "Nonetheless... maybe you're right. I apologize if I overstepped, Sorun."

"No, no you didn't. And I get it's super complicated trying to balance all this for you, and I mean really it's not like you ever have to do anything after this anyway so a one-off doesn't seem like that big a deal-"

"And I suppose you're correct in that depriving a local business with work would be unfair, even as a favor to you," Nicole continued. Sorun froze on the spot, while the lynx had given him a grateful nod. "Thank you for sharing your concerns with me, Sorun. The bookshelf has already been disassembled."

No words. Just Sorun, standing there frozen, mouth slightly agape. Still as a statue. Even after Nicole walked up to him, gave him a brief hug, and walked away. He hadn't moved a muscle at all as he came to grips with the fact he just lost out on a free bookshelf for opening his mouth.

And then he fell to his knees, realizing he probably just deprived himself of getting free furniture for the rest of his life. Because he had to open his mouth and be a good person. Because he had to go and punch a gift horse in the mouth in the spirit of fairness. The will to scream in outrage was nonexistent as he collapsed entirely.

"Why am I so stupid...?" Sorun wondered to himself as he curled into a ball on the kitchen floor.

A/N- By now it's pretty obvious this is the "cool down and get settled" part of the story, and to be honest not a lot's really going on. I had this planned way back along with most everything else, but what I have planned now for this is admittedly a lot shorter than what I was initially going through in my notebook of ideas. Like, I was considering a chapter where Sorun goes back to school to try and get a formal education but decided to axe it since he seems pretty content

with the mailman gig. A lot of it's due to length. Story's long enough and I'm not gonna lie to you guys, I just wanna get past this arc to get to the cool stuff later on. Like Earth. Full disclosure somewhere down the line there is going to be an "Earth arc" of sorts where it's revealed what actually happened over there, like I'm not shelving that and just leaving it unexplained, but we gotta get there first and there's a ton more between there and here.

It's also getting kind of hard to keep coming up with new titles for every chapter. With the exception of the really special chapters I plan out I don't really have a name prepared for these in advance and just make it up on the spot. Half the time it's right before I post a chapter and proofread it and everything and just come up with something at the last minute, and it's because of that I don't think I'll ever top "Air cancel the fat man". There is one chapter I'm *dying* to get out, one of the few I have titled in advance. It's simply called "Freedom".

But that's way down the line.

Chapter 91

A/N- You can see all my thoughts for this whole thing on the other end of the chapter here.

Recursion Error

Episode 91- DATE

The delivery job turned out to be pretty great.

Sure, Sorun'd had reservations about it at first, even if he hadn't made them all that vocal. Delivering stuff with Yamato meant traveling outside the city. The safe city he was supposed to stay in because it was safe, preferably forever. But, in reality, Eggman didn't have a stranglehold on the world anymore since he and all his forces were all concentrated in a single, burnt-out city of rubble on the other side of the continent, continually locked down by the Freedom Fighters. So for all intents and purposes things were safe everywhere else. And hell, with portals Sorun didn't even need to worry about traveling. It was just in instant walk-in to any destination.

The traveling was nice, even if the visits were brief just to drop off Honey's deliveries or bring stuff back. He got to see things. Station Square was a nice enough sight when it wasn't embroiled in guerilla warfare. The people were nice enough and if he squinted enough it almost reminded him of Detroit, except shinier. He probably would have chosen to live there after all if his home and friends weren't already here.

It was a nice job overall.

He emerged from the portal in the middle of Honey's shop. His right hand held a sword that at this point in his life was little more than a

fast travel item, and by now Sorun was completely okay with that. He held a book in his left hand, something he'd taken a detour to get from a book shop he'd seen outside the window to the post office. They had a great selection there, nothing like the library in New Mobotropolis.

Sorun stared down at the book in contemplation. He'd like to start reading it tonight, but, well, he'd already made plans...

"There'll be another time," he mumbled to himself as he closed the portal behind him. Yamato dissolved and reformed into the blue Emerald, and he looked up after depositing his GREAT DELIVERER hat on his personal employee-only hat hook hanging on the wall.

At him.

The guy standing across from him.

The one holding the box.

The other guy that worked at Honey's.

The lynx guy.

... Sorun couldn't remember his name.

"Hey, Lance," Sorun greeted with a wave. The lynx's face fell a bit in annoyance.

"It's- it's Larry, Sorun," he corrected. "Larry. This is the third time."

"... Third?" Sorun repeated, surprised. He'd forgotten his name three times? Couldn't be. His memory wasn't that terrible, was it? Nah, no way. "You must be miscounting," he told him, completely sure of himself and in a voice that was a hundred percent confident.

"I really haven't."

"Honestly, it's insulting, Larson," he continued, ignoring the lynx entirely. "Truly. That you would ever assume I'm as contemptable as to forget the name of my fellow man, coworker, and neighbor. It'd be downright shameful," Sorun told him, though for some reason it was making Larry's mouth drop open in disbelief. "Persons such as that are truly debased."

The lynx Mobian's eyes narrowed at Sorun in part suspicion and part incredulity. "Are... you're messing with me, aren't you?"

"That's really up for you to decide." Sorun's eyes flashed with mischief. The other male coworker didn't look approving of it.

"You know what, whatever," the lynx huffed, hefting the box he was carrying. "I got enough to deal with-"

"LARRY!" a voice screeched from the other end of the shop, causing both males to flinch. "WHERE ARE THOSE MATERIALS I ASKED FOR!? I'M RUNNING BEHIND SCHEDULE HERE!"

"C-coming, ma'm!" Larry shouted out, before slumping and making a pitiful sound. "That woman's a speed demon, I swear. She makes clothes faster than I can bring cloth to make them and I still have to pack away everything she makes after this. She's a slave driver."

"Yeah. I've been there. Just do what I used to do and write with two hands at once on all the shipping labels," Sorun suggested.

Larry blinked in surprise. "I-I can only write with the right hand."

"... Really? You ought to fix that." Idly, Sorun began tossing the Emerald up and down while looking at Larry with a bland expression. "In other news, Station Square is really great this time of year."

Larry's expression became extremely twisted in consternation at the human's friendly but uncaring tone, though he tried to remain friendly-looking while doing a poor job of it. "Is that right?"

"Yeah, they even have this nice little café there. You believe they take Mobian currency, too? The guys over there are really progressive." Up and down the Emerald went in Sorun's hand. "This job is really great, man, I'm basically being paid to travel and all I gotta do is carry some boxes back and forth."

The strain on the Mobian's face became more pronounced. "I really bet. Must be nice, having such a convenient power. Whereas mine is anything but."

"Ah, well, maybe it'll evolve into something cool and marketable if you just die a couple times like I did and come back," Sorun suggested in a lighthearted tone, making Larry's body jolt a bit. "Or you could join the Freedom Fighters and they'd just drop you behind enemy lines for your power to just passively disrupt everything."

"I think I'm good. And, uh, believe it or not but Sonic kinda did something like that. Once, like, years back when we were kids. There was this incident and it was this whole thing and- ah, you wouldn't care," he said. The Mobian's eyes trained themselves onto Sorun, silently looking for any sign that his words provoked *something* in the human, even the barest amount of interest.

To his disappointment the only thing in Sorun's eyes was complete disinterest. "You're not wrong," he agreed.

"... Okay, well, good talk, Sorun, but I really gotta get this stuff to Honey." Larry turned around, making a miserable sound as he began trudging towards the other end of the shop. "I swear, my bad luck let me have this job just because of the people I'd be working with..." he mumbled under his breath as he walked out of sight.

"What a downer," Sorun thought as he watched Larry trail off. He felt the smallest compulsion to pursue the matter, but quickly realized he didn't care at all, so much so that the memory of the encounter was already fading due to how little Sorun regarded it. He blinked a few times and looked down, realizing he was holding a book.

Ah, right, he'd bought a book. He would have liked to get into it, but he had that date...

The bookshelf was a quaint little thing, a thing Sorun had to buy because he'd been an idiot and convinced Nicole that there should be a cap on how much free furniture he should get, but it'd been another point towards supporting the community so he didn't let it bother him too much. The collection was sparse. Mostly because it only had a single book in it right now, the one he'd just bought, and he hadn't even read it yet. But one day. When he had some free time and nobody to spend it with for whatever reason.

'Til then he had important matters to attend to. Which was, Sorun and Nicole had finally settled on a date for *the* date. Which happened to be today. In fact, it was in... Sorun glanced at the clock hanging on the wall. Which he'd also bought.

Oh. Gee willikers. Ten minutes from now.

Sorun found himself biting his bottom lip. He thought he'd be excited for this, but in truth, he was just plain nervous. Anxious to the point of passing out, actually. He had zero experience with this kind of thing, and he didn't know what they were supposed to do beyond just having fun. He did know it didn't entail video games, because that was something they always did and dates were suppose to be special. And since this was the first date it had to be extra special. So no video games.

That was a bad thing since that was practically all Sorun was good at.

"I shoulda made plans," Sorun lamented. He should have the moment they'd agreed on the date, and it didn't help Nicole hadn't discussed it further with him before disappearing off to go do whatever she did all day. The whole managing the city thing. But he'd been too lazy, or too nervous to think properly, he didn't know and quite possibly it was a combination of these two things. Work

had been a nice distraction but that was done and this was now and right now was-

Sorun's head snapped back at the clock. He'd been pacing back and forth stressing about this and suddenly he only had a minute left.

In a scream of panic, Sorun ran to the front door and opened it. At the same time, the exact same moment the clock hands moved to five o'clock, she appeared in front of him, same as always, not looking the least bit as panicked as Sorun was, who tried maintaining a neutral appearance but on the inside was screaming because all he'd done to prepare for this date was take a shower and that was it.

That and that they were seriously doing this. That this was happening. And Sorun had no idea what happened from here.

Instead of greeting him, Nicole's first reaction was to look down a bit at Sorun's body. She regarded his torso for all of a second and then looked back up at him. "You're wearing that to our date?" she asked. Sorun flinched at the question, but relaxed when she didn't sound upset. Just perplexed.

In response, he looked down at the blue coat he was wearing. "Yeah?" he voiced, sounding a bit confused as he looked back up at her. "I always wear this. You made it."

She looked a bit surprised at hearing that. And then actually looked away, appearing almost bashful from the reasoning. "That's very flattering," she mumbled, "but you truly don't have to wear it for *every* occasion."

And now Sorun looked confused. "But you wear the same thing every day," Sorun pointed out. "In fact all of our friends wear the same thing every day. Actually, does... does anyone ever actually change clothes here?"

Sorun's brows furrowed in thought. It just occurred to him, but had he ever seen anyone he knew here wear something different? Now

that he thought about it Honey wore that exact same black and red dress every time he saw her. Sally always had that same vest. Antoine always had that same jacket. He remembered Amy buying dresses that were completely identical to the one she always wore despite her argument to the contrary. No, now that he thought about it nobody ever changed clothing.

And then Sorun looked down at his own blue coat he wore every day and realized he was guilty of the exact same thing.

"Dear god. I'm turning native."

"You've a fair point." Nicole's voice broke Sorun out of his horror and made him refocus in on her. "But for your information I've been working towards developing an alternate set of clothes for my own avatar body. Maybe you're satisfied wearing the same coat every day, but I'd like a change."

"Oh, really? You don't like the...?" Sorun trailed off when he looked at what Nicole wore. If he was honest with himself he didn't even know what to call what it was she was wearing. A dress made of purple wrappings? Was there a word for something like that? Was "dress" even a satisfying word for what she wore? "Outfit?" he tried saying, lacking a better descriptor.

Nicole shook her head. "No, I do. I'd just like something different for every once in a while."

"Oh." Fair enough, he supposed. "What is it, then?"

"That would be telling." She sent Sorun a teasing smile, causing him to roll his eyes. "And I'm still trying to get it just right," she then admitted. "But I incorporated a heavy amount of purple into it."

"You like purple, huh?"

"It's one of my more favored colors."

"Ah, okay." Sorun gave her a questioning look. "If you like purple so much how come you didn't give yourself purple fur?"

For some reason she laughed at that. "I'm afraid that would have looked too out of place. After all, there has never once been a recorded instance of a purple lynx Mobian."

Sorun blinked twice in confusion. "I've literally seen a giant purple cat man."

"Cats are not synonymous with lynxes, Sorun. There's a fundamental difference between the two species."

"... Alright, so! This date, huh?" Sorun quickly asked, loudly clapping his hands together. He stepped forwards next to Nicole while pointing his body in the direction that lead away from the house. "What, uh, what do we got planned, what are we doing, what's going on?"

"Well... we've some options." Nicole turned around and stepped next to him as they began to walk away. "There's a game to be played at the sports arena later on that I know a number of people are attending to see. Alternatively I know of a performance at the theater that's also being planned. I'm not too partial to either, so you can decide."

Before Sorun could respond he felt movement near his hand. He glanced down and saw, with some embarrassment, that Nicole had interlocked their fingers together, without even acknowledging it. He didn't fight against it, feeling the contact to be surprisingly welcome, but it'd been sudden and unexpected enough that he'd still been startled by it. And along with that was the acknowledgement they'd be seen in town like this.

He found himself looking away from Nicole in further embarrassment. It was a thought he could barely stand, people seeing him like this, but he'd put up with it for her sake since this is what she apparently wanted. He still found himself brushing his dark

hair over his face to try and hide as much of his blush as possible. He counted it fortunate his hair finally grew long enough to stretch past his face that such a thing was possible now. Provided it wasn't a windy day.

As if the world itself was out to spite Sorun, a nearby gust of wind lightly rustled his coat and blew some of his hair back.

Ignoring the world's indolence, Sorun thought on Nicole's proposal. Sports or theater. Tactically speaking it was more viable options than he could have ever dared dreamed of, but he didn't need long to consider. He was never much of a sports guy, but a theater? Well, that was a whole other thing entirely. He didn't even know they had a theater here but now he was feeling eager to go just to see it.

"Well, since it's on the table I never have partook in Mobian theater," Sorun said, grinning a bit. "I'll expect great things. A thought-provoking narrative that'll have me reeling for whole weeks."

Nicole lightly shook her head in amusement. "I'm sure they won't disappoint you," she assured him, smiling all the while. "Come along. The theater's this way."

She pulled him forwards, leading the way while still holding his hand.

For Nicole's sake he put up with it.

For Nicole's sake Sorun resisted the unbearable urge to groan out loudly and proclaim how boring this was.

For Nicole's sake he kept his thoughts of wanting to do literally anything else but this to himself as he slumped back in his seat.

When she had told him it was a show at a "theater", Sorun had assumed movies. He hadn't seen movies in near a year now, and the thought of a Mobian movie intrigued him to no end. So he'd jumped at the prospect.

But apparently here the term "theater" was a bit more traditional than Sorun had been suspecting. Because it was apparently theater in the literal sense. As in a theatrical performance. A play. Not a movie.

People here liked plays apparently.

Unfortunately for Sorun he didn't like them.

He could respect the art form, if nothing else, but that was all he could say about plays. And he could try to to appreciate this play in particular if it weren't for the fact it was a romantic story about some woman embroiled in the middle of a love triangle, and with how much of this Sorun had seen in shows back on Earth he saw every plot twist and turn coming a mile away. Predictable story elements. Story stings that offered no surprise. Not a single interesting thing to be seen because Sorun had seen it all before.

Didn't help that a lot of the Mobians playing the characters weren't all that good. The main actress was actually pretty alright, but with the exception of a couple more besides her it was ech.

With a slow motion, Sorun swiveled his head to look at the seat on his left. Unlike himself, who was dying on the inside at seeing this, Nicole was absolutely *engrossed* in the play, practically leaning forwards in her seat and focusing on the performance with every fiber of her virtual being. Which, at any other time would have been adorable and endearing to see. But Sorun's soul was shriveling up by the second here.

He was tempted to ask how much longer this play would go on for, but he didn't want to risk incurring Nicole's wrath at interrupting the play. Or even worse, imply in any way that he wasn't enjoying the play and accidentally sour the date. So he suffered in silence, if only for her sake.

Didn't stop him from watching the play with the most braindead expression humanly possible.

"You didn't enjoy the play."

"Whaaa...? Nah, no way, wha-what ever gave you such an assumption?" It was when they were exiting the theater - pfft, theater, right - when that observation, and it was an observation due to the lack of an inflection making it sound like a question, was thrown at Sorun.

He hadn't even seen it coming. There they'd been, locked in hand because Nicole was starting to make it a habit, with the AI herself practically beaming. *She'd* enjoyed the play, at least, which Sorun supposed was all that really mattered. And he would have liked to have left it at that before she threw that curveball at him.

Evidently his attempt at deflecting the accusation didn't work, because now Nicole was affixing him with a knowing look. "You looked like you were trying to fall asleep through most of the performance," she pointed out to him. She didn't look to be beaming anymore.

"Big emphasis at try. Sleepin' through that woulda been a mercy," Sorun mumbled out, giving up on trying to deny the accusation. But all that did was make Nicole frown and cause Sorun to panic slightly at the sight. "What? The plot wasn't good."

"I thought it was sufficiently entertaining."

"It was just 'Romeo and Juliet' but... like, worse. Which in itself is a pretty big achievement because 'Romeo and Juliet' was already pretty bad," Sorun said. "'Least I thought so, anyway, but it was all the rage back in my old home. 'Oh, but it's a classic about fleeting, forbidden love and totally not a couple idiot kids doing stupid stuff for the sake of a fleeting crush.' And this version didn't even have a cool sword fight. And nobody died at the end."

Nicole gave him a quizzical glare. "I would think nobody dying in the end would be a highlight of the story."

"But then where's the stakes? The suspense? The drama? It's completely boring if everything works out for the protagonists and they get to ride out into the sunset arms in hand to live happily ever after. No thought-provoking narrative, no sense of realism that could immerse me in the plot, every single twist was being telegraphed from a mile away with nothin' creative going for it, it just- I didn't feel all that immersed in the narrative, Nicole, and frankly it wasn't that exciting."

"... Sorun, it was a children's play," Nicole reminded him, sounding dumbfounded at his take on the play.

"Yeah, and those kids couldn't act to save their lives." His standards hadn't been that high when he saw that it was a bunch of kids performing the play, but they hadn't been *nearly* that low. He swore half of them could barely remember their lines, stuttering out the words like their brains were overheating just trying to assemble the letters together in their minds.

Nicole shook her head. Whether it was in amusement or disbelief he couldn't tell. "So this play of yours was a popular one in your own home, then? Who died at the end?"

"Oh, both the protagonists. Nobody got a happy ending."

"What lesson is there to be taken in a romance story where the main love interests die?"

"I dunno, stupid kids do stupid things?" Sorun shrugged. "Why, why was this the play we went to, anyways? Why a kids' play?"

"Because the New Mobotropolis School of Performing Arts has a very diverse number of acting groups and they were the ones scheduled to be performing today," she answered, and then asked, "You really didn't like it?"

"It was..." Sorun rose his hand that wasn't being grasped in front of him, made a sighing sound and let it flop back to his side. "I mean,

you seen as much media as I have from back on Earth and suddenly ya got all this experience and less and less stuff stops exciting you. I'm holding out that literature can still surprise me, I bought this book from Station Square, but that play. Ech." He shook his head.

"I see..." It took a second for Nicole to speak again. "Sorun, I wanted this to be something we could both enjoy. For the sake of the date."

Stumbling a bit at her words, Sorun quickly responded with, "I-I mean it wasn't like it was *completely* unenjoy-" He stopped dead when Nicole gave him a flat look. "By that I mean you were there and it made it bearable," he quickly corrected. "I didn't have an awful time. So. Yeah."

"... Well, at the very least it was something to talk about," she said. "And the date isn't over yet."

"Hey, if you just wanted to find somewhere quiet to talk we could just do that," Sorun suggested.

"We talk frequently. I was under the impression a date was supposed to offer a change to our normal routine and interactions."

"Yeah, but, like, you know. Talking about date stuff instead of regular stuff."

She gave him an inquisitive look. "And what does 'date stuff' entail?" she questioned.

At that, Sorun released a breath and looked away, shyly rubbing at the back of his head. "You know, uh... feelings. And stuff," he mumbled out. It felt like a struggle just to get those words out it was so embarrassing, and as the seconds passed Sorun began to slowly regret ever brining this up. He wasn't sure how he'd get through a talk about feelings at this rate if it was this hard saying just this much.

"Okay, then." And once again Sorun ends up shooting himself in the foot, because Nicole looked agreeing to the idea. "We'll find somewhere private to talk."

One of these days he'd learn to keep his mouth shut. It wasn't this day.

"..."

In the awkward silence Sorun found himself clicking clicking his tongue while quietly tapping on his legs. When Nicole had said somewhere "private" he assumed something like his house. Or a soundproof room somewhere. The park. The server room in the science center. Something like that.

He was somewhat right with the last assumption, except Nicole picked the roof of the place. Just teleported the both of them there and made a pair of chairs for them to sit down in. Wasn't exactly conventional, but at the same time it was far enough from being weird that Sorun didn't think much on it and just went with it, with him sitting in one chair and Nicole sitting in the one next to him.

Wasn't a bad view, at least. It was a nice view of the city, and the sky was bathed in hues of blues, reds, and oranges with the sun approaching sunset. At any other time he'd go as far as to call it a surreal sight, but the situation of him being in the middle of his first every date was fraying his nerves too much to appreciate the scenery.

Encapsulating his feelings to other people just wasn't something he did. It wasn't something almost anyone did where he came from. With her, it was... easier, somewhat, Sorun would readily admit it, but that didn't detract from the difficulty in not only finding the words to say, but to just try and figure out what he was feeling in the first place. It was ultimately feelings of nervousness over this whole thing and the joy that somehow, in defiance of all belief, he'd pulled off making it this far with her that were so well-blended together that

Sorun was coming up with blanks on what to do, and was really holding out hope that Nicole would start talking soon so he could just piggyback off that.

Path of least resistance and all that.

"This is nice," Nicole announced from besides Sorun, looking out to the sunset-bathed city in front of them.

Sorun internally winced. That conversation starter didn't give him much to work with. After a few moments of breakneck thought, the best response he could give her was a solid "Yeah."

"'Yeah,' he says." She at least sounded a bit amused, which Sorun took as a good sign. "I went through all this trouble to set us up with this venue and the best response you can muster is 'yeah', is it?"

Okay, he could work with this. "Well, uh... yeah." When he glanced over at Nicole he caught her covering a smile with the back of her hand. "I don't know, I would have tried booking us a reservation at that one really fancy restaurant, but, er, you don't eat. And I figured it woulda been really weird to have a date where I'm eating and you're kind of just watching so I figured dinner dates were just, like, not a thing we would do."

The hand dropped away from Nicole's mouth. The smile faded. "I could just make virtual food and pretend to eat alongside you," she offered.

Sorun made a nervous laugh. "No, that's, that's fine. Really." He didn't even know whether to call that endearing or not. "There's more to dates than eating. I'm pretty sure."

"Yes, like speaking. As you've proposed," Nicole pointed out. "Though the talking, I feel, hasn't differed from how we normally talk."

"I mean, I was under the impression this was the part where we, uh, just said stuff to get to know each other better." He waited for Nicole to respond, but all she was doing was waiting for Sorun to continue, making him anxious as he glanced away a bit. "Not that I'm asking you to bare your soul to me or anything, but, um..."

Slightly, Sorun went a bit limp in his seat. Even he could see this was going nowhere, and the embarrassment from letting this continue was outweighing the nervousness preventing him from asking the question he really wanted to ask. So he went and asked it.

"So why me?" Sorun asked, looking back at Nicole. "I'm glad we're doing this, I really am, it's just that... well I imagine you probably process time a bit differently than other people, being an AI an' all, but even so compared to everyone else I knew you for the shortest amount of time. Barely two-thirds of a year. So why?"

The question seemed to catch Nicole a bit off guard, as she gave him a somewhat surprised look. Nevertheless, she did take a small bit of time to process the question before answering him. "You *are* the only one who's ever expressed a romantic interest with me," she said.

"Sure," Sorun hesitantly agree, "but so did you. So why me and no one else?"

This caused Nicole to pause significantly longer than she had the first time, even going as far as to look down a bit as she thought over the answer. Eventually she looked back up and began speaking again. "I never did tell you how I came to be here, did I?"

"Something about a pod? I dunno, Rotor told me a bit way back."

"That's accurate, yes. I'd arrived in that same handheld that used to house me." She looked ahead towards the city. It was one of those rare moments where Sorun saw such an introspective look on Nicole's face as she spoke, speaking quietly with a somewhat subdued expression. "I don't know where I came from. I was

supposed to; there are old memory files that indicated signs pointing towards me having been sent with a specific purpose in mind, but they're blank, as if whoever designed me wiped them at the last minute before sending me for whatever reason. Whether they changed their mind or something went wrong for whoever and wherever is a complete mystery I doubt will ever be solved."

"Oh. Er..." Sorun was already growing a bit uncomfortable, and sad at the same time for her sake. "Y-you really don't have to do this if you don't want-"

She immediately waved off his concerns with a small smile. "It's alright, Sorun. It's completely irrelevant at this point and doesn't matter all that much." The smile slowly began to drop off as she continued. "But it was the others that found me in that pod, yes. They were children at the time, not even teenagers. It was early on in Robotnik's campaign, and, naturally, they regarded my sudden and unexplainable arrival with suspicion and my word of assisting them with a heavy amount of skepticism. With good reason," she added. "Autonomous machines were not regarded kindly. I recall Sonic didn't have an ounce of trust in me and wanted to destroy me immediately."

"Slap Sonic later, got it," Sorun thought to himself as he nodded along to Nicole's words.

The lynx gave him a knowing look. "I know that look, Sorun. Please don't hold Sonic in regard for the past. It was a long time ago and we've been friends for years since then."

"Look? What look?" Sorun coyly replied, though Nicole didn't look convinced in the slightest. "I wasn't planning anything malicious whatsoever, buuut I suppose if you can be the bigger person and find it in your heart to forgive him then I can let it slide, too..."

"Yes, Sorun, I in fact can. Even if he did sometimes shake the handheld a bit too roughly during some missions."

"..."

"Sorun."

"He'd never guess it was me that egged the window to his bedroom you made look like his head for some reason."

"He would assume you immediately, but that is besides the point. You're not allowed to be a vandal." A beat passed. "And it was an artistic choice."

"Fiiiine," he sighed out, and then rolled his hand at her. "So you were saying?"

"Right, my initial meeting with the Freedom Fighters," she continued. "Sally, for reasons that were her own, decided to take a chance on me and ingratiated me into the group, and I became the companion she traveled with. And as it happened having an AI with functions higher than anything Robotnik could ever produce turned out to be a boon," she said with no small hint of pride to her voice or face. Sorun didn't comment on it but still grinned a bit in amusement. "Though, as you've probably surmised, those were my early days of existence, during which I wasn't as... expressive as I am now."

"I was more wondering why you decided to tell this story when I asked a question. Not that I'm not appreciative of it," Sorun quickly added, "but it's a bit weird."

"It pertains to the answer, I promise. Just let me get there."

Sorun nodded. "Alright. But didn't you tell me once that you didn't even used to have emotions?"

"You did remember," Nicole commented, a bit quietly. "But yes, you're right," she continued. "Though my abilities as an AI were unprecedented and I was far from a mindless drone, I was... for a lack of a better descriptor, my personality was in its infancy."

She paused, remaining quiet for a bit while Sorun silently watched on. She lifted her legs and pressed her knees against her chest while resting her arms up on top while gazing out at the city.

"Even with my intelligence I wasn't much better than a machine back then," Nicole quietly admitted. "My entire world was nothing but interpreting streams of data, hacking technology, manipulating functions in other machines, sorting through and memorizing data files. Colorless. Shapeless. Nothing but information. The only glimpse of the real world I ever received was when somebody talked to me. But as limiting as that was, even then it was something. Time passed, and I started to grow more and more expressive as my personality developed, but it was never *enough* , and the longer it went on and the more I grew the more I knew I was missing something, but I never knew what. I was yearning for something that, at the time, was completely incomprehensible to me and could never figure out what it was no matter how much consideration I put into the issue."

"And... then the body swap thing with Sally happened, and you got to walk around in the shoes of a living person for a bit," Sorun guessed.

"Yes," she confirmed. "It was admittedly overwhelming at the time, being bombarded with so many sights and senses I'd never experienced before in such a short time, but in the end I believe it's what I needed." She looked away from the city and at Sorun. "So many things changed after that. When I attained that perspective. Even in the digital world I began interpreting data as having shapes and colors. More than that, I'd... learned to truly feel, through her, in that one moment. And it's been progressing from there since." Her legs lowered back to the roof as she continued to Sorun, "Emotions have undoubtably been the most challenging aspect of life I've encountered. Never remaining static, always changing, new emotions sprouting up at new experiences. I would never trade them for anything else even if they prove frustrating at times, but I'll confess to wishing to be able to understand my own and others' emotions more than I usually do."

Sorun blew a lock of hair out of his face and sat back in his chair. "Well, we organics barely even understand emotions even though we invented 'em, so I don't know what you hope to do about it."

Nicole actually laughed at what Sorun thought was a bad joke. "Perhaps that is for the best. I think the mystery adds some charm to it." She paused for a bit. "But in short, that's how I became who I am. That and, of course, creating a body so I can interact with the real world proper. I was admittedly hesitant of letting others seeing it at first for fear of what they'd think or if I'd made a mistake with it somewhere, but Sonic was actually the first one to see it when he was visiting the digital world during a small emergency. I was extremely relieved when he accepted the form immediately." She closed her eyes and smiled at the memory. "He had a great very many compliments for it, in fact. It was almost unusual how receptive he was towards me after seeing the body I'd crafted."

For a single frame of time, barely even a single millisecond, Sorun's irises flashed green, and a few, barely perceptible blue sparks flickered around his face before his eyes returned to a solid blue. It was an event that went unnoticed by the both of them as Nicole reopened her eyes to continue addressing Sorun.

"Even so... nobody ever referred to me as a person back then when we'd first met, and people were slow to trust. Even in recent years new acquaintances never saw me as a person but just as another machine. It was a sentiment shared by many of the citizens here, actually, though I suspect using the nanites to craft them a new city relieved them of these notions," she added with a small smile. She focused completely on Sorun, and the smile began to drop as she gave him a curious look. "But... you never did," she said, almost sounding confused.

Sorun tilted his head a bit. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"You were... somewhat volatile back then," Nicole carefully said. Sorun winced a bit and flipped his palms up in a sign of reluctantly agreeing with her. "I realize now you had much more on your mind

than what we all thought, the threat of perishing under the power of the Chaos Emeralds, stranded on an alien world and pressured to fight in a war that wasn't yours. You were very brash and dismissive of others, and I was there in the handheld when you first arrived and shouted at Tails for what he did-" Sorun made a heavy wince in regret as Nicole spoke, "-and I tried my best to be considerate of your circumstances, but you were giving off a rather poor impression regardless."

"... To be fair I was having a really rough week," Sorun said in an attempt to bring some levity to the conversation.

"I'm aware," she assured him. "Sally wanted to introduce me all because she was worried for your mental health and thought playing those games with me of all things would help you some." Her face grew a bit sly. "Evidently she was more right than she knew."

Sorun mirrored her expression and leaned his head up at the sky, covering his face with a hand in amusement. "Little bit, yeah," he agreed.

"But to my original point," Nicole continued as Sorun sat back normally, "you only ever called me an AI in describing *what* I was, not *who* I was." She looked down a bit. "And you'd said all those things, during that botched mission inside that head we decided to undergo. It was a shock to hear such words from someone that barely knew me and yet put so much stock into me being my own person and not a machine, and... well, I suppose that's where my feelings with you started to develop, though I hadn't known at the time."

Startled, Sorun jumped back in his seat. "Geez, it was that early?" Sorun muttered, more to himself than Nicole. The lynx still heard him and her ears perked up as a response.

"Thereabouts, yes," she confirmed. "When was it for you?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, Sorun nervously answered, "Uhm... I couldn't tell ya an exact point, it just sorta... happened. Like, not

instantly, over time, but I don't know when it solidified into a genuine crush, uh... when we got to this city, maybe? Bit before that?" He shyly looked down to avoid her inquisitive eyes. "To be honest I wanted to say something back then, but I thought I was gonna die soon so I didn't wanna risk more damage. And I legitimately thought I had no shot with you, still amazed we're actually doing this."

"Well, despite numerous difficulties it's seemed to have worked out for the best," Nicole laughed out. And then she asked with a serious tone, "But why did you regard me so highly despite knowing so little? Why put so much faith in an AI?"

That was a loaded question and a half. One that made Sorun lean back in thought, arms crossed as he pondered the question, Nicole silently watching on. It felt like it took him a whole minute to come up with something before he chose to answer her.

"... I'm pretty biased," Sorun decided on. "My planet wasn't besieged by killer robots, so a lot more people were open to the idea. Granted, before everything ended over there we never managed to develop AI *near* anything this zone has got," he explained. "Ironically the closest we ever got was video game AIs and chatbots with predictable speech patterns. Nothing truly sapient, not like you. Even all those dimestore Badnik AIs Robotnik churned out were more impressive." He leaned forwards in his seat, hands clasped together as he gave Nicole a serious look. "But humanity was fascinated with the idea of creating artificial life, for lots of reasons that were up for debate. To see if we could, or to maybe just alleviate the loneliness humanity felt since, well, Earth wasn't like Mobius. There were humans and that was it. Not even aliens."

Nicole nodded along, listening intently and leaning forwards to be right in front of Sorun.

"The fascination was enough that there were tons of pieces of media made all about AI and the question, with all their various plots and stories revolving around AI and how free they were, AI rights, other various plots."

"A majority of them were video games, weren't they?" Nicole asked in a dry voice.

"Hey, 'NieR: Automata' was a good game, okay?" Sorun said, though he didn't rebuke the claim. "... Alright, yeah, lots of 'em were games, and they always made a really flattering picture for AI. Some of the coolest and most supportive characters in all of gaming fiction were all AIs. Like 9S, or Bladewolf, or Cortana, or EDI, or ED-E, or BT, or GLaDOS- that's not a good example, forget that last one," he choked out, making Nicole tilt her head at him. "But there were a tons of books and movies, too, some shows, you get the picture. I was always into AI." Sorun glanced up a bit. "Wasn't a universal interest, though, 'cause there were a lot of people that thought AI would be evil and wanna wipe out all humanity. But you're cool so I guess they were wrong. Oh, except all the AI Eggman programs are pretty evil, I guess. Hm." He looked back down at Nicole. "You're not planning on wiping out all life on the planet, are you?"

"Not presently, no."

It took a few seconds for Sorun to register those words, but after they did he did a double-take at Nicole while staring with wide eyes. She managed to keep up a completely serious expression for all of ten seconds before a small grin broke out on her face.

"Just kidding."

"Ah, good, 'cause-"

"The plans have been in motion for some time now."

"Gah-!" With that, Sorun had fallen backwards out of his seat entirely and fell onto the roof. Nicole laughed at his expense, though instead of being mad Sorun just rolled his eyes and sat back in the chair while folding his arms in mock anger. "Alright, fine, very funny. Was about to start callin' you SHODAN there. Sheesh."

"Well, you make it easy." It was hard for Sorun to resist the urge to stick his tongue out at Nicole when she said that. "You never talk that much about Earth culture like this."

For very good reason. "It's... well, I don't, no." Sorun glanced away from Nicole and at the city. "You know, I keep thinking about that time you said I lie by omission a lot just by not telling you stuff sometimes."

"Do you not?" Nicole asked. "Despite how much you've told me of your past and the life you used to live in your own home I know shockingly little of what life was like there. You never say much."

"... I don't ever really want to," Sorun admitted, causing some surprise to bloom on Nicole's face. "It's the past. It's irrelevant, like yours. Dunno why I need to bring it up."

"But it was your past. Your culture. I would think you'd want to remember it."

"I remember the good parts and try my best to forget the bad parts. It's the bad parts I don't talk about," Sorun said. "Look, Nicole, things were just different over there. And it doesn't do anybody any good bringing up stuff that happened on Earth here; people got enough to deal with considering all the Robotnik stuff. It's unnecessary baggage." By that Sorun really meant he didn't want to inadvertently traumatize someone by bringing up the worser points points of human nature and history. It was a lie, maybe, but honestly Sorun was completely fine with that. He doubted others really cared anyway how much he kept to himself. People here had their own lives and histories to deal with, after all. "There just isn't a good reason to bring it up, Nicole. Ever. It's not out of disrespect for you or anyone else. It's really just stuff I'd rather leave buried."

"It... truly was that bad?"

It hurt a bit hearing Nicole's voice be so down. "Some stuff was better off being erased along with everything else over there. I don't

want to speak of it further." He looked up and did his best at offering Nicole a reassuring smile. "But hey, this is supposed to be a date. Rather not spend it reminiscing about a bunch of pointless stuff."

Nicole instantly straightened up, looking a bit sheepish as she nodded in agreement. "Yes, I suppose that's true. I'll trust your judgement on the matter." She fidgeted around a bit. "I... I was wondering, since we were on the subject. Why me, of all people?"

"Huh?" Sorun flinched back a bit in surprise. "Uh, you wanna know that?"

"Of course I do. I told you my reason, didn't I?" she shyly responded. "I'm curious myself, I'll have you know."

"Ah, yeah, I guess..." It was fair enough, even if Sorun didn't want to acknowledge it. He doubted his words would be as pretty as Nicole's on the matter, but he'd give it his best shot anyway. "Well, the AI part was never really a factor for me, just that you were you, and, uh... I guess it started with... well, video games."

There was a moment where Sorun was sure Nicole would say something sarcastic at that, even closing his eyes and waiting for it, but nothing ever came. When he opened his eyes he saw her waiting for him to continue, even if she did look a bit mystified at the explanation. He took it as a sign to keep going.

"The truth of the matter is there wasn't a whole lot I could do in my old home. 'Cause of physical limitations and general disinterest and all that," Sorun truthfully admitted. "Video games were my thing. And I was *good* at them. I was internationally ranked in a lot of competitive circles, actually, but that's a whole 'nother story entirely," he admitted, causing Nicole's eyes to go wide. "Even won some tournaments. Maybe coulda gone pro when I turned eighteen in a couple years, but that's a bygone dream now." He shook his head. "But discounting all of that I legitimately loved video games. They were my thing. It was what I latched onto here during my stint with the Freedom Fighters so I didn't go insane." Sorun looked up at the

sky and smiled at the memory. "And oh, man, Nicole when I played with everyone and compared our levels of skill I realized all too quick..." His smile instantly dropped into a frown. "That everyone was terrible at video games and I remained at the peak apex of skill among all other gamers."

Nicole went completely motionless, smile frozen and eyes still wide. And then she blinked a bit, the smile somewhat becoming withered and forced. "That's... somewhat harsh, don't you think?"

"No, it's true, none of them were good," Sorun said, in a tone that was a bit too bright for Nicole to bear, so her ears lowered as she listened even as she maintained that detached smile. "There was no challenge, no skill, no sense of accomplishment, I'd argue it was a waste of time if it wasn't served asserting my dominance in the digital landscape. But you!" Sorun used both hands to point at Nicole in an exaggerated manner, making Nicole jump at the sudden movement. "With you I'm pushed to do my absolute best! And I even lose half the time! You know how great that is?"

"It's extremely impressive," Nicole hesitantly admitted, "but perhaps you're putting too much stock into the significance of games of all things in our relationship, Sorun?"

"Well, I didn't mean to imply that- I mean that wasn't-" A slightly troubled expression crossed Sorun's face, after which he grimaced and shook his head. "Actually, yeah, you're right I'm probably going too deep with this." He cleared his throat before attempting to try again. "What I mean to say is... video games are important to me, and back there I had people that could actually challenge me. Here it's just you, and when we're playing it's... kinda like I'm back there, you know? Everything feels normal for a bit. It's always like that with you."

Nicole's expression softened at the same time her ears lowered down. It was at the way Sorun's voice had gone quieter, and the way his eyes were continually flicking at her own eyes and the ground, like he was uncomfortable or struggling to say something. But on the

other hand it was rare she that she heard him speak this directly and with things so personally. She would find it touching if it didn't feel so out of place for him.

For Sorun it truly was a struggle, doing this. A thing he was never supposed to do with anyone, that he never wanted to do. Looking so vulnerable like this, in front of someone. Anyone else he would have flied into a rage in a desperate attempt at shaking that impression off, but with Nicole it felt... fine? Maybe that's how it was supposed to work in a relationship like this. He didn't find himself minding it too much; it was nice sharing, for some reason. So he kept going for it.

"I wouldn't go as far as to say I outright *hated* everyone back then in the early days, but... I hadn't really been fond of anyone, either," Sorun admitted. "I latched onto you because you were the only person I could connect to. You were really just that: my one friend. The person I could hang out with and pretend things were alright for a little bit. But you were always nice, and really supportive, and for some reason you actually laughed at some of the stuff I said sometimes, and to be completely honest I would've fallen apart if you weren't there for me, and..." He rose a hand in the air and let it fall limply into his lap. "I can't point out when it happened, it just did. That eventually I started to feel like I didn't want us to be *just* friends, but a combination of fear of rejection and impending doom kept me from saying anything, and after that whole mess, I... really, really wasn't in a good place.

"But you were there. All the time. I don't even know if I'd be here if it weren't for you," Sorun mumbled out. By now Nicole had transitioned out of her own chair just to sit next to Sorun while gazing at him with a sympathetic look. "I just... really like you, 'cause of all the things you did for me." He shuffled a bit more, fighting to get the words out. "I'm not used to this kind of thing. You're the only one who gets to see me like this, okay? Nobody else," he said in a meek voice.

She didn't look like she knew how to respond to him when he said that. Puzzled, but somehow understanding at the same time, so

she'd put a reassuring hand over his while doing her best to respond.

"I... very much appreciate how trusting and open you are with me," she carefully said, "but you don't have to make it so that you're only so open exclusively to me-"

"Yes I do."

She seemed taken back by how quickly Sorun rebuked her. "I think the others would be assured by-"

"Others aren't you." Sorun moved his hand around to intertwine his fingers with her; more of an unconscious reflex to reassure himself more than anything else, and something that barely rose to Sorun's mind. "Does it really matter so much?"

It wasn't something he was willing to budge on. Nicole was a special exception; a special everything, really. Friends were friends and he'd always be more open and friendly with them than anyone else, and Sorun figured that was normal. But it was one thing being open and friendly and another appearing this vulnerable in front of someone when it was just the two of them alone. Not that he didn't trust the others, but because it was a level of trust he *only* wanted Nicole to have. Because it helped represent what they had between themselves.

Sorun tried explaining as much, in not so much a concise matter and with a bit of nervous stuttering on his part. Nicole had listened intently through the whole thing, even during the parts where he'd had to pause and work up the nerve to continue, because this thing on a whole felt embarrassing to admit, borderline mortifying, it felt, but it was something Sorun wanted said even if it was at the cost of great difficulty. And throughout the whole time that confused, but understanding look Nicole held never wavered, though she did look less and less confused as it became clear what Sorun meant.

Maybe it was just confusion because of where he was. Maybe people here were just more open with feelings naturally and he appeared strange never wanting to project so much of himself. Consequence of differing cultures, maybe, or probably it was just because of who he was. An answer didn't really matter since in the end it was still what Sorun wanted. Just for her and only her to see him like this, if only because he felt she deserved it and the relationship probably wouldn't survive otherwise.

"You make it sound like you're scared of opening up like this in front of anyone else," Nicole had pointed out in a gentle voice.

"I'm not," he quickly denied. "I've just never done this before. It's normal from where I'm from."

All at once some new form of comprehension alit in Nicole's eyes, like she'd finally found the answer to some intricate puzzle she'd been stuck on. She made a small laugh, like she was amused by something silly, and then stood up while pulling Sorun along with her. "Fine, Sorun, that's fair enough," she decided, "but you're always open to changing your mind."

"Doubt I will. Doubt it. Heavily," Sorun said, rolling his eyes away from Nicole. He looked towards the horizon and saw the sun was nearly setting. "So anyways, with all that awkward stuff out of the way, umm, can-can we, I dunno, take a walk? Somewhere? It's getting dark and the roof-"

"Is an immediate safety hazard, yes, I agree," Nicole immediately said.

"I wasn't gonna say a safety hazard of all-" And then there was a flash of light, and suddenly the two of them had went from standing on the roof to standing on the sidewalk in front of the science center, "-things... you know, it's rude teleporting people without warning them," he pointed out, looking back at Nicole.

She guiltily smiled at him. "It's the most expedient method," she offered, though she amended herself when Sorun kept staring. "I'll warn in advance of future teleports. So, the park, then?"

Things got progressively easier when they started to stray away from the talks of feelings, what Sorun considered to be the most difficult subject to encroach humanly possible and always took active steps to avoid unless with Nicole. Maybe down the line it'd get easier - a miracle Sorun wasn't holding out for. Or maybe such heavy feelings talks would never occur again - Sorun held a large amount of hope out for that miracle.

Fortunately for now it was a subject successfully broached and concluded, so to his immense relief they'd managed to talk about other things as they... strolled through a park, holding hands. Sorun was thankful it was freshly nighttime and there weren't many people out at this time to see. The shame of it would-

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Why would there be a shame in it?

It was a question that just now popped into Sorun's mind, as the two of them were walking along while Nicole spoke of something. *"Is there anything to... I mean it's a consensual relationship we're both pretty committed to, I don't see why... no, there shouldn't be, but this is embarrassing. Why is it embarrassing?"* Sorun asked himself. *"I guess it doesn't really look like 'me' acting so...* this *with Nicole, with the handholding and all, when I already built up this image that doesn't even fit with... does anyone even care about that image? Do* I *? Why do I have to worry about preserving some static thing if it gets in the way of this? Why should doing anything beyond what I want matter?"*

Maybe Nicole was right and he was being a bit silly with how he was handling the "openness" side of things on his part, something he felt she really only went along with because it was easier on his part. And he had a sneaking suspicion she figured he didn't have the

mental constitution to keep up a mental shell forever now that the relationship was picking away at it.

She was probably right. The longer this went on the more Sorun realized how exhausting it was. But saying so much in front of her felt like admitting she was right. So maybe over time he'd... relax, somewhat, around the others. A bit more and more over time. Never as much as around Nicole; she deserved a special place. But in a place where his worries were near-nonexistent now with such accepting people Sorun found less and less reasons to bother.

But again, this was a revelation that could never be said to Nicole. Because it would prove her right and she'd be the automatic winner. If he had it his way he'd follow her suggestion without ever openly acknowledging it.

Unless... she just noticed one day he was slowly doing just that, and he knew, *knew* , she would never verbally acknowledge it, but even worse give him that knowing "I told you so" smirk. And Sorun dreaded this was, quite possibly, an inevitable course.

"... Maybe she wins after all," Sorun decided with a mental shrug as they continued walking along. He looked upwards at the park, the trees the small pond nearby. Things that looked so authentic he never would have suspected they were completely artificial and completely comprised of however many trillions of quadrillions of nanites or whatever ridiculous number it surely was. Something that probably required scientific notation. But that was for Nicole and her completely alien ability to comprehend math to figure out.

They passed by a patch of flowers next to the path they were walking. Nicole had stopped to look at them, so Sorun was forced to stop alongside her. He glanced at the lynx, staring down at the flowers with the same look of pride and joy a parent would give their kid for winning a spelling competition, which forced Sorun to look down at those very same flowers.

A patch of pink something-or-others, Sorun deduced. Certainly authentic-looking. And... certainly flowers. Yes indeedy.

"Isn't it kind of a waste of space, making a big park like this?" Sorun wondered, looking up from the fake flowers and at Nicole. "The city only has so much space and you can't really expand outwards."

She waved his concern off. "It's not all that much," Nicole assured him. "But more importantly is that all Mobians have a deep affinity to nature. I didn't want anyone to feel alienated living here without something such as this. It's the same reason I put so many trees everywhere."

"I mean, sure, but the city's in the middle of a forest. I can walk out the front door and see nothing but nature. We aren't exactly disconnected from nature here."

"It looks nice and the people like it, so I feel vindicated in my choice."

"Alright, alright..." His gaze traveled back down to the pink flowers. "The flowers look kinda weird. In the way the petals are all angular and everything."

"Those 'angular flowers' are a popular breed I read about in a botany book that I copied."

Sorun winced. Both at the slightly incensed tone Nicole took and upon realizing he may have inadvertently just insulted her. Fears that were confirmed when he looked back up at Nicole and caught her giving him a narrow-eyed glare. His mind raced to think up a solution to reconcile this and sprang at the first thought that came to mind. "You... you're very pretty?"

Nicole looked more startled by that claim than Sorun had ever seen her before. And by some miracle it seemed to *work* , because she'd made a small, abashed smile while turning away, earlier glare all but evaporated.

"Oh, well... I suppose flowers aren't for everybody, and... well, that's very nice of you to say," she mumbled out, so flustered Sorun couldn't believe it.

"Oh man. I can get away with anything now." Dumbstruck, Sorun looked down at his own hands, like his own palms held the answer to infinite power somewhere in their creases. Like the universe itself no longer held any mysteries because Sorun himself had just figured out the ultimate solution to getting out of trouble: just compliment Nicole on something. The possibilities were endless.

Unfortunately it didn't seem like it was to be, because when Nicole caught Sorun staring at his hands with an awestruck expression she frowned upon immediately realizing what he just did. And then Sorun noticed her staring, immediately realizing ultimate power had slipped through his fingers and he'd been caught in the act. As a result he was shoved - playfully, with so little force that a gentle breeze would've carried more force behind it.

With the utmost maturity afforded to him, Sorun grinned and leaned backwards. The path they were on was on the edge of a small hill, one that he was leaning towards while waving his arms in an exaggerated manner. Nicole looked concerned at Sorun's sake for the movements, and then realization and panic when one of his arms shot out and grabbed one of her wrists with the intent to drag her with him.

"Oh, Nicole, how could you, I can't believe you'd do such a thing...!" Sorun cried out with a false, nearly smug-sounding voice as his body leaned further and further back.

"No, Sorun, no no no don't SorRUN-!"

Despite her protests, there hadn't been resistance to Sorun's pulling. There may have even been the slightest hint of amusement to her voice if he focused in hard enough, past all the panic. Whatever the case was, they'd both ended up falling, rolling down the hill while tumbling over themselves. This continued all the way to the bottom

of the hill, stopping with Sorun on his back and Nicole on top of him, both laughing with mirthful looks on their faces.

It was a happy moment, something that'd Sorun had lacked for so long it nearly felt foreign, but still good. To just laugh at something stupid. But the laughter started to quickly die out for the both of them when they realized the position they were in, after which the two shared a blank expression. And then after a quick scramble they ended up sitting on the ground shoulder-to-shoulder, embarrassed looks on both of their faces as they stared off into the nearby pond reflecting the moon and stars in the sky.

"Um, uh, yeah, so-" Sorun began.

"Yes, tha- I didn't- that-" Nicole replied.

"It's... yeah."

"Agreed."

"For sure." Sorun didn't know what just happened and he suspected Nicole didn't, either. "I haven't messed up on this date yet, have I?"

From the corner of his eyes he saw Nicole make a small smile as she stared out at the pond. "No, Sorun, I've been enjoying our time together," she said, making Sorun so relieved he felt half his weight just disappear. "I'll freely confess to always being somewhat envious of watching people enjoy their lives, so being out here with you, doing this and... *living* , I suppose, has been... it's..." She grew quiet for a bit, and her hand slid over the ground to rest atop Sorun's. "It's really all I wanted was the opportunity to do this."

"That and the whole 'liberate the planet from the crazy guy so our friends can stop fighting' thing, right?"

"Yes, but I felt it too obvious to mention." She turned her head a bit to look at Sorun. "I just wanted to thank you. For doing this with me. *Being* with me, I mean. Which is to say... no, that isn't right..."

Suddenly looking flustered, Nicole looked down and away. "What I mean to say is you're always doing these things with me to help me experience what I've been missing for so long. So thank you."

"... Should be me thanking you," Sorun mumbled out. "Sooo... does this mean I'm allowed to call you my girlfriend, or...?"

Nicole's head whipped towards him with a surprised look. "You were allowed the moment we agreed on going on this date, were you not?"

Sorun blinked. "Is that how it works?"

"I assume?" She didn't sound so sure herself, eyes squinting a bit in concentration briefly. And then she shook her head. "It doesn't matter. We're in a mutually established relationship now. The girlfriend and boyfriend labels are warranted."

"Okay." So that was it. About as official as Sorun could see it being made official. As in he was officially in a relationship now, and...well, he didn't know how to feel about that. It was so shocking in fact he didn't feel much of anything. Bewildered to a point beyond bewilderment to simple acceptance. "Um, so we can kiss and stuff?" It was a second later Sorun realized what he just said. If he still had the Bringer Claws one of them probably would have punched him in the face.

Worryingly, Nicole's face displayed a hefty amount of apprehension at the prospect. "Ah. That."

Well, now Sorun was feeling something. A heavy amount of disappointment and panic was what he felt. "You don't want to?" It was translation for, "Was I too forward and asked too early and/or what did I do to screw it up this quickly?"

The answer wasn't either of those, but it was still something Sorun didn't know how to process. "It just seems so unsanitary."

"D... bu..." It was levels of confusion Sorun didn't even know was possible that were generated by that response, and he was sure it showed on his face from the way Nicole was looking at him. "But you don't even have an organic body, what do you have to worry about!?" he whined out.

Pouting, Nicole crossed her arms and turned her torso away. "I don't see how a couple locking mouths together is supposed to prove their feelings towards one another, despite how much it's been lauded. Mouths were not even designed for this function. I fail to see the point."

The half of Sorun that wanted to argue was beaten into the ground by the feral side of Sorun that desperately didn't want to come off as pushy and told him to just respect her position on the matter. Even if he really didn't want to because he'd admittedly been looking forwards to it. It was beat harder by Sorun's other side. "Yeah, okay, that's fine," he said, clear dejection in his voice as he slumped a bit where he sat.

One of Nicole's ears flicked at Sorun's voice, and she turned back around to look at him. She seemed a bit taken back at the disappointed look he held, and after a few seconds of personal deliberation she said, "Oh, fine. Come here."

"Huh?" Sorun's brain shorted out a bit, following him hearing that and feeling Nicole grab the collar of his coat. It stopped working altogether when she leaned forwards and pulled him towards her at the same time to press their mouths together. Truthfully he was so out of it due to sheer shock he didn't even remember what was going on during the kiss. Just the feeling of his heart thumping at about a trillion beats an attosecond and the mental picture of a mental version of himself jumping up and down, arms flung up while screeching in victory.

His face felt like it was on fire, too. From all the blushing. But the good kind of fire.

The jumping, screaming Sorun in his head collapsed and started crying when Nicole broke away from the kiss. He couldn't imagine what his own face like. Stunned and stupid, probably. To the point fancier, more sophisticated words couldn't be used in place of stupid, like dumbfounded or gobsmacked. Just stupid.

By contrast, Nicole looked... almost perplexed. The same kind of perplexed look a scientist would get when they just discovered something never before seen under a microscope, along with the air of seeming to like something. Maybe from looking at his face. She was paying a lot of attention to it for some reason.

She liked *something* , apparently, because she grabbed him again and went in for another kiss.

The mental image of Sorun in Sorun's head jumped back up like the little caveman he was and started screeching again. Yelling and laughing, pointing up at the metaphorical sky with both hands while screaming at the world itself, "Fuck off, I win. There's nothing you can ever do to take this from me because I *did it* ." Because this was quite possibly the highest achievement Sorun had ever accomplished for himself.

With this in mind suddenly Sorun remembered his muscles were capable of locomotive function and he moved his head a bit to try and do something to make the process better for the both of them. To his immense disappointment she'd already began pulling away again by that time, apparently satisfied with the second kiss. The disappointment was world-shattering when her tongue left his mouth, which was the point he realized she actually went for that kind of kiss and he hadn't even realized until it was over twice over. He took a bit of solace in the fact there'd be another time to enjoy it.

Also she thankfully hadn't made her tongue have spikes on it like normal cats. He was worried about that.

"... I take it back. The kissing is necessary," Nicole decided in a matter-of-fact tone after they broke away. "Thank you for... that."

Sorun didn't know if a proper response to that even existed but he decided to go for it anyways. "Y-yeah, sure." He noticed something odd in his mouth. The volume of liquids in there was higher than he was accustomed to, and he recoiled a small bit when he realized why. "What is... why is there spit in my mouth?" Sorun asked, holding a hand up to his mouth. "Why do you have spit?"

The look Nicole sent him couldn't have possibly looked more confused at the question.

"Wait, it's gone." And like that the added volume of saliva in Sorun's mouth just vanished, like it hadn't even been there to begin with. It'd left behind a faint cooling sensation that... well, if Sorun was being perfectly honest was almost pleasant, but he was too bewildered to think on it. "What just happened?"

"What... what is the answer you're looking for here, Sorun?" Nicole tried, seemingly lost at what was being asked of her.

"I mean, I just didn't... I... I'm asking how that's possible," Sorun stammered. "Like, I don't understand how you have liquid in your mouth."

Some of the confusion on Nicole's face was alleviated in understanding. "Ah, that. This body is a hardlight projection, Sorun. With an emphasis on the word 'hard'. As in this is a physical construct able to completely and fully interact with the world," she explained. "And as such I wanted it to be as accurate to a real-life body as physically possible. So there were many functions added in that, while they may be ultimately superfluous in function, act to simulate this as a living body as perfectly as possible. So yes, I added in a separate function for my body to produce fluids. It disappears a short while after being separate from the main body." She started twiddling her fingers together and glanced away. "I hadn't thought you'd be so surprised. Since you've seen me cry."

... Right, he had, Sorun had realized with a small feeling of awkwardness accompanying the thought. He remembered being

intrigued at the sight of her producing tears at the time, but there'd been so much going on then that he'd brushed it off and forgotten the matter, it seemed. But admittedly even with Nicole's explanation the answer went a bit over Sorun's head. Really the whole science behind the nanites and how Nicole got this hardlight stuff to work to be so realistic went over his head, and he was always happy to shrug it off and tell himself that him understanding didn't really matter as long as Nicole did and could make it work. So if she could make hyper-realistic stuff like this work for her, then hey, more power to her.

Of course by this point Sorun realized his reaction to his first ever kiss with someone was asking why she had spit. The resulting cringe would have knocked out lesser men - Sorun was proud to report he only *almost* succumbed to it completely.

"I am... *so* sorry I asked that. Like, after... uh... man, I'm stupid," Sorun mumbled, covering his face in embarrassment. He saw the pond past his fingers and briefly considered drowning himself to escape.

By some miracle Nicole giggled besides him. "Oh, it's fine, Sorun, I wasn't offended in any way. Just off-put slightly from how you worded that." Her next words came out a bit pensive and hesitant, almost nervous. "And... I trust it was, erm, enjoyable for you as it was for me?"

It was actually so enjoyable Sorun's mind couldn't even comprehend it. Literally. The only comprehensible parts had been the white noise of bliss and the longing sensation that told Sorun he needed more of it. But all that was secondary to the fact *she* apparently enjoyed it, and for all Sorun cared that one thing alone trumped everything else. That she liked it. Liked *him* .

"... It was the best," Sorun shyly admitted. It was a statement so embarrassing to say he couldn't find it in himself to face Nicole after saying it, but he could practically feel her beaming besides him.

"I'm glad." She shuffled closer besides him, though they were already sitting so close together that the most she managed was to brush the sides of their bodies together, and she'd looped an arm around one of his own. "Admittedly, Sorun, I was surprised. Verily so." Her voice grew a bit softer. "Back then, when I'd accidentally swapped bodies with Sally, there'd been a moment when I'd laid eyes on Sonic, and her body had relayed a certain feeling. It was a peculiar emotion I'd never been able to replicate until I felt something similar when we kissed."

Sorun looked over when he felt a weight settle on his shoulder, and saw Nicole resting her head on him. "Only similar?" he questioned.

"Mhm. It doesn't hurt. Their relationship had always been somewhat tumultuous," she mumbled out in answer. "I don't know what the emotion means nor particularly care. I liked it for some reason. I demand we repeat the act as frequently as desired. Daily if possible."

Again with the blushing. Sorun was thankful Nicole wasn't in a position to see it. "Sure. We can do that," he shyly mumbled out. "I'm glad you liked it."

"Yes, well, you made a rather humorous face, too. That alone warrants enough reason."

All at once the blush evaporated and Sorun frowned. Joking or not, that was a sentence that demanded retribution. He immediately began searching for a medium to channel his revenge and found it right there. At the bottom of Nicole's legs.

Feet. Completely uncovered, perfectly vulnerable toes patterned in black and brown fur. With toes noticeably larger and more bulbous than a human's toes, but that was besides the point. For some reason Nicole chose this form to walk around barefoot. She was about to regret that decision.

"Tell me again how you managed to make your hologram body able to feel things," Sorun requested, in a gentle and curious voice that was completely opposite of the mischievous grin he held as he subtlety reached forwards with the arm Nicole hadn't taken hostage of with her body.

Her head perked up off his shoulder at hearing the question, and when she responded she sounded almost eager to speak of it. "I'm glad you asked! It's actually a nano-lattice of pressure sensory strips integrated into the surface of my body, minus the clothes. It was admittedly largely based on data extrapolated from my time in an organic body, plus study of biological nervous systems, but after a painstaking amount of time I managed to calibrate the sensors to send the proper sensations based on the type of stimulation given, and I'm proud to say it's a system that confers roughly a ninety-nine-point-nine-six percent accuracy to a normal Mobian's sensory input-"

When his arm reached far enough Sorun poked one of Nicole's toes.

The reaction was almost comical. Her body had gone completely straight, ears somehow even straighter than that, as Nicole detached herself from Sorun's body with a wide, surprised smile and even wider eyes. And her whole leg had flinched so hardly it'd nearly risen a whole ninety degrees in the air before flopping back down on the ground. Sorun himself would have laughed if the sight hadn't been so unexpected, so all he could do was blink in surprise and look at Nicole.

"Sorun... that's a very sensitive area," Nicole said, and began to look apprehensive when the mischievous grin Sorun had on began to grow. "I-I request that you do not-"

"Oh, we are far, *far* beyond that point," Sorun rebuked. He'd already leaned to the side and shifted his body so he was in a better position, with two hands raised.

Nicole looked nearly panicked and scooched back a bit. "No, wait, Sorun please think about-!"

His fingers began assaulting her feet with reckless abandon. Rubbing the soles - or pads, whatever those incredibly soft things under her feet and toes were - of her feet, slipping and rubbing between the toes, intermingling with bouts of him lightly feathering his fingers over whatever he felt was soft and vulnerable on her feet. For Nicole's part Sorun had never, ever heard her laugh as hard as he was hearing her now. It was a sound that was as musical as it was comical to his ears, which just spurned him to go further. Even just seeing her laughing, having fallen on her back while wriggling around and feeling her legs flinch and kick in his hands, and just how *adorable* the sight was just renewed his tickling fervor.

But never let it be said Sorun wasn't merciful, because he did eventually stop. After what might have been a minute. Or two. He'd had so much fun with it he didn't even know, but after a bit he'd begun to take pity on Nicole and stopped. Being what she was Nicole didn't outright *breath* except to keep up appearances, and it was a rare occurrence that she did something like sigh since for her it was a conscious effort that needed to be made to project her current mood. So to some her laughter dying out so quickly without her breathing in so heavily may have been eerie, but to Sorun it wasn't even a factor when he flopped down on his back so he was lying right besides her. There was still a large smile on Nicole's face as she swiveled her head to look at him, after which her hand softly slapped itself on top of his chest, where it chose to rest.

"You're incorrigible," was the only response she gave him. "I'm adding shoes to the new outfit."

Sorun just smiled wide and interlaced his fingers behind his head. "If you really wanted it to stop, you could have just teleported away. Admit it."

"No. Never." Her hand left his chest and reached behind his head to take one of his hands. He let her steal half of his makeshift bio-pillow and embrace it before letting the two hands rest on the ground between them. The smiles both held turned more easy and relaxed as they stared up into the night sky. A corona of deep blues, blacks,

and purples hovering over the two amidst an expanse of infinite lights dotting the surface of the sky.

He'd said it once, and he'd say it again. The night sky here was stunning compared to Detroit standards where one would be lucky to catch a few stars in the sky.

"The stars are beautiful tonight," Nicole idly commented.

Though he agreed, the need for conflict to produce more words from her than if he just simply agreed compelled Sorun. "Eh. 'S just a bunch of burning plasma a billion miles away. I can see that just by staring at the sun."

"Please do not disrespect the plasma, Sorun. It is impolite," Nicole playfully chided. "Also do not stare at the sun. I will be upset." That one didn't sound playful.

The laugh he made was way more nervous than Sorun would have liked. "I-I won't," he semi-promised. He made a mental note to never tell her about the time he and his friends on Earth dared each other to see which one could stare at the sun the longest. "So, the date-?"

"The date was *wonderful* , Sorun." Something about hearing that, from how honest and happy, genuinely happy, Nicole sounded saying that, it did something to Sorun. Like his heart itself felt lighter; hearing that felt freeing, and Sorun couldn't explain why. Maybe that he'd managed to do this without screwing something up, that it was an accomplishment that he hadn't screwed up, but he wasn't even sure he cared about that aspect of it. He was pretty sure he was still stuck on the part where he was amazed someone actually decided to be his girlfriend.

That was still a weird word for Sorun to toss around his head and be able to associate it seriously with someone. Didn't feel real, almost, but here she was. Lying besides him on the grass and holding his hand. That someone cared enough about him to do this.

Just... happy. That's all he could really feel about this. Truly, genuinely happy. There'd been a time in his life he'd seriously believed he'd never feel that way again. Now that he did it was almost overwhelming. Happy he'd made it this far and happy that she was happy. He was almost conflicted over what aspect he was happiest over, which Sorun supposed was a good problem to have. A happy sort of problem.

"I was really scared I'd mess up at some point here. I'm happy something didn't go wrong for once," Sorun confessed to her. He made a small yawn. "I'm... happy in general. With this. And you."

"Hm?" Nicole propped herself up on her elbows and turned to look down at Sorun. "You seem tired," she noted.

Was he? Upon further examination Sorun realized, yes, he was. In fact it was only now he realized how far his eyelids had been drooping. He'd been so relaxed around Nicole Sorun hadn't even noticed it. "Oh, well, you know, it was a long day and the date was so much fun I guess it kinda, eh... took it out of me." Sorun moved his hand to rub against one of his eyes and realized with mild surprise it was taking serious effort just to lift his arm. He really *was* tired.

Nicole shook her head. "There's no need to apologize. It *is* rather late out, and the evening has been, well... eventful." She glanced away with a shy smile. "Rolling down that hill probably didn't help matters."

"Hey, the hill was fun," Sorun lightheartedly argued. He sat upwards and attempted to stand up to his feet. He accomplished this - but then stumbled a bit when a wave of exhaustion hit him; he really must have been tired if it was hitting him this badly. Nicole look startled at the motion and quickly moved behind him to brace his body with her arms. Not that he thought he would have actually fallen, but... he appreciated it, regardless. Since it got her arms on him.

"You don't seem awake enough to walk back home unassisted." Her voice and the look in Nicole's eyes didn't seem overly concerned with Sorun's current state. More analytical than anything else, though there was a touch of tenderness behind her demeanor that Sorun wouldn't mind getting used to. Though she'd hesitated with saying the next thing. "I could... carry you. If you wanted."

Yes, he deeply desired that. No, they couldn't do that because someone might see. "Someone might see," he tiredly protested.

She gave him a flat, but patient, look. "I can instantly transport us to your home."

"Silver might see."

"He's likely in bed at this hour."

"Virgil might see."

"I don't think your *pet* will overly care that much, Sorun," she stated in exasperation. "Are you truly that concerned about your pet with a single word in his vocabulary seeing me carry you?"

Not really, now that he thought about it. Mostly because she was right in that he couldn't talk and spread the secret. Part of Sorun still felt like protesting the matter, but, if he was being honest with himself, he really didn't feel like walking all the way back home this tired. And he actually did want her to carry him. And if the risk of seeing someone was mitigated to being a non-issue, well... at the end of the day she was smarter and knew better, so who was he to argue with Nicole's advice?

Screw it. He wanted to be carried.

"If you so insist." He went completely limp in Nicole's grasp - Sorun was mildly surprised that a sudden lack of tension in his body hadn't made Nicole herself budge in the slightest. "Just straight to my room."

"Yes. I've been running too long, myself, come to think of it. I may need to retire for the night shortly after you." Once again Sorun was mildly surprised when Nicole lifted his whole body up with both arms without looking the slightest bit inhibited. He'd have to remember to ask her one day what kind of strength rating a hardlight body actually had. "But otherwise, yes, I'll take you straight home. Because I know you get embarrassed showing affection around others."

He crossed his arms and pouted as his legs dangled off of one of Nicole's arms. "Do not," he denied.

"It's alright, Sorun. I know." It was hard to tell if she was being kind or teasing with that comment. Sorun was both too tired and liked her too much to care, so he settled with just shuffling into a more comfortable position as he was carried off by her.

He'd nodded off and drifted into sleep before she'd even managed to place him in his own bed. It was the first night he could remember actually falling asleep while being happy.

A/N- Alright, this is it. This right here is the mushiest, most sappiest chapter this entire story will ever have, so take it in while you all can 'cause I'm not doing this again. Thing was a nightmare to get out.

Anyways, onto a little behind the scenes commentary on this whole thing.

So full-stop I didn't plan a romance while making this story. In fact I went into planning this story without wanting to do any kind of romance at all for various reasons. It wasn't a main focus, people kind of get turned away by that if it's advertised out the gate, I plain just didn't want to. Lots of reasons. I was ready to go through this whole story without even so much as a mention of romance and almost did.

Of course, obviously, I changed my mind. And it was the most last minute change in the world, too, because I'd already posted chapters of the story while still under the impression I wasn't going for a romance side-plot here. It was halfway through writing chapter 19 that I'd paused and started considering the two. "Well, Sorun's this weirdo guy in a terrible situation that'd latch onto pretty much anything for stability, he likes games, she likes games, Sorun's a huge gamer nerd that'd probably be super interested in AIs, she'd probably appreciate hanging around a guy with unique views on AIs, there's a bit of chemistry there, I dunno, let's run with it and see what happens." That was pretty much my thought process during the whole thing. I didn't set anything in stone at the time but I kind of pushed things around here and there to test it out and see if it'd work out in future chapters and, uh... yeah, then this happened.

100% it was the latest possible change I could have ever done, and I admit it was a huge risk that even still I'm not completely confident was the right move to make. But it looks to be going great in my eyes and the reviews have had a positive reception towards it, so I guess it's going good? Which if that's the case then I dunno, maybe I cracked how you make a good romance side-plot in stories. You go into the story without planning for a romance and just let it develop if one does. Probably worked here.

And at the end of the day, even if it doesn't work out, the late entry of a romantic interest doesn't really change anything. The story beats are gonna be the exact same, the ending hasn't changed, nothing's really been knocked off course or have had to be re-planned because of this new addition, and honestly it might have even helped in a lot of areas previously in the story. Plus I get to do a couple of fun things later on in regards to this, some of which the people who read the comic probably see coming, and if ya know ya know. But otherwise, yeah. It's a thing now.

Chapter 92

A/N- Alright these questions have kind of piled up and a lot of them are just from guest accounts so we'll just answer 'em here since I can't do it direct.

"What's the deal with the hallucinatory Sorun-double that Sorun sees sometimes?"

I get it's weird that got introduced and Sorun had zero reaction and just rolled with it like it was nothing new, but this is one of those "it'll make sense later when it's retroactively explained" deals. Even then I still haven't completely settled on whether to go with that or just call it a case of "the stress from dying made Sorun slightly cracked in the head".

"Is the Rubrum guy working for you?"

Working for me? Author-person? I don't really give spoilers like that, but in this case I feel it's safe to say, no, I'm not going that meta with it.

"Why is the story called Recursion Error?"

We'll get there. I will say that chapters 11 and 83 both have segments that shift to first person in the perspective of an unnamed character, and in both instances it's the same person. It's the only hint I'll give.

"Lemons?"

Ha ha, no. Never. Absolutely not.

"Are you gonna go to IDW?"

Nah, I'm trying to focus on Archie exclusively.

"Shorts?"

Story's long enough as it is without padding in more filler.

"Will *insert character here* ever show up?"

Already said I'm not answering questions like this.

"Will *insert story event here* happen?"

See answer to question above.

Recursion Error

Episode 92- The worst detective that ever detected: that guy

By and large Sorun greatly disliked the diner that Sonic's uncle Chuck ran. Cleverly named Chuck's Diner.

He didn't have anything against the man personally. In that same vein of thinking Sorun didn't really have anything for him, either. Seemed like a good guy but that was pretty much the extent of their relationship: he was some guy Sorun knew and had a couple conversations with in the entire duration he'd been on this planet. That was it.

Normally that'd be the end of it, except for the fact that fast food wasn't really a concept here, so Chuck's Diner was about the closest experience Sorun could get unless he went outside the city to Overlander territory or Station Square. Fine enough, he liked diners anyways, except for the part where he sold those *god-awful chili dogs* as some sort of grand staple. And Sorun could ignore that if it weren't for the fact the man didn't sell french fries, which made Sorun question the diner's legitimacy.

Could have been worse; at least he didn't have to live in a world completely deprived of fries. That being said nobody in New Mobotropolis sold them, but fortunately he'd found a small little family-owned grocery store in Station Square that sold bags of the things. And they were actually pretty great, much to Sorun's delight. So that problem was solved. Didn't change the fact Chuck's Dinger was a sham as far as Sorun was concerned. And normally this wouldn't be a problem, except for the fact Silver wanted to talk to him about something and wanted to eat out. So here they were eating lunch at what may be the last place Sorun wanted to eat lunch somewhere at.

The milkshakes were pretty banger, though, Sorun'd give Chuck that much.

"You know what astounds me to no end? Almost every single Sonic we ran into during that big multiverse jaunt we did made a reference to eating these things," Sorun said in a voice full of disdain as he looked down at the paper plate containing the offense in question. The dreaded chili dog. Because Silver wanted to try one and Chuck threw in another on the house for Sorun 'cause Chuck was just that swell a guy. "It means his addiction to these things is so strong it transcended universal boundaries. I don't understand it."

Silver stared at Sorun from the other side of the outdoor round table they were sitting in, cancer in a bun in-hand and halfway to his mouth, but he'd froze when he heard Sorun talk. "Sorun, it's just a hotdog," he said, blankly and with a bit of disbelief.

"It's a statement," Sorun denied.

"S-statement? For what?"

"Look, it's simple math," Sorun began. "Sonic likes these things. Ergo I can't be seen eating them because otherwise it associates me with him, because the guy's so popular everyone knows he has an addiction to these things. He hogged a whole category of food, don't you see that?"

"... What is this conversation? What does any of this even mean, Sorun?"

"Look, I just don't like them, alright?" Sorun said as he pushed the chili dog towards Silver. "More'n that I actually just don't like how they taste."

"Well, I think you're crazy, 'cause these things are great," Silver proclaimed. He ate the hotdog, much to Sorun's disgust. And he even seemed like he was enjoying it, which was even more sickening to his eyes. There had to be something going on with Mobian hedgehog tastebuds that was different from everyone else; there just had to be. Sorun wouldn't except any other answer. "Hey, where does the meat for these things come from, anyway?" Silver asked after swallowing that thing.

"Silver, I've been asking myself that question ever since I got here," Sorun honestly answered. He held his hand out, extending three fingers while counting down and tapping them with the finger on the other hand. "I've got it narrowed down to it either being cloned meat, synthetic, plant-based meat, or there's a Mobini meat industry I'm unaware of and somehow haven't noticed yet. Don't really see how that last one's possible; there's not a meat processing plant anywhere and there's not really a whole lotta foot traffic coming through the city for it to be delivered, and this was true for Knothole, too, so either Chuck is personally going out into the woods to hunt and bring Mobini back to turn them into hotdogs or something's up."

"You really think so?"

"Here's the thing: I know back in Knothole Rotor and a few other Mobians used to set traps in a nearby river for fish. There's still a few people that do that here, I think. I know for a *fact* Mobians eating Mobini is a real thing, it has to be if they eat wild fish, but I haven't *seen it* . But the meat's gotta come from somewhere," Sorun reasoned in a somewhat lost, confused tone. "So either I've just missed it this whole time or it's fake meat. Or, I dunno, maybe Mobians are just cannibals." He glanced up at Silver. "Did you ever

eat any other Mobians for survival in your time, Silver? Honest question."

"No!" With how appalled and shocked Silver looked he had to be telling the truth. "I never even saw any other Mobians other than Master and Edmund! And even then I wouldn't have! I ate fish and vegetables and fruit, and whatever else Master ever made!"

"Alright, fair enough." Back to square one. Sorun hummed, holding his chin in thought, but after a few more seconds he sighed and threw his hands up in defeat. "Eh, whatever, it's too hard a mystery for me to bother. I give up."

Silver reared back in his seat in surprise. "You're giving up just like that!? We could just ask someone!"

"Man, I got enough mysteries to worry about. How Tails uses his tails like a helicopter without wringing the flesh and twisting them right off, the mysterious red guy, where Amy keeps her hammer. I suspect magic hammerspace because it's punny and something this world would totally do just to irritate me."

"Whoa, wait, back up a bit," Silver requested, shaking his hands at Sorun. "'Mysterious red guy?' What's up with that?"

"Oh, yeah, there's a weird guy dressed in red running around that Shadow told me about that knows impossible information." Sorun's lips thinned in thought. He clasped his hands and glanced down in thought. "Come to think of it, Sonic in the future said that by now that guy killed Eggman. That should have happened by now, but it didn't, which... makes me suspect that whoever that guy is he's aware of the time stuff I did if he was able to choose not to do it this time. He set up that last Chaos Emerald for me to get, too, according to Shadow, so... I kinda wonder if he set up other stuff. Hm."

Silver stared. "Sorun, this sounds like the most important thing you've told me so far. Why am I only hearing this now?"

"Because I'm retired, man, and I just don't care," Sorun breathed out as he leaned back tiredly in his seat. "I mean, should I be concerned some weirdo's running around doing stuff behind the scenes? Probably, man, but it's just not my business anymore and I don't wanna think about it. I'm a courier. I only wanna worry about courier things. Everyone else can deal with it if it ever becomes a problem."

"That's..." Silver sighed, and began rubbing at his eyes. "Okay, if you say so. I doubt some guy you've never even met is the traitor so I'll just ignore that for now."

There was a loud *slap!* sound as Sorun palmed his own face. "You're still going on about the traitor thing?"

"According to the journal-"

"Oh, the journal, the most credible piece of information this universe has ever seen," Sorun dryly remarked. He was given a flat glare by Silver as he slid back in the chair, raising his arms in the air while shouting, "Lawd, praise be! Praise be the all-knowing journal in its vague and uninformative glory!"

"Sorun, this is serious!"

"And I *seriously* refuse to entertain the notion one of the Freedom Fighters is a traitor," Sorun replied in a serious tone as he pulled the chair back up to the table. "I'll buy brainwashing or evil clone, but not one of them actually betraying everyone else. But brainwashing or an evil clone is more a spontaneous thing we'll just have to react to instead of something we can prepare for. And by we I mean you. 'Cause I'm not actually fighting when push comes to shove."

"Yeah, I know." Silver crossed his arms with a disgruntled expression. "Nicole asked me to try and convince you to sit out the heavy stuff like this."

"She would," Sorun muttered off to the side before turning back to Silver. "Well, I don't need much convincing. But, uh, you know, it's

not like I'm leavin' you out to dry or anything. I'll be there. You know... on the sidelines. Offering moral support." He gently waved his right hand back and forth. "Wave a li'l flag that says 'Go Silver!' if I find one."

Silver chuckled a bit. "Well, thanks for that." His face turned serious. "But with something this big I don't want to just 'react' to it, Sorun. We need to be sure and get on this right now. There's too much at stake."

Waving a hand, Sorun said, "Sure, but you have absolutely zero starting points on this. There's no leads. There's nothing. How're you gonna 'get on' nothing?"

"Sure there's a starting point. The Freedom Fighters."

"Eh?"

"We ask them," he elaborated at Sorun's confusion. "You know, like, um, like a detective! We ask them all about this and, hey, if one of them really is the traitor maybe they'll slip up and we'll learn something! And I know," he said quickly when he saw Sorun open his mouth, "I know we've been keeping the traitor quiet from the others because you thought telling them wasn't a good idea, but I don't have any other ideas on what to do."

Sorun closed his mouth, and then spoke plainly after a few quiet moments. "... Silver, as much as I wanna go around accusing my friends of wanting to betray everything they stand for, wouldn't you know it I just don't want to go and do that." He breathed in heavily, and while his outward appearance seemed calm and bored he couldn't help but feel a bit irritated and just a tiny bit angry with Silver's assertions. He thought it was a fair enough reaction hearing one of his friends being accused of ending the world with no proof. "It's a stupid plan and you're wrong. Think of something else."

"But Sorun-!"

The anger rose up a bit as Sorun leaned across the table. "Okay, let's run down the list since you're so insistent on this. Let's play 'which one of my friends wants to end the world'." He started counting off his fingers, slamming the digits together so hard a loud *smack!* sound was heard. Silver jumped in his seat at the noise. "Sonic? Certainly has the power for it, but while that guy irritates me he is, at the same time, quite literally the last guy I would ever expect to end the world. Too pure of heart." Another smack as he slammed his finger down on another finger. "Sally? Don't see it. I swear she loves her people more than she loves herself, so I don't see her rallying an army to roll over the world." Another finger, another smack. "Tails? Sure, I'll admit it, you can never underestimate a genius. I don't think there's a single person in this whole world that'll make that mistake 'cause of Eggman. He could probably actually do it if he set his mind to it, but the problem here, Silver, is that I don't know many happy eleven-year-olds with a loving family that wanna *end the world* ." Every single name listed off by Sorun was punctuated by increasingly loud and meaty smacks on his finger. "Rotor? Same boat as Tails, but he's a crippled politician now, not an evil mastermind. Amy? What's a girl with a hammer gonna do, get real. Bunnie? A single cyborg, c'mon, not a lotta destructive potential there. Antoine? *Antoine* ? *Antoine* !?"

That last name was said alongside Sorun slapping his whole hands together in a frenzied manner. Silver was flinching back with each smack, eventually crying out, "Okay, I get it!" when Sorun wouldn't stop doing it. He did so, sighing and leaning back in his seat and then taking a large breath in an attempt to calm himself down. It didn't help all that much.

"My point is," Sorun continued after his breath, "nobody, not a single one of them, is a guilty culprit 'cause there *is* no guilty culprit, Silver. Not unless it's a evil clone or brainwash situation, which is the third time I've said it in this conversation alone but for some reason you're refusing to see it that way."

"I'm not leaving the possibility out," he denied, "I'm... look, the wording in that journal was really specific, okay? I'm not saying you're wrong; I'm just saying something like that wasn't mentioned and I really feel like it would have been if that was the case." Silver sat back in his own seat, arms crossed and eyes furrowed in concentration. "And you left out Nicole," he noted.

There was utter silence between the pair of them. Silver kept staring on silently, while a surprised looked bloomed on Sorun's stunned face, not believing he just heard Silver say that. The kind of stunned silence where one just sat there wondering if they really had just heard what they just heard with an almost dazed expression.

And then he started laughing. A low, dry laugh with no amusement behind it, with Sorun covering his incredibly small smile with his left hand while bowing his head forwards and shaking it. The combination of his fingers covering his face and hair obscuring him hid his eyes briefly flickering between blue and green colors through the laughter. Silver himself began shuffling around in an uncomfortable manner on his seat, looking half frustrated at Sorun and half concerned at his behavior.

In an instant, it all stopped. Sorun's head straightened up completely with a flat, unamused expression, blue eyes glaring into Silver's yellow. His hand flopped back down to his side. When Sorun spoke he sounded more than a bit miffed, with no indication he'd just been laughing.

"Silver, buddy, I like you. I really do. But you really can't go around trying to accuse someone's girlfriend of wanting to end the world. People don't appreciate things like that."

"Sorun, you know I don't want to." There was an intensity in Sorun's gaze that made Silver avert his own eyes away from him. He didn't want it to show on the outside how much it unsettled him; how quickly Sorun shifted from one mood to the next with no warning or indication. He'd never seen Sorun wear such a cold expression but it unnerved him greatly. "It's the end of the world here. You saw what

it's like in the future. I'm trying to make it so that billions of people don't die and you're acting so... so... dismissal of it when I'm just trying to do my best," he said in a frustrated tone. "I only have one shot at this, so sorry if I'm just trying to be sure here."

Tentatively, Silver looked back at Sorun. He was still glaring at him coldly, but then he'd sighed, and just like that, like someone snapping their fingers, he turned back to his normal, bored expression and lazily laid back in his chair. "There's still the whole red eyes thing. Which gives even more credence to my clone or brainwashing theory. Since nobody in the Freedom Fighters have red eyes."

"Yeah, true," Silver admitted, settling in easier to his seat. "Kind of wish we'd brought that journal with us; we really could have used a third set of eyes."

"Oh, yeah." Sorun perked up a bit in realization. "What happened with that?"

"I left it where I found it before we left the future."

Oh, cool, their one piece of physical evidence. Lost to them forever. Sorun rolled his head up at the sky. "Well, that was shortsighted of you."

Silver huffed a frustrated breath. "Yeah, I know, Sorun, but that's part of why I need to go around asking people about the traitor because I got *nothing else* , okay?"

"... You're gonna get punched in the face, dude, I swear," Sorun sighed out, rubbing a hand over his face. "Which is impressive because I really thought nobody could... eh, Sally would," Sorun mumbled out, absentmindedly holding a hand to his cheek while glancing away. "I wouldn't bug her with this. Really don't bug anyone with this but *especially* not her."

"Kinda have to bug everyone with this, Sorun."

"Then it's been nice knowing your face." Sorun rolled his head back down to look past Silver's shoulder. He saw a blotch of familiar color at another table at the other end of the area full of tables in front of the diner, with the owner of that color seemingly eating lunch. She didn't seem to have noticed them, too focused on the food in front of her. "Hey, look, there's your first victim over there, Amy," Sorun pointed out, making Silver turn around. "Bubbly, cute as a button, will actually assault you if you go through with this. Go get 'er!"

He'd said that last part with a burst of mock joy while pumping his closed fists up and down. It didn't seem to encourage Silver in the slightest, who turned back to Sorun with a very hesitant, bordering-on-scared, look.

"You'll help me out, though, right?"

"Pfft. As if. I'm not shooting my social status in the foot with this," Sorun scoffed out. He waved a hand in Amy's direction. "But please, by all means. Go! Detect away!"

Silver didn't depart with a goodbye of any kind. He merely stood up out of the chair, shaking his head while mumbling something under his breath as he turned around to approach Amy. Sorun watched them converse briefly from a distance. And then he saw Amy get upset at something Silver said. And with a completely straight and unflappable expression Sorun watched as Amy got out of her chair, physically picked Silver up, and carried him all the way towards the trashcan that just happened to be nearby where Sorun was sitting. And then she slam dunked Silver into the trashcan.

"RUDE!" Amy screamed out at the trashcan. And then she kicked it, causing it to tip over and for Silver and a bunch of trash to spill out. She huffed, crossing her arms and turning towards Sorun's with with a displeased look. "I don't know why you're friends with that guy, Sorun," she muttered out as she angrily stomped away.

"Nice seein' you, too, Amy," Sorun called out as he waved at her back. And then he looked down at Silver, lying flat on the ground and

with his face pressed against it in misery. "Man, you're really lucky. I thought for sure she was gonna hit you with the hammer. I'm pretty sure she can swing that thing faster than you can think."

With the rest of his body motionless, Silver picked his head up off the ground to look at Sorun, trash falling off his head. "You could help out, you know!" he yelled out.

"..." Sorun grabbed the milkshake sitting next to him and drank out through the straw. "And deprive you of this educational experience?" he asked, sitting the shake back down. "You wanna go to the castle now since you're dead-set on continuing this folly?"

"Why? Who's at the castle?"

"I think Sally lives there." Sorun's expression became a bit clouded. "She lives there, right? Yeah, she lives there. Right." He focused back on Silver, who was giving him an odd look. "Also Elias invited me to lunch and the only thing I had here was a milkshake. I'm starving. So we might as well kill two birds with one stone."

"Uh... alright," he said, pushing up off the ground and standing up, brushing some of the loose trash off of him. "So we're going to talk to her?"

Sorun shook his head. " *You're* going to talk to her, against my strong recommendations. Alternatively we could just go home and avoid all this foolishness once I'm done with lunch. Play some video games. I'll make some french fries, how about that?"

"Sorun. I have to do this." It would have been easier to take that steely expression of Silver's more seriously if he still didn't have some loose trash clinging to him.

Sensing the hedgehog's resolve and realizing his totally right argument was being ignored, Sorun sighed and pushed himself out from his chair. "Alright, but we're gonna need to stop for some ice along the way."

It was somewhat of a mystery to Sorun's eyes why Elias considered him a friend. They talked sometimes. Sometimes Elias even went out of his way to talk to Sorun. And while that surely rose their relationship just slightly above the level of mutual acquaintances, Sorun still found it odd, because he would have considered being a king and having a wife and step-kid before he was even twenty-five was already a lot on his plate. Somehow he found enough free time to squeeze Sorun in between all that.

Maybe it was all that personal introspection he'd done with Elias during Sorun's low points. Something that might have enkindled some sense of friendship in Elias' eyes when, to Sorun, it was just him venting and indulging in Elias' whims whenever he wanted to talk. Or maybe he just didn't have a lot of guy friends; Sorun certainly never saw any. Then again he didn't exactly follow the guy around, so who knew?

Either way free food was free food, and Elias was easy to tease, so Sorun went with it. And it was an excuse to get Silver to Sally. More importantly it was an excuse to get him there while Sorun could be in an entirely separate room from what was undoubtably a disaster in progress, but hey, that was Silver's problem, not Sorun's.

"Oh, my. Inviting me for lunch, Elias? Again?" It wasn't even in the castle's dining room; it was on a balcony outcropping from one of the castle's rooms that gave them a view of the city. It was all the more ammunition for Sorun to use, his body having been turned away, a hand covering his mouth in feigned embarrassment. "I truly appreciate the gesture, Elias, but we really must stop meeting like this. We're already in established relationships. What would Nicole think? Or your wife? Scandalous."

On the other side of the table Elias made a strained chuckle that sounded both nervous and weary. "Ah, yes, Sorun, that... that joke surely hasn't grown old yet. I can hardly see how a simple rendezvous between friends can be construed as anything other than us having lunch together."

It would have been easy to point out the venue they were currently eating at, all alone like this, and the fact he used the word "rendezvous", but Sorun decided he'd tortured the poor guy enough and dropped it, turning back to Elias while draping his arm over the velvet-lined chair that probably cost more than Honey paid him in a year. "Hey, what's a little teasing between friends?" he lightly remarked.

Elias made a withering sigh, but still smiled all the same. "And even after I had the cook specifically put enough sugar in your tea that I'm confident I could have just bought maple syrup and you wouldn't have noticed. Just for you," he lamented, eyes focusing down on the cup sitting in front of Sorun. "I still can't comprehend how you stand to drink such a thing."

"I mean, hey, if it can't disintegrate your teeth then what's the point?"

"... I worry for your health sometimes, Sorun." The worst part was Elias sounded sincere when he said that.

"'S fine, I got a magic rock back home that regenerates me if I want. So, you know, really hoping I never need my wisdom teeth taken out. 'Cause they'll grow back if I use that again." Sorun absentmindedly tapped the table. "Lotta... lotta stuff grew back with the white hair I had. Some of which I'm too embarrassed to talk about."

"Okay?" Elias shot him a confused look, but then quickly shook it off and gestured to the small item sitting on the table next to Sorun. "And what purpose does an ice pack serve?"

"Oh, I need that for later."

"Why, pray tell?" He only sounded a little worried.

"Eh, don't worry about it."

Elias' confusion didn't fade at all, though he made a bemused chuckle and shook his head. "You're so confusing sometimes,

Sorun," he said, looking down and poking a fork at the plate of whatever was served to them. A lotta green and cuts of meat that Sorun had no idea of its origin and was even more confused on where it came from in the first place. He remembered hearing the meal's name but it was one of those fancy names he was pretty sure was made up and he forgot it instantly.

Meat was good, though. If only he knew where the hell it came from.

"Well, in any event I just wanted to check in on you," Elias informed him. "I hear you've settled in well."

"You hear things about me, huh?" Sorun commented.

"You are a direct friend of my sister. And one of the council members," he reminded him.

"Fair," Sorun conceded. "But ain't this still a bit much? Inviting me out like this? You could've just popped by my house and said 'hi' or something."

Elias made a pensive face. "Perhaps, but I don't have many friends outside of family I get to do this often with. If I made you uncomfortable in any way-"

"Nah, nah, it's... it's nice, this is nice." Alright, maybe Sorun read too far into thinking there was something wrong with inviting someone to lunch. He'd made worse mistakes. "I'm just not really used to this. Things like this. Nobody ever invited me to things before." He drank the syrupy concoction in a cup near him. It calmed his nerves down more than he thought it would.

"Oh!" Elias' ears perked up and he made an understanding hum. "But, you *have* been doing well, correct?"

"Oh, yeah, totally," Sorun told him, finally feeling comfortable to talk about something. Because when was talking about how his life wasn't in shambles anymore not great? "The house is looking great,

the job is pretty steady, city's nice, people are nice, french fry supply's secure, relationship's going good..." He had to glance away when a light blush crept on his face. "Place would be paradise if the games from my old home were here. So here's hoping the Steam servers survived the apocalypse if I ever decide to find and rip all the data out of them." He'd probably have to ask Nicole or Tails to make him something that could actually do that. Even then he was still pensive on the idea seeing as there were a lot of games from Earth with a lot of stuff in them he didn't actually want people here to see. And yet he still wanted to play them again. It was a frustrating conundrum.

Elias' eyes blinked a few times, seemingly not understanding what Sorun just said. "Steam... servers?" he replied, sounding unsure. "Your people had servers that stored steam? How does that even work?"

He couldn't help it. He'd been too slow in stifling the laughter before some slipped through, but Sorun hadn't been able to help it. "Y-yeah, man, all the steam was stored on those things."

Elias made a pout. "I feel as if you're laughing at something at my expense but I can't place what."

Just barely managing to contain his laughter, Sorun waved a hand and assured him with, "No, not at all, you're right on the money. *Servers full of steam, pft* ..."

"Hmf..." The pouty look stayed on Elias' face, and he turned away in light frustration when he wasn't able to understand what Sorun was not-so-subtly laughing at. The pout went away when a somber question seemed to come to him. "So, from the way you phrased all of that... I assume you're planning on returning there eventually?"

Well that killed Sorun's mood really quickly. The laughter died off right there and made Sorun blink in surprise at Elias. Both for posing that question and for looking kind of sad at it. "I mean, uh... been

thinking about it, yeah. Not permanently or anything. I just wanted to grab stuff to bring back here."

The explanation made Elias sag in relief and caused a smile to grow, and it made Sorun wonder if the squirrel was actually thinking he was planning on retiring to his dead, barren wasteland of a world. It seemed like an absurd idea but Sorun didn't know how else to explain that look. "What, you thought I wanted to move back there?"

"Oh, not at all!" Elias instantly denied, shaking his head. "I care for the wellbeing of every citizen here, physical or otherwise, so when you said you wanted to return I thought you hadn't yet, well... adjusted, as it were..."

Ah. Yeah, Sorun would be tripping up on his words, too, if he were trying this. "I think it's more one of those things you learn to live with than get over. But everyone's been helping me with that. Things are fine now." He tried his best to put some levity into the situation by giving Elias a small, reassuring grin. "Not like I was going there for a funeral dirge or anything. Just wanted some cool stuff. Or at least to see if my old PC is still there, 'cause I got a lot of Steam stuff in there..."

"Ah, okay. That's good to hear," Elias said, seemingly happy with the response, or that Sorun seemed to be doing well. And then he'd put on a questioning frown. "But answer me honestly, because I'm struggling to wrap my head around why you keep mentioning steam. Do you mean to say you had steam-powered computers?"

Nope, that'd been the last straw. Sorun couldn't control it when he burst out laughing, keeling over on the table while banging it with his fist. This only seemed to send Elias into deeper distress, because for whatever reason he seemed desperate to unravel the mystery of what Steam was.

"Sorun, I'm serious! What is it!?" Elias asked in a playful whine. Sorun wasn't even sure he wanted to tell him if it made him to continue to give hilarious guesses like that. "It's a simple question,

you could at least be courteous and answer! I had lunch brought to you! Sorun!"

"Ah-ha-ha! Y-yeah," Sorun laughed out, tears prickling the edges of his eyes as he waved a finger around in a circle. "My computer was steam-powered and there was a little hamster that ran around on a wheel to boost the power. I had to dangle a nut on a little string every time I wanted to use it."

The best part was he bought it. For like a single second Elias' eyes shone in wonder before his expression darkened upon seeing Sorun laugh even harder at it. "That's not true at all! Sorun, tell me! I'm your king, I order you!"

"You can't order me!" Sorun laughed out. "I'm technically more royal than you!"

Elias sputtered out at that. "Th-that's preposterous! How!? In what way!?"

"Ahhh, think about it, Elias." The laughter calmed down as Sorun's smile turned sly. "I'm the sole surviving member of the dominant species on the planet I'm from. And seeing as humans were the only sapient species able to lay claim, that, by default, puts me as the inheritor of the whole planet." He leaned back to look out at the city view. "Your territory consists of, what, this city and everything the forest touches? 'Bout half of what the US used to inhabit? I got a whole planet's worth of land and ocean, buddy. If you really think about it I conquered more land than Eggman ever did and I didn't even have to lift a finger."

For the first second Elias sat there, looking absolutely baffled at the claim. In the next second the baffled expression was replaced by a smug look, which instantly had Sorun wary. "I hardly think there are many who will put stock in a vast amount of land you solely have access to, Sorun."

The smile dropped off Sorun's face when he realized Elias was right. "Wait, hold on, I didn't think this through-"

"Furthermore," he continued, a sly smile growing on his face that mimicked the one Sorun had a minute prior, "you signed off any rights of ruling on sovereign authority when you decided to live here and pay taxes to the Republic. It's a sign of fealty."

"That's a *rule* ?"

"Last but not least... those lands of yours have no people in them. And I hardly think anyone will pledge themselves to somebody who carries packages around for a living."

It was a statement said in jest, but it still made Sorun blow out in a petulant manner and sit back in his chair, arms crossed. "Alright, fine, I don't have any people or actual authority. I still got resources and stuff over there," he bitterly mumbled.

"Which, again, people would have to go through you just to access. And nobody is particularly hurting for resources at the moment." A small frown formed on Elias' face. "Which... actually begs the question, now that I think about it. Can you actually access your old home using that sword?" he asked. "I was lead to believe it was notoriously difficult. The others needed all seven Chaos Emeralds just to briefly open an entranceway there."

"I think I can?" The way Sorun said that and the way he was looking down in thought didn't make it seem that he was so sure, because in reality he wasn't. "I haven't actually tested it. Been, um... too nervous to."

"Well if you don't even know-"

"I've..." Sorun cut himself off with a deep sigh, and then looked back up at Elias. "I just haven't had much reason to work up the nerve. Things here have just been working out so well, you know? Job, relationship, other things. I took up reading again."

The squirrel perked up, looking genuinely happy at that. "Oh, that's good!"

"Yeah, but going back there? Uh, I might. One day. Still deciding."

Elias nodded. "That's quite understandable. I don't think you should be pressured by-"

A knock on the faraway door to the room was heard, making Elias straighten and Sorun to twitch his eyes to the door. "Ah, sorry about that," Elias quickly apologized as he sat up from the table. "There was a, er, issue earlier this morning and we lost a lot of paperwork. Some of the councilors said they'd come by later on with some documents I need to re-sign."

Sorun blinked in curiosity. "What happened?"

"Councilman Rotor decided the paper shredder was 'running too slow' and elected to modify it for our convenience." Elias' eyes squinted into a displeased look as he excused himself from the table. "On an unrelated note we no longer have a paper shredder. The guards had to destroy the last one after they caught it."

"W-what?"

"Speaking of which I would very much consider it a personal favor if you procured a new paper shredder for us the next time you go to Station Square, Sorun. I'd reimburse you, of course."

"Sure...?" That seemed to be the end of the matter as Elias had left the table and went to the door. Sorun was barely managing on running through the words Elias said to him and decided halfway through that he was better off not looking into it. And it was right at that moment Elias decided to return back to the table with a somewhat embarrassed smile on his face. "Yes?"

"Right, hello, Sorun. Um, somewhat of a bluster on my part, I didn't think of bringing a pen to eat and I need to sign these documents.

You wouldn't happen to...?" he trailed off in a hopeful voice. It was hard not to notice Elias was putting a lot of effort towards not looking at the impatient Mobian woman standing behind him with a large sheaf of papers in her hands.

Sorun gave him a regretful look and flopped his hands up. "Sorry, man. Left it at home."

Elias made a hiss. "Okay. Alright, that's quite fine." He glanced over his shoulder towards the back of the room. "I think I might have something lying around here. Miss Prower if you'll just excuse me for a moment..."

"Aw, don't tell me that's Tails' mom." With a remarkable amount of willpower Sorun managed to keep a straight and bored face on as he watched Elias leave him behind to the woman standing on the other side of the table. Lethargically, Sorun turned his head towards her. *"Aw, don't tell me he left me alone with her. What if she starts talking?"*

He was already worried due to the fact she was dressed more professionally than any other Mobian he'd ever seen. Didn't much look like Tails with the brown fur, auburn and all; really the only relation he saw were the eyes and that she was a fox, too, and even then he only knew she was a fox because of her last name; it being the same as Tails' somewhat cinched that. What really made him worried was, at one point in time in a past conversation, Elias made a comment that she didn't like Sorun so much because he "caused her son stress", as if getting pulled into an alternate dimension wasn't stressful for him. He didn't think the time he threatened to beat her husband's face in with an IV pole for inciting a revolution helped her opinion of him.

Maybe it never came up at dinner.

"Hey." A harmless greeting and a little wave by Sorun. That had to be construed as friendly, right? "We haven't met, I'm Sorun."

"Hello." Sky blue eyes that were the same as her son's were worryingly glaring at him. "Yes, my son spoke of you plenty. As did my husband about a conversation you two once shared."

Damn, it came up. "Um... okay." He clicked his tongue and rapped his fingers against the table. "Pretty tense atmosphere you're projecting there, huh?"

"I wouldn't go that far," she denied. "I would just rather be somewhere else right now that isn't in your direct presence."

Wow, well, if she was going to go right out the gate and say it suddenly Sorun felt a lot less awkward and more... relieved? It was strange to feel that way but at the same time it felt like a breath of fresh air to act honestly when Sorun stopped nervously tapping on the table, shifting his hand into a fist to rest his head against as he matched the fox's glare with a bored stare of his own.

"Don't gotta outright say you don't like me," he teased in a blank tone, face unamused. "What have I ever done to you?"

Her expression subtlety tightened. "Nothing directly. I'm sure you're a very upstanding individual." She sure didn't sound like she believed that. "It doesn't change the fact that, during your first month in this world, my son had trouble sleeping due to the guilt he felt over your circumstances and you constantly reminding him of the matter didn't help."

Sorun breathed in deeply. "Alright, I see," he breathed out, eyebrows raised as he glanced down. "Jerk move of me, yeah. I wasn't in a good state of mind back then." He glanced back up at Rosemary. "You're a good mother, looking after your son like that. Everyone should have a great mother like you. I had a great mother like you. Too bad I was never able to say goodbye to her since, you know, your son kidnapped me in the middle of a grocery store. She'd dead now. Glad Tails has such an upstanding mother to support him, though. Good for him. Really."

The words themselves were friendly, but they were delivered with such a dry, bland tone that they could be construed as anything but. The lack of subtlety was something Rosemary obviously picked up on from the quiet crinkling sound of her fingers digging into the stack of papers she was holding, but otherwise she was keeping up a professional face.

"I found a pen!" The tense silence between the two was broken by Elias, who stepped into the conversation while holding up a pen in a victorious manner. It didn't do anything to break the staring match Sorun and Rosemary were having, making Elias appear visibly nervous as he turned to the fox woman. "If I could just take these, councilwoman..."

It took some tugging, but eventually Elias managed to free the papers from Rosemary's grip. He immediately set to work on setting the papers down on the table so he could sign them. He was working unusually fast as the two continued to glare at one another.

"King Elias," Ms. Prower began in an icy tone, "I have to question the decision to allow a private citizen of the Republic, who, regardless of past affiliations, is not a member of the royal military nor even a Freedom Fighter anymore, to remain in possession of an object of great importance such as a Chaos Emerald when it was agreed such objects of power that can prove to be a danger in the wrong hands were to be guarded under lock and key."

Sorun almost laughed at the audacity. "Would you consider the one I'm currently possessing to be in 'the wrong hands', councilwoman Prower?" Sorun asked her in a tone mixed in sarcasm and innocence.

"I would argue I am reasonably justified in my concerns. You have displayed a multitude of questionable choices that call to question your character, with one of your more egregious actions being to crash my son's beloved airplane on a deserted island in the middle of the ocean while inebriated."

"I believe that was ruled as an accident."

"You're an unstable individual, Mr. Sorun, and I don't believe someone such as you should be the one safeguarding one of the seven Chaos Emeralds."

Elias' scribbling turned noticeably feverish. Sorun's eyes darted to him for a second and then went back to Rosemary.

"Well, that's the thing, ain't it? The one I have isn't one of the 'seven' Emeralds. It's an eighth one I fluked into existence via time travel, so I don't see it as being part of the set since I made it," Sorun argued. "Technically doesn't even exist to people who don't know about it. It's mine."

"Regardless it is identical in both form and function to Chaos Emeralds, and there are many who see those Emeralds as objects of danger due to their potential uses," Rosemary coldly responded. "It's a dangerous item that deserves to be in a vault, not your house."

"Hey, my kitchen sink is very secure, what are you talking about?"

Elias made a small groan and visibly withered at Sorun's remark; Rosemary rankled at it. "King Elias, with respect, surely you agree something as dangerous as a Chaos Emerald needs to be protected for the safety of the people, and not left in the care of *him* ?" she snapped, gesturing towards Sorun.

The king looked very uncomfortable at the question and bent his body to be closer to the papers he was signing, as if he were attempting to sink into the papers themselves. "I'm rather busy at the moment-"

"You're really doing this?" Sorun asked, utterly ignoring Elias as he spoke to the councilwoman. "Really? Because you don't like me?"

"This isn't about you; it's about the people of New Mobotropolis and every citizen under the protection of the Republic of Acorn."

"And wouldn't you know it, but I just happen to be one of those citizens," Sorun shot back. "And believe it or not I'm financially dependent on that Emerald because of the portal ability my special sword has. I'd argue it's a lifeline to Honey's business because of how lucrative it's been. You're gonna take that away over something as paper-thin as safety?"

"'Paper-thin.'" The way she repeated that almost made her sound disgusted at Sorun. By now Elias was writing so fast Sorun wondered if the signatures would even be legible. "The government is supposed to trust that *you* , an individual of dubious ability, is capable of protecting the Chaos Emerald from a hypothetical third party that could potentially attempt to take it from you for the purpose of nefarious deeds against the Republic's interests? Especially when you're using that thing to teleport all around the world, well outside of our protection? If, say, Dr. Robotnik or someone under his employ were to move against you, we're to trust you'd handle it appropriately and *not* lose the Emerald to someone who wants to use it against us?"

"Does he even know I'm alive?"

" *Irrelevant* , Mr. Sorun. You surely see the issue here."

To be fair, she had a good point. It was actually one of the few things left Sorun was paranoid over: someone attempting to try and take the Chaos Emerald from him. Which, on its own, was a fair enough assessment; things were practically weapons of mass destruction in the hands of people who knew how to use them. He was somewhat confident if someone did try he'd make it out fine, and it wasn't as if he advertised his possession of it outside of the city so chances were low something like that would ever happen, but... well, at the end of the day it was an item that could be stolen very easily from Sorun if he wasn't quick enough, and without powers he was quite possibly the slowest being on the planet. It was something he tried not to think about. The fact he'd gotten so far without issue helped to quell those thoughts. But he would begrudgingly admit having him

carry around something as important and dangerous as a Chaos Emerald may be, admittedly, alarming.

But Sorun didn't care. The Emerald was his; it belonged to him and nobody else. It wouldn't even exist if it weren't for him. It was his power. *His* . Nobody was taking it from him.

When Sorun spoke next, his voice was low and derisive. "Well, councilwoman Prower... if you really want the Chaos Emerald so badly, you're certainly welcome to try and take it from me."

She balked at him. "If you are implying what I think you are implying then I warn you-!"

"Ah, there, done!" Elias frantically announced, haphazardly throwing the pen over his shoulder to the back of the room while holding up the sheaf of papers. He then immediately thrust them into Rosemary's arms, quickly saying, "Councilwoman Prower I understand your concerns, and while they are justified I think Sorun has proved through numerous past valorous actions that he is more than responsible enough to looking after the Chaos Emerald."

The councilwoman took the papers offered, though her angered expression didn't look like she agreed in the slightest. "You cannot seriously-!"

"I would think," Elias interrupted, handing her the papers, "that a bit of trust is warranted after all he's done for us. And it's bad practice to be seizing property without just cause."

Though she accepted the papers, one of Rosemary's eyes was visibly twitching. "We're considering Chaos Emeralds personal property now?"

"It's a special case, Rosemary," Elias sighed out. "Can you please just let it go?"

She opened her mouth, and then closed it, her face set in a deep scowl. She looked like she wanted to argue the point more, but then decided against after making a short sigh. "Thank you for the signatures. Good day to you, Elias." The fox didn't even bother to glance Sorun's way as she turned around to storm out of the room. Neither of them missed how hard the door was closed behind her, with Elias jumping a bit from the loud slam.

"... Well, she seemed nice," Sorun remarked, grinning wryly as he glanced over at Elias. The king made a loud groan and slumped down in the nearest chair, head in his hands as Sorun continued with, "Really an upstanding woman. I can see why people voted for her. Really great scolding voice."

Elias looked up at Sorun, and then groaned at seeing Sorun's grinning face before sinking his own back into his hands. "You enjoy needling people," he accused.

Sorun made a mocking gasp. "I do *not* ! And even if I did, can you blame me? Humans thrive off conflict. I need it."

"That's not a healthy mindset."

"Well, really, every sapient species needs conflict to avoid stagnation, so if you think about it Mobians aren't an exception-"

"Not a single word you just said excuses you antagonizing her," Elias groaned out as he let his hands slap against the table. "'You're certainly welcome to try and take it?' What did you even mean by that!? Were you planning on actually fighting guards if they were sent to your home to confiscate it!?"

"... Would I be allowed to?"

"No! No you wouldn't!"

"Ah, hm. Oh." Sorun sat back in his seat and rubbed his chin in thought. Would he have actually gone that far? Maybe even go to

the lengths of cutting himself and stuffing the Emerald in his body just so he could use Devil's Body to fight them off? Tenable idea, except for the fact it'd probably get him thrown in jail. Or kicked out of the city. And with that realization Sorun made a sigh and the grin dropped off his face. "On second thought if you'da just asked Nicole to demand it off me I'd've given it up," he answered truthfully.

Elias looked a bit relieved at that. Not much, but a little. "It's admittedly a bit of a hot topic, you and that Chaos Emerald, Sorun."

"Oh, don't tell you people have debates over it," Sorun groaned out.

"It's a somewhat touchy subject between the councilors. Myself and councilors Chuck and Rotor try to speak in favor of you. Councilor Prower... well, you just heard her stance on the matter. And the other three councilors are otherwise indifferent on the subject," Elias informed him. "It's not an issue I would take too seriously, Sorun. Though, since we're already discussing your use of that Emerald..."

"Hm? Oh, no." Sorun could spot the look of someone getting ready to ask someone something a mile away. "No no no, Elias, do not tell me you dragged me all the way to lunch just to ask me to do favors for you using Yamato."

To his credit the king looked a bit offended at the insinuation. "No, of course not! Why, to even suggest I had some ulterior motive beyond just inviting a friend out to lunch... I'm almost hurt by the notion." Elias darted his eyes to the side and turned away a bit. "That being said the Republic is a major world power and we are required to keep in constant communication with the other world powers, namely the president of Station Square and the Overlander representatives. Usually video conferences are suitable enough but now and again there are official documents that need to be physically delivered all around. And the normal couriers try to be expedient, but, quite honestly, a large majority of the time matters get stalled because of how long those papers take to get to others and we've been looking for a quicker means." His face wrinkled a bit. "And a less expensive one."

Sorun tilted his head back in surprise. "Okay, seriously, how much are those couriers charging that both you and Honey are complaining about them?"

"A bloody fortune," Elias muttered out in contempt, shaking his head and then looking at Sorun. "I don't blame them since they're quite literally carrying packages past whole continents, but... well... you're here."

"I already got a job," Sorun protested, raising his hands up. "Honey'll kill me if I quit. I'm too convenient."

"That's a bit of a morbid jest-"

"'Cause it ain't one!"

Elias momentarily winced at the shrill cry. "Truth or not, I'm not asking you to quit your job! Just to take five minutes out of your day to teleport somewhere to deliver important documents to foreign government officials!"

The offer calmed Sorun down somewhat, and he lowered his hands. "Okay, so... once in a while I just get a letter from you in the mail and I gotta take it somewhere? That it?"

Elias shook his head. "Oh, no, these aren't the type of papers I can simply mail. They'd be hand-delivered to you by a guard."

"Dude..." Sorun groaned out, rubbing at his face.

"You'd be doing your Republic a valuable service," Elias attempted, flashing Sorun with a winning smile full of bright teeth. And damn him and his charisma, but it was working because Sorun was starting to consider it. "More than that it makes you look favorable to the councilors, who would think twice of wanting to confiscate your Emerald if it meant being deprived of a useful service."

He had a strong point, and Sorun liked it. "But I'd get paid too, right?"

The winning smile Elias wore withered greatly. "W-well, Sorun, considering the extremely minimal amount of invested time and effort on your part I'm not sure such a service constitutes-"

"But I'd get paid too, right?"

"You'd... yes, I'd send you a small remittance for services rendered," Elias sighed out, slumping a bit in his chair. "I assume that's a yes, then?"

"Yeah, sure, I'll help you guys out from time to time." If it got Tails' mom off his back about the Chaos Emerald so he'd stop worrying about it then Sorun was all for it. Elias had reached out for a handshake - Sorun responded by gently slapping his palm with the back of his hand, and then the back of his hand with his palm, and then wiggled his fingers in a mystical manner as Sorun pulled his own hand back. The human got up from the table with a victorious grin. Elias remained rooted to the spot, staring at his own hand in a bewildered manner.

"Is... I was going for a handshake, Sorun, not... whatever *that* was," Elias told him. He couldn't stop looking at his own hand.

Swiping up the icepack from the table, Sorun said, "It's a common traditional handshake on Earth."

"I don't believe you," he whispered out, focusing on his own hand like his life depended on it. To be fair to Elias he was right, Sorun did make that up, but he had no way of knowing that.

"Mm. Well, anyways, thanks for lunch and the side gig. Nice talkin' with ya." The king was *still* looking at his hand by the time Sorun began walking his way towards the door, waving at Elias as he left. He'd only managed a sort of half-wave back at Sorun because he was so focused on trying to figure out what kind of handshake Sorun gave him like it was the most important puzzle in his life. It got to the point that halfway out the door Sorun was looking at Elias in confusion and wondering why he was putting so much thought into

an unconventional handshake he made to have a bit of fun with Elias.

Mobian culture, fixation on handshakes, he didn't know, whatever, he was out.

Shrugging, Sorun exited the room and closed the door right behind him... only to then be met with Silver in the hallway, who seemed to have been waiting for him. He had a somewhat forlorn expression on his face. Might've had something to do with the large, red handprint throbbing on his face.

Automatically, Sorun offered him the icepack he was holding. "I tried to warn you, man," he told him as the white hedgehog accepted the ice.

"Thanks," he mumbled out, pressing the ice pack to his face. "... Sorun, it's melted."

"Yeah, I was wondering why it felt like I was holding a bag of water." Silver didn't look amused. "Man, what do you want from me? I bought that a while ago."

"Ugh, I know. Thanks anyways." Silver lowered the ice pack off his face, but then winced and put it back on the angry hand mark. Probably figured it was at least cold enough to help with it somewhat.

"So it didn't go well with Sally?" Sorun guessed.

Silver sighed. "No. I talked to her and then she yelled at me. And hit me. And then yelled some more," he lamented. "She's not a very nice person."

"Aw, don't say that. She's super sweet to her friends," Sorun denied with a wave of his hand. "And to every single person who lives in the Republic. And total strangers who seem alright. Really she's nice to

everyone not trying to kill her. Man, you must have made a terrible impression, huh?"

"I don't feel like this is very constructive, Sorun."

"I disagree."

"Disa- you're barely taking this seriously!"

That wasn't true at all: Sorun wasn't taking this seriously in any amount. Of course he didn't say that to Silver's face to avoid is ire. In Sorun's defense it was hard to get onto the idea one of his friends was trying to do something as insidious as end the world, and he was pretty sure his brainwash/clone theory was dead-on. But for some reason, some unexplainable reason Sorun just couldn't figure out, Silver was barely considering that idea and was stuck on this traitor thing. Maybe because that journal specifically had the word "traitor" in it, which wasn't really a word that applied to brainwashed/cloned people. Unless it was taken out of context. Or any other number of things, which Sorun couldn't say for certain because he hadn't read the damn journal and he couldn't go get it to fact-check Silver.

And he got it, he really did. Fate of the world and all that. He didn't blame Silver going to these lengths. Except he could because he wasn't getting anywhere and Sorun warned him how bad an idea this was. But even if it meant the slightest possible iota of forwards progress Silver was apparently willing to go to all sorts of lengths just to get that much closer to solving the problem. Maybe there was a way to work around that - be constructive, like Silver suggested.

"Silver, hear me out. Maybe... *don't* randomly accuse good people of plotting crimes," Sorun suggested. "I mean have you considered, man, I dunno... joining the Freedom Fighters just so you could observe them from the inside? Gather evidence, or lack thereof, on the inside, get to know them in a way that would go a lot easier for them than if a stranger just walked up to them saying crazy stuff like what you're doing? For crying out loud, you have TK powers. That's

already a better powerset than most of them have. Wouldn't even be hard for you."

To Sorun's great frustration, Silver shook his head. "I don't want to be distracted. Plus, what if me helping out so much derails the natural course of time, throws off what little we already know? Can't risk it."

"I think you're vastly overestimating the Butterfly Effect here," Sorun muttered out with a shake of his head. "Look, Mogul of the future said the end of the world don't even happen for twenty-five years. We have so much time; why are you rushing? Besides the whole I-wanna-meet-my-family thing, which I understand, but *twenty-five years* , man!"

Again, Silver shook his head. "World ends in twenty-five years, yeah, but the red-eyed traitor that kickstarts it shows up sometime this year. It's what the journal and all the other research I did suggests, and Master agreed."

Sorun sputtered out and threw his hands up. "S-so what, they show up and take a nap for a couple decades before ending the world? Spend twenty-five years building up a power base to end it? Gets sent twenty-five years into the future? Coma? Imprisoned? 'Cause future Sonic didn't mention *any* of this happening." Wasn't even clear if there had been a traitor to deal with after Sorun got sealed in the Master Emerald, because he never referenced it. Which made even less sense because then why would there be one in this time? Nothing changed. But there'd been so much happening and so little time maybe Sonic just hadn't seen fit to mention a so-called traitor. Maybe the end of the world was slated to happen but the time anomaly Sorun had to put the kibosh on interrupted it. Too little information.

" *I don't know* , Sorun, okay, that's as much as we learned!" Silver exclaimed. "We have this amount of information! Okay!? That's all! I'm trying to work with what we've got!"

"But why can't the others help if you told them all this when-!" Sorun stopped dead when Silver grew an apprehensive look mid-sentence. His eyes narrowed. "Silver. How much did you tell them when you gave the Freedom Fighters your whole little debrief thing when you first got here with me?"

Seemingly sensing his growing frustration, Silver grimaced and avoided Sorun's gaze. "The... bare essentials," he admitted, making Sorun's eyes narrow further. "I mentioned the threat and how bad of shape the future is in. Nothing else."

"You didn't tell them the timeframe." Rubbing his hand over his face and through his hair, Sorun made a great groan of frustration and leaned back until his back hit the wall. "Du-u-uude, why!? Why are you doing- you're hiding information now, seriously!?"

"Because I didn't want to tip the traitor off that I knew more than I was letting on!" Silver argued. "They were all there listening to me!"

"But they already know you're looking for them because you decided to go and ANNOUNCE it so what difference does it make if- ugh, ugh forget it!"

Maybe it was Sorun's fault for not seeing it. For assuming that someone who spent their whole life only having social interactions with a walking thesaurus and an old hermit would translate into Silver having something even closely resembling social tact. He certainly couldn't blame Silver; this was just... what he grew up to be, as a result of his environment. And his environment in *no way* could have ever prepared him for the social-fu it would have taken to play mind games, observe from the shadows, and subtly gather the information he needed to sus out whoever this culprit of his was. He'd already thrown all that out the window with quite possibly the bluntest strategy Silver could have employed to solve this mess.

Hell, these are things Sorun himself wasn't confident he could say he could do, and he was at least cognizant of the concept. With Silver Sorun wasn't even sure the hedgehog knew these kinds of concepts

existed, and why would he when he grew up alone in an apocalypse with a single person looking after him?

So yes. Maybe it was Sorun's fault for realizing that, at the end of the day... Silver just wasn't good at this. Terrible, in fact. Just wasn't in his skillset. And maybe Sorun should have seen that and tried steering him just a bit, but he had been, and still was, so skeptical of the traitor idea he just didn't want to entertain it. But now because of that they were in this situation where Silver was making himself look like a paranoid weirdo to everyone else, and that was probably gonna end up being counter-intuitive to his end goal of finding the damn traitor. Which Sorun was sure didn't even exist. And yet the world *would* end. So there had to be some truth there somewhere.

It was such a stupid situation and Sorun had no idea what he was supposed to do about it. He was supposed to be retired, dammit. Not dealing with this. Not playing spy games with someone so woefully underprepared to be playing spy games they already lost the spy game and thought they were still playing the spy game.

"Maybe we should split up." Case in point. Now Silver was suggesting ideas like this. "We'd cover more ground if-"

"I want you to run that back in your head, and then I want you to remember the part where I told you I wasn't gonna go accusing my friends of being a traitor," Sorun said, back still flat against the wall as he glared up at the ceiling. "It's gonna be a hard no from me."

"Sorun-!"

"We said we were gonna be reactive with this, Silver. That was the plan. That was the strategy devised from all the no-information we have." His head tilted down to look at Silver. "This is a pretty proactive approach you're taking."

"Because I just don't think 'oh, we'll react to it when it happens' is a very reliable plan, Sorun," Silver shot back.

Sorun winced. "It ain't, granted, but-"

"If we get the traitor then they can't somehow end the world in twenty-five years." Silver's voice came out more somber and sad than Sorun like, and it stirred something inside of him that didn't feel good. "We can just cut it off sometime this year. Everything'll be saved and I can go back to the parents and family I was supposed to have." The Mobian looked frustrated as he looked down at his feet. "I know you don't like the idea of the traitor, Sorun, and I'll agree that there's a chance you're right, even if the journal didn't imply it, but... I'm trying my best here, alright? I know I might have messed up in a lot of places but I'm really trying here."

"Why can't shit ever be simple?" He'd be lying if he said he wasn't as concerned about the future and world as much as Silver, but it kept coming back to the concept of a traitor in the Freedom Fighters. Silver was so stuck on the idea he wouldn't move off it and Sorun just didn't believe it. Stick up for his friends and he's leaving behind the one person trying to solve this in the dust. Stick with Silver and... well, yeah, that would involve accusing his friends. Seemed like a loss no matter what he did. *"Screw it, I'll play along a bit."*

Silver already blew his chances on playing the passive observer, but Sorun was in a prime position to do that. And unlike Silver he actually had subtly and a modicum of social skills. So maybe... he could just say he was investigating the matter but in reality was doing nothing and just watching for anything out of place. And if he did see something off he'd just bring it to Silver's attention.

So basically what he was already doing. Just a whole lot of passive watching.

But hey, Silver didn't have to know that.

"Alright, fine," Sorun sighed out as he pushed off the wall. "I'll 'investigate the matter' if it pleases you so. Gonna come up with a fat lotta nothin', though, just getting that outta the way right now."

Well, that's what he promised, but at the end of the day Sorun just had zero reason to suspect any of his friends, so "investigating" was more "kind of just goofing around talking about whatever". It was arguably the same vein of thought, though. Sorun thought so, anyways.

"You wanna hear about the future?"

Sorun hadn't even been the one to initiate the topic of the future. When they split Silver wanted Sorun to talk to Tails, because apparently he really took the whole "you can't underestimate a genius" thing Sorun offhandedly said to heart and he was somewhat suspicious of him. For no other reason than that. Seemed ridiculous to Sorun but he needed to appease the guy, so off to the fox he went.

He was pretty sure he lived in the hangar at this point, because Sorun barely ever saw the kid anywhere else. To the point going home for dinner probably felt more like a visit to his folks. Between that and going out on life-threatening missions Sorun'd probably be worried in their shoes, but there were others always looking out for him, so Sorun thought it was fine. He'd been at it long enough to be fine on his own anyways.

And... the plane got fixed, it looked like. After Sorun totaled it. He did his best to not even look at the plane when he walked into the hangar just to talk to Tails at Silver's behest. He'd looked up from whatever he'd been working on, smiled, waved, they made some small talk, and then Tails came right out of left field with that question about the future. Sorun didn't really know what he was supposed to talk about, but he for sure knew what topics to avoid. Namely the killing. And threats against his future kids. Should probably leave the Mina thing out, too, 'cause he wasn't risking tempting those butterflies.

"Well, yeah, you went there, right?" Tails asked as he turned back to working on whatever was on the table in front of him. Some sophisticated thingamajig by the looks of it, with an exposed panel

leaking wires that the fox was poking around in with a pair of tools. Sorun was sitting on a stool right next to him. "What was it like? You don't talk about it."

For a lot of good reasons, but none of those could be said. He chose not to even bring up the alternate future and skipped straight to armageddon. "Well, I met Silver there, and uh... yeah, looks real bad," Sorun confessed. "Dunno, he's, uh, trying to fix it. But yeah. Can't really say much since most of it was... you know. Rubble."

"Oh." His ears sagged down a bit at hearing that. "I was just wondering 'cause I figured the tech a few centuries ahead would look pretty wild, but... yeah, you're right." A few electrical sparks jumped out of the thingy Tails was working on. "I'm glad you made it back though," he added, giving Sorun a smile. "I know you had it really rough for a while there but you look like you're doing good now!"

Sorun rubbed the back of his head and glanced away. "Yeah, things are going great," he agreed. "'Cept with Silver. He's going really ham on this whole 'save the future' mission."

Tails face soured. "Oh, yeah. Him." He turned back to whatever that electronic contraption was. "No offense to him, Sorun, but I don't see how somebody from the future could have so few answers on how to actually save it."

Sorun couldn't refute that. "Silver means well," he carefully said. "He's just... not really going about it that well. Because apparently he thinks that one of the Freedom Fighters is the threat he mentioned and thinks it's one of you."

There were a few sparks that came out of the device that came when Tails sharply twisted his wrist, like the news Sorun gave him was so startling he'd done it on reflex. "He said *what* ?" he asked, almost sounding scornful as he turned Sorun's way.

"I know, right? It's crazy," Sorun scoffed out, rolling his eyes. He was glad to see his statement caused Tails to grow a relieved look. "I tried telling the guy there's no way any one of you would wanna end the world. Be another matter entirely if one of you were brainwashed or cloned. Would explain the whole 'the traitor has red eyes' thing since stuff like that usually causes that kind of effect. Oh, he said the traitor has red eyes," he added at Tails' confusion.

He nodded, and turned back to the gizmo he was dissecting. There was a rattling sound as Tails poked around its insides with his tools. "Well geez, Sorun, that sounds almost logical," he remarked in a sarcastic tone. "You didn't tell him that?"

"I did, but he's not buying into it so hard. Barely acknowledges it as a distinct possibility," Sorun said. "According to him it doesn't really line up with the wording of a journal he read of someone who knew what the deal actually was, but I didn't get a peak inside the thing so I don't know what he's talking about. But I can't believe one of you would do something like that." A beat passed. "I mean if you were to go about ending the world how would you even do it?"

"Doubt I could do it if Robotnik couldn't," Tails truthfully admitted, not even bothering to take his attention away from his work. "Kinda doubt anybody could, actually. I mean... through what means? Robotnik tried everything and we always stopped him. I don't think there's anybody in the world who could end it if they tried."

"Psh, I could do it. Easy," Sorun replied in a joking manner.

Tails rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right. How?"

"Just use Yamato to separate the world from the ozone layer and let the sun cook the planet in rads. Kill off all plant life, work up the food chain. Take a while but it'd work."

The quiet rattling sound of Tails' tools stopped. The fox slowly put the tools down on the table, and then swiveled around in his stool to

regard Sorun with a cautious look. "Um... your sword can't actually do that, can it?" he asked.

Sorun met his cautious look with a serious gaze of his own... for approximately five seconds, after which he barked out a laugh and shook his head. "Nah, something like the ozone ain't solid enough for me to stab and separate. But I really had you going there," he laughed, making Tails pout and cross his arms in a disgruntled manner.

"Where do you even come up with stuff like that?" Tails grumbled out, looking at least slightly amused, if annoyed, at Sorun's antics.

"Stuff like 'Worm' were really inspirational sources on creative power usage." At seeing Tails' questioning look, Sorun elaborated with, "It was a, uh, book. Yeah. Book."

"Oh. What was it about?"

"It's~a~story~I~can't~talk~about~'cause~you're~too~young~" Sorun chimed out, each musical syllable punctuated with him tapping Tails on the forehead.

"Quit it!" he laughed out, waving his arms in front of him to get Sorun to stop. And then he made a mad sort of pout again. "And I am too old enough! I'm old enough to go on missions with all the other Freedom Fighters but I'm not old enough to hear about a story!?"

"Oh, no, 'Worm' is one of those stories that's firmly in the 'I can't ever talk to anybody about this ever because it's too dark' box," Sorun corrected, though this just made Tails look more confused. "It's in the same box as 'Berserk'. Which... hurts, Tails, not being able to talk about 'Berserk' with anyone here. Almost as much as not seeing how it ends."

With a sigh and a shake of his head, Tails went back to work on the gadget. "I don't really understand how a story could be so dark you won't even talk to anyone about it," he said, "but if that's the case

can't you just reinvent it or something? Just change things so it's child-friendly so I can actually hear the stories and understand what you keep referencing?"

"Child-friendly 'Berserk'? *Child-friendly 'Berserk'* ?" That sounded like blasphemy to even speak. Thinking about it sent Sorun reeling in horror. "Tails, you don't know what you're asking, that's not- alright, fine, let's try," he said, more out of morbid curiosity than anything else. "Our story starts with Gu- Gatsu sounds more friendly, we'll use that. Gatsu was born and... uh, yeah, he was born, that was it. Yep."

Tails glanced to the side to give Sorun an incredulous look. "You have to edit his birth? Seriously?"

"Yes. And after being born Gatsu had a childhood where he did things as a child. And then he grew up," Sorun continued. By this point Tails had shaken his head again once more returned to his work. "And then he met this cool guy and his friends, and they did stuff together! As friends! And then, uh... after that- this is stupid, I give up," Sorun sighed out. "Look, I can't do 'Berserk' dirty like this, Tails. It's like trying to separate moisture from water. The two are intrinsic; it can't be done!"

"I don't even know what you're trying to separate here, Sorun," Tails said, sounding thoroughly uninterested. "Never mind, this story sounds boring."

More blasphemy. Sorun excused it on a foundation of ignorance on Tails' part. Just barely. "Yeah, well, your mom'd try and get me if she found out I was telling you scary stories anyways." He started to gently claw at the air in front of him. "She'd be like one of those really annoying Home Owner's Association people from Earth that'd hit you with every minor infarction in the book and drown you in fines just to annoy you."

One of Tails' ears twitched in annoyance. "She'd never do that! She's way too nice!" He paused. "Wait, did you meet her?"

"Yeah." He really didn't like her. "She seemed like a nice enough lady." He thought about complimenting her on how she seemed competent, but that was the only compliment Sorun could think of and thought it'd sound a bit weird, so he chose to keep it to himself.

Well, then again, she had to at the very least be a decent mother if Tails was singing her praises, and he could respect that. Was probably the only reason Sorun didn't outright hate her - she was a good mother. He could tolerate a lot as long as she held onto that title.

He glanced back at Tails. Looked like he went back to being so absorbed in the thing he was working on he was barely registering Sorun's presence. He knew enough about him that at this point it'd probably be an effort in futility trying to talk to him - more likely he'd just end up bugging the Mobian for interrupting his technological guru flow state or whatever. He got testy when people did that.

"Alright, well, good talk. Seeya later," Sorun sighed out as he spun around and hopped off the stool. There'd been some small sound that left Tails mouth, a murmur that might have possibly been construed as "goodbye", but more than likely he'd just made a noise acknowledging Sorun was leaving. The teen shook his head as a result and walked away towards the hangar exit.

"Wonder if Silver had any luck on his end?"

"So no luck, huh?"

"It's no use, Sorun." It was a sorry state he'd found Silver in when he returned to the house. Flopped onto the couch with an arm and leg hanging off the side wearing a dead, forlorn expression, the aura of sullenness radiating out from him. It was a pathetic-enough looking state to appear pitiable. "It really is no use."

"Well, I coulda told ya that. I did at the onset of this, actually. Multiple times over if I recall," Sorun lightly replied as he sat down at the

other end of the couch. "So how bad did it go?"

Silver's head listed off to the side, and he sighed out. "Pretty bad..."

"Um... so I can't just go in and talk with the councilor? You're sure?"

The Mobian clerk sitting on the other side of the check-in desk to the castle lobby regarded Silver with an uncaring, deadpan stare. "No. As I said, councilman Rotor is extremely busy. If you want to make an appointment with him you're gonna have to fill out a 58-B form."

Silver groaned and pinched at his nose. "Okay, fine, so if I fill one of those out then *can I go see him? It's important!"*

The duck on the other side of the desk shook his head. "No, you misunderstand. A 58-B form is a prerequisite to get your name on the waiting list of people requesting an appointment with the councilor. Once your 58-B form gets approved you're put on the list, and once you're next in line a 35-C form will be mailed to the residence address provided by you in the 58-B form. You'll need to get an approved 35-C form if you want an appointment with the councilor."

"And then *can I talk to him!?"*

"No, a 35-C just guarantees you a spot to wait in line on the day the councilor is accepting appointments," the duck drawled out. "I'd recommend getting here early on that day. Please bear in mind a spot in line doesn't necessitate you an actual meeting, variable by how his schedule is looking that day and what other matters he's beholden to attend to."

"O-okay, fine, how long does all of that take?"

"Usually about a week to process all the necessary paperwork."

Silver flinched heavily, but then took a breath to steady himself. "Alright, then can I have a 58-B form, please?"

To the hedgehog's frustration, the duck secretary shook his head. "No, sir, you'll need to see the clerk at our Forms & Registrations desk in order to get your hands on a form 58-B."

Silver's nose sucked breath. " Okay *. Where do I find that?"*

The duck didn't answer him. Instead he reached out to the little triangular plaque on the desk that read 'Front Desk' and turned it over backwards. An indescribable feeling of frustration welled in Silver when he saw 'Forms & Registrations' stamped on the other side.

"Hello and welcome to Castle Acorn's Forms & Registrations desk, how may I assist you?" the duck clerk asked in that same deadpan drawl.

"You- you could have just told me at the beginning that-!" Silver stopped himself, biting his lower lip as he did his best to contain his outburst. "Never mind... Can I please get a-"

"Sorry, sir, but you'll have to take a number before I'm able to help you," the duck interrupted, and then gestured to the strange dispenser item nearby that had a paper ticket stub sticking out of the bottom of it.

Blinking once, Silver turned around, noting how he and the duck were the only two Mobians in the lobby. He processed the empty sight for a single second, and then turned back to the clerk. "There's nobody else here, though," he whined out in protest.

"..." The duck's thousand-yard stare was uncompromising. Unflinching. Still enough that Silver would think him to be a statue if he hadn't heard him speak prior. It was disturbing enough, in fact, that instead of arguing the point Silver just awkwardly shuffled towards the dispenser. He pulled a ticket out, and then shuffled back

to the desk before softly putting it down on the desk. "Um, here," he politely said.

Not even blinking, the duck picked up the ticket and read the number. He put the ticket down, and then cried out, "Number twenty-three!" Somehow he still sounded like he was on the brink of exhaustion despite yelling out like that.

Awkwardly, and not sure what else to do, Silver raised his hand. "Hello?"

"Hello and welcome to Castle Acorn's Forms & Registrations desk, how may I assist you?" the duck robotically recited in a voice that was completely identical to the first time he said that.

"You... what..." Silver quickly shook the confusion from his mind and calmly asked, "Can I please get a 58-B form, sir?"

"Certainly, sir, of course. Here you go."

Silver didn't like how, barely a moment after the duck finished speaking, he'd already had the form in hand and slapped it right on the desk in front of Silver. He'd even narrowed his eyes at the act, but then let it go and grabbed the nearby pen chained to the desk as he began filling the form out. Not even thirty seconds in he had a question. "Hey, so I'm staying at a friend's house right now so is it okay if I just write down his addre-?"

"The residency address to the domicile currently being inhabited by the applicant of form 58-B must be provided as stated in the directions outlining that requirement."

"But I don't live here, I don't-"

"Oh, then excuse me one moment." Without missing a beat the paper form was snatched right out from in front of Silver. He'd barely managed to let out a cry of "Hey!" before the duck, before Silver's eyes, shredded the form right then and there. His mouth dropped

open, unable to even comprehend the act that had just been perpetrated before him.

"W-why?" he feebly asked once the white hedgehog gathered enough willpower.

The duck readjusted his glasses before speaking. "I'm afraid only citizens are eligible to receive form 58-B. Visiting members of New Mobotropolis require an escort of no less than one guard to accompany them in order to receive form 46-I in order to obtain form 58-B so that form 35-C can be obtained. Foreign dignitaries require no forms in order to seek an audience with the councilors or the king but do require a foreign diplomat visitation badge and express permission from the king." He took a slow, methodical look around and then looked back at Silver. "You have no guard escort."

Why did there have to be so many hoops involved with getting to talk to somebody? It didn't make any sense to Silver; already his patience was thin enough that he wanted to quit right there and just leave. "The future, Silver, think of the future," *he mentally reminded himself, steeling his features and regarding the clerk with newfound resolve. "Is there really no other way to see him?"*

Humming, the duck suggested, "If you applied for citizenship to New Mobotropolis you would eventually be eligible to receive form 58-B directly."

A smile broke out over Silver's face. "Yes, that's perfect! How do I do that!?"

"Sorry, but I can't help you." The smile dropped off Silver's face. "You'll have to go to the Department of Immigration in order to get that sorted."

Even more hoops than before, but this one Silver could at least understand partially. "Okay," he mumbled out, "so where's that?"

He could literally feel his face twitching in irritation when the duck clerk took the plaque off of his desk, and then reached under that very desk to put a new plaque on top of it. Somehow he wasn't surprised to see 'Department of Immigration' stamped on it.

"Hello and welcome to Castle Acorn's Department of Immigration, how may I assist you?"

"... Can I please apply for citizenship?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but due to a recent dispute with a rogue paper shredder any and all documents relating to citizenship application have ceased to exist. Maintenance staff is currently working to rectify the issue. If you have any further questions you'll have to ask them."

Silver groaned. "Okay, fine, then where's the nearest maintenance person that- no, come on don't, please- agh, come on!" he yelled out when, once again, the duck flipped the plaque around so it now read 'Maintenance Manager'.

"Hello and welcome to Castle Acorn's Maintenance Management desk, how may I assist you?"

"How many jobs do you have!?" Silver screamed out. "No, you know what!? Forget it! Can you please just tell me how long it'll take to fix whatever went wrong so that-!?"

Before Silver could continue the duck slid a new sign in the center of the desk that simply had the word 'closed' printed on it. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm on lunch. Please return later if you have any additional questions."

By that point Silver decided to leave before he accidentally crushed that desk with his mind.

"I mean how many one jobs can a single person even have!?" Silver screamed out in frustration, looking ready to tear his own quills out.

"It doesn't make any sense! And the way he acted, it... rrrgh, he spoke in so many circles for no reason!"

Sorun only needed a moment to recognize the person Silver was talking about. "Oh, yeah, I know that guy. That's Dale. He's one of the Mobians that got roboticized for a whole decade 'til that one alien came and fixed all the roboticized Mobians. Rumor has it he was really traumatized from the experience so everyone thinks he works a bunch of jobs to take his mind off it. Elias told me he lets him since he felt bad and needed a bunch of superfluous positions filled that nobody wanted to do."

The explanation served to bring realization to Silver's eyes. And then he grew a sad yet disturbed expression.

"Also he runs the local book club, too," Sorun continued in a completely blasé tone. "I might join it one day. Dunno. Still thinking about it."

A bunch of airy sounds left Silver's mouth that was hanging open. He looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words. Then he shook his head to get rid of whatever mental picture he seemed to have conjured, and then stopped when his normal expression returned. "Right, anyways, after that I went to talk with Antoine and Bunnie..."

"-and so I really need to talk to you two because this is really important and-"

"Ah'll stop ya right there."

When Sorun first told Silver about Bunnie he said she was one of the nicest people he'd ever met. In hindsight it didn't mean all that much, because according to Sorun everyone *in the Freedom Fighters was the nicest person he'd ever met, but after he got slapped by one of those "nice people" for investigating who in their group would eventually turn traitor to end the world he was starting to doubt him.*

The "nicest people" he ever met. Nice people didn't throw people in trash cans.

He was hoping Sorun was only slightly wrong and Bunnie was an exception, and when he'd knocked onto the door to her home and she'd opened the door she'd been smiling. So the hope had been there. But then the hope was lost when her eyes took two seconds to recognize Silver, after which the smiling face turning into a wary face.

But he was new and Silver figured a bit of caution was probably warranted, especially after everything he'd said, so he decided to make his case to her in hopes that she would help. And now she was giving him a really cold scowl.

"So what yer sayin' is, ya think one o' us is gonna end the world," she drawled out. "An' ya don't know which one dunnit. So ya suspect ah'm some monster in disguise that wants tah end the whole world. Or one o' mah friends. Or mah husband. Or even the fella who's lettin' ya live in his home."

Silver shook his head. "No, it couldn't be Sorun. He's not a Freedom Fighter anymore."

("Wow, wait," Sorun interrupted while listening to Silver, "you... denied suspecting *me* but didn't disprove you thinking either she or her husband was a 'monster in disguise that wants to end the world,' Silver? Are you for real?")

("... You think that's why she ended up slamming the door in my face?")

("Gee, man, who knows. Could-coulda been anything, really. I mean, you think so? Could have just interrupted a marital spat between her and Antoine. Can't imagine she'd take offense to that. Being accused of plotting mass murder? Who'd get mad over something like that? Maybe she accidentally burned a pie.")

("I get it, Sorun, I get it...")

(Sorun had doubts Silver actually understood completely, but kept listening regardless.)

The scowl Bunnie was sending Silver became even colder, but for what reason Silver couldn't figure it out. "Not how the rest of us see it, even if he don't fight with us no more."

"Oh. That's, uh... nice of you?" The cold glare didn't subside in the slightest, making Silver nervously gulp. "So can I come in to talk to you and Antoine?"

"No. Get off'a mah lawn."

The answer had come so suddenly and harshly Silver had flinched from it. The mere delivery of it and how bitter the rabbit sounded almost made him shy away, but seeing her close the front door and the knowledge that he was losing his chance managed to keep Silver together. So, slightly alarmed, he jumped forwards and pressed his hand against the door to keep her from closing it.

"Wait, hey, this is really important!" Silver protested. "I know you probably don't want to hear it but I'm serious! One of you-!"

"Get yer hand off the door, friend." He did so, automatically, more because of the dangerous-sounding undertone Bunnie's tone had taken when he stopped her from closing the door. She kept regarding him with that cold look as he stepped back. "Listen', ah get where you're from they probably do things a bit different, but 'round here folks really don't appreciate it if ya start spoutin' nonsense like that 'thout a shred o' proof. 'Specially when ya ain't been here that long."

"You say that like I haven't been researching this for-!"

Bunnie promptly slammed the door in Silver's face before he managed to get another word out.

When Silver had finally gotten around to catching up to Sonic, a feat that was really harder than it ought to have been, he'd explained what the situation actually was to him in the hopes that he'd be of some help. So far it was really feeling like he was in the same mind on the matter as everyone else was, which was attributing to Silver feeling more distressed by the second.

"Alright, lemme get this straight." There was a heavy amount of skepticism on the other hedgehog's face as he leaned back, stretching his arms over his head. He regarded Silver with half-lidded eyes and a small, disinterested frown. "You're convinced one of us is gonna end the world. Even though we're spendin' all our time saving the world. How sure are you about this again?"

"I wouldn't be bringing it up if I wasn't sure, Sonic, and believe me when I say I am pretty sure," Silver stressed out.

"Ah-huh." He didn't look convinced at all. "And, uh, what, what does Sorun have to say about all this?"

"He's... pretty convinced I'm wrong and that it's not one of you, or if it is it's an evil clone or one of you got brainwashed."

"Huh. You know what, that sounds really smart. You should probably listen to the guy." Sonic pivoted around and turned his back to Silver. "Alright, I'm not listenin' to anymore of this. Later-"

"Hey, just listen a second-!"

"No, you *listen." When he rounded back at Silver the skeptical look on Sonic's face was replaced by anger. "I've known all these guys practically my whole life. They're friends. They're family. I'd sooner believe Eggman woke up one morning and decided to be a decent person than believe a single one of 'em would* ever *want to threaten what we've been working our whole lives to save."*

Silver slapped his hands against his own chest. "I know, okay, but I, the guy from the future who knows what happened *, am telling you that-!"*

"Well then tell me who did it."

"Huh?"

"If you're from the future and already know everything then tell me who did it!"

"I don't know who did it!" Silver shouted in frustration. "I wouldn't be here trying to get help if I knew who did it!"

"Then I guess you don't know a whole lot, do you!?" He stomped up to Silver and roughly poked his chest with a finger. "Look, you wanna crash on Sorun's couch and hang around here just to throw a bunch of accusations around at people? Fine, whatever. Do what you want. But I don't care whatever it is you got up to in the future, 'cause I'd bet my life on none of my friends ever doing the things you're saying one did. Which wouldn't be a hard win 'cause you don't even know who did what."

"I-"

"Zip it," Sonic snapped. "I know them, okay? You don't. If something does happen then we'll deal with it like we always do, and you can feel free to help out if that time comes, but I'm not gonna hear this from a guy that's barely been here for a couple weeks. Don't bug me or any of my friends with this again."

After getting the last word out Sonic disappeared, only leaving faint blue speed lines that near-instantaneously faded away into nothing. Silver stuttered out from the sight, having opened his mouth to try and argue the matter with Sonic before he'd sped away, leaving him alone in the middle of the street. Staring forwards at nothing with his mouth hanging out.

"He... he gave me the spare room..."

By the time Silver finished explaining Sorun couldn't help the pity he felt. On the one hand he shouldn't, because he'd warned Silver this was gonna happen. The whole reason he wanted to keep the traitor thing secret was because he saw this outcome coming a mile away, not to mention they were his friends, too, and he was essentially in the same boat as Sonic not thinking it possible any of the Freedom Fighters would turn traitor to end the world of their own consent.

On the other hand Silver was his friend, too, and it left him in the awkward position of having one group of friends hating another friend now because of what he said. The same friend that was probably the only hope for saving the doomed future Sorun had personally seen.

He had a job, dammit, why did he have to deal with this?

"Well, Silver, uh... hm. Yeah." He didn't even have it in him to keep ribbing Silver on his decisions anymore after how today had gone. He just felt plain bad for the guy - Sorun imagined he'd feel as terrible as Silver, too, if he invested a large portion of his life researching in these mythical hero figures and went back in time only for them to yell at him. But then he was reminded of how much it was Silver's fault, and while it lessened the feeling somewhat, he still felt... well, bad for the guy. "So no progress?"

"No. None," Silver sighed out. "Any luck with Tails?"

He could have responded by saying he'd approached Tails in a manner infinitely more tactful than Silver did and walked away without earning any scorn from the fox while simultaneously throwing Silver under the traitor bus the same way he was throwing himself under that very bus. Sorun gave Silver a break and didn't do that. "No."

Silver sunk lower in the couch. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. How am I supposed to save the future when I don't even know what I'm supposed to do to save it? Who I'm supposed to stop, what I'm gonna prevent?"

"..." After grimacing in sympathy Sorun reached forwards and gently shook Silver's knee. He tried his best to put on a reassuring grin, though his face didn't feel very assuring. "Hey, there's always the original plan. Good ol' wait-and-see."

"What, just wait until the traitor's revealed so I can swoop in and help everyone deal with the problem?" Silver sighed again. "I told you I don't like that plan, Sorun. It doesn't leave us any time to prepare. Just to act. There's a whole lot that can go wrong."

"As opposed to doing what?" Sorun asked. "Nobody believes you, so the Freedom Fighters ain't gonna help. At this point I'm pretty much the only guy in the whole world batting for you, and I don't even believe in the traitor thing. And if you wanted to spend time investigating you blew your chances to get close to any of them after this. Wait-and-see's all you got at this point."

It was probably the cold, hard reality of the situation that pressed Silver deeper into Sorun's couch, who was beginning to become slightly worried one of his quills would cause a rip. "I guess you're right." He sat upwards - Sorun was relieved to find the section of couch he was laying on appeared to be fine. "Nothing to do but keep an eye out. I just really hate the idea, though. Feels like I'm just hoping for the best." He curled his knees against his chest and glanced to the side. "It's really frustrating."

"Yeah, I know." Sorun felt himself awkwardly scratching the back of his head once an awkward silence rose up. "You want those french fries now?"

"Didn't you just have lunch?"

"Ah, I mean... that was a while ago. And there's always time for fries." Sorun sat up off the couch and gave Silver a friendly pat on the shoulder. "C'mon, you'll love them. I found this new brand of ketchup at this one organic store in Station Square and I think you'll really like it, it's got this kind of tang at the end of it that..."

Most of whatever else Sorun said was lost on Silver, since by then he'd gone too far into the kitchen for him to hear him properly. He still found himself feeling more at ease despite it all from hearing it. The friendly voice was a nice reminder he still had one best friend to lean on even if things were looking so bad. So it was with a smile he got up from the couch. "Yeah, Sorun, that'd be great."

A/N- I mean, listen, I try toning down how hard Silver goes on the whole "there's a traitor, hur-dur" thing, but this is the same guy that was straight-up attacking people on nothing more than hunches in the comics. There's only so much I can do with that.

Chapter 93

A/N- Alright, here it is. The obligatory beach episode. Look, see, it's even called that.

Also friendly reminder that canon dates are a bit askew because of the way the story went so if questions about age come up, well, there it is. Story's time is a bit ahead of where it's supposed to be in canon despite some events not happening yet. Don't think about it too much, it isn't really that important.

Last I played a lot of Disco Elysium before this so some of that may have accidentally bled into the writing.

Recursion Error

Episode 93- The beach episode

It was one of those days.

Everybody had "one of those days". Days they didn't recount, days they didn't care to try and keep track of, maybe even dreaded when that day's date was coming up. When that one day did come most people did their best to ignore it. Most managed, others didn't, but at the end of the day one of those days was just a day. It'd pass and then it would go back to being business as usual for those experiencing their day so they could just move on with their life. That was the hope, anyways.

For Sorun it was one of those days. A day he'd made the mistake of going through the effort of keeping track of, after juggling around a calendar to line this world's dates up with Earth's. But it was locked in now, so here he was. Sitting on a park bench in the middle of the

park with a bottle of soda clutched in his hand as he stared up at the morning sky.

"Here's to you, you shitty old man. Fuck you." Raising the bottle up to the sky, Sorun slammed it back and drank half the contents right there. Of all the things that managed to be preserved from the old world, thank goodness cola was one of them. He'd shake the hand of that Mobian that rediscovered the coveted drink if he ever found them. Or if they were even still alive.

... Nah, on second thought, that sounded like a lot of work.

Things would be alright. He'd finish the soda, walk somewhere, he didn't know where, just anywhere, carry on with the rest of his day and then tomorrow would get here and he'd get to stop thinking about it. Hopefully he could do all that before Nicole found him. Which would take all of a second if she put actual effort into looking for him. But he liked his odds.

He rose the bottle back to his lips. Yep, it was smooth sailing from here. No need to dwell on-

"Hey Sorun guess whose birthday it is!"

"Blegh!" The precious cola was sprayed out of Sorun's mouth in a fine mist to prevent him from accidentally choking on it in surprise. Past the quickly-fading rainbow formed from the mist he saw Sonic, the culprit responsible for sneaking up on him and startling him, all with that stupid grin plastered on his face. But none of that was important because Sorun was panicking over the words he just heard. "WHAT, WHO, HOW!? WHO TOLD YOU HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY KNOW!?"

God fucking dammit who leaked it, he never even told anyone he swore to god when he found out who the hell did it he was gonna kill them-

"Uh... well, I've known Sally since I was five," Sonic slowly began, the smirk being swapped out for a confused face. Sorun froze and reflexively sucked his own lips into his mouth. "So she, you know, told me? When she turned six? Along with all our other friends? And we just... sorta remembered? Like normal friends?"

Sorun's lips folded back out of his mouth. "Oh it's Sally's birthday, alright, yeah, good for her. Cool," he rasped out, throat surprisingly dry at the moment. "So she's seventeen now?"

"Eighteen," he corrected.

"Ah. Whole two years older, huh? Ain't you still sixteen?"

Sonic rolled his eyes away from Sorun and crossed his arms. He looked annoyed now. "I mean, we used to be the same age 'til my whole space trip sent me ten months ahead. I come back and suddenly everyone's a year older than I remember."

"Rough." Sorun tipped the glass bottle over and peered through the neck. A single drop of cola dripped out of the empty bottle. "So she got a big party or something planned for you guys?"

Sonic looked back at Sorun, looking a bit surprised. "Uh, us. As in, all of us plus you."

"Could just buy another. Two sodas in one day never killed anyone and it's a special occasion- wait, what?" Blinking a few times, Sorun switched his attention from the bottle to Sonic. "I'm... I'm invited, too?" he asked. "Why?"

"'Cause you're a Freedom Fighter?" The way he said that made Sonic sound more confused than Sorun did at the moment.

"I mean, not really," Sorun said as he lowered the bottle from being raised above his head. "I carry boxes and stuff from point A to B. I don't fight stuff like you guys anymore; I got a job. I pay taxes and buy my own groceries. And then I have to make a second trip

because Nicole frets over my lack of vitamins from not getting vegetables. So then I go buy the vegetables but I'm really just feeding them to Silver so she thinks I'm eating them. Please don't tell Nicole any of this," Sorun pleaded when he saw Sonic's wide-eyed stare. "I take vitamins I bought at Station Square, I swear, I just really don't want to eat the vegetables."

"Yeah, sure, whatever." Sonic waved his hands in a reassuring manner. "But listen, back to that first thing. 'Course you're still one of us. Once a Freedom Fighter always a Freedom Fighter, y'know? Just 'cause you're not out there with us anymore doesn't change that."

It was one of those awkward situations where, once again, Sorun was touched beyond words but the person who said those words wasn't Nicole so he couldn't show it. So it lead to the situation of Sorun just blankly staring at Sonic, inwardly cringing at his own reaction but lamenting he was too far in to back out now. It was better than admitting how endearing the words were and how much it meant to him.

"You okay? Sorun?" Mildly concerned but mostly just weirded out, Sonic waved a hand in front of his face. "You're spacin' out on me, man, what's going on?"

Sorun straightened up a bit and cleared his throat. "Ah, nothing. All is fine, everything is... fine. All fine." Absentmindedly tapping his fingernails against the bottle, Sorun asked, "So is there just gonna be a party or something in the castle?"

"Actually, I don't have a clue what she's planning," Sonic admitted with a shrug. "She asked me to find you, actually. She wants to talk about it for some reason, I dunno."

He seemed to find it odd from the way Sonic said it, and to Sorun it seemed odd, too. But the request itself seemed reasonable enough regardless, and Sorun was interested. It was a distraction he needed, anyways. "Oookay. I'll head there right now," he said. And

then he looked down at the glass bottle in his hand, and then reared it back getting ready to throw it.

... And then he realized what he was doing and got out of the throwing stance, bottle still in hand.

"Right, can't do that anymore. Need to find a recycling bin," he muttered out. Sonic saw the small exchange, and one of his ears flicked in curiosity.

"Sorun, don't tell me people in your old home just threw empty bottles everywhere," he said in a joking and pleading voice.

The hedgehog wilted a bit when Sorun nodded. "Broken glass was a really bad safety hazard in Detroit," he admitted.

"Yeah, but *you* didn't contribute to it, right?"

"... Listen, I'm a responsible citizen now. What does it matter? Nobody ever even bothered to clean out that scrapyard."

"Okay, okay," Sonic chuckled out nervously, holding his hands up. "Look, if you want I can just take care of that for you so you can just head straight to the castle, how about that?"

Another endearing moment Sorun fought not to fawn over. Instead he simply just handed Sonic the bottle. "That'd be great actually, yeah, thank you."

"Sooo... eighteen. The big one-eight." Sorun clicked his tongue and tapped on his knees a few times. He was forced to readjust himself slightly - this couch had so much padding on it he was genuinely worried his whole body would sink into the thing. He didn't know how Sally wasn't having the same problem since she was sitting right next to him. "It's two less than twenty, you know."

"I'm pretty familiar with math," Sally lightheartedly replied, though she was giving Sorun a perplexed look. "You okay? You're kind of acting weird."

"Never better, never better, it's all good," he assured her.

She blinked at him and gave him an odd look, but then shrugged and drank out from the glass of water she'd been holding. "You sure you don't want something to drink?" she asked after finishing.

"It's all good, it's all good, never better." She gave him another odd look. "So, birthday, big birthday, big birthday plans, what's your plan, why am I here, why am I involved in these big birthday plans?"

Instead of answering immediately she continued to regard him silently with that questioning look. She slowly put the glass down on the small table in front of them. A really ornamental table with gold fittings. Out of everything else in what looked like a meeting room in the castle Sally had invited him in to it was probably the most extravagant piece if furniture in here. Aside from this couch attempting to swallow Sorun.

Seriously, what did they pad this thing with? His hands kept disappearing into the cushions.

"I wanted to ask you a favor in regards to..." Sally slowed down when she saw Sorun adjust himself for the fifth time in the last twenty seconds. "Sorun, do you want to sit somewhere else?"

The latest position featured Sorun sitting in a way that he was facing Sally and with his legs crossed. Seemed to be stable so far - he wasn't sinking at a rate that made it look like Sally was growing. "Nah, I think I finally figured it out," he assured her. "Oh, uh, congrats, by the by. You know, for surviving eighteen years."

She smiled for the first time since greeting him after he entered the castle. "Well, thank you, but you don't have to say it in such a macabre way. My brother complains that you do that a lot." She

twirled a lock of red hair between her fingers and glanced towards a nearby window. "It doesn't really feel all that different. There's a bunch of traditions members of my family were supposed to do at these times, but with everything I barely ever got to participate in many of them throughout my life. But my father was the only one who ever enforced those and he... well..."

Sorun shifted his legs so the other one was sitting above the previous. "He's still not doing well?"

She grew a somber face. "He... can't really speak anymore. Mom's spending most of her time looking after him, but. Well. You know..."

"Mm." Old age - the oldest and most reliable killer there was. Sorun wanted to make a snide comment, but held off in light of it being Sally's birthday. And her dad, too, he supposed. "Didn't mean to bring the mood down."

Sally waved his concerns off. "It's fine," she said, a bit of her smile returning. "So, listen. We haven't been able to do much because Eggman and his Legion went quiet due to us all pushing them back. Again. So we're all just waiting around on standby."

Sorun nodded along. "Following."

"So this is happening and... well, a lot's just happened in the last year," Sally said. "Pretty much the whole world's liberated now, we got the new city, things are finally going fine for everyone, and in light of all this we all figured it was a good time to celebrate. Even if it seems a bit premature. I think everyone just capitalized on my birthday as an excuse to celebrate something," she remarked with a small grin.

"Naturally."

"And to that end we all just decided to hold a small get-together. In recognition for everything that's happened and just to celebrate. Just us Freedom Fighters. And Knuckles, too, since he and the rest of the

gang on the island have been with us through a large part of all of this. They're coming, too. It'll be nice. All of us hanging out like old times without some massive, giant threat looming over our heads, you know?"

Oh, Sorun knew, all right. He'd been living the stress-free dream of not having to worry about all the heavy stuff for a while now and it was sweet. "I can get behind that," Sorun said. "Plus what you guys do is important. You should totally just take a moment to yourselves-"

"Ourselves. You're coming too, remember?" Sally interrupted. "You're still one of us, Sorun. We wouldn't be having this conversation if we didn't think so."

There was that warm feeling again that Sorun had to hide by shifting positions on the couch once more while looking away. "Yeah, well... I got the time, so I'll go." He had a hard time keeping up his indifferent composure when he saw Sally beam a smile at him. "But why'd you need to talk to me about it like this? You could have just come to my house."

"Oh, that." Sorun looked back at her in interest when Sally's expression suddenly became mildly sheepish. "So... way back in the day during one of our operations we found this one island, right?"

"Ah-huh." He nodded along.

"It's a really nice place, remote, large beach, I remember it being really great," Sally continued. She was twiddling her fingers as a distraction. "We all want to go there, half because it's nice and half because of where it is in the world it'll be morning in a few hours so we'll have a whole day to enjoy there."

"Ah-huh..." Sorun started smirking in amusement because he saw where this was going. It was a reaction Sally caught, which made her twiddle harder.

"And what with it being so far away and Angel Island currently being in an inconvenient spot I just wanted to ask if you just transport us all there? With your sword?"

"Ah-hah, I see." It was allll clear now. The nice invitation to the castle, buttering him up with all these nice words and this impractically soft couch. And of course he would do it, but more importantly than that the door to teasing just now was opened and Sorun would be a fool not to capitalize on it. "You never call, you never write-"

"We live in the same town," Sally dryly commented.

"-rarely visit," Sorun revised, "I mean I get you're all so busy with the Freedom Fighter stuff and this is the first time you've had some time off in a while, but... but I thought we were friends. But now it just seems like you only ever give me the time of day because I have this super convenient katana thing. It's almost hurtful."

She made a small sort of chuckle. "Come on, Sorun, it's not nice to tease. And you know it's hard to find time when we're both living in different circles now."

A bit of dissatisfaction grew in Sorun. Was always hard to get things past Sally - nigh impossible, almost. Not like her brother where it was so easy Sorun probably should have felt bad doing it. She was too "people smart". People genius, even, in the same way Tails was a mechanical genius, or Honey a fashion genius, or Sorun a gaming genius. Or Nicole being a genius in general.

"Really should have been you holding the crown," Sorun off-handedly muttered, sounding a bit bitter over his teasing being seen through. Sally grinned wider, and whether it was because of his remark or his mood, Sorun didn't know.

"It's something Elias and I talk about," she admitted. The grin dimmed somewhat. "He's entertained the idea of stepping down to pass the crown to me one day in the future. Even if the position's

power is diminished from an active council, it's still the highest position in government now. We... don't really want to talk about it so much with dad still around," she added. The grin faded altogether. "He's a serious traditionalist and the change of a monarchy to a republic... well, the stress didn't do wonders for his health."

"So what, you're waiting for him to pass before you start swapping the crown around like a hat?"

Sally flinched at the wording. "I wouldn't put it *quite* like that," she said, "but... it'd make things in our family easier, yes." She made a small sigh. "Our mother isn't as set in the matter as our father, but with his health and me being busy with the Freedom Fighters along with everyone else, it's just not a good time. The people need a leader and there's only so much a single person can do at once. Maybe one day, after we win. But I think my brother's doing a fine enough job that I'm not really worried about it."

He didn't have much more to add. It seemed like sensible enough reasoning and he agreed with her wholeheartedly. "Alright. Now, moving away from that dour stuff..." he started, "I have always wanted to go to the beach. To have fun. Not-" He pushed the memory of drunkenly crashing a plane out of his head, "-for any other reason than the one I just stipulated, nope."

The bright smile returned to Sally's face. "That's great! And, say... since we're on the subject, when's your birthday?"

Red alert. Deflect it. Deflect it right now. "Kind of a weird thing to bring up out of nowhere, ain't it?"

"Not... really? We were talking about my birthday, I'm asking about a birthday, seems pretty related." Instead of answering Sorun silently stared, making Sally shake her head. "Fine, don't tell her I said this, but... Nicole's been trying to figure it out." Sorun felt himself still as Sally continued with, "It's just that you've been here for over three-quarters of a year and she's a bit worried she'll miss it. It doesn't help you've never talked about it."

"Ah. Well ain't that a thing?" He probably should have figured something like this would happen, but for the most part he'd been ignoring the possibility in hopes that it would kind of just go away on its own. By and large that was still Sorun's strategy and at this point he was hoping Sally would drop it really soon so they could get back onto another topic.

"So...?" Sally hedged, seemingly awaiting a response.

Evidently she wasn't dropping it. "So what?"

"So are you gonna tell her when it is?"

No. He wouldn't tell anyone. He wouldn't tell Sally right now because for all he knew this was some sort of convoluted plot she concocted with Nicole and the AI was listening in from somewhere. Or more realistically she'd just tell her later. Either event was a disaster Sorun couldn't abide.

To that end Sorun did the thing he was reasonably good at: continue to deflect. "I don't think today's really an appropriate day to be talking about something like this. It's your birthday, it's your day. Shouldn't have me crampin' it."

"I wouldn't go that far." She tried to make light of the reasoning, but all the same still looked off-put by his words. She seemed to shake the mood off after a brief moment. "She cares about you a lot, you know. She just wants to do something nice to make you feel more welcome when it gets here."

"Yeah. I know." Part of why the situation sucked so much. He'd usually just consider lying about it but Nicole was the one person he didn't really want to do that to, so... back to hoping the situation would just go away on its own. Which it probably wouldn't. Eh, he'd wing it if it ever became a problem. "I'll talk to her about it. One day." Probably. If she remembered.

... Ah, dammit, she always remembered.

"I'm glad to hear it." She smiled "So you've never went to one in your old home? A beach?"

"... There was a beach in Detroit. I never went." Sorun's face soured. "Except for that one stupid contest at the youth center next to the beach my mom and Dave's parents dragged us to. But other than that, no, I never went personally."

"How come?"

Because how the hell was he supposed to grind experience points out on a beach? "Just never found a good opportunity," Sorun said, shrugging. He smiled a bit. "But no, I'd like this. I'd like to have fun on the beach with you all. And hey, it'll be nice seeing the gang from the floating island place again. I haven't seen them since... I said goodbye to everyone before trying to go back to Earth." Sorun frowned a bit. "And then I never saw them again until I almost died again and you all shoved me in the giant glowing crystal..." He frowned deeper and looked Sally in the eyes. "Um... did, did you guys ever, like, tell them? What happened with me? And Earth? Because it kind of looked like everyone assumed I did leave and acted surprised I was there. Shadow was freaking out."

The first thing Sally did was awkwardly cough. Not a good sign. Then her eyes darted away from Sorun's as she said, "Well... the truth is nobody was really sure how to handle it. A good time to explain things never came up before... you know."

"Do they at least know I'm fine now?" Sorun pressed. "I vanished after going in the Master Emerald. Do they all still think I'm vanished?"

He felt a bit relieved when Sally shook her head. "No, we explained things. After," she elaborated, "when you came back. They know."

"It's still gonna be super awkward," Sorun muttered out in lament. He rubbed his face a bit, letting out a small sigh as it dropped back to

his side. "Ah, well, nothing to do about it, I guess. But hey, since they're coming I can bring my houseguest, right?"

Sally froze. Not in the "I'm surprised you asked that" kind of way, but more in the "I need a polite and tactful way to handle this" kind of way when somebody needed a moment to think. For Sally it took less than a moment for her to find the response she'd been looking for, but Sorun had still noticed the pause. "Well, Sorun, I... suppose your pet Chao *did* help out with that one mission at Station Square, so technically he could be construed as an... honorary Freedom Fighter of sorts, so yes. I suppose he could. As long as you keep him away from Sonic; the two don't get along."

Sorun blinked suspiciously at Sally. "Uh... I know he's kind of dumb, but I wouldn't really refer to Silver as a pet-"

"Okay I tried to be nice about this but I'm just gonna say it," Sally interrupted, bluntly. "No. He can't come."

"A-ah, I see." Well that was disheartening to hear. He couldn't say he was surprised, but he hadn't expected to hear it laid out so raw. By Sally of all people. Maybe he really did underestimated how much damage Silver did. "Is this about the traitor thing-?"

"It's about the fact it's a gathering for Freedom Fighters and he's not a Freedom Fighter, Sorun." She crossed her arms, glowering not at Sorun, but seemingly at the mere thought of Silver, which couldn't have been a good sign. "But since you brought it up, yes, Sorun, it's because of that, too. I don't take kindly to the insinuation either I or one of the friends I've spent nearly my whole life with, who I'd *trust* my life with, are secretly plotting to undermine everything we've spent our lives fighting for." She looked like she was getting angrier from mentally reliving Silver's questioning. "And he was saying all that with, with such a carefree expression! Like he didn't even care-!"

"He cares," Sorun very carefully corrected, hoping to calm Sally down, "he's just, well, I don't wanna say emotionally stunted 'cause he's not, but, uh... he doesn't have a lot of practice with people. I

mean he was raised by Mogul and never had contact with anyone else besides some weirdo hermit before he met me, what do you expect?"

The name "Mogul" made Sally freeze, and slowly she turned towards him with narrowed eyes. "The mammoth. *That* Mogul?" The name sounded icy coming out of Sally's mouth.

"Y-yeah?"

"The one who tried to usurp the old kingdom by taking a family artifact from me? The one who sent mercenaries against the Freedom Fighters? The one who kidnapped Tails and sent a clone to replace him for months? *The one we were keeping in jail before he escaped* ?"

Okay he forgot about the body snatcher part. Goddamn. "Uh... to be fair it seemed like he chilled out after living in an apocalypse for a couple centuries. Or maybe being a dad mellowed him out, who knows?"

She didn't even seem to hear that. "You're saying that same Mogul is the one that raised Silver?"

"I'm starting to regret having revealed this information, but yes. It was that guy." Sorun gulped and nervously tapped his knee. "I feel like this isn't helping you trust him."

"No, the opposite, actually," Sally stated through her scowl. "I'm starting to wonder if we should even have him in the city."

"Hey, come on." Slightly alarmed, Sorun uncrossed his legs and sat up straight on the couch to give Sally a serious look. "I know Silver's kind of an anti-social weirdo, but so was I! You never kicked me out for being weird!"

"You weren't raised by a villain!"

"Ehhh- forget it, look, he's a good guy," Sorun said, though Sally didn't look like she believed him. "I mean I'll admit it, flat-out, he's stupid when it comes to a lot of societal cues, but it's not his fault! If anything he came out really well for where he came from! It's almost a miracle when you think about it!"

"Sorun-"

"Look I know he screwed up with you all, it's fine if none of you like him, I get it, but you can't just throw him out! He doesn't have anywhere else to go and I'm not entirely convinced he'd make it out there on his own!"

"Sorun," Sally repeated, a bit more forcefully. He quieted down and listened as she spoke. "Listen, I'll concede the fact he actually hasn't done anything illegal. Wrong's another matter, but... ugh." She made a small groan and pinched the space between her eyes. "I just don't want to think about him today, Sorun. It's supposed to be a day to celebrate, not think about your friend Silver and everything surrounding him. And I know he's your friend, but... he just can't come, Sorun, not after what he did."

He would concede the fact that it'd be a big mood killer to bring Silver, who pretty much everyone saw in a negative light. It didn't stop him from feeling a bit disappointed, though. Even a bit guilty, knowing how he'd be going to a fun party while pretty much just leaving him behind. Knowingly. Especially since he doubted Silver had never been to a beach part before and would have really liked it.

There was a small shuffle from Sally. She seemed to grow a bit uncomfortable at the sudden sullen face Sorun had. "It's not all that bad, Sorun. It just a day."

"Yeah... I know."

The response didn't sound encouraging, and it made Sally frown a bit. Then her eyes lit up at realizing something. "You know..." she began with a small grin, "Nicole's going to the beach along with the

rest of us. We're bringing the handheld and a supply of Power Rings."

Silver didn't exist anymore. He never did. Large parts of the world itself fell out of Sorun's worldview when the full weight of that sentence hit him. It was like a switch being flicked so violently the switch itself was torn straight out of its housing. Nothing in the whole damn universe existed except for the single thought racing through Sorun's head:

"Nicole. The beach. The beach. Nicole. Nicole at the beach. The beach and Nicole. The beach. And Nicole. The beach. Nicole. The beach. Nicole. The beach-"

"Well, Sally, when you say it like that I guess there's only one responsible thing to do."

"Silver I'm going somewhere with the Freedom Fighters. Won't be back 'til tomorrow. Also I'm taking Virgil so you got the house to yourself 'til we get back."

"... Huh?" From the couch he was sitting on Silver seemed to find the news unexpected, which was to be expected. Then again he may have been off put from that having been the first thing Sorun said when he entered the house, wearing nothing but a t-shirt and shorts, but he pressed on regardless.

"Yeah, it's this, uh..." Well he couldn't go and call it a party now, could he? Not without hurting Silver's feelings. Since he couldn't come. "It's a little get-together the Freedom Fighters are doing for old times' sake. And I was one so I got invited. Tried to get you in but they said no."

"That's fine?" He either didn't understand the gravity of what was going on, which was good, or didn't care that much, which was just a tiny bit sad for Sorun to consider. His white-furred head turned a bit

to the side to glance at the small, floating creature next to Sorun's side. "But your pet gets to go?"

"Virgil was an indispensable ally in that one mission we did that one time," Sorun explained. "He helped me cut up a giant robot scorpion thing and then I beat up a really small and sad man."

"Chao." The intimidating-looking Chao nodded his head in approval as the single-syllable word was said in his deep, wispy voice. More than likely both in being recognized for his efforts and that Sorun committed an act of violence.

The expression Silver was giving painted him as being ambivalent overall to the news, which made Sorun feel a bit more at ease with the situation as he retreated to the house's kitchen. Mature as Silver was he didn't want him to feel down being explicitly told he couldn't come, but he seemed to be handling it fine enough. Likely due to Sorun downplaying the event itself. Or he probably just did accept he wasn't welcome and learned to live with it, which would be the best path overall, but he was locked in enough Sorun was willing to let what was happening already ride.

After retrieving the Chaos Emerald from its resting place in the kitchen sink, he retreated to the living room to address Silver one last time before he and Virgil departed. Still looked ambivalent, fortunately, bordering uncaring, if not a bit surprised from how sudden this was. "Anyways since we're all going you're officially the strongest person in the whole city. I really doubt anything'll happen and even if it does Nicole set the automated defenses for the city up so nobody can even get in, but, erm... yeah on second thought don't worry about anything, just chill out 'til I get back."

"All I do here is 'chill out'," Silver said. "I don't have anything else to do between trying to nail down the whole 'hey the entire future's on the line' thing I have going on."

"Well if it makes you feel better I'll ask around *a bit* about it since they'll all be there and they actually like me." No he wouldn't. The lie

brightened Silver up a bit, though. "Doubt anything'll come of it, though." And now he looked a bit sad again. "Look man, seriously. Take a break and destress. Read a book or something, I dunno, I got-" he glanced over at the sparsely-populated book shelf nearby, "-some over there. Or go out to lunch. Geez, I'll even leave you some money to eat out for dinner if you want."

"It's not that." He tried to look gloomy, but there was a small flicker of a grateful look Sorun managed to catch. "It's... you know, it's hard sitting still knowing all this and how much pressure there is. I just wish I knew how you manage to stay calm all the time knowing the same stuff I know. Like right now," he said, gesturing to Sorun. "I'm not blaming you for going out to do something, but you're... you're always just not bothered by anything. Kind of wish I could keep it as cool as you."

Well, Sorun would concede that was mostly due to the fact he internalized a lot of his feelings and he was an utter jackass, but he could still see Silver's point. "I mean, I get it. Don't get me wrong I get it. But it's times like this I need to go and do this because it has something extremely important going on and I will never be able to focus on anything ever again if I don't witness it."

Silver arched an eye ridge. "And... what, exactly, is so important you can't do anything else?"

"Nicole. The beach. Nicole. The beach. Nicole. The beach. Nicole. The beach-"

"Look, you gotta stop worrying about things like 'what' or 'who' or other unimportant details like that," Sorun said, sitting down next to Silver while draping an arm over his shoulders. "Some things in life are just too important. Arguably more important than food and water."

"What, like breathing?"

"Even *more* important than air." He shook Silver's shoulders with his arm and then bounded back up to his feet. "And so! I must go accomplish this great feat," he said, shifting the blue gem into his katana. "And you must do something else to occupy your time, don't care what, just relax. We're bouncing." He nodded his head to Virgil. "Come along, Virgil. The beach awaits."

"Chao."

Nodding again, Sorun split apart space behind them with a single swipe of his sword. Virgil didn't waste any time flying through. Before he crossed through Sorun turned to give Silver one last look, and then waved at him. "Bye, have fun."

"Wait, you're going to the beach?" Silver's question wasn't answered because by then Sorun had already left through the portal he'd created. And almost as soon as he left it closed, leaving Silver completely alone in the living room. He slumped further into the couch. "I... I would have liked to go to the beach..."

The beach.

Compared to the last time Sorun went to one there was a lot less stress going through his system. The lack of a burning pile of wreckage, a monument to everything wrong with his life back when his life was in shambles, was a good improvement. And the island itself was... eh, big. Maybe two, three times bigger than the dinky little island he got stranded on that one time during the plane incident that was in no way his fault.

But that was all secondary to the beach, which was, as Sorun stood there looking over it... well, a beach. That was about it. Was nice enough.

He looked behind him. All the others were there setting up a veritable pile of *stuff* that had been brought over from New Mobotropolis to

further enhance the Beachtime Experience. Mostly just some folding chairs, containers for food and drinks, other miscellaneous items.

It was all very nice. Being here with everyone, doing this. Having a sense of belonging and being allowed to just relax. It'd be the perfect experience, too, if Sorun weren't standing there clutching Yamato in his hands in a fit of nervousness as he looked down at his feet.

"So you, uh... you gonna go get 'em now? 'Cause they're waiting." He didn't even look over at Sonic, who sounded a bit impatient with Sorun at the moment. He was doing that thing where he crossed his arms and tapped his foot rapidly, which was already creating a small crater in the sand. "We told them you were gonna portal them over, Sorun, come on."

"It's just been a while since I've seen them and a lot's happened," Sorun said. It was understandable to be nervous. Not overly anxious, but the sensation was still there. "I mean I saw Knuckles that one time, but what about the rest? It's gonna be awkward. I don't do awkward."

The look Sonic gave him was skeptical at best. "I really don't think they're gonna care all that much, man. You're thinking about this way too hard."

Nonsense. He never did that. "If you say so, I guess." Sighing, Sorun swung the sword through the air, cutting a blue cross shape in the space in front of them which folded into a portal. And then Sorun promptly turned around and walked away a little bit. "Well, there it is, go fetch them," he said, giving a small wave to Sonic as he passed.

"Seriously? Really, Sorun?" The flat look sent his way didn't slow Sorun down in the slightest. It made Sonic sigh and shake his head, though he still turned towards the portal right after to walk through. Sorun didn't pay much attention; amongst all the Freedom Fighters setting up the Beachtime Experience stuff was Nicole sitting in one of the folding chairs, fiddling around with the handheld she was really

in. He had more of a desire to go and talk to her than to greet the people that would inevitably come out of that portal, though alas...

The sensation of air and space rapidly being displaced behind him; something coming close. Eyes flashing green, world coming into focus. Blood rushing and making everything become clear. Muscles tensing. *"Dodge it."*

"SORUN!"

He dodged it. The black and yellow object zoomed past Sorun after he quickly sidestepped it. He saw who it was and the world sped back up to uncomfortable levels. Eyes returned to blue as the blood slowed, muscles went lax, and everything returned to the sluggish levels of painfully normal.

The entire event barely took three seconds.

"Huh?" Sorun blinked and looked down at his feet. There was a deep groove cared into the sand about half a meter long from where he'd dodged, and a small frown wormed its way onto his face. *"That movement... it's getting worse."*

He tried his best to relax his face and looked up. He'd never admit to missing Charmy. Maybe to Nicole if it was in private and she asked. He was one of those people that brightened up the room. But he couldn't abide getting tackle-hugged from behind in spite of that. He had standards. And Charmy wasn't Nicole.

It didn't stop the bee from zooming forwards to try again.

Sorun sighed, left hand holding the sword while his right swung freely. That *urge* was easier to keep a handle on when he knew what the fast-approaching object was and that it wasn't dangerous. Fast things triggered it sometimes and it was getting harder to get a grip with it. But it was an issue he pushed to the back of his mind like always so it wouldn't bother him, and afterwards he rose his right

hand forwards so his hand caught Charmy in the chest when he tried tackling him again.

"Now, now. It's rude to try and commit sneak attacks like that," Sorun jokingly remarked. "Hey Charmy, been a while. Don't, uh... please stop trying to do that."

He acquiescence and relented, thankfully, and silently Sorun breathed a sigh of relief as he allowed his hand to rest back at his side. Charmy still had that goofy grin on his face regardless. "Sorry, Sorun, but it's been so long!"

"Yeah, it's been a hot minute." He glanced over at the portal. Sonic thankfully had guided the rest of the Chaotix team through the portal. They were good people; looked like they were already having a great time. Of course when Sorun's gaze wandered over to Knuckles he couldn't help his eyes sticking on him for a moment longer. Couldn't help feeling something stir in him, couldn't help seeing a golden helmet superimpose itself over his head for a single frame of time. The moment passed and it was just Knuckles again, and Sorun breathed a bit easier.

The fingernails on his right hand felt itchy looking at Knuckles.

At some point Charmy had grabbed at Sorun's hand and was dragging him towards the group, chattering on about something. He smiled, nodding along and pretending like he'd been listening the whole time while silently berating himself for zoning out like that.

"Ah-huh. Ah-huh, yeah. Oh?" He felt a bit bad, stringing the bee along like that, but Sorun felt it was more polite than flat-out admitting he'd ignored him, even accidentally. "So how has life on the island been?" Smooth. Divert the conversation along a path Sorun could follow. Detract from the fact he hadn't heard.

"Oh, it's been great!" Charmy sounded happy enough, so he couldn't have noticed. Good. "We still travel down from time to time to help with Eggman, but otherwise everything has been going great!"

"Chill, chill." He'd been dragged right to the others. It'd been so long since he'd seen them that he barely... well alright, no, they looked the exact same from the last time he saw them. It was still nice all the same. "Hey, all," Sorun greeted, giving a small wave.

"Hey, you!" When Mighty gave his own friendly greeting by way of a shoulder pat, Sorun was pretty sure he'd felt the sand underneath his feet vibrate from the force of the impact. He'd been worried about holding in the wince, but to his surprise he didn't need to put in the effort. It didn't hurt as much as it should have. "Man, it's been so long!" the armadillo continued. "Like, wow, we all thought you left and you didn't and..." The smile started to trail off of Mighty's face. "Then, uh, then the others said what happened with you and, uh-"

"Hey, hey, hey, come on, now, none of that," Sorun said. "It's supposed to be a good time we're all having, isn't it? None of that sad stuff. It's fine."

"See? I told you he'd be fine!" This time when a reassuring arm found itself over Sorun's shoulders it'd slammed down with enough force that Sorun felt his feet sink into the sand. And this time he'd *really* felt this one, right alongside the realization that he hadn't missed Vector nearly as much as all the rest of them. "What'd I tell you, solid as a rock this guy!"

"Yeah..." Maybe he could have a bit of fun. It was supposed to be one of those events, after all. "You guys still don't have financial troubles since you live up on Angel Island, do you, Vector?"

When he looked up, had to crane his neck back, really, Vector, who Sorun still thought had an unusually expressive face for a crocodile, looked down at Sorun in confusion. "Whatchu talkin' 'bout, Sorun?"

"Sonic didn't tell you about my rates?" Sorun asked, feigning mock surprise. "I make a living teleporting stuff around, since, you know, it's such a convenient thing only I can do. I get complaints from couriers for stealing work from them. And even with the friends

discount I gave you all it's gonna be two hundred mobiums for a round trip." A pause. "Each."

Vector stiffened stiffer than a statue. If he looked closely Sorun could almost see the green color draining out of his scales and took a small sort of delight out of it. All of the others were in similar states of shock. Even Espio, who should have been the most composed out of all of them, looked visibly sick. Like he was about to throw up on the sand.

Ray was the first one to speak up. "I-i-i-isn't that a b-bit high?"

Shrugging off Vector's frozen arm and stepping back a bit, Sorun scratched the back of his head. "Is it? Because that discount I waved your guys' way scratched off ninety percent of the overall cost. I'm being generous here."

"IT'S STILL TWO HUNDRED WITH NINETY PERCENT OFF!? YOU'RE CHARGIN' A RACKET!" Vector bellowed out. "It's highway robbery! And to us, of all people! I take it back, you're just as cold as I remember you!"

It was with supreme self-control and discipline that Sorun managed to keep from chortling, or even so much as grinning from the display he was seeing. A feat not so easy from the amount of amusement he was seeing before him. Alas, somebody had to come along and ruin the fun. Even went as far as to grab his ear like a strict mother would do to a misbehaving child.

"Guys, relax, Sorun's just having a bit of fun with you all," Sally assured them with a lighthearted grin. A grin that seemed a lot less sincere when she turned her head to Sorun and tugged harshly at his ear. "Because in no way is Sorun seriously *charging* for this kind of thing, right?"

This time he couldn't hold back the wince of pain, but he was less upset at that and more at his fun being ruined. He got over it a second later, rolling his eyes and waving Sally's hand away from

him. "Yes, I'm kidding around. You guys get the full hundred discount. This time," he assured them. And then paused when he turned and saw all eight of them slumping down with so much relief that he could have sworn they were about to pass out. "Um... you guys are still bad off, huh?"

Espio was the one that answered. "Our efforts dedicated towards protecting our home isn't the most prosperous of efforts. Mainly due to the fact there's no longer any major infrastructure on the island and no one to pay us," he informed. "We appreciate you waving any fees charged for your usual services for our sake, Sorun."

"I mean I just wave a piece of metal around in the air a bit, it ain't all that much effort. But you're welcome for being the most generous person you'll ever meet in your entire life, Espio."

Once again he found an arm slamming over his shoulders. It was Sally's arm this time. And she put a lot of effort in because he almost doubled over from how hard she slammed the arm on him. "You know what, Sorun, I think I should catch up with the rest of the Chaotix while you go do something else, what do you say?"

"Didn't you go on a mission with them all like three days ago?" Pressure from the arm was increasing. Shoulders were feeling like they were about to fall off. The argument was lost and Sorun took three steps back. "I see your point, though, I'll get out of your hair."

The only response given was a sickly sweet smile from Sally. With a roll of his eyes and a scoff, Sorun turned away as he heard the nine Mobians behind him begin to converse. Sorun, the sole human on this entire island, wandered a few steps down the beach with his eyes glancing around towards the one sole AI on the island. Alas, Nicole wasn't sitting down where he'd seen her last. And he couldn't find her by sweeping his eyes around the immediate vicinity.

With his girlfriend nowhere and sight and motivation temporarily plummeting, Sorun found himself collapsing into a sitting position on

the sand. He huffed out a defeated breath, but then felt his ears perk up when he heard a soft, scratching sound nearby.

"Hm?" He looked towards the source of the noise, but lost all interest completely when he saw it was just Tails sitting in the sand. Drawing something with his finger. Which actually did serve to draw a bit of Sorun's interest, and after evaluating that he didn't have much better to do at this exact moment, he scooched over so that he was sitting next to him.

"Is this *work* I see here, Tails?" Sorun accused, moving over so that he was shoulder-to-shoulder with the fox. "During a sacred beach trip? Have you no shame?"

"Hey, Sorun." Tails didn't even so much as look up from whatever he was drawing in the sand with his finger, but a small smile did grow on his mouth. "It's not work. I'm just trying to figure out what to do about the sandcastle."

"Sandcastle?" Sorun repeated in a murmur, craning his head down a bit lower to look. Indeed, the diagram in the sand was that of a castle. A really intricate 3-D rendition of an otherwise basic castle structure quickly and expertly sketched into the sand. For the plans to a sandcastle it sure did look like the most complicated thing in Sorun's life. "You really have to go this far for a simple sandcastle, man?"

"Not really. It's a blueprint. You need those to build things."

"So just... build it," Sorun slowly said, looking up from the diagram and at Tails. "Like, do you really? What's stopping you from just building it? It's a sandcastle, man, not a plane. Its main ingredient is sand and literally nothing else."

Tails' finger stopped mid-drawing of a castle turret in the center of a long diagram of lines and measurements. "I guess... the others did say I need to relax more. Hmrf." He made a short sigh, and then in a

move that mildly surprised Sorun he completely wiped away the sand diagram before turning to him. "Alright, then help me out here."

"With the sandcastle?"

"Yeah!" He nodded at Sorun. "It'll be fun, right? And plus I've never seen you build anything before. We can make one together!"

"..." The enthusiasm Tails was displaying was completely lost on Sorun as his own gaze fell down towards the sand. "Sandcastles, huh...?"

Four years ago

Detroit City Community Youth Center

Everything about this was stupid. The stupid contest, the stupid youth center, all this stupid sand. Useless.

Get out of the house more. He didn't know what mom was talking about when she said he should get out more. He got out fine enough. He went to school. Except for right now since it was summer but that didn't change the fact he went to school. And it wasn't just his mom, either, because Dave's folks were apparently acting the same way and dragged them to... to this.

Stupid youth center. Stupid plots of sand everywhere crowded by other kids. Parents all standing in the back watching them all. Weird moms dragging them to stuff like this when he just wanted to play his games.

At least Dave was here. Suffering with him and making the suffering easier.

"Okay, so..." Sorun languidly blew past his lips and looked down at the plot of sand they were sitting in. "'Ooh, build a sandcastle, it'll be fun for you kids,' goddamn shitty-ass fuckin' broke-ass MC," *he*

thought hatefully, glaring at the "event organizer", a title much too prestigious for the fat woman who organized all this, sitting in a booth nearby with the other judges. Because this shit was being judged.

Fucking hell.

"Dave," Sorun tiredly mumbled out as he rubbed at his face, "look maybe we can just half-ass it and go home early 'cause-"

The world itself rumbled when Dave's fist struck down on the sand supporting their weight. It was in that frame of time Sorun saw it: Dave's entire form, outlined in a golden corona of sand that matched his blonde hair and yellow hoodie. His smile wide and near-manic as he stared at the very sand itself, like it was an enemy to be defeated. The very image emitted a sense of confidence so alien and yet captivating that Sorun couldn't help but be drawn in to the sight.

"THE SANDCASTLE BUILDING TECHNIQUES OF THE MILLER FAMILY IS AN ART THAT HAS BEEN PASSED DOWN FOR GENERATIONS, SORUN!" His will, unwavering. His belief in conquering the challenge, absolute. Every single facet of the other teenager sitting next to Sorun exuded nothing but the utmost confidence. Unyielding charisma he couldn't help but not be drawn into. "We'll build a sandcastle that'll rival heaven itself," Dave proclaimed. The sand around him settled as he pointed straight up at the ceiling. "One that'll blow all these guys outta the water!"

Sorun didn't understand the meaning behind a single word David had said but goddamn was he in from that alone. "Yeah, alright, fine. So speaking of water should I grab some?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah, dude." And like that, like a light switch had been flipped, the charisma was mostly gone. Mere eddies of the glory he'd held for but a single moment wafting off of him as he looked at Sorun. He seemed a bit off-put by Sorun's mood. "But I mean come on, man, get hyped! We're gonna beat everyone! You love doing that!"

Sure he did. When they were on the other side of a screen and couldn't overpower him by virtue of Sorun having bottom-tier strength. This wasn't that. And yet, looking around... he supposed Dave had a point. Shying away from a challenge was a real anti-gamer move a self-respecting gamer like him could never commit to. Especially if Dave wasn't talking out his ass and he actually did have some ancient family technique for building sandcastles. However the hell that kind of legacy managed to manifest.

"... Well I guess we, as gamers, can't go and let everyone beat us. Just ain't right," Sorun finally admitted with a small smile. He became much more startled when Dave wrapped his arm over his shoulders and roughly shook him, laughing all the while.

"Ah-hah! That's the spirit, my dude!" He swept his free arm out in front of them. "I'll teach ya how to create a work of art, Sorun. By the end'a this you'll be able to make sandcastles whose light will pierce the sky! Just like a real man should!"

"Yeah, sure man, can't wait..."

Present

"..."

"Erm, Sorun?" Tails' voice shook him out of the memory. His eyes drifted towards the fox, who was giving him an odd look. "You kind of spaced out there. You doing okay?"

"... We'll make a sandcastle whose light will pierce the sky, Tails." Sorun's head tilted up to gaze at the infinite blue above them. "One that'll rival heaven itself."

"Okay?" The divine meaning behind Sorun's words were lost on Tails due to a lack of context. He just stared on at the human, slightly confused but otherwise he was mainly focused on the sandcastle. "So should I get the buckets-?"

"The buckets. Yes. And water. All is required."

"... Alright, Sorun." He was obviously weirded out by Sorun's sudden demeanor, but quickly shook it off and rose up to his feet to go get the supplies needed. Sorun himself didn't even notice the fox leave; his eyes were solely focused on the sand below him, his mind envisioning the first steps needed to construct his masterpiece.

There wasn't much thought that was needed. The designs were as fresh in his mind as day-old memories.

At approximately 10:37 A.M., in the complete center of the multiverse, in the centermost universe known as the Prime Zone, within the Milky Way Galaxy, located inside the Sol system, on a small, unassuming planet known as Mobius Prime, formerly known as the planet Earth Prime, home to a miniscule island located within the planet's tropics, on a completely clear and cloudless day, a human being and citizen of the Republic of Acorn created history.

From Sorun's perspective, the process had passed by in a blur. Barely any thought put in as his arms had moved automatically to shape and mold the sand as needed into the shapes desired. At some point Tails had become a non-entity. Relegated to standing back and observing Sorun in mute amazement as he constructed it.

The best damn sandcastle this planet would ever have the privilege of bearing witness to.

The instructions in his mind were as fresh as the day they had been instilled into Sorun by Dave. Every step, every meticulous detail, all plotted out and acted upon perfectly by his body. Perfect mimicry of the movements Dave had displayed to him, now being displayed to Tails as the sandcastle slowly took form. As if the memory itself was guiding Sorun's hand as sand walls were smoothed over, as intricate detailing was bored into the castle walls, as shapes heretofore thought unattainable by Mobian kind to be implemented in sand sculptures were indeed sculpted and implemented.

Sorun had always remembered perfectly with his hands. It hadn't been a difficult task on his part.

When he stepped back to admire his great work he felt a sense of pride befitting such a great work. It'd come out exactly as envisioned: a perfectly identical sandcastle to the one he had helped Dave build that day. The walls, perfectly symmetrical. The canopies to the turrets, perfectly conical. The gaps in the parapets, spaced perfectly. The sand surface itself perfectly smoothed even to the point it shined not as a sculpture of sand, but as a porcelain work of art. One that was as fragile as it was beautiful.

The waves softly crashing onto the beaches shores staggered, if only for a few beats, and the wind itself blowing across Sorun's had picked up in intensity if only for a few moments. As if the very planet itself was taking a shuddering breath in awe at his works. At the work of indescribable beauty lying just in front of him; a piece of talent and art that would never be replicated by any pairs of hands for as long as the stars burned. Such was its splendor. It was an image the world would treasure and hold in its memory until the universe grew cold.

It was... the true essence of a sandcastle.

"Wow, that's pretty neat, Sorun!" Tails praised.

"It's okay, I guess," Sorun said. "The ancient Miller family sandcastle building techniques, passed down through generation upon generation, has served us well." Shame it'd die with him in all likelihood. Unless Tails had been paying real close attention to the craft, but part of Sorun sincerely doubted even a genius mind of his caliber could fathom such an intricate and complex art. Hell, Sorun didn't even understand it. He just copied what Dave did.

"The ancient... uh. Um?" Blinking in clear confusion, Tails looked back at Sorun. His tails slowly swished in the air to match his visible confusion. "Is... so your last name is Miller?"

"No." Sorun said, gaze stoic, unceasing from the sandcastle.

"Oh." The answer didn't cede Tails' confusion. It only grew. "So what is it, then? I've never asked."

"I have a new life, Tails. Why taint it with things like names? I'm Sorun. It doesn't need to be more complicated than that." That was the bonafide truth and certainly not an attempt at erasing his embarrassing last name from the annals of history. Certainly not. He was who he was.

Sorun. The Ultimate Gamer. Mail courier and employee of the fashionista Honey. Sandcastle artisan.

"U-um, uh... okay." A small, defeated breath left Tails. His shoulders sagged, and whatever questions he had burning on his tongue were snuffed out as he made the decision to just accept the words coming out of Sorun's mouth and not question it. "We probably should have brought a camera or something."

"I hear you." Distant laughter drew Sorun's attention momentarily from the sandcastle. It was further down the beach. Nicole was with a group of their friends and she was laughing at something someone said. And here he was without a camera. "Be different if I still had my phone. But who knows where that went."

Tails' eye ridges furrowed in confusion. "But a camera isn't a phone? I don't know what you mean."

Sorun looked back at Tails with a deadpan expression. "You know, it amazes me this world has laser guns, robots, and nanotech, but somehow a common smartphone from my world seems more advanced than half the stuff here. Gives me really weird 'Final Fantasy' vibes, y'know?"

Tails' face changed to mimic Sorun's deadpan. "No, Sorun, not really. I didn't understand any of that."

"The suffering continues." He pocketed his hands and rotated fully to face Tails. "Do you even have touchscreens? You're telling me Nicole can make holographic displays you can interact with but you don't have touchscreens? You skipped that and went from analogue straight to the future haptic stuff?"

The deadpan mimic upon the fox's faced turned into a fresh, puzzled one. "Why would I want to touch the screen to interact with it? Why would anyone want to do that? That... no, seriously, I can't see a practical use for that."

"It was mainly to save real estate on space. Less keyboard and more screen for your phone," Sorun explained. "We're talking about a pocket-sized rectangle that was, like, a millimeter thick here, Tails, you needed as much screen as you could get."

Something about something Sorun said caught Tails' attention. No, more than that. He seemed focused now on something, his interest piqued and his eyes going inquisitive as he asked, "Your people really made communication devices that thin?"

"It's weird when you call it that but yeah." Communication device. Huh. Sorun didn't know how to feel about that one. "Had a bunch of apps in it, too. Clock, calendar, compass I never used because why would I, interfacing widgets to connect to local networks, software to download and install other apps people made, high definition camera and recorder, video playback software. All sorts of stuff."

"... How much storage did they have?"

With a shrug, Sorun answered, "Some of the higher-end ones had hundreds of gigs of storage. Might've even worked their way up to a whole terabyte, but I dunno, I didn't follow those circles too closely." As far as he was concerned computer tech and the latest SSD chips were a whole different world than the one the phone techies lives in. Things of that nature he could go on about for days. Phones? He was pretty much clueless in that area.

That'd done it; the gears were turning now in the young inventor's mind. His eyes weren't even focused on Sorun anymore. His head was tilted down, chin cupped in thought as quiet, indiscernible murmurs left his mouth while Sorun watched on, likely rambling on about theories and tech-speak that would go far over Sorun's own head. All because he made the mistake of talking about a phone.

"Tails?"

"How could they fit so much- no, unless, but maybe- but then how would, oh, the materials needed alone, maybe Sorun knows-"

"Come on, man, we're on the beach." Bending forwards a bit, Sorun softly flicked Tails on the forehead. It seemed to snap him out of whatever funk he'd been in as he blinked up at Sorun with wide eyes. "It's beach time, not tech time."

No, it wasn't working. The fox still seemed pensive about something, worked up. His fingers were curling in an out like he wanted, *needed* , to get his hands on something to take it apart and examine it. And now Sorun was thinking maybe it was a good thing that he'd lost his phone. Probably was a kinder fate than whatever he planned on doing.

"Sorun, you... um, said you lost the one you had. The commu- phone, I mean, you implied you had one but no longer have it." God, he was scratching behind his ear the same way a meth head would scratch at their neck. Had the same frenzied look in his eyes, even. "What, um, what happened to it? Your phone?"

He had to take a short breath to clear out the irritation the memory brought on before answering. "I lost it when you grabbed me at the store. Way at the beginning. Fell outta my pocket or somethin', I dunno. It either got left there or fell out somewhere inside the portal, and if it's that last one then I go *no* clue where it wound up." He looked up and scratched at his cheek. "Lost my wallet, too, man. I had some stuff in there."

"Oh..." The way Tails slumped over in defeat almost made Sorun sad from the secondhand sadness alone. He genuinely looked like someone just murdered his parents in front of him and Sorun didn't know whether it was out of guilt or disappointment he didn't have a smartphone to dissect. "Um, uh, I mean, sorr- wait, that's not-"

"Chill, dude, it's fine. Apocalypse, remember? Managed to dodge all that 'cause of you?"

The reminder did serve to massively relieve Tails mood. Even so he still looked a bit sad. Must have been really bummed over that phone. "Yeah, I know. But, uh, hey! I could maybe pay you back for it? You know, the phone? How much did they cost, anyway?"

When money was mentioned it was like a spike of adrenaline going through Sorun's entire system. Time slowed to a crawl, lost all meaning, really, as that single word reverberated through his mind. *"Money, money, money..."* He stopped moving. Tails stopped moving. The world itself refused to move. Time itself became irrelevant as all sorts of thoughts began whizzing through Sorun's mind, all around that single concept. The idea of getting paid.

"Hey. Dude." Sorun could see him. Himself, a mirror image of Sorun, standing next to Tails with an incredibly mischievous smile on his face. "You know what you gotta do, dude."

"Do we really wanna lie to Tails about how much a smartphone costs just to milk as much money out of him as possible? I don't know, man, that's kind of rude. We're friends. I'm not even upset about the whole abduction thing anymore."

"Forget about Tails," Sorun said. "Just, like, just think about it. No way does Tails' have the money, but what about his *mom* ?"

"That stone-cold bitch."

"My man. My homie. My thoughts exactly. I mean, I mean come on, think about it, she's one of the councilors, the whole family's

probably loaded. They can super afford you ripping them off."

He had a point. He did not like Tails' mom. Or even his dad, now that he thought about it. Uncle was a right bastard whose teeth he'd knock out if he ever saw him again. But he did like Tails, which was the problem. *"Do we even need the money? We're pretty much set on funds. What am I supposed to do with more?"*

"We can buy Nicole a really nice gift from Station Square. They got all sorts'a pricey shit in that one district."

Once more, he had a point. *"Let me consult my moral compass for a bit here."* He looked down on his left shoulder. A miniature Sorun with silver, cylindrical horns and a barbed, silver-scaled tail was standing on it. *"What do you think?"*

"Fiscally speaking this is the most responsible course of action we could possibly take," said the Devil. *"Strictly speaking we're well-off enough that we could afford not to take such a reprehensible action. Unfortunately we may have a moral responsibility to do so."*

"Huh?"

"Think about it from a logical standpoint: the socioeconomic policies of the Republic of Acorn are fairly decent even by our standards. It features many socialist policies such as free healthcare and education while adhering to capitalistic values that allow individuals such as Honey to own and maintain their own businesses, which feed into funds towards funding the city in the effort of further improving its own welfare. It is, by all rights, a near-ideal society we have found ourselves in. We have a duty as citizens of this society to help nurture it. In matters such as this though we need to think of what we can do to help us in order to help others."

"Huh?"

"Because of the economic structure of New Mobotropolis independent businesses such as Honey's bring in a, while not

substantial, otherwise rather large sum to be added to the Republic's pockets. We are an employee of said business, who has played a large part in its success due to our unique circumstances and abilities."

"I'm following you."

"We are indispensable to the business. We're integral *, which means, logically speaking, we ourselves are vital to the health of the entire Republic as a whole."*

"Ahh..."

"It stands to reason we would need to monitor our levels of motivation and keep them elevated in order to continue to perform exemplary within Honey's business. High motivation leads to high success of the business, which leads to success of the Republic. Procuring additional funds in the effort of acquiring expensive gifts to court the AI you have been dating will go a long way towards increasing motivation levels. An AI, I remind you, who is charged with the responsibility of maintaining the city. Surely making her happy would improve her performance and further support the Republic."

"That does make sense."

"Further support of the Republic leads to a slow increase in funds. As Tails' mother is a politician of the Republic, those funds are inevitably funneled back into her as well as the Republic so she is able to make a living. She will make back the money given to us. More than that, she will make more *money. This is basically an investment on her part."*

"Whoa."

"So you see the course of action we have to take," the Devil concluded. *"We* must *steal from their family. It's for the good of the Republic. It's for the good of everyone who lives in the Republic. It's*

for the Prower family's own good we steal money from them. It is the only clear, morally righteous path available to us. It's our duty as proud citizens of the Republic of Acorn."

"You make a solid argument." Sorun looked over on his right shoulder. The miniature Sorun standing there had a pair of silver horns that curved up in a way that they formed a halo coming out of his head. *"What do you think?"*

"You should gouge the fuck out of him," said the Angel.

"I see no problem with either of your positions."

"Sorun? Hey, Sorun?" Tails' voice brought the human back to reality. Time once more existed. The waves were softly crashing into the beach once more. Dave's ivory sandcastle stood tall for as long as the tide receded. "You've been standing there staring off at nothing for two minutes, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I was just doing the mental calculations converting my world's currency to this one's. In case it interested you mobiums almost completely match the value with US dollars one-to-one. So that phone's gonna set you back five thousand mobiums," Sorun said with a completely straight face.

The face Tails made in regards to that news was the same face somebody who just got shot with a gun would make. He even stumbled back as if he'd been shot, and his fur was standing up on end, too. "Fi-fi-fi-five th-thousand, huh...?"

"The wallet was five hundred, too, so not to add to your burdens, but..." That was a lie. The wallet had only been eighty dollars. But who was he to stand in the way of profit and the future of the Republic?

"Five hundred for a wallet!?"

Sorun shrugged. "It was a birthday gift." Was made of real fake leather, too.

Nearby, within the group of Mobians she was conversing with, Nicole had stopped talking and went dead still the moment the word "birthday" spoken in Sorun's voice reached her audio receptors. Her ears had flicked backwards towards his direction, and after her head spun so quickly towards him that, were the body organic, the head would have twisted right off.

"Look," Sorun continued, completely oblivious of the lynx staring intently at him, "if you don't want to actually pay it's cool, man. It don't care too much about it for it to matter all that much."

"No, no, it's..." Tails sighed, rubbing at the temples of his head. "Look, maybe I can talk to my mom about it or something. Or I could just make... I dunno, I'll figure it out."

"Yeah, no, that's cool. 'S cool," Sorun said, hands in pockets as he watched Tails spin up his tails and fly away. And as he turned his head to watch the fox fly away he'd noticed that, funnily enough, Nicole was standing there. Her back turned to Sorun but also with her startlingly far away from the rest of the group while being really close to him. Hands folded in front of her and ears perked up unusually high.

Sorun blinked, and then tilted his head at the odd behavior. He couldn't really figure out why it was she was just standing her like that, like she'd been just kind of... standing there, listening to Sorun and Tails speak. He was about to ask her when she turned her head and decided to speak first.

"Oh, hello, Sorun," she greeted. "I trust you're having a good time?"

"Er, yeah?" He looked around a bit. It was just the two of them standing there. "It's nice, doing this. It was great of Sally to invite us all along for her birthday."

"Yes. Speaking of birthdays, I happened to overhear you talking about one with Tails."

Oh. This is what this was about. It was red alert time again. "Yeah, we were just talking about stuff. Wasn't anything important."

The smile Nicole had dimmed a bit. "Are you sure?" she asked. "Can I ask what the topic-?"

The master of deflection interrupted her with a wave of his hand. "Eh, it was just about some lost stuff I was talking about with Tails, nothin' serious."

"I could assist if there is something-"

"Nope, all good. Thanks anyways."

"If... if you say so." She didn't even try to hide the visible disappointment from her face, or the way her ears drooped at bit as a result. They perked right back up when she noticed the small structure standing behind Sorun: his immaculate monument fit to rule a granular kingdom. "What is this?" she questioned, immediately moving over to it and crouching down to get a better look at it.

Ah, new topic. One Sorun wasn't uncomfortable with. He was happy to answer. "It's a sandcastle. Of the sand variety."

"You made this?"

"Well, Tails helped. He carried the water. But otherwise, yeah, I made it."

"It's...!" She really did seem to be examining Dave's sandcastle in depth. Moving her head all around the structure, green eyes darting left and right as they scanned the structure. "The dimensions are near-perfectly symmetrical, the walls and parapets evenly spaced, everything about its overall aesthetic is... you constructed such a thing out of sand and rudimentary tools?"

Sorrun glanced down at the plastic bucket and small shovel sitting nearby. Rudimentary? Maybe by her standards, but he wouldn't use that kind of word with those tools. Whole civilizations were built on shovels. It was almost insulting calling them rudimentary.

"Sorun, you should have told me!" Nicole's voice made Sorun look back at her. She was smiling at him widely for some reason, practically beaming with pride. "I didn't know you could sculpt so flawlessly!"

Ah, that's where the confusion was. Now it all made sense to him. "Oh, no, I can't," he corrected her. "I can't sculpt to save my life. I can only exclusively make sandcastles. That specific one, actually."

The beaming pride dimmed down to near nothingness. In its place was the look of hopeless confusion Nicole was now adopting as she looked at Sorun. "I-I don't understand what you mean by that." It was obvious from her face, the slight twitches to her features, that she was trying to piece together the statement she just heard, but she was having difficulty making sense of it. "Surely if you could make something like this your skills-"

"Nope. Only sandcastles," Sorun said. "I can do sandcastles and nothing else."

"But... but that doesn't..." It was almost like the logic was causing Nicole pain just trying to figure it out. The distress continued as a particularly large wave rolled in and washed over Dave's sandcastle. Walls crumbled and were washed away. Rooftops collapsed as the structure became unstable. All too quickly the once great monument was transformed into nothing but a malformed ruin as the wave receded back into the water. Somewhere else in the world the land flooded as the planet wept at its loss.

"Ah, well, easy come easy go," Sorun said. Nicole said nothing, electing to simply look at the ruined sandcastle with a completely lost expression on her face. "So how's the beach going for you, Nicole?" Sorun asked.

"Hm?" Whatever was going on with her must have been severe, because even after Sorun spoke out she continued looking down at the sandcastle with that lost expression. Then she shook her head, looking extremely dissatisfied at whatever conclusion she'd come to before looking back up at him. "Oh, yes. The beach." Her smile seemed to return as the conversation shifted away from the topic of the sandcastle. In fact, Nicole seemed to be taking great, concerted efforts to not even look at the remains of the sandcastle, and stepped around it so she was closer to Sorun with the destroyed castle behind her. "I'm having a wonderful time, thank you for asking," she continued. "I like being here. It's an interesting new perspective to experience the beach in person."

He heard a small rustling sound and looked down. She was moving her toes through the sand, letting them shift through the spaces between. He remembered when they first arrived on the beach he'd seen her jump from the moment her feet first touched the sand for the first time. She spent five minutes after the fact standing there, just looking at her feet, with Sorun snickering all the while. It was another moment he lamented the loss of his phone.

"I could fill a small spot in the house full of sand if you want," Sorun offered.

Nicole's smile froze. "Please don't." He didn't know why but for some reason that didn't sound very much like a request to Sorun. He shrugged and decided to let the matter drop.

"Alright." He gaze traveled upwards. With the sun sitting there so bright he once more was thankful for his choice of dress for the occasion. He didn't want to imagine roasting in his immaculate coat and was glad he'd just come with the shorts and t-shirt. Nobody else had really done the same, on account of the fact that pretty much all of his Mobian friends already wore a strikingly small amount of clothes to begin with. He saw that Bunnie left the short jacket she usually wore behind and Antoine traded out what he normally wore for shorts and a shirt like Sorun did and that was literally it.

And Nicole did the same. Wearing the same purple dress-robe-wrapping thing as always. It didn't matter, he guessed. The important part was that she was here and having a great time. That was most important. He wasn't at all disappointed she hadn't attempted to change into something more beach appropriate. Or that she was the one percent of Mobians in the world that didn't walk around practically naked. Usually a positive in Sorun's eyes but this was a case where it wasn't.

"So you're just gonna keep wearing that?" Sorun asked. "Not, uh, nothin' else? It is the beach."

Nicole just smiled and shook her head. "I'm completely fine as-is. Why do you ask?"

Clearing his throat, Sorun quickly turned his head to the side. "Oh, no reason, just wondering, wasn't- yeah, no, was just a question. Don't look too far into it." His eyes quickly scanned for a distraction. He settled on the ocean itself. "I'm gonna go in there," he said, pointing to the ocean.

"The ocean?"

"I mean it's the beach. It'd practically be a crime not to." He looked back at Nicole. "Did you want to...?" The questioned dragged on as Sorun dared to hope.

Politely, Nicole shook her head. Hope burned once more. Sorun soldiered on and didn't let it show. "No thank you. The handheld's range is limited and I don't want to risk something happening. I've made concerted efforts to keep it and myself as far away from the water as possible."

The legitimate safety concern was a good enough distraction for keeping Sorun's mind away from lost bikini dreams. He nodded sagely at her and said, "Alright, that's fair. Well I'm gonna go in anyways. In fact, uh..." He briefly paused and look down at his shorts. His quite-obvious normal shorts and not shorts meant for

swimming. "In fact I completely forgot to get- ugh, where's the Chaos Emerald, I gotta dip out for five minutes to buy something from Honey's."

It was hard to conceptualize times like these. Feeling weightless, floating in an endless sea of blue. Staring up at an endless sky of blue with blue eyes. Wearing nothing but a newly-procured pair of blue shorts.

Nothing but blue, blue, blue...

The sensation was weird. Sorun had only ever had one opportunity to do such a thing, just mindlessly floating on his back in the water. But that had been in a public swimming pool so noisy it was impossible to find peace there. Here in the water off the island there were barely any sounds. Just waves and the wind. The distant chatter of all his friends had faded out eventually, just leaving Sorun alone with his thoughts. It was a unique peace. One he *didn't* prefer to his quiet moments alone with Nicole, but it had its own charms.

Right now his thoughts were mainly on himself. Seeing himself in bright sunlight without a shirt. How so many things had changed.

"Man. I almost look... healthy? What happened?"

Used to be he was an emaciated skeleton. The level below skinny but the one above being actually anorexic. The "Shaggy Special", as it was known on Earth. Little muscle, showing ribs, whole nine yards. It was a stark contrast to the body he'd have whenever using Devil's Body - a perfect specimen of lean, muscular physique. The apex of human form. Literal Adonis bod. Something people worked a lifetime just to sculpt. Of all the powers given up by Sorun that one probably hurt as much as Yamato.

Nowadays it was... better? Still skinny, but more filled out. He would daresay, normal-ish. And he actually felt better these days, too,

beyond the emotional aspect. More awake. By all appearances it was a solid improvement.

It was Nicole's fault.

She always fretted over the littlest things, he swore, and he should have known something was up when she'd always been subtlety pushing him to eat more than he usually did. But then... but then she'd had to go and do it. She had to go and open his refrigerator and he had to watch as all the bags of french fries he'd been stockpiling spilled out from it right in front of her.

He didn't think he'd ever forget that accusing glare she gave him.

So after the health rant where he hadn't even been able to get a word in edgewise he'd been diversifying a bit. Half because she seemed genuinely worried and he wanted to relieve that for her sake, half because he wasn't convinced Nicole wasn't sneaking looks inside his fridge when he wasn't aware just to make sure he was actually being truthful with his diet. It got to the point where she'd even come over sometimes to show him all these recipes she found, going all, "I care too much about you for you to jeopardize your health to bad eating habits" and, "It really is for your own good, Sorun, I can give you reading material on the subject if you're truly inclined." He'd managed to dodge vegetables so far but if she ever decided to start cooking for him he was doomed.

"Women, sheesh..."

But the changes he'd undergone on the road to being a functional, healthy human being had been an eye-opener to Sorun, and he had to admit that, once again, Nicole was right. As always. And... maybe a small part of Sorun regretted that her boyfriend's physique was tantamount to a fleshy skeleton.

It was something he'd suspected for a bit, that her attitude had something to do with that, but no, when Sorun looked further into he found she really was just worried about his health and couldn't care

less about the rest. In fact nobody cared. It was another one of those Mobian cultural aspects that was completely foreign to Sorun - how visual looks just mattered strikingly little to them as a whole. He suspected it was in part due to the fact that Mobian bodies were so diverse from one another due to all the varying species, doubly so since everyone was compatible with everyone, which was near-opposite from where he'd come from.

Still... as endearing as it was that Nicole, really Mobians as a whole, were so socially progressive with matters like that... well, Sorun wasn't, so he couldn't help but be a bit self-conscious about himself and how Nicole deserved better than his bony ass. So he was somewhat glad he was filling out a bit more. He often wondered what he'd be like if he actually tried to obtain the same physique Devil's Body afforded him - that Adonis bod.

But something like that would require work. Like, a whole lot of work. Sorun didn't want to do that.

But then there was Nicole, and she deserved Adonis bod. The treacherous part of Sorun's mind whispered that there was an easy, effortless way to get that bod - just use a Chaos Emerald to get Devil's Body and he'd have it forever, no work, no muss, just straight to the results. Be the easiest thing in the world.

Of course... he had his health to consider. And he did not think Nicole would ever forgive him for shredding off over a decade of his life just to look hotter - and she wouldn't even see it from that perspective. Plus he needed that Emerald for something already. His job security depended on it.

"Ugh... should I just 'Johnny Bravo' it?" Sorun wondered. *"Mf. Sally and Bunnie are fitness nuts, maybe they'd have tips. Amy, too, but... I can't go to her with this. Gossip'd reach the whole town within an hour with her mouth. Ah, but wait, Nicole's really close friends with Sally. And Bunnie. Man, this is already too hard."*

Something brushed by Sorun's side, in the water. He'd caught it from the peripheral of his vision. The object looked startlingly similar to a shark's fin.

"I'm going to ignore that. I didn't see that." The memory of what he just saw was already forgotten. *"It's for Nicole sake thou- would she even care all that much? Beyond me just looking healthy? Ugh, this really seems like a serious discussion I should have with her, but... yeah, I just won't."*

Something brushed by Sorun's foot.

"That didn't happen," he decided. *"Eh, then again maybe it wouldn't hurt to at least have some light exercise thing in the morning at the very least. If nothing else then for the health benefits. That's a pretty good balance between laziness and health, right? Yeah, it's gotta be."*

Nope, this time he'd seen it for sure when it swam past the side of his head. Shark fin. In full view of his eyes.

"Maybe it's not a shark's fin. Maybe it's a dolphin. They're practically indistinguishable." Sorun rolled his body over so that he was facing the depths below, and then dived under a bit to get a better look.

That proved to be a mistake. It was right there - jaws wide, right in front of Sorun. All he could see were rows of teeth mere inches away from his face in the water. He was pretty sure dolphins didn't have teeth like that which only lead to one conclusion, one that he reached in an instant.

He panicked. Cursed his own ineptitude and rose up through the surface of the water, flailing his arms in the air and screaming. He expected it to happen any second now: to feel a massive bite clamp down somewhere on his body, forcing him to fight off the shark. A shark he didn't think he had much of a chance of beating. It was a Mobius-brand shark, so probably no amount of nose punching would

deter it. Sorun'd probably die right here. To a random shark of all things.

Except none of that ever happened. A bite never came. What did come was laughter that wasn't Sorun's voice. Familiar laughter, at that, and when Sorun put a face to the voice he started scowling something fierce. Performing a feat that to most would be moderately impressive seeing as he was floating in water, Sorun turned. Rigidly, near motionless with that scowl affixed to his face at the culprit floating in the water alongside him. Pointing with one hand and holding his laughing head with the other.

And then without so much as a single word Sorun grabbed at Razor's throat with both hands and pushed him under the water in an effort to drown him.

It wasn't working. The shark was still laughing at him, just underwater now. *"He can breath water, dammit,"* Sorun realized seconds later. He let him go when he realized his efforts, while merited, were ultimately futile. All it did was cause Razor to burst back out of the water while still laughing at Sorun.

"Ahahahaha-!"

"Yeah, that's- that's great, man, real great, you, you can stop any time now."

"-hahahahaha-!"

"Any time would be appropriate, now, for instance, but please, by all means."

"-ahahahahah-!"

"My kind turned his into soup," Sorun bitterly thought.

"-hahah...! Man, that was... that was great. I needed that."

"Yeah, it's great you got your jollies out," Sorun replied in an unamused tone, "now you mind answering how it is every time I go out to the ocean I keep finding you? It's the ocean!"

The sharklike grin Razor was holding faltered a small bit. "Because you keep coming back to the same spot?" One of his hands rose up out of the water so he could point in a direction. "Look, the island we met on is literally right over there."

In a move that startled Razor slightly, Sorun's entire body spun around in a complete 180 while still floating in the water. He squinted - oh, yeah, there it was. Even more it was less of a black dot on the horizon and more of a greenish-brownish blob it was so close. Huh.

Sorun spun back around, startling Razor again. "Ocean's smaller than I thought," he said.

"Uh, if you say so." The shark's wide grin returned. "Anyways, hey! I didn't know you'd come back! Did you crash another one of your plane things?"

Irritation played over Sorun's face. "Why you always gotta focus on things like that, huh? On words like 'crashing' and 'me' and other things that don't fit together?" He huffed out a breath and crossed his arms. "And anyways, I'm here 'cause, uh, well no reason, really, we're all kind of just hanging out here 'cause it's my, er, friend's, one of my friend's birthday today."

"... Oh, you mean all those Freedom Puncher guys you said you were friends with?"

Sorun smiled in an amused way. "Yes, Razor. Those words exactly. But what are you doing out here?" he asked.

"Eh, I just wanted to get away from the city for a bit. Like to hang around the area here." He grimaced and turned his head a bit. "Some of the guards were givin' me a harder time than usual. Didn't feel like hanging around."

The light smile Sorun had on died. The fingernails on his right hand itched again. "They're still harassing you?"

"It's not 'harassing', it's... y'know, foreigner, former pirate, all that," Razor said, making a lighthearted chuckle while shrugging his shoulders. It didn't do much to change Sorun's expression, making Razor continue with, "Look, I wouldn't be comfortable, either, so I kinda get it. My friends are still lookin' out for me. Sister ain't. She's, er... still in jail. You know. With all the others. Won't really see me when I visit."

"... Yeah, sorry, man, I don't really have anything to contribute to that one," Sorun admitted.

"I getcha." Razor made an awkward cough and rubbed the back of his head. "So, um. How have you been?"

"Some stuff happened, but otherwise I've been... well, better off than I've ever been since coming here, actually," Sorun admitted. He glanced around at the water around them, and then realized something. "You didn't bring your Chao with you, did you?"

"'Course I did!" Razor happily replied with a wide grin. Sorun just barely resisted sighing and palming his own face. "He goes wherever I go! Why?"

"He ain't here. He on the island?"

"Probably!"

"Okay." Maybe wasn't the big deal, but Virgil was there with all the rest of them and he didn't know what that kind of meeting would bring about. And he guessed all the others would wanna meet Razor, anyways, so Sorun turned towards the island and- "Whoa, wait, why's it so far!?"

He'd been, like, right off the coast of the beach when he'd began mindlessly floating in the water. Not even five meters away from the

shore. Now it looked like he was a hundred meters away from the island, maybe even two! And he wasn't even facing the right side of the island where all the others were!

Noting his confusion, Razor responded with, "Oh, yeah, the currents in these parts are kinda strong. Surprised you went in without knowing that, actually. I'd think it'd be kind of dangerous with your whole 'can't breath water' thing." He turned to face Sorun. "Did you ever get that fixed, by the way? Just seems weird."

"That ain't a thing you can *fix* , man," Sorun bemoaned, staring off towards the island. "Freakin' currents, man, how do they work...?"

The beach, Virgil concluded, was boring.

Nothing to do. Nowhere interesting to go. No one to fight. Nowhere to sleep - this sand stuff was just as irritating a substance as the first time he'd went to one with Sorun when he crashed them on that other island for some reason. It was terrible. He couldn't comprehend why anybody would want to spend time here.

Which was why he was so confused looking around and seeing all the other Mobians having a great time. *Somehow* . Here, of all places. A place where enjoyment shouldn't be possible. They were somehow enjoying this wasteland.

He'd bug Sorun about it but he wandered off somewhere and Virgil couldn't find him.

The Chao's head picked up suddenly. Maybe it wasn't a complete waste being here, because something was rushing up on him from behind. Wasn't hard to get out of the way, quickly zipping to the side to dodge what just tried tackling him. The silver-horned Chao's mood instantly became elated when he saw who it was. One of his own kind, an evolved one like him, but more importantly he'd recognized the green and black colors. The one joined with that one shark Mobian in the same way he was joined with Sorun. Crusher.

Crusher was fun. Crusher could actually put up a fight and be amusing. Crusher didn't whine and cry like the unevolved trash joined with the young rabbit Mobian. He was actually *fun* to be around as opposed to that bowtie-wearing weakling.

Wearing a stern, yet lighthearted and amused frown, Virgil had spoken in the language only their kind seemed to understand. "Chao chao-chao, chao chao chao chao-chao."

("You still haven't learned that doesn't work, even after all this time. Yet you try.")

The words seemed to fall on completely deaf ears when the green and black Chao whirled around, manic grin on his face. "Chao-chao chao!"

("Doesn't matter! Still gonna getcha!")

He wouldn't. But it was nice he was so spirited.

And thus, there they went, colliding into each other, rolling around in the sand as one Chao tried to force the other to submit. The coarseness and overall terrible feeling of sand didn't even register with Virgil at the time; why did sand matter at all when something fun was finally happening? The stares of all the other Mobians around didn't even matter to Virgil, even if everyone stopped to stare. He couldn't really blame them. This had to be better than whatever they were all doing to amuse themselves in that wretched sand.

"Uh... is, uh, is anyone gonna stop... whose Chao even is that?" Sonic wondered aloud, watching the display with wide, startled eyes. "I mean, that's... that's Sorun's Chao, it'll probably really hurt him."

Before anybody could respond there was another sound: the sound of a body crashing through the nearby brush and then landing face-first on the beach's sand. One only needed a momentary glance to tell it was Sorun lying in the sand. And then in the next instant he'd

pushed himself up, shaking loose sand out of his hair while exhaling an exhausted breath.

"Ugh! Finally!" he groaned out, rising up to his feet as he brushed the remainder of the sand off his body. "Flippin'... swimming all that way and the mini-jungle... agh. I hate currents." He looked up, locking eyes on the two Chao wrestling in the sand - and then made a loud groan once again while rising a hand up to cover his face. "You gotta be kiddin', I rushed all the way here for nothing. They're just playing around."

When Razor burst out of the foliage next to Sorun, everyone just stared. Mostly in mild surprise and interest, though Razor himself had the same reaction multiplied a hundredfold seeing the entire group of Mobians spread out in front of him. He'd looked at all of them excitedly, pointing at them while looking at Sorun and asking, "Oh, are those all those Freedom Puncher guys you keep talking about!?"

The mute interest morphed into stunned surprise on everyone faces. Sally was the worst off; she looked mortified hearing that. And for Sorun's part, all he could do was laugh.

The time had come.

An opportunity like this was one that appeared only once in a lifetime. Some people didn't even get the opportunity, such was how rare this moment was. As such even thinking of squandering the opportunity was nothing less than a crime against life itself. And Sorun tried to not be a criminal.

He sighed, hands folded behind his head as he looked over towards the beach. Some of the others were missing, having gone off... somewhere, he wasn't sure where, but most were there. After the initial shock of his appearance wore off most of them wanted to talk to Razor since apparently nobody had much experience with aquatic Mobian culture. Sally had been the most interested one and had

been asking the most questions when she wasn't glaring at Sorun out of the corner of her eye, like it was his fault he kept calling them Freedom Punchers because he didn't bother correcting Razor because he thought it'd be funny.

Nevertheless. It was keeping them busy, which meant Sorun had a chance to sneak off from the main group to fulfill a lifelong dream every aspiring man had. He'd be a fool to waste such an opportunity.

"This truly seems unnecessary, Sorun..."

Of course she had to be a naysayer to the aspiring dream. Sorun lowered his arms back to his sides and turned his head to Nicole, who was standing besides him. "This is the most necessary thing we will ever do in this relationship."

"It's just..." She was rubbing at her arm and looking away, wearing that extremely apprehensive look and yet wearing that reluctant and amused smile. She was digging the idea, or at least considering it. She'd outright deny Sorun if she was completely against it. "We have a home we can do this sort of thing in. With walls. And privacy."

"Look, Nicole," Sorun began, "you're always going on about how you want to experience now things, yeah? This is one of those things people do."

"You're goading me using past behaviors," she accused, but that nervous, apprehensive smile wasn't disappearing. "I don't see why... just tell me why it would be any different here than-"

"Because it's a tropical island," Sorun explained, as if that alone was explanation enough. "Making out in a tropical paradise setting is a wholly different experience to just doing that at home, and I don't know if we'll ever get this opportunity again so we need to strike now while the iron's hot and everyone's distracted. It's basic science."

"It is not," she firmly denied. "There is no scientific foundation to these claims of yours. And I really don't know why you must phrase it

like that..." She was tapping her arms with her fingers in a nervous manner, and Nicole's face had grown flustered. It was a rare day he managed to make that happen.

"But you don't know because you've never done something like that in this kind of setting," Sorun challenged. He was grinning in a very much opposite manner to how Nicole was apprehensively smiling, but he knew he was getting through to her from the very obvious lack of any variation of the word "no" on her part. "You need data to ascertain these sorts of claims. Data that can only be accrued through personal experience, Nicole. We *have* to kiss in this tropical paradise to prove or disprove my hypothesis that it's a different experience. It's for *science* , Nicole, and you love science. You wouldn't want to deny the science, would you?"

Her head sharply turned towards him. "This has nothing to do with science and you know it," she accused. "You're twisting words to try and make this course of action sound reasonable when it is not."

Shrugging, Sorun said, "Weeell technically speaking chemistry is a science so-"

"Sorun...!" She couldn't even look at him she seemed so flustered, and she had to resort to holding the side of her face with a hand. But at the very least he knew he hooked her with the scientific intrigue, because she had this certain look in her eyes that Sorun had grown accustomed to that told him he'd already won her over. Those same eyes had darted over to their group of friends nearby on the beach. "But all of our friends are here, Sorun, and if any of them were to accidentally come across us doing *that* I'd-"

"Nicole, Nicole, it's fine," Sorun assured her, waving a hand aside to ease her worries, "I talked to Razor on the way here and apparently he's super familiar with the island. There's all sorts of spots he told me about that nobody would ever find us in. We're in the clear!"

Because he needed this to happen. Because it was every man's fantasy to kiss the girl of their dreams on a tropical island. Dave had

said as much to Sorun one time. That a true man needed the perfect setting to kiss the girl to express their true feelings. He'd gone on and on about how it was one of his greatest desires if he ever met a girl he liked enough to make that kind of commitment - to kiss her on a tropical island.

Well, Dave was gone along with everyone else on Earth, but Sorun was still alive to carry on the dream. He didn't want to tell Nicole this; didn't want to inadvertently guilt trip her into going along with it and ruin the mood. Had to be of her accord to set the mood, but that part was already taken care of, because despite of how vocal she was against it that smile combined with the looks she kept giving him said enough, and the moment he said he knew of spots they could do this in secret without being discovered she looked completely agreeable to the idea.

The dream would be fulfilled.

And... well, he did just genuinely want to kiss her since there wasn't a bunch more going on at the moment.

"Fine, Sorun, we can... convene somewhere. Privately. If you truly know of a location where we assuredly won't be discovered." There it was. She was smiling more openly now. Only hints of apprehension remained on her face. "But only for a few minutes. Just long enough that the others won't begin wondering where we went and come looking for us. Five at the most."

A bit of disappointment made its way on Sorun's face. "Wha- seriously not eve ten min-?"

"Five minutes."

"Five minutes, okay, sure." He'd take it. Arguing further would only serve to jeopardize the dream and he didn't want to pressure her any further anyways. He never reacted anymore whenever Nicole just grasped his hand without any warning, but it still made him feel a bit

warm inside when they both walked further into the island brush, away from all the others.

If nothing else, the sights were pretty. And mostly green, but while they were walking around Nicole kept glancing around at all the plants around them. Never made any idle comments or pointed out anything in particular, but he caught her eyes tracking some of the plants they'd passed by.

The plants weren't all that interesting to him. All except for what was up ahead: a small alcove in the brush surrounded by a curtain of vines hanging off from the trees above. Unless one were to push their way past the vines nobody would be able to see whatever was on the inside. For all intents and purposes it was the perfect hiding spot.

The absolute... perfect... spot.

"The perfect spot," Sorun vocalized in whispered awe when the pair had stopped in front of the curtain of vines.

"... Sorun, truly?" Nicole didn't sound in awe at all. More slightly amused but mostly skeptical. "I understand you wanted to be a bit adventurous, but this is-"

"The perfect spot." There was no denying it. Complete coverage. Out of the way. On a tropical island. There was no better spot that would suffice.

"You've certainly said as much." With the hand not holding Sorun's own Nicole palmed her own face to hide the amused smile that had grown. "Very well, just... I'm not exactly sure how we're to-"

"You don't need to know anything when you've found the perfect spot, Nicole," Sorun explained when he reached out towards the vines. "It's like, uh, it's like when you do stuff without really thinkin' about it so ya just do it," he continued as he moved the vines aside, "so in this instance we'd-"

There were people in the perfect spot.

The perfect spot was compromised.

More specifically it was Knuckles standing there. Julie-Su was standing there, too, right next to him. Both were standing rigid and staring at the pair of them with wide eyes. Coincidentally Sorun and Nicole were doing the exact same thing, even holding the same postures. It was a solid ten seconds of awkward silence before Knuckles cleared his throat to speak.

"Uh..." His eyes darted between Sorun and Nicole and landed on Sorun. "So, uh, wow, you two-?"

"'Splorin'," Sorun automatically replied without any thought.

"Exploring?" Knuckles repeated.

"Exploring," Sorun confirmed. "What, uh... what're you two doing here?"

Both the echidna looked at each other before looking back at Sorun. "Just exploring, you know?" Knuckles said.

"Exploring?"

"Exploring."

"Yeah?"

"Mhm, yeah."

"Ah. Okay." Slowly, movements robotic, Sorun began to move the vines to re-obstruct the view of the interior of the alcove. "Just gonna... put these back."

"Alright," came Knuckles stilted voice from the inside of the alcove. And that was the end of that conversation once they disappeared from sight.

"..." Nicole blinked a few times at the vines and then looked questioningly at Sorun. "What was that?" she asked.

He didn't respond. He just wordlessly took her hand and guided her further into the brush.

Dave had been right, it seems. The way to the true man's dream was found through kissing your girlfriend somewhere on a tropical island. Why else would Knuckles be all the way out there? In the middle of nowhere, away from the others? With a girl?

Good for him, but that left Sorun without a viable path to fulfill the true man's dream entrusted to him by Dave. *As of yet* . There had to be more than one hidden spot here somewhere, Razor had said there were tons, and Sorun was determined to find another one yet.

Nicole seemed increasingly puzzled by the lengths Sorun was going through but was going along with it nonetheless if only to satisfy his whims.

"You know what? I was wrong. *This* is the perfect spot," Sorun claimed once they'd found the *true* perfect spot. A waterfall. Not an overly huge one, just a small stream running off a mound of rocks. But behind that waterfall was the obvious makings of a cave - a sight only one with the trained eyes of a gamer could ever spot. "It's thematic and everything, Nicole, it can only enhance the experience."

The grip in Sorun's hand was limp by now. Once more she sent him a questioning look that conveyed just how mystified she was with the entire experience thus far. "A hidden cave behind a waterfall is thematic for us?" she echoed. "In what way?"

Gesturing to the waterfall, Sorun answered with, "'Cause they always hide stuff behind waterfalls in video games. And we're gamers, so, like, it's perfect."

Yes. Truly. That other spot? Nothing but a random assortment of vegetation. Knuckles could have it to do whatever he was doing with Julie-Su. This spot had everything. Atmosphere, significance, sound dampening from the running water. It was better by a factor of ten, maybe even eleven. There was no way they could leave this island without kissing in there.

"I've yet to encounter that particular trope in games. Perhaps it's a quirk from the games of your old home." She made a small sighing sound and released Sorun's hand. "If you truly think this is that important then by all means we can, but can you do me the favor of at least looking in there first to see if it's suitable?" She looked around a bit, paying attention to some of the plants hanging off the rocks nearby. They had colorful orange and yellow flowers growing out of them. "I want to stay behind for a bit to examine some of the local flora."

"Alright, sure." He was already moving towards the waterfall while Nicole stayed behind to look at all the flowers. He couldn't begrudge her that, it was new things to look at and he doubted she could really resist cataloging all the plants she saw to memory, but he had more things to worry about than plants. Like scouting out the true perfect spot to ensure it was as perfect as it looked. He didn't have any doubts, though, because there was no way-

"Wait..." Sorun stopped, right at the front of the waterfall, inches away from the mouth of the cave. There were sounds, sounds beyond the rushing water right in front of his face. Voices. Indistinguishable in both the words those voices were saying and how many there were, but voices were voices. But more startlingly was the fact in addition to the voices he heard... high-pitched giggling! *"No, no, no!"*

An alarmed Sorun burst through the waterfall, nearly sprinting into the cave in a mad dash to confirm his fears. Those fear were realized when he saw two distinctly yellow bodies in the cave. He wasn't sure what happened next - he'd been rushing too fast and the movement in front of him had been too frantic to make out, but by

the time he came to a stop he was face to face with Charmy. Just... floating there, right in front of Sorun. With his hands folded behind his back and the guiltiest smile Sorun had ever seen plastered on his face.

"H-hey! Sorun! It's so weird seeing you here, what do you know! Ha ha!" Oh, the poor guy. It was so obvious what had been going on Sorun couldn't poke fun at it. It was just too sad. He'd feel nothing but pity if he weren't currently embroiled in unyielding rage on the inside for the perfect spot behind occupied. "So what are you doing here?" the bee asked rather quickly.

He was too tired and distraught to tease. With a resigned breath and sunken eyes, Sorun tonelessly said, "I heard some noises and grew concerned." He looked a bit to the side. He wasn't at all surprised to see Saffron hiding behind a rock and poking her head out to look at him. Sorun lethargically turned his eyes back to Charmy. "It would seem, however, my fears of danger were unfounded. You and Saffron were just exploring this cave. Absolutely nothing else to note, it seems."

Rapidly, Charmy nodded. "Yep, yeah, completely! Totally! Just us looking around, y'know, 'cause this island's so neat and she wanted to-"

Goddamn it all. "Look I'm just gonna leave. This didn't happen. I wasn't here. Just...-" Exhaling through his nose Sorun shook his head and turned around, "-pretend this didn't happen, alright?"

He didn't hear Charmy respond as he exited the cave and passed the waterfall. Honestly, he couldn't blame him; a situation like that was so awkward it was natural to look for a way out, to turn the other way and forget about it as quick as possible. Sorun'd do the exact same thing. He was happy to leave the matter alone as quick as possible, in fact.

Didn't change the fact his will was being crushed at a worryingly alarming rate, because dammit, that spot had been so primo. So

much, in fact, that Sorun knew, deep within his soul, that there could possibly be no spot on the island that was as good as that one. Not without the hidden waterfall chamber. He wasn't even sure he wanted to do this anymore if the best spot on the island got swept on up from right under Sorun's feet, but, well... the embers were still burning within him. The dream wasn't quite dead yet.

"Ah, you've returned," Nicole commented when he returned back to her side. "Sorun, a quick question. Do you think your shark friend is knowledgeable of the names and classifications of the genus of plants we keep finding here? A number of these flowers have unique characteristics and traits I want to file away for future reference and I'm not wont to try and classify something as important as species of flora if official labels already exist."

Sorun made a noncommittal grunt. To most that would mean nothing. Fortunately for Nicole she knew him well enough to understand he was greatly upset at something and didn't have the mental fortitude necessary to formulate an articulate response. That specific grunt meant that he didn't know and would ask Razor later.

"I see," she said, nodding. "Was something wrong with the cave?"

"..." He looked up at Nicole with hollow, vacant eyes. "The spot is compromised."

This, Nicole did not understand. "Pardon?" she asked, visibly confused.

Sorun didn't elaborate. He merely took her hand once more, and continued on further into the island. Nicole wordlessly followed, more for his sake than anything else.

Maybe in the end it was all a pipe dream. A stark, unreachable goal only meant for those who struggled to obtain it to struggle in vain. All except for the people that actually seemed to be accomplishing it because they'd acted faster than Sorun on this.

Damn it all. There had to be something.

"Maybe here?" he wondered. It was a rather innocuous-looking spot he'd found after some wandering. Some tall rocks surrounded by a gathering of palm trees. Slightly uncomfortable, maybe, but... well, it was hidden. And really, could it be any worse than making out in a cave? On the hard rock? On second thought, yes, this had to be much better than a cave. What was thematic ambiance to the padding of actual ground?

He looked in the other direction. He wasn't even sure Nicole cared anymore - she was crouching down near some plants and examining more flowers. At this point Sorun wouldn't even be surprised that half the reason she was putting up with this was because they kept finding interesting-looking plants along the way and she was just using the excuse to look around. Couldn't really blame her, in fact he was happy she was having a good time, but dammit, what about him? What about his dream? Dave's dream?

A quiet laugh broke Sorun's thoughts and made his head whip towards the newest spot he'd discovered. A laughing voice. Two voices, actually. A female voice and a male voice. The male one was noticeably French-sounding.

"Son of a bitch."

There wasn't any surprise on Sorun's face when he leaned past a gap in the rocks to look inside the small spot. Absolutely no surprise when he saw Antoine and Bunnie sitting rather closely towards one another, arms around each other. He didn't get a laugh out of the way they were frozen and staring owlishly at him. He didn't even know what he was supposed to feel at this point.

"Er... hi, Sorun," Bunnie awkwardly greeted. She'd untangled her arms off of Antoine and looked to the side in an embarrassed manner. "We was just, uh, lookin' around, y'know, all curious-like, an'-"

"Bah, I'm not ashamed enough to caramel-coat it," Antoine interrupted, shaking his head. He actually looked a bit defiant when he turned his body towards Sorun and crossed his own arms. In a weird way it felt a bit refreshing to the human. "Sorun, we are a married couple who are very much loving each-"

"Save it, man, I ain't gonna ruin your little mack-on fest here." Evidently Antoine didn't understand what Sorun just said, because he looked at him in confusion. Bunnie looked like she did, though. She was trying to hide as much of her face behind the sunhat she'd brought along as possible. "I'm leaving. This didn't happen."

"Oh. Uh... okay." Antoine blinked, like he hadn't expected this to go this way. Or be resolved this easily. "Then-"

But it was too late. Fed up with it all, Sorun had already gone.

The dream truly was a futile thing in the end, it seemed.

"I don't know, Nicole, I just wanted... I dunno." They'd settled on sitting next to each other, both resting against a palm tree on the beach. It was a mutual agreement that exploring the forest was done, on Nicole's part for having seen all she wanted to see and on Sorun's part for giving into the futility of achieving the dream. "Just a nice moment or something we could share," Sorun glumly continued as he threw a small stone into the sand.

Nicole glanced over at him. "We have many moments together," she pointed out. "I don't see how this was supposed to be any different from all the other times."

"Would have been unique? I dunno. I just thought it'd make a nice memory."

"And this isn't one? A nice memory?" Sorun thunked his head on the back of the tree when he heard the teasing tone Nicole had grown.

"I'd thought we were all having a wonderful time here, but it seems I was mistaken."

Sorun crossed his arms and shifted a bit where he was sitting. "Not saying it isn't a good memory. Just could have been a bit better is all I'm saying."

"Hmm. Fine."

He was about to ask what that was supposed to mean, but then he'd seen Nicole lean over to where he was sitting. And then she'd quickly pecked him on the cheek before moving back to where she'd been sitting prior.

By all accounts it was the most chaste kiss he could have possibly gotten, but at this point Sorun would take it. Even if it meant he had to look away from Nicole out of sheer embarrassment. It still made him happy. It counted.

"I did it, Dave. I did it."

"Well?" Nicole asked, sounding expectant. "Did it live up to everything you were hoping for?"

"... Well, you always outperform my expectations," Sorun mumbled as he rubbed at the spot on his cheek he'd been kissed. "But nah, it felt about the same." Not that he was expecting some heretofore unfelt emotion due to a simple switch in location from the normal locale, but he'd been open to being surprised. For the dream to be more than just a dream, even if attainable. Still worth it.

"I told you so it would be like this, Sorun," Nicole stated. She crossed her own arms and put on a self-satisfied, smug look. "And you had us traipsing through all of that jungle, too."

"You liked looking at the plants, you can't complain," Sorun shot back. She didn't refute it, but when Sorun glanced at her she was still holding that smug smirk. He rolled his eyes, shook his head, and

stood up to his feet. "Alright, well, we're having a huge bonfire and I gotta go help Razor track down a bunch of dead wood." He pocketed his hands in his pockets, mumbling off to the side, "Offered to just cut down some trees with my sword that can cut through anything, but nooo, gotta preserve the environment..."

"It's good to do things like that, Sorun, yes."

His eyes snapped down at Nicole. She wasn't even looking at him; just sitting there, eyes closed while still holding that smirk. He couldn't say anything as a good comeback. She'd won too thoroughly. "Er, yeah, I guess," he'd simply said in reply as he turned around to walk away. "See you later."

"If the kiss was that disappointing we can always try again when we go home."

His footsteps sped up a little bit. He could he felt that smug grin burning a hole in his back as he fled away from Nicole.

Okay, so it wasn't much of a bonfire. More a campfire. A modest campfire at that in the middle of the beach. As it happened there wasn't all that much wood on the island, and with the risk of invoking the wrath of his friends present he elected not to cut down any of the healthy trees. So he and Razor had tried - they really did. But this is what they came up with in the end.

A modest pile of sticks they were gonna set on fire later. Might last them a half hour if they were lucky.

"I still don't get why you guys mess around with this fire stuff," Razor huffed out when he tossed the last handful of sticks on the pile. "That stuff burns, you know?"

Sorun paused from unfolding one of the folding chairs the others brought as he looked up at the shark. "Is this one of those underwater things I don't understand because I breath too much

air?" he asked as he set the chair down. "You... you cook food, right?"

"The, er... the others I used to ride with did," Razor said, "but I never got it. Sis didn't, either."

"I mean, I can respect eating raw meat. In that same vein of thought I can't respect salmonella, though. So yeah." And that was just Earth standard. He didn't want to risk an encounter with whatever hyper-evolved, Chaos-laden super salmonella was probably running around on this planet.

"What's wrong with salmon? I think it's great."

"God." There was a soft crunching sound as Sorun stabbed the legs of chair into the sand beneath him. "Look, it's a species barrier thing, alright?" he continued as he looked up at Razor after rubbing at his eyes. "Ocean people like it raw, land people like it cooked, it's just how it is even if we can't understand *why* the other likes their way of eating so much. It's like a two-dimensional being trying to comprehend a three-dimensional being. It just ain't happening."

With a chair in his own hand, Razor looked up at Sorun before he planted it into the ground. He blinked at him, giving him a look that clearly lacked comprehension for a few seconds before shrugging and planting the chair. "Eh, I don't really understand what you just said, but if you say it then it must be true. You're smart like that."

Smart? That didn't sound right. "What gave you that impression?" Sorun asked as he placed another chair.

"Well, you're the smartest guy I know, so... it makes sense, doesn't it?"

"..." With his eyebrows raised high in disbelief Sorun went back to placing the chairs. "I worry for your people if that's your takeaway," he muttered out.

Having placed the last chair down, Sorun stepped back in admiration of their work. A circle of folding chairs around a pile of sticks amidst the setting sun. Paired with the image of crashing waves in the background and the orange lights from the setting sun dancing along the ocean's surface, it was... certainly one of the better sights Sorun had seen in his life.

"Huh..." Razor had traced Sorun's eyes to the sight he was looking at. From the serene look on his face it was hitting him about as hard as it was hitting Sorun. "Y'know, sights like these are pretty much half the reason I bother coming up here. You don't get stuff like this under the surface of the ocean."

"Hrm. Move to the surface," Sorun suggested, without hesitation. "You'd get to see this every day and you wouldn't have to deal with the people in your city. In fact just move to the city I live in. There's room."

"Eh-heh, yeah, that'd probably be nice." Razor had laughed it off in a tone that suggested he took what Sorun had said as a small joke. It caused him to frown a bit. It hadn't been a joke. "Couldn't really leave my friends, though."

"Bring them."

"Nah. One of my friends really likes the temple she looks after. Don't think she'd leave it for anything." Razor turned to Sorun and approached his side. he pulled something out from a small pouch strapped to his waist - afterwards he tossed it to Sorun. "Anyways, here. Check out what I found."

Sorun caught the object midair and looked down to examine it. A cursory glance revealed it to be a yellow fruit of some kind dotted with green spots. "What's this?" he asked.

"Dunno!" Razor grinned and gave him a shrug. "These fruits all grow on the islands around here. Everyone back home likes 'em enough so whenever I'm around I bring some back with me. Try it!"

"Hm." Well, he was kind of hungry. And exotic, tropical fruit was exotic, tropical fruit. If Razor vouched for it that was good enough for him. "Hey, if you say so."

Sorun bit down into the fruit.

His pupils dilated.

Did anyone ever look up into the sky and think to themselves... *man*?

Like... like cloud watching, but into the soul. Soul watching. Like the sky was a mirror and all of Sorun was up there looking down on him along with the other million and a half colors swirling up there.

It was questions like these that would baffle even the most studious of philosophers, would stump the greats like Play-Doh and Scrotumtease, that'd been whirling through Sorun's mind at a million snails a minute ever since he ate that fruit Razor gave him. He didn't know what the fuck was in that fruit, but it was eye-opening. Literally. He felt the third eye in his brain opening up, and it was... it was dark in there. There wasn't light in his skull. Maybe that's why he couldn't see out of it.

Could Tails put a lightbulb in his skull? He'd, he'd ask. One day.

There were a bunch of noises, too, but what even was noise? His brain told him noise was vibrations in the air picked up by the cochlea organ in his inner ear within a range of twenty hertz to twenty kilohertz which converted those vibrations into electrical signals interpreted by the brain as noise. But when did he ever listen to his brain?

"Are his eyes supposed to be all big like that?"

"Razor, what did you give him!?"

"I-I thought it was harmless! Everyone from where I'm from eat these things and nothing like this ever happens! I ate one before I gave him the other one!"

"He can't handle mild substances!"

"R... really? 'Cause they make baby food outta this, too."

"We all figure his tolerance for pretty much everything is nonexistent, it's... it's a human thing, we don't really know. I think we can fix it, though. Nicole, can you...?"

"I'm already looking for it, Sally. Does anybody know where he left it?"

"He left it half-buried in the sand over there because he got too tired of carrying it around. I'll show you where."

"Thank you, Tails."

See? The brain was nothing but pain.

Except it wasn't anymore. Oh, it'd been there - that deep, gray fog weighing *everything* down that only grew more and more oppressive the longer he stayed here. And then he found out everything he knew was gone, washed away in invisible fire, and his body was chained beyond the fog. Into the great nothingness.

He felt nothing. Nothing mattered. Anything was nothing. Hey, Nicole was visiting again. Why was he bothering to breath when there was nothing left?

But that was gone! It's over! There's stuff again! No fog or chains or darkness. *Stuff* . Tangible, edible stuff. 'Cause... 'cause he had money? Yeah, 'cause of the job he had.

Holy fucking shit, he had a job now, and a house he could call his own. He wasn't a total failure and a waste of space anymore like he'd always been. And there was a whole community that actually

gave a damn about him. He never even thought things like that even existed. He had friends? And a girlfriend even? And it was Nicole?

God, he was so fucking happy. His life was going so great and he didn't want it to stop. He could just live there like this forever, right? That'd be nice.

"Heeeeey~... you." He didn't even care he was latching onto Antoine like this. He might care, but it was hard to tell since his face was kind of an amorphous blob right now. But nah, he wouldn't care. He was good people. The goodest of people. "You're, you, you're the greatest, man, come here, just, just come here."

It didn't feel as good hugging him as it did hugging the angel lynx computer lady person but that didn't matter. Still warm. Could he just do this forever? Ev- everyone should just do this, the world would be such a gooder place if everyone just hugged their problems out.

God, they took him to the beach with them and he couldn't be happier people cared about this much, he fucking loved them all so much.

"Th-that, that iz nice, Sorun," he heard Antoine say, a bit lighthearted but nervous, as he pulled him off of him. What he sitting in a chair right now? Was that what that was? Oh, *he put the chairs there, yeah* . "You're a very good friend, too, oui."

"Nah, but, but you're better," Sorun protested. "Not as good as the, the... the nice kissy gamer kitty. She's best." He poked Antoine in what was either his chest of his forehead. "But you're so great, man, I, I don't wanna be around if you're not around, 'cause you're so great 'n' just, man I just like you so much, man, I'd hug all of you if I could but, but like you're here an' everyone else is... like, I don't know where they are. There's oxygen an' stuff keepin' us apart. But invisible, like glass. The invisiblest glass, Antoine, can you believe that? So smooth. So breathable."

"I really do think you are needing to do ze lying down until Nicole comes back with ze Emerald, mon ami."

"I'm so glad I have so many friends like you, Antoine, you're all just the best. Wonderful, all of you. Man, I have so many friends, I... I had more than this? Oh, yeah, the, uh, the one. That one. Yeah."

The coyote he was clutching onto shifted under him. "Sorun?" He sounded more flustered than anything else for some reason. Sorun couldn't imagine why. This was great.

A picture of something he didn't remember appeared. "Mhm, the, uh... that one, her. We were... we was cool." Cool as ice because ice was always cool. But then he broke something and the ice had turned warm. He'd laughed while doing it. "Everything was fine until it wasn't, and then she got real mad and everything got all bright and HOT. But then it was fine!" Sorun cheered out, throwing his arms up. "'Cause I heal good." He felt oddly sad for a moment. "She couldn't heal good."

"I really am not understanding any of zis," Antoine said, now more bemused than anything else, "but I am seeing ze picture. You ate ze strange zing and now are seeing all ze strange zings, non? Imaginary people and ze such."

"Nahhhh, man, it was... she was..." He wracked his brain for an answer. The picture was disappearing, the words evaporating, but the word was... a path to the word was there! "'They're in the net, Command. Send it. Authenticate: Solutions 0-8-1-6.'"

"Okay, Sorun, it iz ze obvious sign zat you are ze spinny-noodle-y type in ze head right now." Sorun giggled when Antoine picked him up and set him down so he was sitting on the soft sand. "Just sit here."

There was another picture. It was *that place* .

Frantically, like his life depended on it, Sorun grabbed at the collar of Antoine's shirt. His life *did* depend on it, this was so important, he couldn't believe it, why wasn't he there right now!? "Antoine, I need to go there. The tower. There's something important there, Antoine, it's waiting for me, Antoine it's in the tower I need to go there! I need to go to the tower!"

It was there. It reached up so high into the skies it breached the clouds. It was the only thing left alive.

Gently, Antoine pried Sorun's hands off of him. "Sorun, zere iz no tower," he softly mumbled out. "What tower?"

"It's there, Antoine, it's right there. I need to go in it."

"Why? What's zere?"

"It's... frrrreeedom, Antoine. Truth."

"Okay, Sorun." His hands were softly placed back into his lap by Antoine. "Just please be sitting still and you'll be right as ze raindrops licking splitted."

"That sounds right," Sorun agreed. There was a crunching sound of sand, and he looked towards the source. "Oh, h-hi!"

There were no words. "Radiant" was insufficient. If the words did exist his mind was running a bit too soupish to remember the collection of letters. All he could tell was that the person standing in front of him was bright. Striking. Not just in their features but in their spirit. That's as best as he could describe it. The person in front of him was truly beautiful beyond words. A person whose mere presence was so blinding Sorun was beyond words and could only stare in awed silence. A figure that shone so brightly that the glowy blue thing they were holding in their hand seemed dim in comparison.

He couldn't understand the feeling he felt looking at the person. The feeling of warmth just from being in that light. The sheer joy from being in its direct vicinity. The feeling of sheer devotion he had towards it, like he *had* to accept this light and this person as an immutable part of his life. Every single fiber of his being was telling him to love and cherish this light. His soul was telling him he should fight anything that ever threatens them. He was pretty sure he had a sword that could help with that, but he forgot where it went.

This person was beautiful. He was compelled to poke them in the face.

"Ha ha." He tried poking the light. It was too bright, and he missed. In reality he was just too far away due to sitting down while the light was standing up and away from him, but Sorun had no possible way at the moment of comprehending what that ordering of words even met. Distance didn't exist.

The light shifted. "Sorun, please take this," it said. The cochlea organs in his ears quivered in pleasure at the sound of the light's voice. He didn't even know light could speak like that. It held out the glowy blue thing, and the first thought he had was that he didn't want that dull piece of shit. He wanted to hold the light forever because things were always great when the light was around and he didn't have to worry anymore and he felt like his life had just a little bit more meaning if it meant he could make the light happy. But he got the sense that the light would be unhappy if he didn't take the blue thing, so he took it.

The blue thing was hard and smooth. Not at all like the light. The light was soft and had fur.

The light... had fur.

God, if light had fur then what the hell was the sun made of? The thought scared Sorun, and he dropped the blue thing as a result.

The light sighed. They crouched down and picked it up, and then placed it in Sorun's hands. He was able to feel the light's hands when they brushed past his.

The hands were everything. The hands of a gamer. An artisan. A coder. A kind and loving person. He was definitely one of these things. Maybe two. Did sandcastles count?

"Now Sorun, can you do something for me?" The light asked him.

"Mmmmmm... hm. Yeah, I'll do anything for you."

"That's nice, Sorun."

"Even tax fraud."

"Don't do that, Sorun, Elias will get mad and I don't want to put you in the jail."

"Alright." Crime was illegal. Couldn't do that. Got it. "But what do you need me to do *right now* , then?"

"Do you know that one power you have? The one where your hair turns white?" the light softly asked him. "Do you think you could use that? Just for a moment so you can go back to normal?"

"Huh? But... o-oh, wait, you're Nicole! The light's name is Nicole!"

The light named Nicole seemed to need a moment to pause and try to understand what he just said. It gave up, saying, "Yes, Sorun, it's because you needed a minute to remember my name that I need you to fix yourself. That's not normal."

"I mean that body feels great an' all, but..." He looked down and attempted to grab at Nicole the light's wrist. He got lost and grabbed his own wrist by mistake. "But I feel so happy right now, Nicole. Because you're here and everyone's here and everything's great but because you're here everything's greater than great because you're here and I feel great and I don't wanna stop feeling great. I don't

want that to go away. Let's just stay like this forever. I'm fine with that."

Nicole patted him on the top of his head like a lost dog, unsure of what else to do in this situation. "You can be happy without being under the effects of whatever was in the fruit Razor gave you that intoxicated you, Sorun," she soothingly said to him. "But I'm happy to learn you have all these feelings, even if it took all of your inhibitions being obliterated by poison to get the words out. Now please cure yourself."

Well, if the light was asking him, he had to obey. To not listen to the light was blasphemous. That was a bad thing, he knew that. "'Kay," he simply said.

Sorun's hair turned white.

He blinked. Reality snapped back to normal.

Currently Sorun was sitting in the sand in front of one of the chairs circling the pile of sticks and and Razor made. Everyone was sitting in a chair except for Nicole, who was staring at Sorun. Actually everyone was staring at Sorun.

He glanced down at the blue Emerald in his hands. He didn't remember everything he just said, but he remembered enough to know the embarrassing parts. *"Oh. Huh. Wow. Yeesh. How do I salvage this?"*

"I got nothing for ya, bro," Sorun thought.

"Dang," thought Sorun. *"Uh... alright, plausible deniability here we go."* If he pretended he never said all that vulnerable, mushy stuff then it was the same as it never happening in the first place. That's how it worked.

"What just happened?" Sorun asked, looking back up at Nicole. "I was standing next to Razor and now we're all here. What

happened?"

Nicole looked confused at his words. So did everybody else, who glanced at each other questioningly. It was Nicole who spoke. "You don't recall a single thing that happened?" she asked, sounding a bit incredulous.

Damn. She wasn't buying it. "I remember a fruit," he helpfully replied, trying to garner just a bit of credibility for his case. "I remember eating it. Now I'm here. What's with that?"

"... I think I see." She closed her eyes and offered a small smile. Sorun instantly translated that as her knowing he was completely faking not knowing what just happened, but would go along with it anyways for his sake. It was hard to take any solace in this fact because he knew she was going to tease him about it relentlessly when they were alone later. "Razor gave you a sample of some of the local fruit and you fell under a stupor of sorts. I managed to goad you into curing yourself with the Chaos Emerald."

"Oh, wow, really? That's nuts. That's real nuts, guys." Yep, and that was that. No need to dwell on the matter if he didn't remember anything. Case closed and shut. He hopped up one of the remaining empty chairs. "What a wacky adventure, everyone, glad it's over."

Once more everyone glanced around at each other. "We're really not gonna talk about-" Rotor began.

"Nah, nope, nothing to look at." Sorun snapped his gaze to Razor. Miraculously somebody miscounted the amount of chairs they needed and an extra just happened to be brought for him. "Razor, why'd you poison me?"

The shark floundered at the claim. "How was I supposed to know you'd react like that!?" he yelled. "I've seen people eat tons of those things and they turn out fine!"

"Well, that's how it goes, Razor. Mobians get all the biological advantages over humans," Sorun glibly remarked. "But the crisis is averted, so we can all go back to what we were doing before."

Once more everyone stared. Sorun was fairly confident the bead of sweat rolling down the side of his face was imaginary. Phantom sweat.

"... Okay, if ya say so," said Bunnie. Sorun breathed out a sigh of relief as Nicole sat down in the chair next to him. "Jus' try'n watch what ya eat from now on. Wouldn't want any more crazy episodes on our hands."

"Ha ha, yeah, crazy, I-I didn't do anything actually crazy, did I?"

He didn't like that smirk Bunnie grew. Dammit, everyone had it. "Oh, nah, Sorun, you ain't gotta worry 'bout a thing."

Well, it was clear enough to Sorun. Everyone but Nicole bought the memory loss lie. Didn't erase all the stuff he said that he knew they heard. He supposed he should be lucky they were all giving him a break and pretending nothing happened. Except for Sonic, who looked like he wanted to say something about it, but Sally was glaring at him and pinching his shoulder so he was keeping his mouth shut.

Eh. He'd take it.

"So we gonna start this campfire or what?" Sorun asked, desperate to get away from the shame of it all.

Again, everyone looked around at each other, and Sorun felt glad to be a part of the group now. Espio was the one who spoke out.

"Charmy. You did remember to bring the fire starter, correct?" the chameleon asked.

"Why would I pack it?" he asked back. "You're the ninja with all the ninja tools. Shouldn't you have packed it?"

"Does starting a fire truly sound like something a ninja would do?"

"How would I know? I'm not a ninja."

"..." Espio sighed and looked at the rest of the group. "We didn't bring a fire starter," he said.

Groans of disappointment all around. Sonic looked ready to get up off his seat. "Alriiight, I'll rub some sticks together really fast to try and-"

"Nah, hold on, I got it," Sorun interrupted. His hair darkened back to black as he held the Emerald up.

Sonic blinked a bit in confusion, but settled back in his seat. "Er, thanks, Sorun, but you really don't gotta go all the way back home for a fire... huh?"

The hedgehog's eyes widened in surprise. Everyone's did, really, when the Chaos Emerald in Sorun's hand instantly transmuted into a weapon. Not a weapon any of them were familiar. Indeed, it was the first time any of them had ever laid eyes on such a weapon. A... guitar, by the looks of it. A wicked thing covered in sharp edges with a scythe's blade folded inside of it.

"No, not that one," Sorun muttered out. A few small bolts of purple electricity danced along the instrument's strings before the weapon disappeared and turned back into the Chaos Emerald. "Lemme cycle through a few and find something," he said.

The Mobians all around stared on in sheer fascination. The Emerald changed again, this time into a large falchion blade. The hilt seemed to be fused to an engine and there were exhaust tubes jutting out the back of it.

"... Bit too violent, no," Sorun muttered. Another shift. Now he was holding a cleaver-like, serrated sword. The blade itself was dyed red. "Too unruly."

The weapon changed again. This time it was three intricate metal rods, the ends frozen with blue ice. They were all connected to a central metal ring via... vaporized ice, of all things. "This'll work," Sorun claimed.

Before anybody could say anything, he spun the three-headed nunchucks around. They shifted, the ring disappearing and the rods combining into a singular, long staff. The ends glowed orange with heat. And with the nonchalance of somebody sticking a fire poker into a fire, Sorun touched the end of the blazing staff into the pile of sticks.

The sticks alit within a second. The campfire had begun.

"Fixed it," Sorun said. The staff disappeared and the Emerald settled into Sorun's hands once more. "Alright, so where'd we leave the food, 'cause-"

"Whoa whoa whoa, wait up just a second there," Sonic interrupted, waving his hands in front of him to gain Sorun's attention. "What was that thing you just made? Since when have you been able to do that!?"

Sorun quirked an eyebrow at Sonic, and then made a look of understanding. "Ahh, I guess you haven't been paying attention. So I'm a void-type, right, which means I get to turn Chaos energy into all sorts of wacky stuff-"

"No, I get that part, Sorun," Sonic said, a bit exasperated, "I mean all that stuff you did! All the weapons! Since when could you do that!?"

The confusion on Sorun's face didn't fade. "... Since I got the ability to pick the powers and hold Emeralds without absorbing them?" He turned the Emerald into another weapon. This one was a longsword.

The hilt was stylized to look like the blade was jutting out of the mouth of a gargoyle, and the guard was stylized to look like wings. Blue lightning sparked over the blade's surface. "I've got dozens of weapons I can cycle through. This is Alastor."

"And that other one? The nunchuck thing?"

"King Cerberus. Sixty-six percent cooler than normal Cerberus," Sorun said. "Like literally it's the same exact thing but without the lightning and fire configurations. It's pretty useless."

"Okay, wait..." Exhaling through his nose, Sonic started rubbing the sides of his head. "So... so this whole time. You had all these great weapons this whole time but haven't been using them? You didn't think back then any of them would have been useful?"

"Not really." The sword shifted into a metallic suitcase covered in glowing, maze-like yellow lines. There was a three-eyed, fanged skull imprinted in its center, the slit eye sockets glowing yellow. "For one, I didn't get a choice of what I got back then. Second, even if I did I would have just stuck with Yamato. It's the best one. Why would I use any of the others when I already have the best one?"

The answer didn't seem to satisfy Sonic. "But why? If they all have different powers like the one sword-"

"None of them are like Yamato," Sorun interrupted, somewhat firmly. "All of the weapons are... gimmicky. Difficult to use with abilities that don't really measure up to Yamato's. Actually I probably can't even use half of them without the white-haired body; they're too intense for a normal human to use. By contrast Yamato is easier to use. The power's simpler and more flexible, versatile. It's the most efficient. It's... cleaner to use than all the rest." The suitcase shifted into Yamato. He laid it down on his lap, eyes gazing over its form. "You saw me use it against all those robots so you see what I mean. I wouldn't have got nearly as much mileage using any of the other ones. So I stick with Yamato because I never needed any of the others."

It was somewhat of a struggle to not let the phrase "Devil Arm" slip out of Sorun's mouth. But part of him worried how they'd react hearing him call them that, so he let the true title of the weapons go unsaid.

"Besides," Sorun continued as he looked back up at Sonic, "I kind of depend on Yamato to make a livelihood. And I don't really have much pragmatic use for a pair of gauntlets and greaves that'd probably blow my limbs off if I tried using them. And I've got, like, four sets of those."

"Uh... four?" Sonic blinked at that, looking a bit surprised. Everyone did, really - Sorun didn't blame them all that much. He supposed he did just drop a lot of sudden info on them. "Sorun, I figure I gotta ask. Where does all this stuff come from, anyways? Like not just all the weapons but the, er, the powers and everything." He shrugged. "You just always seem super familiar with them all. Even have names for 'em ready and everything. I was just wondering."

Ah, yeah. The origin of all the powers and weapons. Yeah, no way in hell was he ever telling them all he aped them from video games. Too much embarrassment. "That's a secret," Sorun said. There were more than a few disappointed groans all around. "Maybe I'll tell Nicole if she asks."

"Oh, come on!" Sonic complained. "You're seriously gonna pull that card!?"

"Yeah." Without missing a beat Sorun tossed the sword away. It turned back into the Emerald as it sailed away and landed in the sand somewhere. In the process he'd found it - the cooler they brought the food in. "Enough about all that, though," he said as he got up to pull the cooler towards the group, "we've been out here all day, so I think it's time we-"

Abruptly, Sorun's voice cut out. It was at the same moment he'd opened the cooler to see the actual contents of the cooler. The

"food" that laid within. Hunger was all but forgotten in lieu of the pit that'd dropped in his stomach.

Hot dogs. There were nothing but hot dogs in this cooler.

After witnessing the crime against nature, Sorun's head snapped up to Sonic, his eyes accusatory. What made it worse was that the hedgehog seemed genuinely puzzled as to why Sorun seemed so upset at the moment. It only served to make Sorun more upset.

"There's more food on this planet than hot dogs, Sonic," Sorun stated in an icy tone. "This is cruel and unusual treatment, you know. They imprisoned people for stuff like this where I'm from."

"I really doubt they did," Sonic flatly responded.

"You don't know that. What are you gonna do? Fact-check me? You won't." He glanced at all the others. "You guys couldn't talk him out of it-!?"

Something hit him in the face. Sorun sputtered out, grasping at what hit him. Something soft - a bag of some sorts. He pried it off his face, but the initial panic Sorun felt was mollified when he saw it was a simple bag of marshmallows.

"We brought other food," came the deadpan statement from Sally. He looked up from the bag and saw her looking at him, a handful of metal rods in her hand. "You said you weren't gonna make up Earth laws to mess with people, Sorun."

"Yeah, well... thanks," he muttered out in meek thanks. He grabbed a marshmallow from the bag and tossed the rest towards the nearest person, and then grabbed the metal rod tossed to him from Sally out of the air. He trudged back to his seat, though he didn't even manage to get the marshmallow on the skewer before he heard a disgruntled yell from Sonic.

Looking up, Sorun saw the problem. The problem took the form of his Chao floating next to Sonic with a marshmallow skewered onto one of the blades jutting out from his arms. The hedgehog was giving the small creature the stink eye, and then began reaching out for another marshmallow. He grabbed it, but only for a second before Virgil blurred forwards. Now there was a marshmallow skewered on both blades.

Sorun laughed at the sight on the inside and pretended to ignore it as he held the marshmallow over the fire. It brought him back...

One year ago

"Wow, Dave, yeah, this is... this is totally where everyone wants to be on their sixteenth birthday. You're a fuckin' genius." The sarcasm was less dripping and more pouring out Sorun's mouth. "I feel like a goddamn hobo."

"Hey, now. That's disrespectful to Crazy Ricky."

"Dave, we're roasting marshmallows over a barrel fire in the middle of a scrapyard."

"Yeah and you didn't wanna actually go anywhere, so the hell else were we supposed to go?"

Sorun bit his tongue. He had him there, admittedly. If Sorun had it his way he'd just be huddling in his room and they'd all be playing something together online like sane people. But nah, it's his sixteenth birthday, they said, we all gotta do something special. "Let's all go camp out at the scrapyard!" they'd cried out. Meanwhile Sorun was wondering why he bothered to go along with this.

It's 'cause Jarod was bringing those damn imported chocolates, that's why. And Dave all but begged him.

Still, it wasn't... it wasn't the worst locale, he guessed. This was the spot *, after all, on the rare occasion going outside to hang with the others was a decision Sorun committed to. A playground made of junk left to the whims of the imagination of a bunch of boys. It was good times. Except for the tetherball incident but that was besides the point.*

Wasn't the worst place to spend his sixteenth birthday. Wasn't the worst place at all.

"Oh, hey," Dave suddenly said, head picking up to look beyond the flaming barrel in front of the two, "Jarod, you made it! It's so dark out here I barely saw ya coming."

The dark-skinned teenager who'd just walked into view was holding a plastic bag with his left hand. His right hand was holding up a middle finger at Dave, who was cheekily grinning as a result. "Ah-huh, yeah." He nodded his head to the fourth, white-skinned teen that'd been walking next to him. "So head's up but Billy forgot the graham crackers."

Both Sorun and Dave's heads snapped to Billy, who sheepishly rubbed a hand through his ginger locks while looking down. Dave was the first to speak out.

"Seriously, Billy?"

"Yeah, for real, Billy?" Sorun followed up.

"We were really counting on you, Billy."

"You had one job, Billy."

"Can't believe you've done this, Billy, just can't."

"I mean, really, Billy?"

"Billy, I just, I can't, man."

"What are you doing, Billy?"

"Foolin' around, Billy, that it?"

"Havin' a laugh, Billy?"

"Fun at our expense, Billy?"

"Of all the times to be let down, Billy."

"Worst time imaginable, Billy."

"Absolute worst, Billy."

"Bite me, both of you," Billy snapped, looking back up at them. "I forget one little thing and it's all, 'nyeh, Billy, how could you, it's a crime against humanity,' I mean what the hell?"

"Because you forgot one of the main components of s'mores, man!" Sorun argued. "What're we gonna sandwich the marshmallow and chocolate against, huh? I ain't spending this whole night with sticky fingers."

"Would you eat a hamburger without buns?" Dave added. "Would you eat a grilled cheese without cheese? That's just toast, man. You gonna give me pancakes with no syrup, huh?"

"Gyro with no sauce," Jarod added.

"A gyro with no sauce, Billy," Dave agreed. "Do you wanna live in a world like that?"

"We already live in that world. We live in that world every time we go to that damn diner." Billy looked to the side. There was a fifth teenager sitting against a pile of tires. Light skinned boy. Squirrely-looking with curly, brown hair. "Hey, Jamie, are you getting in on these or not?"

The teen didn't respond. He seemed incredibly engrossed in whatever he was sketching in the sketch pad he held.

"Yo, Jamie!" Jarod yelled out.

This time he'd heard. He looked up, blinking brown eyes in surprise as he looked at the group of four. "Huh, what? What's going on?" he asked.

In response, Jarod held up the bag of chocolate be brought. "S'mores but without no damn crackers 'cause someone forgot them," he explained, shooting a glare at Billy who rolled his eyes. "Guess we can just sandwich them between the chocolate but it ain't gonna be the same no matter what we do."

"Oh, no thanks." Jamie turned his gaze back down to the sketch pad. "You guys know there's a certain weight range for fighter pilots in the military? I thought it was because of fuel concerns but apparently it's more because of safety concerns with ejection systems, though they've been phasing it out on some models of planes-"

"Jamie you don't even wanna be a fighter pilot, why do you care?" Sorun interrupted, sounding almost worn out from the other teen's words.

He shrugged. "It's just cool. That's all. And I don't want to get my sketchbook sticky."

"Hey, that's fair." Fair enough that Sorun almost wished he'd just lead with that one and left it there. "What're you sketching this time, Jaimie?"

"SU-30." He flipped the sketchbook over to show the rest - to Sorun's eyes it was a drawing of a fighter plane so realistic he could have mistaken it for a black and white photograph at this distance. To anybody else it'd look like a work of art, but by now Sorun had seen Jamie sketch out so many planes that it became par for the course.

"Huh. That's cool." He wasn't even sure if Jamie heard that; he went back to sketching. Shaking his head, Sorun turned back to the other three. "Any idea what we're gonna do for Jamie's sixteenth? We ran out of airplane museums."

"We'll go skydiving," Dave said with complete confidence. "We'll scare the very idea of planes out of him. For the next week or so, anyways."

"You say that like he would be able to take his attention off the plane itself long enough to remember he's supposed to jump out of it," Jarod remarked.

"Ain't there an age limit, though?" Billy asked. "Gotta be eighteen or whatever, right?"

Multiple sounds of realizations and disappointment resounded from the four teens standing around the barrel fire. Jamie remained silent, wholly intent on sketching.

"Well, whatever we do it can't be worse than roasting marshmallows in the middle of a scrapyard for cars," Sorun sighed out. "With no graham crackers."

"Some would say the lack of crackers would build character."

"Fuck off, Billy, we're talking about a whole third of the snack here." Sorun's eyes glanced upwards, towards the black Detroit sky without a single star shining in it. "Gotta say, though, I don't feel a whole lot different, turnin' sixteen and all."

"Yes," Jarod agreed. "We all thought for sure the minute you turned sixteen you'd hit a magic growth spurt and reach normal size."

One of Sorun's eyes twitched. "I want you to keep making these short jokes while bearing in mind I'm holding a really pointy metal stick," he said. "And stop reminding me I'm old now. It sucks. This sucks and you all suck."

"Yeah, well, you suck, too, so we all suck together," Dave countered.

There probably would have been a cricket chirping somewhere if the conditions in the scrapyard didn't make life nigh-impossible to propagate in that particular region. The soft crackling of the fire was all that was heard in place as all the other teenage boys turned to look at Dave. Even Jamie had looked up from his sketchbook.

"You, uh... you wanna try that one again, man?" Billy asked.

"Nah," Dave said in utter confidence, shaking his head. "A true man stands by his convictions, and I meant what I said. You guys are are all the ones at fault for misinterpreting."

"Sure, but, like, you could rephrase it or-"

"Fine, it's like crabs in a bucket," Dave tried again, never losing his cool composure. "A crab by nature is a complete bastard so we're never getting out of that bucket 'cause we'll keep dragging each other down. But hey, at least we'll be in that bucket together."

"Yeah, I know that feeling," Sorun muttered out. "We ain't ever getting out of Detroit."

"You even wanna leave?" Jarod asked.

Sorun looked at him like he was mad. "What? Hell no. The fiber optic internet here's too good. I'm good never leaving the bucket. Bucket's got wi-fi."

"Uh-huh." Jarod pulled his marshmallow out from the open fire. He made a dissatisfied face and went back to roasting it. "You figure out what you wanna do with your life yet, then?"

At hearing that question Sorun couldn't help but scoff. He rotated his marshmallow around in the fire. "Hell if I know, man. I'm sixteen years old now and I have absolutely no aspirations whatsoever."

"Hey, you're good at games. You win all those tournaments all the time. You could go pro, try doing that," Billy suggested. "I mean, didn't you recently win that one 'Smash' tourney?"

A sour look crossed Sorun's face. "It's too soon for that one, Billy."

The reactions all around were near-universal. Jarod winced in pain, Dave glanced down at his feet, Jamie nervously returned to his sketchbook, and Billy shuffled around on his feet while nervously coughing to the side. He couldn't speak for the others but the last thing he wanted to talk about was what happened with that, and by the looks everyone else had it was a topic nobody wanted to talk about.

"Anyways," Sorun continued, trying his best to change the subject, "I dunno about the pro leagues. Maybe. I mean, I dunno how my mom'd react to me telling her I wanna be a professional gamer. She's a doctor, man. That's a hard enough standard to live up to."

"Yeah, but your mom's chill," Dave argued. "Like, the chillest person on Earth. She'd be cool with it. You know, assuming you pull it off."

"Which, by all means, you could," Jarod added. "If you really want to split hairs you already do play professionally. Give it a couple more years and you won't have to have your mom sign you off on all the tournaments."

"Guys, I don't even wanna know if I wanna do that for a living," Sorun said to them. "Games are more a hobby than anything else and I don't even know if I wanna turn that into a living. And I mainly do the tournaments 'cause I like beating people. The money's secondary."

"Well, hey," Billy said, "they say if you're gonna do a job you should make it something you love doing."

It was a fair point. It didn't change the fact Sorun felt unsure about the entire thing. About life in general. "Look, at the end of the day I dunno where I'm gonna end up in the future. Don't think anyone ever

does," he said as he stared into the fire. "This world's messed up in all sorts of ways but that's one of the great things about it, ain't it? That anything could happen, an' life's this big journey that could take us anywhere? Some shit like that? I dunno, feels like media keeps drumming that idea into our heads but there's some truth in it. We can go anywhere and do anything we want. And 'cause I'm lazy as hell I'm gonna wait around 'til I figure out what to do with myself. And the world'll let me. 'Cause the world's cool like that."

The marshmallow on Sorun's skewer melted to a point that it slid off the skewer entirely. It fell into the barrel fire, bursting into flames at it shriveled into a black, charcoaled mess.

Sorun glared at the fire, as if trying to combust the flames themselves with his eyes. "I take it back, the world fucking sucks."

At first there was nothing. And then a few snickers coming from David. The small chuckles spread to everyone else, and soon enough all five of them were laughing.

Present

"This... this is fine, right? Guys?"

He'd never thought being nostalgic over roasting marshmallows could ever be a thing, but by now Sorun's life was so atypical the abnormal was normal at this point, so he didn't bat an eye at it. Everybody had gone on to talk about their own things as they all held the sugary cylinders over the fire. Sally, Sonic, Antoine and Bunnie were chatting about one thing or another. The entirety of the Chaotix were talking and laughing together about something. Tails and Rotor were having some deep discussion, probably about something heavily technical that would go over most people's heads. Amy and Nicole were laughing about something, and it was probably related to Sorun since they kept glancing his way. Razor wasn't even roasting a marshmallow, electing to just eating one of the hotdogs raw as he watched Virgil and Crusher go at it again in the sand.

It was serene. A weird sort of peace Sorun found himself enjoying. Just being there, surrounded by friends. Included. Knowing everything would be alright when they all went home later tonight because everything in his life was sorted. Knowing Nicole was over there and would go home with him.

Everything was so peaceful, in fact, that it hurt. Literally. It still hurt sometimes to smile for long stretches of time since his face just wasn't used to the action, but this was one of those rare occurrences where he couldn't help it. He felt complete. There wasn't a better way to describe the sense of belonging he felt being there. They were the closest he had to family.

He still sometimes wished Dave was here, though. The peaceful feeling was familiar enough he couldn't help but think of him. Everyone, really, his mom especially, but he often kept wondering how Dave specifically would have reacted to this whole situation. All things considered out of everyone Sorun knew Dave in all likelihood would have handled it the best. Would have adjusted way quicker than he did; unlike Sorun he actually had charisma.

It just figured. As far as Sorun cared charisma was a dump stat no matter what game you were playing. But Dave had always pumped charisma on his characters. It was probably the only argument they never settled.

"Ah, man, Dave... I'll always maintain you shoulda been the one to be sent here 'stead of me," Sorun thought to himself. *"They're still fighting Eggman 'cause I screwed up on killing him at the last second. You wouldn't have done that. Knowing you, you would have solved every damn problem this world had in the span of a month. But I'm here and you're not, so... yeah.*

"But hey, man, listen. I made it work." Sorun's eyes glanced over at Nicole. *"Dunno how but I did. The pro gamer dream is pretty much dead in the water at this point, but despite all that and despite the world doing its damnedest to do me in, I did it, Dave. I got a normal life going for me. You'd all be stunned with disbelief that I, Sorun,*

managed to carve a workable life out in an alien world... but I did. And I got a girlfriend, too. So you all owe me five bucks from that one bet."

That barest amount of humor had Sorun make an airy, silent chuckle as he leaned back in his chair to look at the rest of the people sitting around him. He rose the marshmallow out of the fire. Perfect golden brown. *"So... in light of all that, I think things are going to be fine. If you were here you'd call it the proudest moment of your life. You would, don't deny it. Geez... But yeah. Yeah, it's all gonna be fine, Dave.*

"I made it home."

A/N- Alright, so listen. This chapter just wouldn't cooperate with me at all while I was trying to write it. I dunno if it was because I tried putting nearly the whole cast in one place which alone is a nightmare to write around because there's just too many people, or trying to get the idea of a beach episode out or the fact I just don't mesh with happy chapters like this. I dunno. I just kind of wanted to make it special since it's the last big filler chapter in the whole story. Nothing but straight plot from here on out. And I think on some level I managed to pull that off, but yeah, here it is.

Anyways, 93 chapter-long happiness arc is over. Sadness arc starts now.

Chapter 94

Recursion Error

Episode 94- Vacation's over

It was a beeping sound that woke him up.

Not an overly loud sound; a serious of soft, repetitive beeps emanating from somewhere near him that were just loud enough to rouse Sorun from sleep. He opened his eyes - his eyes burned when sunlight bleeding in from the window his them. He held in the groan he wanted to make and sat up silently in the bed. And then he looked to his left.

Yep, there it was. The source of the noise. Nicole was sitting against the headboard to the bed right next to him. Typing away on a bunch of holographic keyboards floating in front of her. Her fingers continued to unceasingly type away at the keyboards as her right eye quickly glanced in Sorun's direction.

"I'm sorry if I woke you," she said in a simple tone as her eye turned back to the keyboards and screens. Sorun could only blink in response.

"I... you... but wh..." Not being able to find the words, Sorun shook his head. "You didn't, don't worry about it."

Slowly, he settling back into the bed, laying his head on the pillow and pulling the covers up over him. Nicole continued typing away, barely even acknowledging his actions as Sorun tried to go back to sleep.

It wasn't working. His mind was stuck on what he just saw so he sat back up and let the blanket fall away from the top half of his body.

"Okay, but do you really have to do this here? *Now* ? Of all times?" he asked.

She didn't even look back his way when she responded. "I'm the administrator and steward of the entire city, Sorun. I have responsibilities. And I don't like to spend an inordinate amount of time sleeping like you do."

"But you have wi-fi," Sorun complained. "Administrate some other time." He shuffled closer to her, wrapping his arms over her bare midsection to draw her in closer. The screens had followed Nicole when she was pulled away, and she smiled a bit and took her attention off the screens for just a second to pry Sorun off of her.

"Sorun. My responsibilities," she protested, laughing lightly. It was a struggle - one of his greatest - to let go of her. He managed, barely.

"Fine, alright." She'd already gone back to her screens. He pouted a bit, looking out at the window and resisting the urge to instinctively hiss at the sunlight shining through, and then turned back to her. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Eight A.M."

This time he did hiss, and then began the process of settling back into the bed. "Ugh, just wake me back up around two."

"You have work."

Sorun paused mid-process, and then groaned in realization and sat back up against the headboard. "Ugh, yeah, you're right. And you just reminded me I got that stupid thing I gotta go do."

Still typing away with her eyes firmly locked on the screens floating in front of her, Nicole queried with, "'Thing?'"

"Yeah, so, ugh..." Tiredly, Sorun ran a hand over his face. He didn't know if the exhaustion came from just waking up or the knowledge of

what he had to go do. "So Honey got into talks with some, uh, some guy. Fabric tycoon dude in Station Square."

"Oh?" She sounded a bit interested, but mostly was just focusing on whatever she was working at. Sorun had snuck a curious glance but then looked back away when all he saw were walls of text and code on those screens.

"Yeah his name is Reuben or something, don't remember, anyway he kinda just reached out to Honey outta the blue for business reasons and they worked out some kind of deal over the phone. So now I gotta be the guy to go all the way to Station Square to meet up with him and sign off on a bunch of stuff, and then I gotta bring back a bunch of boxes of fabric from what I assume is a warehouse or whatever in Station Square back to Honey's shop."

"Seems reasonable."

"Mhm, except for the fact I gotta stay in Station Square for a day or two."

The typing ceased. Evidently that last statement had warranted enough of Nicole's attention that she finally tore her face completely away from the screens to look directly at Sorun. "Pardon?" she asked, looking surprised.

"Right, so..." Sighing, Sorun offered her a hapless shrug. "I just got told all this yesterday and I'm really short on the details, and I'm gonna ask her *why* I have to do this when I go to her shop later, but for whatever reason Honey needs me to stay a whole day, maybe two, in Station Square. So I'm gonna be gone for a bit," Sorun explained. "It's just business stuff. Not clear on why I have to stay there when I can teleport with the sword, but again, I'll ask her later."

"You'll be gone for some time, then." There was a note of disappointment in Nicole's tone.

"'S just for a day, two max." Sorun took on a bit of an amused face at the disappointed look Nicole was wearing. "It's not that long, Nicole, don't tell me you're that upset over it."

The look turned into a pout, at which point Nicole promptly turned back to the screens. "Just because we've been together for a month doesn't mean I'm suddenly incapable without you somewhere in the city," she said.

"Ah, I see." Sorun nodded his head with a serious face, timing hums with every head bob in a sign of clear understanding. "You won't miss me, I got it, I completely understand-"

"Of course I'm going to miss you," Nicole interrupted, looking at Sorun from the sides of her eyes. When she said it like that she almost sounded insulted. Her expression softened and she glanced to the side, away from him. "You can't come back to sleep here instead of spending the night there?"

"I cannot." For reasons Honey better explain to him before he started using the "raise" word again. She started to get into the habit of hissing and swatting at him like some kind of vampire whenever it sounded like he was about to say that word.

"Then I suppose it can't be helped." She only looked a little disheartened at the news, which Sorun supposed was a good sign of something. The disappointment was more clear in her voice, though. "In that case you had better begin your preparations, then. I'll tell Silver where you went if he asks and feed the Chao in your absence."

He gave her a grateful smile. "Thanks." He looked down - his hand was sitting there, all innocuous-looking. He began to slide it over the surface of the bed towards Nicole. "You know, I got about an hour before I need to head out so we could totally just stay here and-"

Before he could even finish Nicole gently grabbed his wrist and placed it back on his side. "You need breakfast and I'm in the middle

of something important," she told him as way of explanation. Now Sorun was the one pouting again as he turned away, arms crossed and thinking to himself he wouldn't forgive this. "... But we can certainly revisit this conversation after you've returned from your business trip."

Maybe he could forgive her. It was Nicole, after all. They were in a relationship. He was pretty sure he was supposed to do things like forgive.

"If it makes you feel better I'm not letting you leave this house without a goodbye kiss, Sorun."

Ah, there it was. The forgiveness he'd sought out for so long.

"Remind me again why I have to spend a couple of days in Station Square."

It's not that Sorun was, strictly-speaking, *annoyed* at the prospect of having to spend an abnormal length of time in the city. There were certainly worse places and the locale gave him a small inkling of his previous home, if not full nostalgia. And the food was good enough.

Or it would be good enough if he wasn't being consigned to the fate of being stuck in a hotel room during the entire duration.

He stood there with his back leaning against the counter, glancing to the side at Honey as she was filling out a bunch of forms behind said counter. Larry was on the other side of the shop unpacking some boxes - Sorun lamented that he'd finally run out of names that sounded like Larry to tease the lynx with and had begrudgingly started using his real name recently. Probably for the best when Sorun thought about it. The joke had begun to grow stale and he needed to keep his coworker on his toes for no reason.

But he couldn't care less about Larry at the moment. His focus was on Honey, who hadn't even looked up from the forms.

"Sorun, you know how these eccentric business-type guys are like." He couldn't be sure, but Sorun was almost sure he'd convulsed when he heard that word. Oh, did he know. He knew just what "eccentric business-types" were capable of. He worked for one of those damn things. "If this Reuben person's anything like me their schedule must be so hectic they can't get anything straight! It makes sense he needs you to be there to take his call the first moment he's available. And since we don't know when that is you're planting your butt in that hotel room 'til he calls the room phone. It makes perfect sense."

No it didn't. It didn't make sense at all but he couldn't argue it because Honey wrote his paycheck. Sorun didn't see at all how anybody could be so busy that he had to bend over ass-backwards just to accommodate their schedule but Honey was the boss here. "But I can *teleport* ," Sorun continued to complain, "can literally make a portal from there to here and back, he can't just call you and-"

"He's planning to call a specific phone in a specific room in a specific hotel, Sorun," Honey interrupted. "If he does that and you're there to answer the phone the conversation goes as quickly as possible. If he has to call here and I have to waste time tracking you down, it's more time out of his schedule, and at that point we're gonna lose a potential supplier of high quality materials and it'll be your fault. It makes total sense, I don't get what you're not seeing here."

Was this one of those things he just wasn't able to comprehend because Sorun didn't have the mind of an entrepreneur? One of those business acumen things he needed an actual education or experience in the field to get? Because he didn't get this. It sounded like pure nonsense, really, but Honey over here was acting like it was the most sensible thing on the planet and it confused him. "But you're the business owner," he argued. "It's your business, your deal, why do I-"

"Because you're the person delivering the fabrics here so I can inspect them and make a final decision on a purchase," Honey succinctly put at the same time she flung her arm out to the side in a

wild flourish of finishing off a signature she was writing down. "Besides, I don't know when he's calling. I can't afford to wait by the phone for a whole day or two."

"Oh, like that thing you're asking me to do?" Sorun snidely remarked.

The yellow cat looked up from the papers she was signing to give Sorun a critical look. "Are you actually gonna lean there and tell me you're complaining about me paying you to wait around in a comfy hotel room?" Honey asked him. He had to look down in silent admittance that, yeah, it was sounding like a pretty stupid argument the more Sorun thought on it. "I'm even fronting the cost of the room and room service for you here, I don't get it, what's the problem?"

Unfortunately, his masculine pride refused him the privilege of telling Honey that Sorun just didn't like being away from his girlfriend for extended periods of time. And beyond that the more he thought about it the more he realized he really shouldn't be arguing this. Easy money was easy money. Regardless of how... weird this all was.

"It's just a bit unusual," Sorun said in a half-truth as he looked back at Honey. "There's no problem here, I'll do it."

The annoyance that had been on Honey's face evaporated in an instant and was replaced by a beaming smile. "Great!" she exclaimed in happiness, mouth open in a wide smile and eyes closed. She leaned forwards to poke a noticeably slate-faced Sorun in the cheek as she opened her golden eyes to look at him. "But really, Sorun, I super appreciate you doing this." She continued poking him in the cheek. "I get this is totally a whole lot of responsibility you're in no way qualified to handle-"

"How am I even supposed to respond to that?"

"-so I need you to realize I'm putting a *huge* amount of trust on you," Honey continued. "You, my most experienced and capable

employee. There is absolutely nobody else I could hope to trust with this. *Make me proud* ."

The poking wouldn't cease. Sorun tried his best to ignore it. "What about Larry?" he asked.

Honey scowled. "Oh, yeah, that reminds me." She thankfully stopped poking Sorun and turned to the side a bit to face Larry's way. "Hey, Larry!" she shouted at the lynx. "I told you I needed all that unpacked twenty minutes ago! So help me if I look back in five minutes and you're still at it...!"

The threat needn't have been said. The implications, whatever they were as Sorun had never incurred such wrath from the cat, was evidently clear to Larry. The lynx Mobian had made a frightful kind of squeal and tripled, no, quadrupled his movement speed in that moment.

Honestly, Sorun was just impressed he'd survived working for Honey this far.

"Now then!" And like that Honey turned back to Sorun, all smiles. "I'd say the fate of the business rests in your hands, but the situation isn't nearly dramatic enough for that."

"It ain't?"

"I mean, I'd certainly *like* to have silk fabrics imported from Station Square for me to work with," Honey said. "You know how hard it is to get actual silk all the way out here?"

"Pathetically easy 'cause I can go anywhere in the world in an instant for you?"

"Yeah, and do you have any idea how few people actually sell silk? More than that they have manufacturing processes for silk over there nobody else in the world have. I *neeeeed* it...!" She really didn't need to look so creepy in that moment. Rubbing her hands together like a

damn movie villain in that instant, only to transition to looking all gleamy and innocent in the next instant, standing up straight with her finger pointing up in the air. "And so! The moderate success of the business rests in your hands, Sorun."

It was certainly a way to lay out the situation. Sorun rolled with it. "I'll try not to let you down, ma'am." And he meant it. Truly. Because the consequences for doing so wasn't a world Sorun wanted to imagine, and thus he pushed himself off the counter and walked away as quickly as he could.

He passed by Larry on the way out, still unpacking things out of boxes. A passing whim made Sorun give him a halfhearted wave and mutter out, "Hey, Larry."

"Huh? Oh, hey!" Larry momentarily stopped what he was doing and straightened up to fully address Sorun. "How's it going, you need something?"

Already Sorun was feeling like this had been a mistake. He'd been dragged into a conversation without anything to discuss. "Nah, man, I, I was just, you know, saying hi. That's it."

Larry wilted a little bit. "Oh. Uh, I just thought, like the way you said that-"

"Yeah I know-"

"It's just, it came out really sounding like you had something to-"

"Just saying hi."

"Like I really thought-"

"I know what you thought."

"Oh."

"Yeah." The next ten seconds were some of the most awkward this week, Sorun had felt. He scratched the back of his head for lack of anything better to do. "I gotta go."

"Okay." Somehow, and Sorun didn't know where in the world the lynx found the fortitude to do this, Larry managed to give Sorun a smile. "Have fun on your trip!"

Usually the socially correct action at this stage of the conversation would be to reflect the other party's niceties in order to further reinforce a positive repertoire. Considering he was a coworker of Sorun's this proved to be doubly true. But for reasons that were unexplainable to Sorun's psyche, likely stemming from the fact that this was Larry, Sorun truly just stood there, silently deliberating with himself if he should say something back.

For the first five seconds Larry waited patiently. Ten, fifteen seconds had passed, and an odd look at came across Larry's face from Sorun silently staring at him in indecision. Twenty seconds in he looked to grow worried. At thirty seconds his eyes began darting around in random directions, as if he were seeking help.

At the thirty-five second mark Sorun made a decision. He turned around and proceeded to leave, with Larry staring at Sorun's back with wide, bewildered eyes as he exited through the shop's front door.

"..." Giving off a short sigh as the door swung closed behind Sorun, he looked down at the sword resting in his hands. He shook his head as the blade was pulled out of the sheath. *"Not a good moment, not a good moment,"* came the mental belittlement. The following portal that Sorun cut was made quicker than normal.

"Sorun, hey!"

He'd only gotten one foot through the portal before he heard the voice, froze, and then made the mental equivalence of a grimace when he recognized the voice, all the while keeping a neutral

expression. He let as much as an unpleased hum sound in his throat as he turned around. Sure enough, Sonic was there.

He must have been more distracted with this trip than he thought; Sorun hadn't even heard him approach.

"What do you want, Sonic?" Sorun asked. "I got a job I need to do. Because I need to pay taxes. Unlike some people."

Of all the remarks Sorun had expected, a light chuckle out of Sonic hadn't been one of them. "Ha ha, great one, Sorun." He even did a little point and winked at Sorun, which put him off even more to the point he was considering just turning around to leave mid-conversation. "Anyway, I just came to ask one quick favor. You're going off to Station Square, right?"

"... Hm?" Sorun quirked an eyebrow. "How did you hear about that?"

"Ah, just heard it around."

"..." Now Sorun's head was tilted to the side. "Even though the only people that knew of this was Honey and myself? I only told Nicole just this morning. A bit over an hour ago." Larry knew, too, but he wasn't even sure that was because Honey told him. From Sorun's perspective it looked like he'd just been listening in on the conversation between himself and Honey and pieced it together himself.

Sonic didn't respond. Literally. As in, it was almost like he was standing there with a frozen expression, just staring at complete silence. When Sorun started to feel unnerved from the sight, the hedgehog became animated again and began speaking. "Yeah, Nicole told Sally and she told me, you know how it is."

"Okay, whatever." It was a logical enough of an explanation and Sorun didn't feel like dwelling on it further. He was more focused on just hearing what this "favor" was so he could leave already. "What do you want?"

"Right, yeah. So there's this one pizza joint over in Station Square, so I was just wondering if on the way back-"

"You seriously want me to make a pizza delivery for you?" Sorun grumbled out. He couldn't help but feel more annoyed in the fact it was Sonic asking him this. Somebody who could run all the way there and do that himself in a matter of seconds. If it was anybody else asking he'd made it a hard maybe but with Sonic he just didn't feel like-

"Well it's not just for me, it's for all the Freedom Fighters," Sonic explained. "Everyone's been working really hard on everything and I just thought, y'know, since you're gonna be over there and everything already you could just bring something back to the ol' HQ on the way back. They have a special way of making it over there and you can't really get it anywhere else." He grinned. "It's just a little surprise for them all! All I'm asking for, swear it."

It had a practical reason behind it and Sorun hated that because it was hard to argue against pragmatism; that was his thing and he didn't like poking faults in his own style of reasoning. And if it was for everyone and not just Sonic, that was... that was different. Enough to make Sorun much more amenable to the idea.

Nope, it was more than that. He was already standing all slack-like, eyes pointed up to the sky in resignation at a choice already being made. The least they all deserved for their work was a pizza, after all. "Fine. But you're spotting me for it later."

"Hey, alright! Thanks bud-"

"I don't know when I'm coming back so when I go to the HQ and no one's there I'm leaving it in the fridge." Sorun's back was already turned to Sonic, his feet carrying him through the portal. "I'll be upset if you don't pay me back for the pizza."

And with those warm parting words, the portal closed behind Sorun, leaving Sonic standing alone in front of the shop. A stiff breeze had

passed by, rustling the nearby grass and making it bend in the direction of the wind. What hadn't been disturbed by the breeze, unlike the grass, was Sonic himself, who was standing rooted to the spot and completely motionless, smile completely frozen on his face. Not even a single hair of fur on his body had moved in response to the wind brushing against it.

And then, he'd shattered. Like an ice sculpture being struck by a large hammer the hedgehog's entire body broke apart into innumerable red, glowing cubes of energy, scattered along the ground. And like water evaporating off the sidewalk on a hot day the innumerable cubes that had made up Sonic's body disappeared, leaving no evidence of their presence to be seen. Another breeze passed by the empty spot in the street in front of the shop.

On top of that shop a pair of legs were swinging carefree off the side of the roof. A hooded person dressed completely in red sat there, a few more of the glowing red cubes floating around his body as he stared at the spot where Sorun had been standing previously before disappearing through his portal.

"Illusions are fun," Rubrum said to himself. He held up his right in, in which was a piece of paper, and released a sigh of lament at the sight. "The things I do just to get a single guy in the wrong place at the wrong time..."

Back on Earth Sorun never participated in hotels. He did participate in them out of necessity during the road trip with Silver, and all things considered he'd handled the experience well enough. He hadn't thought at the time he'd have an easy time sleeping in a bed that wasn't his, not to mention the stress that had been the current situation at the time, but after all the bullshit that'd happened prior he'd found himself sleeping rather soundly those times. In Silver's case it had been more a matter of sleeping in a bed that wasn't two hundred years old and ruined for the first time in his life, and he'd jumped up and down on it for an hour before going to sleep.

Even though he'd never been in a modern Earth hotel, though, he at least knew what they looked like, and the hotel room in Station Square was about the most standard-looking room he could have imagined. Maybe a bit nicer, even. Nicer than his own bedroom back home at any rate, but the lack of Nicole certainly brought it down a fair bit.

Tossing the blue Emerald aside on the floor - thank goodness he'd remembered to turn it back before coming in, because for as much as someone carrying around a glowing gem would raise some eyes he was almost positive someone carrying around a katana would raise a few more - Sorun flopped down on the bed. It really was a nice room: good wallpaper, decent air conditioning, the cleaning services must take their job really seriously because the smell wasn't bad. The thought crossed Sorun's mind that he ought to thank Honey for calling ahead and booking the room for him, and even going as far as to pay for it. Even the room service, too, Sorun had considered as he looked over at the hardline phone sitting on a nightstand next to the bed. He should, but then he considered how big her ego was already from all her success and how smug she'd act if he did such a thing. She already lorded the fact he got all his clothes from her over her.

The woman was his only supplier of pants. And was one of two women in the world that knew his underwear size. That was already too much power.

Then again she did deserve it. Setting up the hotel in advance, giving him a good job (another thing she liked to hold over him), the fact the clothes were good. She certainly had the praise coming, and part of Sorun thought that he'd feel bad if he didn't at least say *something* . But what if he doled too much praise out? She'd get uppity about it just to annoy him and he'd end up regretting the whole affair to begin with.

"Ugh, whatever, I got this whole trip to mull it over," Sorun thought to himself as he sat up on the bed. There, sitting at the end of the room, was the one sole reason Sorun had immediately chilled out

about this whole trip from the moment he'd entered this room. Possibly the third most beautiful piece of technology Sorun had seen in his entire life, right next to Nicole, and the wireless game controller Nicole had made for him.

A plasma screen TV.

"In the ten months since I first came to this planet... I don't think I've ever once sat down to just watch some TV," Sorun thought to himself with widened, astonished eyes.

New Mobotropolis, the Republic of Acorn as a whole, really, didn't have TV as Sorun knew it. The technology was there; the industry wasn't, so the most monitors were used for was long-distance communication, computation, and playing existing pieces of media. A hundred percent none of the other Mobian settlements on the planet had it. The Overlanders might, but Sorun didn't like going to those territories.

So here it was. The last bastion on the entire planet where the concept of commercialized TV existed. Right here in Station Square where the last vestiges of actual humanity survived. When he fumbled around for the nearby remote he couldn't help but hold it up in what was nothing but pure reverence.

He'd cry if he didn't have standards. So instead he just flopped back on the bed and flicked on the TV. He was shooting for cartoons here, but at this point he'd take the *news* if it meant he finally got to watch something on TV to recapture those memories of happier times. He would still hold out for hope that there was actually something entertaining on that wasn't the news.

There weren't any cartoons, unfortunately. What there was, however, was what looked like a live-action rip-off of "Kamen Rider", so he'd take that. And he savored it for all it was worth.

---

50 hours later

"And it's finally time," he thought to himself. The lights were off and the blinds were closed on all the windows, letting only a few rays of sunlight in to brighten the room. It was times like these that made him realize how close and yet how far and end to all this was, but this... this was one of those big steps. One of the milestones that marked actual progress towards him being done with all this, and the sooner that was done the better.

But the day he could finally stop wasn't here yet. Because Rubrum had a phone call to make.

There was an ugly scraping sound as the stool he was sitting in was dragged across the room's floor to the nearby nightstand where the phone was resting. In his right hand: nothing, hand open and fingers poised to grab the phone. In his left hand: a fake mustache he'd bought from a nearby novelty shop with money he'd stolen from a random passerby. With a swift motion his left hand reached towards his head and breached the darkness of the shadow obscuring his face from the hood he wore to affix the mustache to his unseen upper lip.

It was done. With that piece in place he could get into proper character.

"The glue on this thing kinda smells off," Rubrum thought as an offhand remark he picked up the phone with his right hand. With the receiver held to the side of his head he reached forwards with his left to dial in the numbers to make the call.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he realized something.

The phone was a rotary phone.

"... Oh my fucking god I don't know how to use this," he realized. He went slack; enough that the receiver fell from his hand to end up being dangled by the cord connecting it to the phone. *"What the f- there's no buttons, it's just a wheel! Why!? It's the fucking future, why is this still a thing!?"*

Of course he knew what a rotary phone was, but like everyone else in his generation he'd never bothered to learn how it works because such things were seen as ancient in his time. And here he was, sitting there slack-jawed like and idiot unable to cross the next item off his list because he didn't know how to use an antiquated piece of technology.

"Dammit dammit dammit if I screw this up because I don't know how to use a fucking rotary phone..." He got up from the stool, fake mustache and its strange-smelling adhesive all but forgotten. For the first time in what felt like years anxiety, a new type of anxiety to join the heavy sense of loathing he felt everyday, began to assault Rubrum as he nervously paced around the room. The rotary phone continued to sit there, receiver swinging on the cord like it was waving at him. Mocking him.

Goddammit it was the bike all over again. He had to do this because it was on the list and he had to do everything on the list because to not do everything on the list wasn't an option because he had to do everything on it but he couldn't because he didn't know how the phone worked and-

Rubrum stopped and took a calming breath. The red energy angrily crackling along his body and causing the surrounding walls and flooring to warp from his sheer presence receded back into his body, and the room stopped being damaged. He shot a panicked glance over to the rotary phone. It seemed fine.

"Alright, cool it, man, you don't wanna go accidentally vaporizing the whole building 'cause you had a panic attack, we're past those." The reassurances did very little because he was still pacing. He'd actually started pacing faster, actually. As if in a panic. *"Okay okay, uh, okay I can just ask someone how this works, can't I? No, there's no time and I'm not supposed to technically be here so it'll look real suspicious to the staff- I can just illusion up some random guy and I'm not that strapped for time. Maybe. Lemme look at this thing."*

He approached the object of his grievances with trepidatious steps. For how old it was it looked well-maintained, which made Rubrum think, much to his chagrin, that maybe the phone was an aesthetic choice to go with the place. Which didn't help at all with the fact he needed to figure out how this thing worked, so he cut out this line of thinking and leaned closer to it.

"Okay, I'm a marginally smart guy, I can probably figure this out," he muttered to himself. "Worse comes to worse I can just illusion a guy and have him talk to him. Not exactly the plan, but whatever, same result so it doesn't matter. But how does this work...?"

Phones had buttons. You pressed the buttons to form a certain string of numbers to call a certain phone. Basics of how a phone worked. He did have the number and knew exactly what to call. The problem... was that rotary phones didn't have buttons. The numbers were arranged in a circle on the phone's face and there was a plastic wheel over the numbers, with a large hole punched in over each number. Zero through nine, a pound key and a star key. Twelve holes in total in the wheel.

Now how the hell did it work?

"Okay, I know from movies you're supposed to put your finger in a hole and kinda rotate it to the right," he continued to mutter. "How do I know what hole to use, though? And how far do I rotate it? Oh, man..."

If the stakes weren't so high perhaps he'd be laughing at he absurdity of the situation. Unfortunately he did know what the stakes were, and that knowledge was causing Rubrum to visibly sweat at the moment. He worried for the state of the fake mustache as a result.

"Maybe all the holes are just there to show you where the numbers are?" he guessed. "Like... like maybe you put your finger in the number hole... what's it called, pound key? Maybe you put your finger in there each time 'cause it's a number symbol and you rotate

it to the right a certain number of tics. Then you pull out, let it reset, and go again."

Yeah. Yeah, that made sense. You're dialing a number, of course you have to use the number hole. It made complete logical sense.

Steadily with a finger that definitely wasn't shaking, Rubrum inserted his index finger in the hole over the pound symbol on the phone. He rotated the ring a little bit - he heard it. A single click. He rotated it more. More clicks ensued.

He kept doing this until he heard the desired number of clicks he assumed corresponded with the number he was attempting to insert, and then removed his finger. The wheel rotated back to the left until it was back in its original position. He repeated this action, rotating the wheel from the hole over the pound symbol until he got the right amount of clicks, and then reset. This was done until he'd finally dialed out the whole phone number. And then, with bated breath, he picked the receiver back up and held it back to his head.

It wasn't dialing a number. There was just a single, continuous droning noise on the other end.

"I hate everything," Rubrum growled out. He had to fight not to slam the receiver back down on the phone, lest he accidentally destroy it. And fight to not accidentally crush said receiver in his hand. He took a calming breath and endeavored to try and re-analyze the situation. "Alright, what if... what if you're supposed to put your finger in the hole over what button you want to dial... and then rotate it all the way 'til it won't rotate anymore? Then you let it go back to the neutral position and do the same for the rest of the numbers?"

It sounded crazy, insane, even, but at this point he'd try anything if it got the damn phone to work. So he did so; rotating the ring over and over again until, once again, he... *assumed* , at least... that the number had been dialed. Once again he found himself holding his breath as he held the receiver back up to his head.

It was dialing the number.

"I'm a goddamn genius."

For two days he been sitting here. Eating room service. Watching "Not Kamen Rider". So far it was nothing but proof that Sorun had the best job in the whole universe, and on a whole, he was okay with that.

Seriously, this might as well have been a vacation compared to an actual job. Sure, he couldn't walk around and do stuff, but... TV. After he'd been on a ten-month dry spell. He could probably sit in that bed for a whole week if he really wanted to doing nothing but watch TV at this point.

"Seriously though," Sorun began to wonder to himself as his head swiveled over to the phone on the nearby nightstand, "not that I'm complaining, but I'm really starting to wonder what's taking this guy so long to-"

The phone started to ring.

"Oh, that's my cue!" Springing into action with all the grace of a slug Sorun rolled off the bed to grab the remote that fell somewhere on the floor, finding it after a few moments and hitting mute on the TV. He stood back up and made his way to the phone, sitting down on the bed while picking the receiver up. "Uh, hi, Sorun speaking. Is this, uh..." He took his attention away from the phone to examine the name that'd been scribbled on the palm of his hand with a marker. It was smudged. Damn. "Er... Reuben Umali Brum? The fabric guy?" Sorun squinted at his palm. "Am I reading that right?"

"MMMM YES hello~!" Sorun recoiled from the receiver, nearly dropping it, even. He hadn't expected the voice on the other end to be so... overtly flamboyant. "Yooouuu must be that delivery boy Honey had mentioned to me!"

"... Just get through the phone call, man." Repressing the deep sigh that desperately wanted to leave him, Sorun pinched the bridge of his nose and said, "Yeah, that's me, so she said she was interested in the partnership and wanted me to bring back-"

"Yes, about that...~" There was a sound like somebody clearing their throat from the other end of the line. "I'm afraid I've changed my mind on the matter and will not be engaging in that partnership."

He knew he had to be professional. Sorun knew that. He was on a job and people with jobs did professional things because jobs were professions. And yet even knowing that Sorun couldn't help the frustration that began to bleed into his tone when he responded with, "What?"

"I know, I know, it's such a shame! Honey is such a beautiful artist with her work and I remember falling in love the moment I laid eyes on it, ah, but alas...~" Sorun could almost picture the person on the other end swooning over their own words, and all it did was add to the vitriol collecting in him. "Another fashion firm had contacted me recently and made me an offer I just couldn't find myself the heart to refuse, so I'm afraid I'll be going over to them instead."

The plastic casing of the receiver cracked under Sorun's grip. "Are you serious, man, I've been waiting here for you for two days only for you to call and tell me this?" In truth he was less upset about that since it may as well have been a vacation waiting here, but more upset that Honey was apparently being shafted because this guy took a better deal with someone. Which... oddly rankled Sorun more than he'd like to admit. But he was too mad with the voice on the phone to even think of that at the moment.

"I know this may be upsetting to hear, darling, but that's the business, you know. Please be sure to pass along my sincerest apologies to your employer for the trouble."

"You-"

Sorun wasn't able to finish. The call cut off right there as the person on the other end disconnected, leaving a continuous tone to ring out through the receiver.

"And people said I couldn't act," Rubrum snickered out after setting the receiver back on the phone. He made a light chuckle and reached up to pat the fake mustache affixed to his upper lip in silent praise for providing the atmosphere needed to pull off such a flawless lie. Truly, he'd have been lost without it.

But, the time for this particular lie was over, and he was no longer in need of the fake mustache. So with zero fanfare whatsoever he tore it right off his face.

In hindsight, somewhat of a mistake. One Rubrum realized when there was an audible tearing sound when the mustache was removed.

"The hell!?" Rubrum hissed out in pain, rubbing at his lip as he stared down at the mustache in his hand. Flipping it over revealed there wasn't any blood stuck to its back. *Somehow* . "What'd they back this thing with, fuckin' epoxy?" he grumbled out as he threw the 'stache over his shoulder. Then he looked over at the plastic sleeve resting on the nightstand the mustache had come in, only to reel back in shock when he saw the warning label on the side that might as well have been microscopic. "They super did-!"

Rubrum's mouth snapped right shut when he heard the doorknob to the room's door begin to turn. Silently and robotically his whole body turned towards the door as it opened, revealing what looked like a completely ordinary Station Square dweller and his family right behind him.

"Yeah, I don't know, honey, the guy at the front desk said-" The man turned his head from assumedly his wife and kids and looked into the room. He looked shocked and confused when he saw Rubrum just sitting there near the phone, and then enraged as he charged

into the room, shouting, "Hey, who are you and why are you in our room!?"

There was no response given by Rubrum as he jumped out of the stool to dodge the suitcase that had been thrown by him. Nor was further commentary given when he charged towards the room's window and leapt right through, leaving behind a completely flummoxed family of four right behind him.

"The fucker hung up on me."

The nerve. The utter audacity. Sorun had never been hung up on before but now that it'd happened finally he found he decidedly did not like it one bit. But even that feeling was nothing compared to the anger he was feeling for being all but snubbed by a fabric guy of all people. He hadn't felt this insulted in an least two months.

Surprisingly he wasn't mad enough to not hear the sound of breaking glass from what sounded like a room right above his. He'd have to be completely deaf not to hear the sound of, oddly enough, somebody screaming as they fell by Sorun's window. He'd turned to see the commotion, blinking rapidly in surprise, but if somebody had fallen past his window he'd been too late to see it.

Ignoring that somebody probably just committed suicide near Sorun, he turned his eyes back to the phone, eyes shining green. That dull tone was still blaring out through the receiver, and all it did was remind Sorun more and more of what just happened. He could picture it all now: him going back and getting yelled at by Honey for screwing up a simple job and having to pay for a hotel room for nothing, followed by her sulking for the next week because of the lost opportunity. He could tell she'd really been looking forwards to those silks.

Two days of his time and Honey's hopes dashed because some prick decided to turn to a bigger buck.

"Fucking eccentrics!" In anger at the whole situation, Sorun had slammed the receiver back down into the phone.

In hindsight, somewhat of a mistake. One Sorun realized when he slammed down too hard, causing the receiver to smash through the rotary phone. And then the nightstand under that, causing it to split in two and fall to shambles.

The angered breathing coming out of Sorun hitched into stillness the second he realized what he did. He stood up straight, looking down at the destroyed nightstand and phone in surprise, the receiver still in his hand with the disconnected cable dangling off of it. A few moments later his expression softened into one of annoyance mixed with resignation.

At the same moment that happened, his green eyes went back to being blue. After that the coughing started - loud, hacking coughs that had Sorun doubled over and caused him to drop the receiver in his hand. The coughing attack was one that only lasted a few seconds, but ended with Sorun feeling a bit winded and panting heavily as he looked down at the destroyed remains. The mild throb in his right hand from doing the act had already faded.

"Still... still getting worse." He straightened back up once his breathing had calmed down. His earlier expression had now turned into a morose one. *"Man... if the hotel complains to Honey this is for sure coming out of my pay."*

What a waste of a trip. He'd figured even after everything he'd walk away from this at least getting paid, but now he wasn't even sure of that. And to make things worse there was... what he'd just done. With the nightstand.

Silently, he gazed down at his hand. He didn't know what to think about the fact the fingernails on his right hand had darkened to a black color, but were quickly turning back to their normal, pale color. Despite how odd it looked he didn't find himself very surprised at the sight. He didn't know what to think about that, either.

"..." Sorun sighed and did his best to put it out of his mind as he pocketed his right hand. *"Let's just grab the damn pizza and go home,"* he thought to himself as he hunted around the floor for the discarded Emerald.

The first thought that went through Sorun's head when he stepped through the portal was, *"How the hell am I supposed to spin this with Honey?"*

On the upside she was a rational person. On the best of days. It was hardly Sorun's fault the deal fell through when he didn't even get a single convincing word in the conversation, and the guy had made it sound like he made his mind up before he'd even picked up the phone. There was a solid chance she would see it from his point of view and understand.

But there was a chance she wouldn't. And then she'd start yelling at him, and Sorun would have to stand there staring blankly at the wall as he did his best to just wait out her tantrum until she finally calmed down. He was almost positive his job wasn't on the line as a result of all this, so that was a strong positive. 'Bout the only positive in this whole experience. Sorun didn't even know what he was more upset over - that he felt guilty over how all this turned out and that this trip was for nothing or that Honey missed out on those silks.

The warm pizza box he held in his left had wasn't of much comfort to Sorun on the matter. Maybe if he were a pizza guy it would be, but he'd always been more a burger and fries guy, minus the burger. The others would like it, though, which is what Sorun cared about most. They deserved the break and seeing them all smile was about the only salvageable moment he'd be able to salvage out of this whole trip.

He didn't think he'd be staying around for a pizza party, though. Beyond not being the biggest fan of pizza, he just plain didn't like being in this place. Too many reminders in the ol' HQ of what he used to do here and everything associated with that. No, he'd just

drop the pizza off, bid everyone adieu, and go home. Even better maybe nobody was there so he could just dump the thing off in the fridge, because he wasn't seeing anybody so far.

Oh, no, there was someone there. He found Sonic in the meeting room, the one with the big oval table and the chairs. Funny thing, though. Sorun didn't remember Sonic having green fur.

"Hey, wait a minute."

Sorun froze, sheathed katana in left hand and hot pizza in right. The... assumedly not-Sonic, he had on a leather jacket with flame decals and wore shades for some reason, was leaning back on one of the chairs with his feet kicked up on the table. He, too, froze when Sorun walked into the room, only moving to lower his shades down so bright blue eyes could look over at Sorun's darker blue eyes. He didn't make any further movements outside of that. Actually he seemed even more confused than Sorun felt from the look he had on his face.

Now that he thought about it Sorun actually did recall something Tails had told him that one time, about there being an evil Sonic from what basically amounted to an evil mirror universe of Mobius Prime. He faintly recalled it being mentioned he was green. So once he'd gotten over the hurdle of overcoming his shock Sorun was able to quickly put together who this person was, at which point his mind started going into overdrive while the two continued to stare at each other with frozen expressions and bodies.

"Ssshhhhit what do I do about this?" He wouldn't admit to feeling uneasy. No, by now Sorun was way past that. He was feeling anxious enough that he wouldn't be surprised if he started sweating because from what he remembered the evil Sonic was supposed to be on par with the original. Which was bad. Because Sorun was currently standing in the same room he was in. *"If he's even remotely as fast as Sonic I don't have time to drop the pizza, draw the sword,*

and swing at him. I don't have time to make a portal and get the fuck out of here. Cut the Emerald into myself? Fuck. No. No time."

It was coming back. The dread. That hopeless feeling he was supposed to have left behind. He couldn't figure out a viable way out of this and he *hated* that. He was trying to keep his breathing under control as best he could. That, he was managing somewhat finely. The edges of his vision darkening wasn't something he could help. Or his heart beating so quickly. He couldn't help it.

"What do I do what do I do the fuck do I do here?" Couldn't fight, too weak, too slow to run, nowhere to go, nothing he could do, goddammit this was supposed to *stop happening* -

"Uh..." The not-Sonic was starting to talk. What had been his name? Scour or something? "So who are you?" He sounded nearly identical to Sonic but there was something under his voice that marked him as someone else. Something in his tone that Sorun could pick out. He sounded meaner.

Sorun didn't answer. Mind going too fast, thinking up so many paths out of here only for his rationale to shoot them all down as no good, doing his best to try and get the terror going through him under wraps as he desperately searched for a way out of this. The evil Sonic person was starting to look annoyed and all it was doing was making Sorun's heart go faster and his body to heat up in fear when he spoke again.

"Look, I asked a question here-"

"No hablo ingles."

There had been absolutely no rational thinking behind Sorun's choice to utter those words. No thought process. No plan. The words that came out of his mouth were the result of a desperate mind running feverishly trying to think of *something* to do, some way to exert some control over the situation to get this feeling of helplessness to lessen so he could just think straighter and maybe

figure something out, but when the green Mobian sitting there spoke the words had just... flown out. A panicked gut reaction that'd been made more out of reflex than anything.

Miraculously it got the not-Soni - Scourge, he just now remembered the name - to go back to looking confused. Sorun's confidence had completely shriveled and died the moment he saw him sitting in that chair and put an identity to him but with that one action there was the faintest glimmer of hope.

"Committed now, god, goddammit, run with it, run with the fucking foreign pizza delivery guy story and hope he sees me as harmless enough to let me go." It was a way out. Maybe. Not a move Sorun would have made if his faculties were in good enough check but he was too far to back out now.

So that was the game. Forget Scourge, forget why he was here, forget all that. Convince him that Sorun was just some random no-name delivery guy that didn't even speak the same language and hope he just let him go. Getting out was all that mattered to Sorun. He didn't even care if it wasn't in one piece - he could fix that with the Emerald later if it got that bad.

"Excuse me?" Scourge blinked in a confused way, then lifted his shades back up to cover his eyes. He shifted a bit in his seat - Sorun did his upmost best not to stare at the two long, diagonal scars on his torso. "No hablo what now? Huh?"

"Watashi hontoni no saikou zetsubo ningen so ware katedo sumero sumo do wa." The biggest problem with this plan was that Sorun didn't actually know any language other than English. He knew snippets of other languages at best from media consumption. Japanese the best from anime consumption. Little Latin from his mom. But he couldn't actually speak any of it or even knew what the hell he just said. Scourge didn't know that, though, so as long as he kept stringing together foreign words that vaguely sounded like a sentence he could probably pull this off. "Donde estas el Pax Romana la Hegelian Dialectics."

"I seriously don't understand a word you're saying." The confusion wouldn't leave Scourge's face. Probably a good sign. He'd stopped propping his feet on the table and was just sitting straight now while looking at Sorun. Wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not. "We even speakin' the same language here? How'd you even get into this place?"

"Derivery! *Peeza derivery* ," Sorun answered in his best Japanese-to-butchered-English accent. "Subarashi derivery-u man-u. Za warudo besto."

"What even...?"

A door opened nearby. The door to the lab. He almost thought it was Tails that walked through, because the person who walked through certainly *looked* like Tails, but last Sorun checked Tails wasn't dressed to the nines like a damn Bond villain. Red jacket with metal studs. And was that... a fucking *toupee* on top of his head? Between his ears? Damn thing wasn't even yellow like the rest of his fur, it was dark gray. Probably wasn't even real.

Never before had such a strong desire to rip something off of someone surged through Sorun before seeing that hairpiece. The fear of horrifically dying was helping keep it at bay.

"I had a look through the computer in their lab, Scourge," the not-Tails said as the door closed behind him. Sorun didn't even need to look at him to tell it wasn't really Tails. His voice was completely flat and cold, almost bored. And it seemed he shared Sorun's affliction of resting bitch face syndrome. "Childish security measures, really. Encryption was third-rate and I managed to just guess the passwords, so whenever you want-" He stopped when he noticed Sorun. His face didn't change to match the confused look Scourge was holding, but he did raise an eye ridge. "We have an intruder?"

"I ain't even sure," Scourge replied, sounding lost. "He just sorta... showed up. Outta the blue. I think he's a pizza delivery guy."

"A delivery man. Really," the evil Tails drawled out. Cold, piercing eyes scanned over Sorun's whole body, hands clasped behind his back at the fox looked him up and down. "What drove you to that conclusion?"

"Well, he's got a pizza. Not getting a word he's saying but I think I picked up 'delivery' in there somewhere." Scourge shrugged. "I dunno, just kinda fits. You order a pizza through the computer thing they got back there?"

"I most certainly did not." A more critical glare was forming in not-Tails' eyes. "He doesn't look like any delivery man I've ever seen. And I don't know of a pizza delivery profession that has one carry around a sword."

Now Sorun was pretty sure he was sweating. Fox was probably as smart as this world's one, and Sorun didn't have any hope of outsmarting him. But he was too deep now. The best hope he had was to keep riding it out and hope the cover story held.

Scourge shrugged. "I dunno, man, you know this world's almost as messed up as ours. They probably have to carry around weapons in case they get jumped by a bandit or robot or whatever else is wrong with this place. Look, if you're gonna be so suspicious then go and check it."

Tails With a Bad Haircut looked over at Scourge. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." He lazily gestured over in Sorun's direction. "Go on, chop chop. I wanna see where this goes."

A bit of a scowl formed on the evil Tails' face, but regardless he turned back towards Sorun and approached him. He stopped right in front of Sorun, with his face scrunching in disgust when he eyed the white box in Sorun's hand. "Well?" he asked. "Let's go, give it to me. Quickly."

Wordlessly, Sorun handed him the box. It was quickly snatched out of his hands by the Tails that wasn't Tails, who gave him a decidedly calculating glare before turning his attention to the box in his hands. His hands moved to open it, the appendages moving with trepidatious speed that matched with the slight look of anxiety his features carried as he moved to open the box's lid. With the way he was moving Sorun would have figured the fox was assuming there was a bomb or something in that box.

In fairness to him if Sorun knew beforehand what he'd be walking into it would have been something he'd probably have done.

The box's lid was flipped open. Unsurprisingly there was nothing but an ordinary pizza on the inside.

Not-Tails' face alit with surprise. "Hm. Curious."

"What? What? What is it?" Scourge asked, sounding impatient.

"It actually is just a pizza."

"Ooh, lemme see." Scourge was standing next to the not-Tails now. Sorun hadn't even seen him get up or shift positions. The only evidence he'd moved was a green speed trail that disappeared completely the moment Sorun had registered its existence. And while his heartrate continued to spike further and further as he silently watched on Scourge had taken a slice of the pizza and took a bite. He made an approving hum and nodded. "Wow, hey, this is actually pretty decent. Go figure."

Evil Tails gave the green hedgehog the same look that disappointed parents often gave their children before they beat them with a belt. "You ate it. Just like that," he stated, not sounding surprised in the least. More nonplussed than anything else. "Despite the fact not a single person here ordered pizza, nor even have the means to, prompting so much suspicion on whoever this person is I'm genuinely shocked he's not in binds yet, you ate it. Did it never occur to you once that maybe this was a ruse?"

"Eh? Ruse?" Scourge had finished off that slice of pizza. He was already going for a second.

The beginnings of frustration was worming its way into not-Tails' voice. "From perhaps the Freedom Fighters whose base of operations we've appropriated from? Hmm? The thought never once crossed your mind they sent some fool who can't even speak properly to poison us and-"

"Ha! Ha ha ha! 'Poison us'! Hah, man, that's a riot. Great one." With a half-eaten slice of pizza in one hand Scourge had draped his free arm all carefree-like over the evil Tails' shoulders. Sorun hadn't missed how the fox had instantly gone stiff, or the fearful look that had briefly flickered in his face. "Miles, c'mon, you're a smart cookie. Ya know these good-for-nothin' goodies ain't gonna do something as nasty as poison us. That's too us! It sounds like something Alicia'd do."

"Alicia *did* poison some of our political rivals back when we had those."

"Yeah, see, that's what I'm sayin', there's no way they'd do that 'cause we do that."

In the midst of their conversation Sorun's mind was whirling. Continuing to struggle past all the panic and fear to think. The fact their attention was off of him and on the pizza right now was the most reprieve he'd gotten since entering the room. Allowed him some breathing room to think, to even out his breathing just a bit to try and clear his thoughts and get his heartbeat under control.

Wasn't working. His chest was starting to hurt at this point from how hard his heart was going, could even hear it in his ears, but in a weird way the pain helped him focus on the current issue. The momentary distraction was helping. He thought as quick as he could to try and come up with a plan.

"If I had just a second I could turn Yamato back into an Emerald. Use Quicksilver. Use the pointy end of the Chaos Emerald to gouge out Scourge's and Miles' eyes. Find a safe corner, end time stop, turn Emerald back into sword. Cut self open, store Emerald inside body, use Devil's Body. Go back to Scourge. Break kneecaps. Everyone else'd be helpless after. Don't know numbers, doesn't matter. Break them, too. Should be safe after."

His best and only shot. That or just running once he had a moment, but there was... something in him that didn't agree to that. Something beneath all the fear that was angry, furious, even, that all this was happening and wanted to do something about it. But wild instincts and a need for survival were mixed in, tearing him between running or ending them all once he poked their eyes out.

The internal arguments and struggles Sorun were wrestling with were moot, though, because of one solid reason: for as good as he'd gotten mentally switching out the powers with the Chaos Emerald, there was still a one-second stall time between transitioning powers. That was a second where the sword he was holding would turn into a big, glowing gem, which may as well have been a signal flare to Scourge's eyes. A second before he'd be able to stop time with it. And for Scourge's speed a second to Sorun was practically a year for him.

He needed Scourge's eyes off of him for just a moment, and the bastard had eyes on him constantly since the moment he walked into the room. Even now while he was talking with Miles at least one of the lenses of his sunglasses was visible to Sorun, meaning he was still in his view. He wasn't turning his back to him. Bad luck on Sorun's part, or maybe a sign of experience on Scourge's. Whatever the case he wasn't turning around and Sorun didn't have any way to force him that he could see.

"Whatever, whatever, look, it's free pizza so stop thinkin' so hard on it." With that, Scourge turned his attention back to Sorun. "Which by the way means I ain't payin' for this. Didn't even order it in the first place."

"Arigato muchacho. No pay. Oui." Fuck it, this worked too. He'd take just leaving if it meant it got him out of here. "Gomen, devo andare. Exodus und all das."

Sorun started to back up a few steps. So far so good; Scourge didn't seem to care all that much, because he wasn't paying him any mind even if he wouldn't turn away. It was Miles that was concerning Sorun. His eyes wouldn't leave his, and he had a deeply discerning look on his face that Sorun had found disturbing.

He hadn't even managed to back up five steps before Miles spoke whatever was on his mind.

"He's faking not being able to speak our language."

Sorun froze. His heartrate was spiking in his ears again, becoming deafening. The discerning glare Miles had became accusing. Scourge had blinked, switching his attention between Miles and Sorun, and then looking back at Sorun. He imagined Scourge was probably squinting his eyes from the other side of the sunglasses.

"... You sure?" he asked. "'Cause, uh, it's a whole lotta gibberish comin' outta him, this guy."

"It's so painfully obvious I'm insulted in not having seen it sooner," Miles grumbled out, almost spitefully. "He's been following our words perfectly. Eye movements, subtle facial shifts, increased or decreased breathing rates after certain words are said, it's all there. His 'language' is a messed jumble of different languages, likely used to throw us off."

"Hah?" Scourge craned his head down at Miles. "Different ones?"

"From the varying phonetics and pronunciations I heard at least seven. I recognized at least one. Antoine speaks it."

"Oh, yeah, those weird words." Scourge looked back to Sorun. "Say it ain't so, delivery guy. Tell me you weren't trying to two-time me

here."

"..." The last time Sorun felt his heart sink like this it was when he was strapped to a table convinced he was about to be electrocuted to death. *"Damn fox,"* he thought, glaring down at Miles. He had the audacity to look smug about it, sending up this cruel little smirk, and if he weren't so overcome with terror at the moment Sorun would feel angry over it.

But he was. Scared for his life, enough that it was honestly hard to stay on his feet. The edges of his vision were blackening even further, and breathing was taking most of his effort. But for as hard as all that was, he was even more terrified of what would happen if he made Scourge wait too long for an answer. So he forced himself to speak. That alone was taking everything Sorun had.

"L-look man... I'm just a delivery guy," Sorun stammered out, eyes darting back and forth between the two. "I don't, I don't know what this all is but it's got nothing to do with me, okay? I just deliver stuff."

"Sure, pal, sure." He was standing besides Sorun, now. Scourge. With an arm draped all friendly-like over his shoulders, with Sorun's body petrified with fear. Once more he hadn't seen the movement it'd been so fast. "I mean, props, that was almost a half-decent play 'cause it was so annoying trying to understand you I was gonna let you go just to get you outta my quills. Buuuuut now we gotta problem, don't we?" From the corner of his eyes Sorun saw Scourge giving him a predatory grin. All his teeth were sharpened to points. "Gonna have to ask you what you're doing' here deliverin' pizzas."

"I just make delivers for the guys that work here sometimes." Pretty much a fib but Scourge didn't know that. That was all Sorun could manage. He wasn't able to think about the words he was saying. "It was a regular thing, I come here once a week with a pizza, I-I don't even know who you are or why you're here."

"Hm... ah, well..." Scourge's arm was lifted off Sorun. The green hedgehog gave sort of a lazy shrug, stepping back a bit while

interlacing his fingers behind his head. "If that's true, then... you must be pretty close with those Freedom Chumps, huh, guy?"

Lie. Lie, lie, lie. "They just pay me for pizza, I don't-"

"Nah nah nah nah, nah. Nah. C'mon, we're past lying here." Scourge's grin widened, showing off those sharp teeth of his. "Not claimin' to be an expert or nothin', but I got a pretty good lay of the land. Not a single pizza joint a hundred miles of here, so you must got somethin' special goin' on to make a journey like that all the time. And it ain't gonna be just *anyone* those idiots are gonna trust to... eh, well, maybe they would. But I gotta figure you gotta be *at least* on a first-name basis with 'em all if you make such regular deliveries." An airy sort of chuckle left his throat. "Eh? Mr. Delivery Guy?"

"If it helps," Miles added, almost sounding creepy with how gleeful he seemed to be finding the situation, "I was looking through the computer in their lab and came upon a personnel database and found some rather *interesting* files. About a human Freedom Fighter they used to have named Sorun."

Goddammit.

"That right?" Scourge leaned forwards on the balls of his feet, humming while looking Sorun over. "I don't know a whole lot about 'em, but I can spot a human, and you're lookin' pretty human-y, here, guy. Your name wouldn't happen to be Sorun, now, would it? Huh?"

"Nnnno..." Sorun denied. It was a weak denial, though. Said in a weak voice. From the smiles both of the Mobians were wearing it was clear they saw the lie. "My name's not Sorun, it's... Caeruleus."

For the first time since this interrogation started Scourge's grin dropped. "I said quit lying, so knock it off with the language shtick." The grin returned, and he began slowly stepping forwards. "But I mean, come on, it's obvious. Look at you. This coat?" He stopped right in front of Sorun, poking him in the shoulder. "Look at this coat. This coat's fly. There's no way some background extra like a pizza

delivery guy'd be wearing somethin' this distinctive, right? Former Freedom Fighter, though, hey... I can see it." His eyes flickered downwards. "Weird sword's kinda a dead giveaway, too, now that I think about it."

Sorun had ended up stumbling back from the pokes on the shoulder Scourge had given him. He was becoming lightheaded. Staying on his feet was becoming a challenge, the breathing was getting worse and he couldn't even think coherent thoughts at this point. He was pretty sure he was shaking at this point.

"Alright, alright, quit it with the huffin'. Geez." Stepping back a bit, Scourge turned back to Miles. "Well hey, listen, I wasn't planning on taking a hostage, but if this guy's just gonna wander in here, I mean, we just gotta, right? We can probably get those guys frothing at the mouth with this." He turned back to Sorun, grin ever wider. "And hey, tell ya what! That pizza? Not bad at all! So I won't even break your legs over the whole lying thing!"

It was too much. Too much. Everything was spinning, vision blurring so much that nothing was clear. Skin so hot it felt like it was on fire, chest nothing but a loud, constant throb. He couldn't even breath anymore, like a dam somewhere inside of him had burst and was smothering him. Too much. Too much pressure, too much fear. Sorun couldn't take it anymore.

"I... I can't..." He swayed on his feet, quickly feeling his balance losing him. He couldn't even tell when he'd fallen over - his vision was too blurred to make out the change in scenery. He hadn't been able to feel the impact. All of it, everything, the world around him. All fading. *"It's too much, I... it... help..."*

Everything went dark as Sorun lost consciousness.

He'd fainted from fright.

A/N- I kinda thought about Sorun faking a heart attack as a last-ditch attempt but it felt too campy at that point. I'm already walking a tightrope between comedy and seriousness here. But yeah, here's the Scourge fight everyone wanted for some reason. All wrapped up in a single chapter and everything.

Chapter 95

Recursion Error

Episode 95- Stranded. Again.

At this point in his life Sorun had seriously considered that'd he'd already fallen as low as he could ever fall and it would only be up from there, but no, somehow he always managed to find a brand new low. The bedrock just didn't exist. He didn't believe in it anymore.

He felt sick. Not in the emotional sense - though there was plenty of that seeing as he fainted on the spot and got captured as a result, feeling that brand of sickening shame was all but a forgone conclusion - but in that, he actually felt sick ever since he woke up from that. Genuinely nauseous. Weak. The feeling hadn't really been going away in the few hours he'd been awake after that.

The fact his arms were bound to his sides by rope probably wasn't helping the matter. Certainly wasn't helping his mood, and the only silver lining Sorun could see was that *all* they'd done was kidnap him and tie him up. Or that they'd decided to leave him in some kind of poorly-lit backroom somewhere with stone walls of all things. The kind of dark stones they used to build old timey castles. And as far has he knew structures like that weren't really around anywhere, so... he was operating under the assumption that after he went to sleep they dumped him off in their own zone. The Moebius Zone. And he didn't know what ended up happening to his blue Chaos Emerald, too, so that was great.

Stuck in a whole different zone in some dingy room with a bunch of evil doubles of his friends while tied up. Fuck everything.

Could have been worse, if barely. They could have just stuck him in a broom closet somewhere. Or a cell, which made Sorun a bit surprised they hadn't, though the room he was currently sitting in wasn't all that much bigger than a cell would be, so he supposed it wouldn't do to be that optimistic. Wasn't even a bed in here. Just a few wooden crates lying around, a swinging lightbulb for light, and a table. Sorun elected to just sit on the ground while leaning his back against a crate. The person he assumed was only here to watch him was sitting on the table while looking down at him.

He chose not to speak to her.

There was a clicking sound, made by the Mobian's mouth out of boredom. She had one leg swung over the other, arms crossed as she looked down at him with equally bored, blue eyes. Sorun didn't know who she was, but at this point he was reasonably good at identifying Mobian species and concluded she was probably a fox. He thought. The red fur and hair was throwing him off but the ears and the one tail were extremely similar to Tails', so he thought it was a good guess.

What did draw his attention was the outfit. Black leather bodysuit and black boots. It was so out there he couldn't help but do a double-take on it, but even so he had to concede it was, somehow, more modest than the outfit that... that one echidna from the bad future that didn't exist anymore wore. The one whose jaw he broke. He forgot her name.

It was probably real leather, too. Moebius was supposed to be some wacko mirror world to Mobius so Sorun wouldn't at all be surprised to learn they actually stripped skin off Mobians to process them into clothing here.

Evidently, while Sorun was perfectly content to just sit there in silence, stewing in extreme displeasure over this whole situation, and no small amount of anxiety, she wasn't. Because she made an annoyed sound and snapped out, "What, you're not gonna say anything?"

"Yeah." Honestly, Sorun was surprised at himself for giving such a measured response. He still felt sick, he still felt, plainly, *bad* about what was happening, embarrassment and humiliation notwithstanding to being kidnapped, but with how many times something like this had happened now he was starting to fear he was getting used to it. Or, more likely, because Scourge wasn't here. Because he didn't have some instinctual feeling screaming at Sorun that he was standing in front of someone who was probably going to kill him faster than he could blink and he couldn't do a thing about it. That overbearing presence that green hedgehog alone carried.

"You're real boring for a hostage, you know that?" the probably-fox noted.

Baleful eyes looked up from the wall they'd been staring at to meet the Mobian's eyes. A clever witticism didn't jump out in Sorun's mind to immediately use to counter her words, and he just wasn't in the mood to expend brain power on thinking one up. The more common ones, the "go to hell" snapbacks and the such, had always been too grossly overused and predicable in Sorun's eyes. He didn't have the pride to spend on petty insults people saw coming from a mile away so he tried his best to stray away from ever saying them.

The bad part about that philosophy was that now he was just staring silently at his watcher and Sorun'd realized all too late that it was probably coming off as creepy and maybe was even worse than just telling her off.

"You're a creepy one, huh?" she remarked. "But you seriously don't have anything to say? Nobody back in... what was it, New Mobotropolis now? Nobody there had anything to say about me? Nothing?"

It took a few more moments of Sorun scrutinizing the Mobian for some things to finally click in his mind. "Oh, wait, you're Fiona?" he realized. "Yeah, Tails talked about you for a bit." It also meant his guess on her being a fox was spot-on, so he congratulated himself a bit for that.

She smirked a bit at hearing the recognition. "Yep, that's right." She stopped, looking at Sorun to gauge him for a reaction. The problem was he had absolutely no reaction and just continued to stare blankly at her. It caused Fiona's smirk to drop off somewhat and made her continue with, "And...?"

"And what?"

"And... do you have anything to say about that?"

"No?" He was more confused than anything else at the question. "Why would I care about who you are? I don't." He certainly cared about the kidnapping thing, but he felt that went without saying. But everything else about Fiona were details he couldn't care less about.

The red fox's smirk was all but gone now, her face making it look like she'd been caught off her guard. "Well, um. No reason," she said. "I kinda just thought you'd have something to say 'cause of the whole... Tails told you everything that happened, right? The whole thing that happened between us?"

"That?" It made Sorun blanch a bit. He felt awkward just thinking about that conversation. "I mean, listen, real talk, I was kinda on his side 'til he mentioned you were about as old as Sonic and I am, at which point I did a whole one-eighty and thought to myself, 'ah, this poor idiot didn't have a chance.'" Something Sorun had said caused an amused look to grow on Fiona's face, so he continued. "Like, *I get it* , kinda. Kids are stupid, I saw kids do stupid things all the time where I come from, and genius or not Tails is a kid, so I get him thinking there was something between you two when there wasn't a chance in hell there was ever gonna be anything there. I can't even be mad about the slap part. Sometimes kids just need a reality check."

There was the whole "leading him on" thing Tails had mentioned that Fiona did to him, which, to Sorun's ears, did sound like textbook manipulation which he *did* have an opinion of, but he kept those thoughts silent. Because it was looking like Fiona was liking some of

the things she was hearing, and he needed whatever he could get at this juncture. Probably wouldn't do him good to make her upset and lose interest. So he'd speak from the heart, but only the parts she probably wanted to hear. Maybe he'd see an opportunity out of this yet that way.

"Ha! Yeah... nice kid, but you're right, he needed one." After making that laugh she'd leaned forwards on the table she'd been sitting on, the smallest of smiles forming on her lips. She looked the slightest bit interested in him now. "You know, I gotta say. You weren't what I was expecting when I heard Scourge kidnapped a former Freedom Fighter."

"The 'former' bit in there didn't tip you off to anything?" Sorun asked her.

Fiona shrugged. "Should probably have, yeah, but I hung around with them to know what their whole deal was, you know?" She made a shaky gesture with her hand. "Like... just how they ticked? The whole hero thing they had goin' for them, how they were likeminded on a bunch of stuff. You, though," she shook her head, "all the vibes I always felt off of them? I'm not getting any of them off you."

"Yeah, probably 'cause I quit," Sorun said to her. "I got out of that gig as soon as I could. You think I even wanted to be a Freedom Fighter in the first place with those guys? That job was a nightmare. I got out just so I wouldn't have to deal with shit like this anymore." The ropes binding Sorun's arms to his sides rustled in response.

For some reason his words just made Fiona make an even odder expression as she looked at him. "You don't even talk like them," she noted. It made Sorun wonder if swear words really did have such a profane effect on Mobian culture, because he never heard them come out of anyone's mouth. And he did his best not to add them to the world with marginal success. "What were you even doing with them in the first place?"

"That's a really long story I don't have the patience to get into. Feel like it'd take a million words to get it all out," Sorun grumbled.

Fiona's response was to gesture around to the room they were in. "Not like you're going anywhere," she pointed out. "And besides, I wanna hear it."

A scowl formed on Sorun's face. "Okay, lemme rephrase it: you kidnapped me, so no."

"Pfft, fine. Prude." If there was any interest in Fiona's expression, it died away right there. Sorun didn't see it as being favorable to his position so he tried shifting gears.

"Why'd you all even bother kidnapping me?" Sorun asked her. "I lied about the language thing, yeah, but I honestly am just a delivery guy. I don't exactly have what'd you call intrinsic value." What he really wanted to ask was what happened with his Chaos Emerald, but given the situation he'd pretty much given up hope on getting that thing back. Which sucked - he needed that.

Fortunately, and likely due to boredom on her part, Fiona seemed to be in a talkative mood. "It's mostly because Scourge figured you were well-off with all the Freedom Fighters. Literally the first thing he did after we caught you was go and brag to them that he had you as a hostage. He must have found what he was looking for because he came back laughing his head off. Said it really set them off."

Well, that was great. Now everyone knew he got himself got by a bunch of evil doubles. Bad enough it was going to cause trouble for a lot of people, but now he had that level of embarrassment to stack on top of everything else. "What are you guys even doing stealing their HQ in the first place? Don't you have a whole zone of your own to fuck around in? Why'd you bother coming to Mobius?"

That question, for whatever reason, caught Fiona a bit off guard. No, more than that - she looked outright uncomfortable, enough that she

glanced away from Sorun. "That was all Scourge's idea," she admitted.

Scourge's idea. Meaning his and not anyone else's. And seeing how he was comparable to Sonic, probably even stronger if he heard the stories right, he could see why saying "no" to him wasn't a good idea in practice. Sorun rolled with the questioning, finding traction in the topic. "You don't sound like you approve," he noted.

"Of course I approve of anything he says!" she snapped at him rather quickly, looking back at Sorun. "It's just that we have a good thing going here on Moebius-" Ah, so he was in their zone after all, "-and have the whole planet eating out of our palm after Scourge conquered it." He conquered the whole planet. That was sobering. "He just... it's this thing with him. He doesn't want to be seen as just 'evil Sonic', and most of this is just proving to everyone that we're all our own people. Mostly to himself," she muttered off to the side. "I'm not sure how far he's gonna take this. Maybe he'll try conquering Mobius, too. Try and cement him as being the best version of Sonic around. That everyone here is the superior versions. Wouldn't shock me."

So obsessed, was the conclusion Sorun came to. He was obsessed at solidifying his own identity separate from just being a Sonic. Sorun wasn't even sure he could blame him - with how many Sonics he saw during the multiverse road trip he counted it fortunate he never saw an alternate Sorun in any of those worlds. Doubted he or anyone else from Earth even had alternate versions anywhere since it wasn't even connected to this multiverse. But if he had... Sorun didn't know. It was a weird thought that made him a bit uncomfortable. The mere thought would make him question his own validity as a person if there were naturally doubles of himself out there just walking around.

For all the things he hated about this world in general, Sorun could give it one compliment. All the evil people, for all their wrong, were shockingly easy to "get" in a sense. Eggman did everything he did because he was an egomaniac that liked hurting people. That was it,

cut and dry. Oddly refreshing in a sense. And Scourge was doing this for... what, validity? Self-esteem? Some inferiority complex? Because he was just naturally an asshole due to being from the evil world, whose existence alone brought up all sorts of questions he didn't wanna think about? He didn't know. It's what he got from just listening to Fiona, but he wasn't sure how reliable that was.

He let out a sigh. Didn't really matter in the end. He didn't need to get in the guy's headspace to know he'd kidnapped Sorun and, as a result, Sorun would likely hate him forever now. Hate him about as much as he was scared of him, at any rate, because unless he had his full suite of powers, or at least a handful of the more useful ones, that was a force he was just flat-out not winning against. And without even that one Chaos Emerald all he had going for him was dry wit.

That and the... other thing. That let him punch through a whole nightstand, among everything else that'd been going on. But that was unreliable at best and Sorun didn't even know what the deal with it was.

"Well, that's good for him," Sorun noted in a dry voice. "But outside of annoying the Freedom Fighters," Sorun continued, and he knew that was a lie. He'd like for them to be annoyed but they were probably way beyond that hearing what happened with him, which in itself was as endearing as it was irritating, "not really seeing what kind of strategic value holding me has. You kidnapped a package courier, not the king or someone like that. And you stole their HQ - they already had plenty of motivation to fight you all, more even if Scourge is gonna commit to this invasion idea," Sorun pointed out. "Seriously, you don't really get anything holding me here."

Wasn't true at all; a hostage people cared about was a hell of a bargaining chip and knowing the Freedom Fighters they'd fight tooth and nail to get a hostage back even if it was some random joe schmoe that got grabbed off the streets of New Mobotropolis. And he actually knew them so there was an emotional connection to consider. Quite honestly they lucked out nabbing him, a fact Sorun loathed to admit. But he was hoping Fiona didn't realize any of these

facts. That'd he'd be more trouble keeping than he was worth and that it'd maybe be best to let him go.

"Nah. I don't think so." Sorun bit back a curse hearing that - she wasn't biting. "Never know when a hostage could come in handy. Maybe they'll catch one of our guys and we'll need to do a prisoner swap. Maybe Scourge'll feel like cutting some of your fingers off and showing the Freedom Fighters just to see the looks on their faces." Fiona shrugged while Sorun stared with a blank expression. "But hey, them's the breaks. Sorry." She didn't sound sorry at all.

"... You all suck." Sorun wished he had the energy to say something more than that, but he didn't. Between the sick feeling and the dread this situation was putting him in there just wasn't anything in the tank for anything else to be said on his part. The situation as a whole sucked, but between them kidnapping him and everything Fiona said these people just sounded plain awful.

"Yeah, and you're the one sitting there all tied up. Must suck to suck." With that, Fiona slid herself off the table. She stepped towards Sorun and bent down so they were eye level, a mocking smile on her face. "I gotta go swap out with the next person set to look after ya, so try not to get too uncomfortable, okay?"

The look Sorun gave her couldn't have been more dry if he tried. "I don't think it'll be that hard. You didn't even tie me to a chair. You just left me on the floor."

"Good boy." She patted him on the cheek. If she wasn't so much stronger than him by virtue of being a Mobian he would have bit the hand. "And you really shouldn't be complaining that much," she continued, stopping at the doorway to the room. She looked spiteful now. "The digs you're getting here are better than most prisons."

And with those rather scathing-sounding words she left, locking the door behind her and leaving Sorun to stew in his own maelstrom of brewing emotions. Feelings and thoughts all of which culminated into

Sorun sighing and thunking his head on the crate he was sitting against. He did nothing otherwise.

It occurred to Sorun that maybe he should try escaping at some point. He could liken the will to escape his bonds and leave this place like a flame, and like a flame it was snuffed to oblivion when he thought further ahead and wondered what he was supposed to do about the fact he was stuck in another zone with no Yamato.

He didn't know the lay of the land. The general disposition of people, locations, hell, he didn't even know the layout of the... what he assumed was a castle but he only saw this room so he didn't really know. Escaping this place didn't necessitate escape from the situation as a whole - whereas if he stayed his greatest chance of escaping would be to wait to be rescued by the others. Stay in a place they knew to look in instead of making them look all over for him. He was stranded otherwise.

That's what really rubbed Sorun the wrong way. Being in a situation where he had to be rescued due to his own inefficiencies. It was demeaning. Humiliating. He'd say humbling, but Sorun had already reached lows so low he wasn't even certain he could be humbled any further by life. And he hated that. Almost more than what was happening to him. And knowing them it'd be fucking Sonic to the rescue.

Getting rescued by him of all people. As far as Sorun saw it was worse than being kidnapped. Having to rely on *him* .

If there was a saving grace, it was that the evil knockoffs hadn't actually done anything to him other than tie him up and leave him in a room. Yet. He was hoping some of the things Fiona said were just to scare him, but he'd seen too much evidence to point to the contrary. Scourge had conquered a planet. Was the opposite of Sonic, who Sorun doubted would kill to save his own life. Scourge and Miles had talked of poisonings, at least on the part of one of their members. But they were aware and didn't seem to mind.

There'd been killings. Had to have been if he really conquered a planet. So if they were really willing to go that far he didn't see how torture wouldn't be on the table. And that was the last thing he needed, more sympathy and worry from others because he'd been hurt. It'd probably hit Nicole worst of all, and to Sorun that was infinitely worse than whatever they'd do to him. Especially since he could just fix whatever damage was inflicted if he got his hands on a Chaos Emerald. And mental scars could be cut out.

But... there was nothing to do but sit here and hope for the best. Because Sorun lacked the strength, ability, and technique to get out of this.

He looked towards his current watcher. They were rotating them out, every six hours it seemed since that was how long Fiona stayed before leaving. He didn't know if this one had stayed as long, there was no clock, but it felt around six hours. He didn't know why exactly they were having someone guard him constantly instead of just throwing him in a cell somewhere and leaving him. He doubted they didn't have a facility like that, or couldn't make one on the fly. More likely it was because he'd popped up in the Freedom HQ without using any entrances and they were worried he had some ability they didn't know about, not knowing anything he could do was linked to the Emeralds. So a guard seemed to be a precaution more than anything.

It made Sorun scoff. At least *that* detail hadn't been in that damn database. He couldn't understand why Tails hadn't scrubbed his fucking profile after he left.

Unlike his last guard, this one wasn't as talkative. It was Antoine's evil double. Who, for whatever reason, was dressed like a biker of all things, leather jacket and all. And an eyepatch over his left eye. Still carried around a saber, even if he wasn't dressed for the part for that weapon like the real Antoine, but outside the clothes and eyepatch this was was a deadringer for his Antoine.

Kind of had the air of a jackass around him, too, but Sorun wouldn't be surprised to learn if everyone on this miserable planet did.

The coyote shifted where he was standing, leaning against the table across from Sorun with an irritated expression on his face. He looked towards the one door leading into the room, looking like he was about ready to bite it in half. "Where iz zat woman?" not-Antoine grumbled out.

Ah. So it had been six hours and he was waiting for the next person to switch out with him. Sorun'd be a bit upset, too.

"You can't speak very well either, huh?" Sorun observed. Not-Antoine's single eye snapped in his direction.

"What was zat?" he demanded.

"Your language. It's fucking butchered," Sorun clarified. "The real Antoine's the same way 'cause his parents tried teaching him two languages at once and now he just speaks both badly, but I kinda figured that circumstance was so specific there was no way it could be repeated on a double from another universe. But you have the same speech impediment he does. I just think it's weird."

"... Ze 'real' Antoine." Not-Antoine's face wrinkled in disgust saying the words out loud. "What makes him real et not moi?"

"Well... the Antoine I know's from the Prime Zone. I was lead to believe that was the first, original zone. And every other universe in the multiverse is an offshoot of that one. This is the information that was provided to me," Sorun said. "And what I've been lead to believe is that this zone only serves to be a 'mirror' of sorts to that world. Everyone here is supposed to be an opposite of the original." He leaned forwards a bit, torso tilted towards the ground so that he was forced to look up at not-Antoine. "By that logic, doesn't that mean that your entire personality is based off the opposite of his? The 'real' one? How much of you is you and not just the opposite of the real Antoine?"

He didn't respond immediately. His one eye was narrowed at Sorun, and his fingers were tapping away irritably on the surface of the table he was leaning on. He didn't look pleased at Sorun's words, but there was something else in his gaze Sorun couldn't place. "You zound like Scourge," not-Antoine said, and Sorun realized what that gaze was. He was perturbed at being reminded of something.

"Him? From what Fiona told me he's obsessed about carving out his own identity and not being stuck as just an evil Sonic. Wants the same for all of you, in fact. Said so herself," Sorun continued. Not-Antoine made a "tsk" noise and turned his head away. "He wondered the same thing, didn't he? Brought the question up with all of you? Is that why you follow him?"

"We 'follow' him because zat hedgehog iz a seekopath who mutilates anyone who doez not go hiz way!" not-Antoine hissed out, turning his head back to Sorun. His teeth were bared as he continued to growl out, "You zink we care? Zat any of us cared zere was a different world with different us's? Non, nevair, but *him* , he iz ze one obsessed weeth hiz image! We were all fine here!"

The coyote exhaled, and then took a breath while shaking his head. Sorun watched on silently, straightening his torso out as he watched the Mobian compose himself before saying his next words. "Besides zat point," not-Antoine said, "I would wonder how 'real' zat Antoine iz when hiz friends had not even notice-ed I had been replacing him for half a year."

Hearing that, Sorun's eyes narrowed. With those words he'd suddenly been reminded of what this Antoine had done to his at one point. "Right... you abducted him. Stuck him in this zone and pretended to be him for six months," he bitterly mumbled out. "You almost destroyed his whole life doing that. Why?"

"Because I was zick of playing ze underling to Scourge. Because I thoughted zose imbeciles in le Freedom Fighter would not be ze noticing ones, and I was right. Eet was not even zat hard replacing him. Eet was pazetic. I am surprise-ed he even managed to survive

living here for zo long." Not-Antoine made a scoff at the mere memory of the event. But then he smirked a bit at some other memory. "Ahh, and I had put zo much of ze planning and ze scheming into ze new life I was to make zere. Such a pity zey caught me when zey did, but at least I got to see my poor, pazetic double's face as hiz fathair laid zere dying right in front of him."

The sentence reached Sorun's ears. He'd heard it, and processed the words he heard. It was a piece of information so disturbing and shocking he'd actually jolted a bit where he sat, and after Sorun felt his entire body go completely still as he looked up at not-Antoine. "What?" he asked, voice toneless. A tiny electrical spark of green bolted over his blue eyes.

"Oh, zat. He did not tell you? I am not finding myself so surprise-ed." He waved a hand casually. *Casually* . Like the death of someone's father deserved such a casual gesture. It was a sight that felt violently wrong to Sorun's eyes. "He had zuch a high position in ze Acorn Kingdom's military. A position *I* wanted and deserved. Whatever life zat position would have given me would be infinitely better zan whatever life I could have here; it's why I swapped weeth him in ze first place! And why would zat cretin's fathair evair suspect hiz own flesh et blood would be poisoning him? Everyone would 'ave thought ze old feool would die of natural causes and I would have been promoted if I had not been caught."

That was wrong. That was so wrong. *Him* . He was wrong. Everything about him was wrong.

"You..." Sorun twitched, as if he'd been violently struck. "You stole six months of his life and killed his dad... for status...?"

"Of course I did! What, did you zink-?"

The rest of the words were lost on Sorun. Not-Antoine was still talking, he could see his mouth moving and could vaguely hear something in the background that sounded like sounds, maybe words, but it was all being drowned out. It was the first time Sorun

had ever heard Antoine's dad had died. That he'd been been assassinated from some poser trying to replace him for a comfier life than what he had in this zone.

His heart was beating hard in his chest. His blood - it was flowing much faster than it should, but Sorun didn't care. Couldn't even register it or the sounds coming out of not-Antoine as he stared at him. He felt... when was it? When was the last time he'd felt so angry? When the Neo-Walkers tried to deprive him of life? When he'd seen the husks of all his friends strung up on a wall behind Enerjak? What Sorun felt now, sitting there completely still while staring at not-Antoine, all those feelings seemed tame in comparison. This was something new he'd never felt before in his life that exceeded all of that anger. This wasn't even close to anger, or wrath, or fury, this... this was...

Rage .

It was the oddest thing. Never before in Sorun's life had his thoughts become so clear than when this feeling of absolute rage began to flood his very being. A state of focus so sharp and clear it felt almost surreal. Almost *peaceful* , of all things. It was a jarring juxtaposition to the absolute rage and hatred coursing through him, a feeling that should have harshly clashed with the fact that, sitting there, Sorun felt calmer and had a more clear head than he ever had in his entire life. He couldn't understand the phenomenon, and wasn't even sure he wanted to. It was serene. And sitting there, in what may as well have been a state of rageful zen, a single thought coursed through Sorun's entire being so thoroughly and completely it was almost as if he *were* that thought.

He wanted to hurt the person standing there in front of him bragging about the fact he'd poisoned the father of one of his best friends. Laughing about it to Sorun's face. It wasn't just a passing thought, or a random whim. It was an absolute fact. Sorun was going to hurt this person.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

"Huh?" Whatever not-Antoine was saying, he'd stopped mid-sentence. He looked confused when he looked over at Sorun, still sitting there on the ground and tied up, and noted, with even greater confusion, there were two changes. One was the stream of blood steadily flowing out of Sorun's nose and dripping onto the stone ground below them. The second was that his eyes had turned from a dark blue to a glowing green.

"Hhhh..." A rattling breath left Sorun when he stood up straighter. Green trails of light followed his eyes as he stared at not-Antoine with oddly calm eyes. "You did all that, huh?"

Creeeak...

Not-Antoine's single eye darted downwards. He grew the slightest bit alarmed when he saw Sorun's right hand. The fingernails had turned completely black and were extending. Lengthening into sharp claws jutting out of the tips of his fingers.

And then Sorun shrugged and the ropes binding him snapped completely off.

The one-eyed coyote that had been watching Sorun tried to move and do something the second the ropes came off. There hadn't been a chance. Sorun had sprung right up off the ground and leaped at not-Antoine with speeds and unnatural movements that couldn't be classified as human. The saber attached to his side and been torn off by Sorun and tossed to the back of the room. And then his left arm grabbed not-Antoine by the throat, shoving him forwards and against the table he'd been leaning on, trapping him between it and Sorun.

Gagging out, expression twisted in pain and anger, not-Antoine tried lashing out at Sorun. He didn't like that. So he'd plunged that

sharpened, black nails on his right hand down and through not-Antoine's left shoulder. The leather of his jacket and the Mobian's flesh parted almost too easily, allowed Sorun to sink his whole fingers into the shoulder.

The anger in not-Antoine's face faded. Now it was just pain and anguish, and he'd made a high-pitched whining sound as his struggles against Sorun weakened greatly.

"Settle down there, coyote," Sorun demanded in a soft voice. Surprisingly, the struggling did almost cease entirely, though Sorun wasn't sure if it was because of the pain or fear. There was both on not-Antoine's face.

In response to the struggling stopping, Sorun tore his clawed fingers out of not-Antoine's shoulder. Two things happened: not-Antoine jolted and shouted out in pain, and some of the blood had flown out from his shoulder due to the force he'd pulled it out. More than that, some of it had spattered onto Sorun's face. Just a few drops had accidentally wound up in his mouth.

Sorun almost gagged from feeling the blood hit his mouth and almost spit it out, but then stopped. The blood, what little there was, didn't taste how he'd expect. He'd tasted his own blood and had known what to expect, but this wasn't it. Not this tingly... almost tangy taste. Nor this sensation. Like the blood was charged with something.

It was... good?

In his confusion a few locks of his hair fell in front of Sorun's face. What immediately caught his attention was a few hairs in particular. The blood that wound up in his mouth, he'd accidentally swallowed it on reflex. And he saw, right before his eyes, the moment he'd did that a few, just about three or four, of his black hairs had turned white. A miniscule, negligible change. But a change nonetheless. And he felt just the slightest bit stronger.

"Huh. Ain't that interesting?" He filed the information away for later. He was more focused on the coyote squirming in his grasp, and so looked back down at not-Antoine. The shoulder wound he'd inflicted was bleeding profusely, already beginning to pool on the floor. One of his claws had probably nicked the subclavian artery, if Mobians even had those. He assumed the anatomy was close enough to humans that it was the case. Wouldn't be bleeding that heavily otherwise.

Didn't matter. His gaze shifted to not-Antoine's face. He was wide-eyed, panicked. Breathing heavily to the point he was wheezing. It felt satisfying.

"Hhhh..." Sorun's clawed hand began moving, the tips dragging along the surface of not-Antoine's jacket as they approached his face. The coyote began squirming a bit more harshly, but stopped cold when the claws began dragging themselves along his face, gentle-like. They stopped at the eyepatch. "Dear, oh dear. What happened here?" Sorun asked as he tore the eyepatch off, casting it off to the side.

It was about as bad as one would expect. The eye was completely gone, and there was a large, jagged scar going through the eye, starting above the brow and ending just above his cheek. And the scar itself... the certain way the edges were frayed. Sorun felt like he'd seen such a wound before.

Oh. Wait. He had. On Eggman's robots.

"I recognize this kind of wound. Did Scourge do this to you? Spin Dash you right in the face?" Sorun asked. Not-Antoine remained silent. "That sucks, man. Though..."

The tip of his index finger, and the black claw jutting out of its tip, drifted over to the empty eye socket. Not-Antoine began squirming again, more fiercely this time, when the tip slowly pushed into the eye socket. "Antoine's a sweet guy, you know? One of my best friends here. And you almost ruined his life. Killed his dad." He could

feel warm flesh pulse around his finger as he slowly lowered it into the empty socket. Heard not-Antoine softly whimper below him. "Ya think I could reach all the way to the hole in the back of your eye socket where the ocular nerves of your eye are supposed to feed through to your brain? Think I could scrape away at your cerebellum from here? Or maybe..."

Suddenly, he stopped. His finger exited the eye hole - in addition to the blood clear, viscous fluid had coated the finger, though he could see from here no damage had been done to the empty eye socket. The finger hovered to the other side of the coyote's face, who went dead still when he saw the single claw hovering over his one good eye.

"You don't really need to see, do you?" Sorun asked. The finger began lowering. "Father-murdering bastard like you doesn't seem to be putting your eyesight to good use anyways, so why should you get to keep it? Antoine's father isn't seeing anything anymore because of what you did."

"Non, n-non, don't, don't do it, please, no-" Sorun's left hand tightened around not-Antoine's throat, causing him to let out a strangles gasp. He was shaking now, his eye quivering as the claw lowered and lowered. Airy gasps continued to leave him when Sorun felt the slightest pressure in his finger from the tip of his claw making contact with the eye. The slightest push and-

"Drop him. Now."

Sorun's head picked up. He hadn't heard the door to the side of the room open. Nor had he even heard the footsteps. Curiosity got the better of him and he lifted his claw off the eye before he'd managed to pierce it, making not-Antoine sag in relief in his grasp. Sorun looked towards the speaker standing in the doorway.

Hmph. The blue jumpsuit was new but the person looked exactly like Sally, just with a slightly different haircut. And the dangerous look in her eyes he wasn't used to seeing. He'd recognized the voice but he

should have guessed it was her alone from the fact she managed to make it there without Sorun hearing her. From what he'd heard her name was Alicia for some reason he didn't care for.

She was in the way, though. He didn't like that.

"Hhhhh..." Another rattling breath left Sorun, glowing green eyes blinking, as he considered the request. "Sure."

He decided to test something risky to see just how much this form and a few drops of blood got him. So he'd released not-Antoine's throat with his left hand, only to then grab his face with his clawed right hand. He twisted around and attempted to throw the coyote - to Sorun's mild surprise he actually succeeded, managed to toss not-Antoine at Alicia. It'd worked. In fact it almost worked too well, because when he hit her they both tumbled right through the door and sprawled out into the corridor beyond, going as far as to hit the wall.

Not-Antoine ended up laying against the wall. Alicia was flat on the ground, groaning and shaking her head in an attempt to recover. Sorun had rapidly stepped out of the room to approach the two, but stopped when he noticed an object laying next to Alicia: a leather whip. She'd probably dropped it after he'd thrown not-Antoine at her.

Not wasting a moment he'd scooped the whip up, stepped over Alicia's body, and then rapidly wrapped the whip around her throat. With that done he pulled it taut, constricting the Mobian's throat and lifting her head off the ground. She gagged out as a result, making wheezing gasps as she, in a panic, scratched and reached out towards the whip around her neck. She wasn't able to get up to do something about it. Sorun kept her pinned by pressing his foot on her back.

Another groan had caught Sorun's attention. Not-Antoine was starting to get up, and though his one eye was bleary and slightly unfocused, he was still looking at Sorun. Another rattling breath left him as he clenched both ends of the whip choking Alicia with his left

hand. His right, clawed hand flicked forwards, grabbing not-Antoine by the throat and slamming his head into the wall. He pulled him back and slammed him again, and this time it'd been hard enough that some of the dark stones comprising the wall were dislodged and fell to the ground. In that same instant he was limp, falling unconscious, at which point Sorun let him go. He fell limply onto the ground.

Below him the gasping struggles performed by Alicia were growing weaker. Her arms were quickly losing steam and beginning to sag, and the wheezing was growing quieter. When he leaned forwards to look at her face he could see her eyes were half-lidded, like she was on the verge of growing unconscious. A few seconds after that observation she *did* go unconscious, eyes closing and arms going completely limp. He waited a few seconds to ensure she wasn't faking it, and then released the whip, ceasing the strangulation and letting Alicia's face flop against the stone ground.

He waited a few more seconds, just in case. She wasn't getting up.

"I just wanted to give a fucking pizza to my friends." Hissing out hatefully, he kicked out at Alicia's side hard enough that her unconscious body rolled over onto her back. *"Fuck... fucking... alright playing prisoner ain't an option anymore, so, so what, what do I do, the hell do I go-?"*

Footsteps. Approaching from behind Sorun, around a corner. He whirled towards it, cursing and glancing around at the same time. He internally cursed again when he realized there wasn't a hiding spot: it was just a narrow, stone corridor. It was either hide in the room or...

Humming, he glanced up at the ceiling. And then Sorun looked down at his right hand, tipped with black claws. He flexed the fingers in consideration. This wasn't a normal thing he could do, but as he was right now, with these few white hairs, he might be able to with the strength he had at the moment.

He decided in a split second to commit to the idea and just hide in the room if it didn't work out. So with that thought he jumped. High enough that he managed to reach the ceiling to the corridor, after which he dug his claws in through the stone ceiling. To his surprise it worked - he'd anchored himself and managed to stay suspended. He couldn't hold in the bemused huff that left him as he pulled himself higher to get as far off the ground as possible. Just in time, too, because the one making those footstep noises had finally rounded the corner.

Sorun couldn't help the surprised smile that slowly spread over his face. It was Miles.

The initial expression that had been on the little fox's face when he rounded that corner was alarm, maybe a bit of concern. Alerted from all the sounds of struggling, most likely, just happened to be around and had come to investigate the noise. But then he saw the two bodies lying in the corridor, and that alarmed look fell away to panic when he rushed over to the two of them. From his perch Sorun had noted, oddly, that after Miles stopped to look at the two bodies he looked towards the empty room with the door broken off, and saw it was empty.

And now he looked concern. Not at his two "friends", though Sorun didn't even think that term was applicable because he wasn't even looking at not-Antoine and Alicia anymore. No, his sole focus was on that empty room that Sorun wasn't in right now. Because he was hanging off the ceiling right above Miles. It somehow set Sorun opinion of him even lower, but at the moment something like that wasn't much of a concern to him.

He let go of the ceiling, dropping right behind Miles. He'd heard, obviously, from the way he went stiff and his ears went straight up. A chilling breath left him as he reached out towards the fox shoulder with his right hand. He grabbed it, gently, squeezing down with just the barest amount of pressure, enough to let him know he was there. Miles didn't so much as move.

"Hello... friend."

Roughly, he spun Miles around so they could look at each other face-to-face. He became startled at the sight of Sorun: from the glowing green eyes and the wide smile to the front teeth stained red from the blood dripping down his nose and onto his face. It must have been quite the sight, Sorun imagined, but for him the face Miles was making was an even better one. Wide eyes, the concerned, almost squeamish look. There was absolutely no aggressiveness in that look; he could almost feel it, weirdly enough. No fight whatsoever in that face. Maybe it was because he was focusing on the two bodies behind Sorun, or maybe he was a coward at heart, but there wasn't a single inkling of violence in the young Mobian in front of him. He was just scared.

For some reason Sorun found it funny.

"Y-you... you escaped," Miles stuttered out, stating the very obvious. He didn't even so much as take a step back, just remained rooted in the spot.

"Hhhhh..." Slightly, Sorun tilted his head as he looked at him. He couldn't very well leave, not now that he'd seen him. He'd alert others and they'd start looking. If he alerted Scourge... well, then that was the end. But oh, after what he'd did, Sorun wondered just how far he could take this...

"Well, it seems... it seems we underestimated you, somewhat. Ahem." Now Miles had taken a single step back, eyes darting around nervously while Sorun stared on. "See-seeing the, er, state, as it were, of my compatriots it would seem engaging you is unwise, so I would like to negotiate-"

Before he could take another step back Sorun reached out with his left hand to softly grab Miles' shoulder again. He made a small "Eep!" sound of surprise and froze completely, breathing coming out heavily as he gazed at Sorun with dread-filled eyes.

"Negotiation? That's a lotta syllables, Miles. The situation at hand doesn't need a fancy word like that," Sorun said to him, making the fox gulp. "It's simpler than you think."

"I-if this is about the kidnapping then I can assure you-"

"Sh-sh-sh, Miles, hey." Sorun leaned in closer, making Miles tilt his head back. "Listen. You're a smart cookie. Ya know how this goes."

There was a change in Miles' expression. Some of the fear ebbed away, and his gaze against Sorun hardened. It was a radical enough shift that Sorun's own smile had dimmed down from the unexpected sight.

"You can cease the bluster, Sorun. We both know a threat like that is meaningless."

And now the smile was wiped completely off Sorun's face, replaced by a perplexed look. "That so?" he asked, wondering just where the hell he was going with this.

"Please. Look at those two." Miles' eyes darted beyond Sorun, to the two fallen bodies behind him. "Rendered unconscious with the barest injuries. I only needed a second's glance at them to confirm you employed only mild force to incapacitate them." The eyes rounded back at Sorun. He was actually starting to look smug now. "And come now, we both know you were a Freedom Fighter. And we *both* know their type. They're not the type to employ any more force than required. I should know. My inferior other operates with that lot." He actually had the audacity to take a step forwards, expression growing more confidence as the shakiness left his voice. Sorun continued to stare, stunned. "If you were with them you must meet the same standards. You're from that zone, after all, so I shouldn't even be that surprised. So we both know threats of violence are just that: threats with no foundation to stand upon. Especially on one as young as me.

"So, in lieu of all that, I surrender." He even went as far as to raise his hands up, confidence practically oozing off of him at this point. In fact, Miles' face was almost smug-like, and he'd continued in a dry voice, "After all it would seem you have me completely cornered. It's only right I give up so we may discuss terms."

He thought that since Sorun was a Freedom Fighter in the past he wouldn't hurt a defenseless person. It took a second for it to register with Sorun, and when it did he couldn't believe it. He didn't even seem to realize Sorun wasn't even from the Prime Zone, as if that actually mattered. The evil double from the evil mirror world was assuming Sorun was from the world where he perceived everyone being a good double and that Sorun was among them. That he wasn't the kind of person that would hurt a helpless child. Because that was probably something they did here.

That was laughable. Sorun had seen Mobians just as bad as the ones here in Mobius Prime. The kindness he'd grown accustomed to wasn't ubiquitous across the whole species over there. It made him wonder if things were the same here and if there were good seeds spread along the planet. Maybe they weren't, and that's why the not-Tails standing in front of him seemed so sure, so confident, in his assertions. That Sorun had been a Freedom Fighter. The Freedom Fighters were their opposites and therefore naïve, merciful fools. He'd been one so he must also be the same. The logic was there.

"... That's a wild theory you got there, Miles," Sorun admitted to him. "You must really hate your prime variant, huh? To have that low an opinion of him? Of everyone there?"

The confident grin Miles held turned downwards. "Of course I do. You can't understand the depths of humility I suffer sharing a name and face with that dimwitted hack," he almost snarled out. "Intelligence near-equal to mine, and what does he do with it? Fiddle with planes and gadgets all day long instead of doing something meaningful with his gifts. He's a disgrace that squanders everything people like us deserve."

"People that are smarter than everyone else in the room?"

" *Of course* , Sorun." Miles rolled his eyes. "I didn't aid in conquering this world on a whim. It was a feat worthy of someone of my stature, of my intelligence! Because unlike my cretinous double I actually know what what my value is!"

Maybe Sorun had been overthinking all of this. Maybe he really didn't need to look past the concept of "cartoonishly evil double from another world". Because after talking with not-Antoine and not-Tails and seeing Scourge that's what it looked like it amounted to. Just a world of bad people with twisted logic Sorun could barely follow. Barely. The sad part was he almost understood these people more than their doubles he was friends with because, after all this time, he still found difficulty in comprehending how people could be so kind. What these people were displaying, the greed and megalomania, *that* Sorun could follow easy enough.

Too bad for Miles, though, because he was wrong about one thing.

"I wanna pose a question to you, Miles, and I want you to think really hard on this one," Sorun began. Miles' expression was slowly slipping into a cautious one after he began speaking. "Do you think it's weird there isn't a Sorun in this world? What do you think that means?" He leaned closer to Miles, who flinched back. "I'll tell you. I'm not from the Prime Zone."

Before anything else could be said, before Miles' face could even shift back into a panicked one, Sorun's balled fist flew out and nailed him right in the stomach. Miles wheezed out as all the breath left him, his body folding over Sorun's fist as he leaned forwards.

"You shouldn't make such assumptions," Sorun whispered into his ear as the fox struggled to breath. "Now, fact of the matter is you kidnapped me. I've some grievances to air."

His fist pulled away from the winded fox's stomach, only to then punch him square in the face so hard he flew into the room. He

landed on the ground flat on his stomach with a pained cry, facing away from the doorway Sorun had just punched him threw. Panicked, wheezing sounds were leaving him as he tried breathing again, and at the same time he tried crawling away.

He didn't get far. Sorun's foot impacted the small of his back, halting him in place and making Miles scream out just as he managed to get a new breath in.

"From where I'm from there were people that got off on the idea of torturing kids. I'm not one of them, but you *really pissed me off* with what you pulled." He removed his foot from Miles' back and knelt down on a single knee. His clawed hand burst forwards, each finger digging into Miles' right shoulder all the way up to the second knuckle. Miles screamed again, a high-pitched, frightened shriek as he clawed desperately at the floor in a vain attempt at getting away. "I would have been home free if you hadn't opened your fucking mouth in front of Scourge and gave me away."

There was a sudden pressure Sorun felt at his waist. He looked down, giving an unimpressed look at the pair of tails that had wrapped around him in an attempt to throw him off. His left hand roughly gripped the tails' bases and squeezed down, hard enough that Miles made an anguished noise. "I'll tear these off if you try that shit again, Miles." Predictably, the tails went slack and unwrapped themselves.

Through it all, Sorun found that the smile from earlier wasn't returning. In fact, he was wholly frowning. This, what he was doing. Almost no satisfaction from any of it. Not like with not-Antoine, against that table. Not when he was choking Alicia out. Oh, there was *some* down there that Sorun recognized, but just barely. And it wasn't just due to the fact it was being muted from the sheer rage he felt just being in Miles' presence. The thing squirming beneath him and crying out in pain from the fingers digging into the shoulder, he was young. *Weak* . Not in brainpower, certainly not, but in physical ability he just wasn't mature. To say nothing of how easy he'd given

up without even a fight. Something Sorun, begrudgingly, could respect having been in similar situations, but even so...

Still. The anger was still there and wasn't being erased, and what he was doing right now was relieving that somewhat. And he had questions that needed answering besides. The questions alone were the only reason it was even still carrying on at this point, because otherwise Sorun would have just ended it already.

"Okay, Miles, let's talk a bit." He pulled back on the shoulder he was digging into. More strangled gasps of pain from Miles as his torso was bent upwards, hands clawing desperately at the air for something. Sorun used his left hand to firmly hold Miles' left shoulder to keep him in place while his right hand tore the fingers out from his right shoulder, eliciting another cry. Crimson fluid began dripping down and staining his red jacket from the wounds as Sorun continued. "I just need to know- I can't take you seriously with this."

It was that damn hairpiece on top of his head. That gray toupee that clashed with the yellow and white fur. Sorun didn't know why, but it annoyed him, so he reached forwards with the clawed hand to tear it off.

... It wasn't coming off, Sorun discovered with a slightly startled expression. It was actually his hair, rooted to his scalp. He'd actually styled his hair and dyed it this way.

"Fuck off, I can't believe it." A disbelieving scoff left him as he shook his head. "Alright, whatever, forget about that. Now..." Ignoring the whimpering sounds coming out of Miles Sorun gently wrapped his clawed fingers around his throat. "Just tell me what I need to know and this doesn't have to get any worse."

"I-I'll, I'll tell you anything, anything you want, just, just stop, it hurts please stop I'll tell you anything-!"

"Sh-sh-sh-sh, hey, none of that. C'mon." The black claws gently scraped along the surface of his throat. Some kind of noise, an

alarmed, frightened-sounding thing, left Miles as he made a jerky nod. "Okay, see? Need answers, not whining. So... I already figured out I'm in your world. Moebius. This place, what, it's your base of operations?"

Another jerky nod from Miles. "It's our, ye-yes, it's, it's where we live and conduct our business. The-the castle, it's-"

"Castle, got it, moving on." Miles' mouth had shut so fast when Sorun spoke again he heard his teeth clack together. "How'd you get to Mobius? I've got experience with zone travel, and it ain't easy, I'll tell you that for free. And I figure the why of it is Scourge trying to feed whatever mania is driving him, but I need a how here, Miles."

"The devices, we'd... it hurts, please..." Sorun squeezed on his throat slightly. "A-a pair of devices, the Globe Posts, we stole and repurposed them to cross the dimensional barriers! It's how we infiltrated their HQ!" The hand grabbing his throat fell away some, though still hovered near. Miles seemed to take Sorun's silence as a sign to continue, but then he said, "But if y-you're thinking of using them to go back then that's irrelevant!"

"Irrelevant, hrm?"

"Yes, yes I mean it!" Miles screamed out when the clawed fingers went back to his throat. "The Freedom Fighters, they used a pair of their own posts to come here! I... Alicia and I helped them get here!"

The claws around Miles' throat pressed down every so slightly, the tips making pinpricks in his neck. The yellow fur around the points was slowly turning red. "I don't believe you," Sorun said. Helped the Freedom Fighters breach their own castle? Sounded as far-fetched as it got for him.

"It's true, it's true!" Miles shouted out - about as well as he could with the hand on his neck. "You don't know what it's like being an underling to that deranged psychopath Scourge, and he has so much power we could never do anything! We took a chance! The

Freedom Fighters agreed to leave us all alone as long as they get Scourge and we stay in Moebius! It was his idea to invade in the first place, not ours!"

It being Scourge's call to invade Mobius tracked with what Fiona said. None of the rest of Miles' words did, because it honestly did sound made-up to Sorun. Convenient. Even if the timing worked out, between the invasion and Sorun being captured to Miles here finding a chance to reach out to the Freedom Fighters. He didn't buy it, and besides that he just didn't trust an evil version of Tails.

"Liar."

"I'm not!" It felt like Miles wanted to shake his head, but it seemed the claws in his neck impeded him. "I only brought your attention to Scourge so we'd have collateral to get the Freedom Fighters to be more amenable to a deal! That's all this was, Sorun! I'm telling the truth! We were going to give you back unharmed once Scourge was defeated!"

"Fiona never mentioned this."

"She wasn't part of the deal, she isn't one of us- OW, PLEASE!" he squealed out when the claws deepened.

"You're missing that all-important vital ingredient called proof, Miles," Sorun whispered, hissing directly into his ear. "That or trust. And if you think I'm gonna trust a literal evil genius then you're acting your age for being so naïve."

"It's... it's the truth, Sorun, I-I swear it is." By now Miles' voice was little more than quiet whines. Tears were streaming down the side of his face, staining his fur. "Ple- I wouldn't lie, not on this, there's no reason, please..."

"Liar, liar."

The room shook. By that, Sorun realized it was the entire castle that shook. There was sound, too, muffled thuds from what sounded like above him, a few floors up, maybe. A few more thuds after, though no castle shaking this time. Rapid in succession, a familiar cadence that Sorun recognized... the sound of somebody rolled into a ball and smashing their body into something rapidly. Even from all the way down here he recognized that sound, even the extremely faint vibrations that reached all the way down here.

Either Sonic was here or Scourge was fighting something. Both situations, possibly. Worst case was even if it wasn't the Freedom Fighters there was *someone* attacking, and maybe Sorun could slip out in the confusion. It was an opportunity he couldn't afford to miss.

But that meant he had to leave now. And regardless to the veracity of his claims, he was done with Miles.

"Okay." The pressure behind his claws slowly began to increase as Sorun pressed his fingers down on Miles' neck. "Bye."

"W-wait! Wait wait wait, no!" The fox was grabbed at Sorun's wrist now, trying to pull him away, but it wasn't any use. The whining sounds he'd been making became weak and feverish, his eyes screwed shut from the pain. The tears were still flowing out of him. "Don't, don't please I'm begging you, don't kill me please I told you everything don't..."

Sorun ignored him. The pressure increased more and the claws dug slightly deeper into his neck, ever closer to the major veins and arteries. Miles was making full-on crying noises now, weakly beating at the arm while continuing to blubber incoherent pleas. They were continually ignored.

"Hey, maybe dial it the fuck back and chill out?"

Sorun looked away from Miles. He saw himself, crouching a bit away. Blue eyes and normal hand, all black hair. He looked about as mad as Sorun himself felt.

"Why? After everything he did?" Sorun thought back to Sorun, clawed hand refusing to leave Miles' throat. *"You can't seriously think I'm gonna let everything he's done slide."*

"You really think Nicole'll ever look at us the same way if she finds out you killed a kid? Or anyone else for that matter?"

"..." His mirror image had a really solid point. He didn't want to admit it but he did. And more than that Sorun doubted he would even get any satisfaction out of it, because what he was currently doing sure wasn't giving him any.

"Just incapacitate him, man. It ain't worth it."

It certainly wasn't. He didn't want consequences like this following him back to his day life. So, with that in mind, Sorun made a small smile at the back of Miles' head. "Just kidding...~" he said in a playful voice, releasing Miles' neck and causing him to sniffle out a small sigh of relief. Which was immediately followed by Sorun grabbing the back of his head and slamming his face down so hard into the ground the stone flooring cracked.

The other Sorun stared. He stared down at Miles' now-prone form, and then stared at Sorun, expression blank and stony. When he spoke, he sounded more annoyed than anything. "Okay, when I said incapacitate him, I didn't mean give him a concussion."

"I didn't give him a concussion," Sorun argued at himself, sounding offended. "Look, see," he continued, reaching down to peel one of Miles' eyelids open, "Mobians are freakishly tough, there's no way that- ooh."

Ah. No, yep. He could already see the fox's eye was dilated and unfocused. He made a low, pained moaning sound, twitching on the ground but otherwise not reacting all that much to Sorun holding his eye open. He was very likely concussed.

"'Ooh, I didn't give him a concussion', what did you actually think would happen?" Sorun said to himself as he released the eyelid and stood up. "Look, it's fine, kids have a crazy high amount of neuroplasticity, they walk off concussions all the time. Plus he has brains to spare anyway. You're being serious right now? What do you want me to do, un-concuss him? Agh, fine, just... let's just go, I wanna leave this place."

Of course he was sick of this place. Who wouldn't? Even another second in this dungeon would be too long, so he turned to leave. One step out Sorun paused, looking behind him and sending, while not a look of concern, at least one that was the slightest bit thoughtful when he looked down at Miles. "Um... try not to fall asleep. Might not wake up, Miles," he said, though with how he was squirming on the ground and muttering quietly like that he wasn't even sure he heard him.

Sorun decided that the warning was sufficient and finally did leave the room... only to find himself standing right across from not-Antoine's unconscious body. The earlier anger flared up in Sorun again, and he found his eyes being drawn to not-Antoine's right hand, currently laying on the ground.

"I don't know if you're like this because of the circumstances you grew up in or if this world really is so fucked that people here are just born evil. Don't really care." He crouched down and grabbed the hand's wrist with his left hand while grabbing not-Antoine's index finger with the right clawed hand. "You killed my friend's dad so you never get to hold a sword with this hand again."

With a sharp jerk the finger was torn off. There was a wet *pop!* sound, followed by the sound of some blood splashing on the stone floor. Apparently not-Antoine was so out of it he didn't even react, though Sorun didn't care regardless as he let the wrist he was holding slip out of his grip so the hand flopped back down on the ground. Then he looked down at what he was holding.

It was a furry finger resting in the palm of his hand. Wasn't much to say about it. There was still a bit of blood dribbling out of the end and dripping off the side of Sorun's hand. His first reaction was to just throw it away in disgust, but then... but then he noticed the few hairs on his head that had turned white, though by now they were rapidly darkening to the point they'd go back to black in a second or two. And then he looked back down at the finger with a contemplative look.

"... I really shouldn't, but..." Blood was power, apparently. Mobian blood, at least. They were probably so chock-full of Chaos energy he could actually get something out of them. And if just a few drops got him this much, let him manhandle Mobians like they were nothing... *"I mean on the one hand it's super fucked up to eat something that used to be part of a person. On the other hand I really don't care about that guy. Plus... well, it's not technically cannibalism since I'm not a Mobian..."*

Looking a bit squeamish, Sorun glanced back at not-Antoine. And then he looked back at the finger.

"I might need it is the thing," he rationalized to himself. *"Ah, but... if the others see me carrying around a severed finger they'd freak out. This is super gross though... but if I have to fight someone again..."*

With a disgusted grimace on his face, Sorun tossed the finger away. "I'm not fucking eating people," he mumbled to himself, shaking his head. He would cross a lot of lines for a lot of things. *Had* crossed some lines. This particular one was... one that didn't set well with him. The mental image of somebody eating a piece of *him* , or even worse one of his friends, nearly sent him recoiling and suddenly Sorun was glad for having tossed the finger away. Wasn't worth the risk of his friends finding out and thinking differently of him anyways.

"You're absolutely sure?" Sorun mumbled to himself, staring after the finger while resting a hand on his head. "Yeah, yeah, we'll... we'll

figure something out if anything goes wrong. Alright. Alright, yeah. Let's go. Yeah."

The castle was a big place. That one fact was very evident as Sorun found himself wandering the place, searching for the source of the fighting he'd heard earlier. He'd found some steps that carried him up and kept traversing floors until he'd found windows indicating he was on the ground floor, and from there he'd kept going. Once he'd gotten to that main floor the evidence of distant fighting became much more apparent. Far-off, barely-perceptible rumbles and the occasional shouting. The words themselves were indistinct due to distance, but to Sorun's ears the voices were familiar.

"Alright, so... so maybe Miles was telling more truth that I thought 'cause, 'cause it sounds like the others are... they're somewhere there..." Somewhere ahead, past this dark corridor of stone that looked like all the rest in this damn castle. All the Freedom Fighters' voices, somewhere ahead. He was pretty sure he even made out Silver's voice somewhere in that mess. It was uplifting to Sorun, hearing all that, knowing they'd come for him.

But the appreciation was falling short because, at the moment, Sorun was barely moving on his feet. The green glow had long ceased, returning his eyes and hand to normal. With it had gone that unnatural strength from before, that vigor, the dulling of that nausea from earlier. It was back in full force now; worse, actually. A constant throb of weakness and sickness that continued to assault his senses. It wasn't enough to debilitate him but it was hard not focusing on it all the same and was doing its best to slow him down.

His nose hadn't stopped bleeding, either, so that probably wasn't a good sign.

"I-I just, I... I gotta... it's just a bit further..." He stumbled forwards a few more steps, lightly panting while staring ahead at the source of the noises. Past this hallway, around a few more bends. They were

all there. *"You, you don't have to fight, okay? It's fine, they're here. Just go a bit further and-"*

Nope, it wasn't happening. He'd gasped out loudly and collapsed on the nearest wall, breathing out loudly in exhaustion as he stared forwards. An awful sensation hit him, forcing Sorun to cover his mouth as he coughed out violently enough to make his vision swim and ears ring. After the attack ended he took out a shaky breath and settled back against the wall, looking down at his hand. It was drenched in more blood than it had been before. *"Goddamn it..."*

The hand flopped uselessly to his side as Sorun's head rolled back in the direction of the hallway. There were still sounds of fighting down there. Fighting Scourge, probably, if he was in this castle. Which was likely seeing as this was his home. And in his state Sorun would be less than useless in that kind of fight. *"Ah, screw it, I'm sitting the fight out. They can sort it all out and get me later,"* he decided.

That was fine. It worked out. They always pulled wins out, and if Silver was there helping it was basically a guaranteed victory. It was what the hopeful part of Sorun's mind was reassuring him. So as far as he was concerned he was good as rescued. They'd beat him and then come to save him. Come to save him and see him in this week and bloodied state despite not having actually been hurt.

He made a lamentable sigh as he stared down at his bloodied hand. *"They're gonna be so pissed I hid this from them... oh man. Nicole will probably go ballistic. Might even kick me off onto the couch. Can she even do that, it's my bed."*

Bzzt

An exhausted sigh left him. *"What is it now?"* He internally groaned out as he looked to the side, down to where he heard that buzzing sound. On the floor, there. There were a few green electrical sparks crackling along the ground. Sorun found it considerably strange

considering it was a stone ground and he doubted there was electrical wiring there.

Actually, that one specific spot on the floor was starting to glow green, and the amount of electrical sparks was starting to increase, much to Sorun's tired chagrin. And a spot in the middle of the phenomenon that had something really concerning to Sorun, and almost familiar. A small section of the stone, a pinprick of space, where, instead of stone, it was a green, bottomless, ever-flowing surface. A portal. It looked like an incredibly small portal that was forming on the floor right next to him.

And then, just as Sorun had noticed it, the pinprick near-instantaneously expanded into a large circular portal that was about the size of a portal he would make. He hadn't expected that. Nor the two bodies that tumbled out of it so hard they crashed against the ceiling.

"What even...?" Momentarily stunned from this new and wholly unexpected development, Sorun found his eyes trained up towards the ceiling, almost against his will he'd been so drawn to it. The crash from earlier had kicked up a fair amount of dust from the impact point, but enough of it had cleared that Sorun was able to recognize one of the figures up there. It was pretty much just Sonic but without a mouth and made of metal. He'd seen it once before. *"What the- I don't- wh- how-?"*

As Sorun's mind feverishly raced to try and understand what was happening in front of him, and doing a fairly poor job of doing it, the robot tossed down the second person that'd flown through the portal with it, said person slamming their back onto the ground right in front of Sorun. He also recognized this person at a single glance of the black fur and red stripes.

Red eyes opened up on Shadow's face and glared up at the robot floating up near the ceiling, a snarl permeating his face. And then he looked slightly to the left and saw Sorun staring down at him with a wide-eyed, confused expression. The snarl disappeared entirely,

replaced by a shocked, equally confused look he was now sharing with Sorun as they stared at each other. Seconds of time passed, Sorun standing there and Shadow lying there, both completely motionless and both desperately trying to process the sight their eyes beheld.

Of course they were so distracted by the sight of the other that neither of them noticed it when Metal Sonic smashed into the wall right besides Sorun. The human himself hadn't been harmed, though he'd still been surprised enough that he'd reflexively jumped away from the wall, hitting the ground in front of him and rolling a bit. He managed to stop and prop himself up on his knees just before he'd accidentally rolled into the still-opened green portal, making Sorun breath a sigh of relief when he saw the open green hole just inches away from him.

He then fell in when Shadow's body was thrown against him, causing the both of them to tumble through the portal.

Lots of colors as Sorun fell through the portal. Mostly green at first, and a bunch of formless shapes that were all indiscernible because he was falling head over heels and couldn't get his bearing on a single thing. Then a lot of blue. Still incomprehensible from the falling, as well as thoughts such as, *"What is- wait- what is this-!"* and *"Oh god oh god oh god what the hell what the hell what the hell"* going through his mind. There simply wasn't room to think beyond recognizing he was falling, and everything was green, and now everything was blue.

His body finally hit something - he was no longer falling. There'd been a brief moment of panic before Sorun realized it'd been a soft landing. Familiar sensations hit him: the lack of being able to breath for one, the sensation of a cool substance covering his body another. The slight sting in his eyes, the taste of salt in his mouth, the heavy sensation he felt when trying to move his limbs. Opening his eyes revealed a blurred, blue sight. Upwards was brightness. Downwards was as infinite black he immediately looked away from.

Underwater. He'd fallen through the portal into landed in water. The ocean, it tasted like.

A muffled sound managed to reach Sorun through the water, and at the same time he saw the surface of the water be disturbed as something fell through it. Even with his vision blurred he could immediately tell it was Shadow's body. Motionless and unmoving. Some worry flared through Sorun, though he managed to push it to the side as he stared back up at the surface.

The robot was there, image wavy and blurred from the ocean water, but Sorun could make him out. Floating above the surface of the water via the jet engine that comprised its torso. It quickly jittered - its left arm spasmed as a small explosion blasted out its shoulder, and even from below the water Sorun saw a fair amount of sparks fly out from the explosion. He could also make out the robot's piercing, red gaze, seemingly staring at Sorun from its own position. Whether it actually did manage to see Sorun or not, he couldn't tell. When its shoulder sparked again Metal looked towards it, and then seemed to come to some conclusion as it turned around and flew off... somewhere. It moved so fast Sorun wasn't even sure what direction it'd moved in. Didn't matter. It was gone.

Usually the sight of the killer super robot leaving should have been an anxiety-relieving sight to Sorun. It wasn't in this case, oddly enough, as the most immediate problem of the ocean and trying to figure out *what the hell just happened* was still there for him. And his lungs were starting to burn besides the fact, though before Sorun endeavored to swim up to the surface he noticed Shadow's body drift past him, falling downwards. He still wasn't moving.

A green light illuminated the water around Sorun's face as he dived down with surprising ease to grab at the hedgehog's wrist. In this endeavor he succeeded, after which he swam up to the surface. No sooner had he breached the surface of the water than he was, once more, heaving large gasps of air to rapidly relieve the burning sensation of suffocating. He tried pulling Shadow up, holding his head above the water in the hopes he'd gained some lucidity, but it

seemed he was completely out cold because his head kept lolling to the side and he wouldn't open his eyes. Worse than that was Sorun found himself momentarily sinking back below the water before forcing himself to swim back up, making him continuously gasp out and breath heavily as he looked around.

There was nothing. In broad daylight with barely any clouds in the sky Sorun didn't see anything from his position but endless, blue ocean. The only plus side was that the surface was calm and there were barely any waves, but that barely helped with- *"Wait, there!"*

He'd seen it when he swiveled around in the water. A small island yonder way. He wasn't able to see any details beyond that - it was land, and as soon as the concept of island land registered with Sorun he immediately began swimming towards it. About as well as he could while dragging Shadow in tow.

It was swift progress, at least, swimming to the island. Much more swift than Sorun reasoned he could move, though at this point it didn't surprise him. The aching exhaustion that was rapidly beginning to assault him was equally unsurprising, but he pressed on regardless. The weight he was carrying along with him was a good reminder of why he needed to get to that land. The water continually splashing him in the face and threatening to drown him was an equally well reminder. So he ignored the aches his entire body felt as he pushed on towards the island. He took a bit of solace in that the blood had been washed off and it felt like his nose had at least stopped bleeding.

Eventually, after however many of those torturous minutes he spent swimming, he made it. Washing up on the shore of the island, gasping and panting while on all fours, slowly crawling forwards while dragging Shadow besides him. The green glow was starting to fade from his eyes, and along with it the added strength, though once he'd managed to reach a dry patch of sand that the tide didn't reach he'd uttered one last, pained, exhausted shout as he threw Shadow on the sand in front of him. He'd managed to throw him a grand total of two inches away.

Good enough, Sorun had thought to himself as he rolled over on his back to face up at the sky. Once another wave of ringing ears and blurred vision came and went the only sounds left that reached his ears were the waves slowly rolling over the nearby shore and his own labored breathing, and while he was struggling to get it under control, with minimal success, it wasn't fixing the exhaustion wracking his body. Or his desire to throw up. Or the aches in his muscles.

Goddamn, but was he tired.

"Hey. Hey, me." Sorun rolled his head a bit. He saw himself standing over in his peripheral vision. "Come over here and look at Shadow. You have our actual, physical eyes and I can't see him."

Sorun's response to himself was to groan outwards. He didn't want to, but the desire to just lay there and fall asleep was override by his worry for Shadow. So with great difficult he ignored his body's protests and tried to stand up. This failed, resulting in Sorun falling onto his knees, making him growl in frustration before resigning to just shuffle over to Shadow's side while digging a twin pair of trenches in the sand with his knees.

He arrived at the body after a few short moments, noting, rather enviously, that the hedgehog was flat on his back and sleeping. He glanced towards his face - there was a moment where Sorun's vision flashed, and suddenly Sorun's breathing seized when Shadow's face became enraged and a crown that hadn't been there previously was suddenly there. He rapidly blinked his eyes and shook his head. When he opened his eyes they were back on the beach and Shadow was still laying there, still and asleep. There was no crown.

Actually, he was very still. Much too still, much to Sorun's growing worry. His mouth wasn't moving at all. Worse, he realized when he looked down at his chest, was that it wasn't rising or falling.

"I think this might be one of those medical emergencies mom warned us about," the other Sorun noted, crouching down on the

other side of Shadow's body. He looked up at Sorun. "Man, sucks that we forgot all those CPR lessons she gave us, huh?"

"God, I didn't think I'd ever need it!" Sorun shouted out in horror, going as far as to grab at his hair in panic. "What do I do!?"

"W-well, fuck, man, is he even still alive!?"

Immediately Sorun's hands when to Shadow's nearest arm. He ran his fingers along his wrist, grumbling in frustration when the golden bangle got in his way. He froze when he felt it. A pulse. "Yeah," Sorun gasped out as he let the arm drop back in the sand, "he's still alive."

"He's not breathing, though," Sorun noted when he looked back down at Shadow's chest. He poked at the white tuft of fur on his chest. Still no movement.

"Yeah-yeah-yeah, yeah he's, uh, he's drowned, I think. Yeah."

Sorun's head bobbed up and down in understanding. "That makes sense, yeah. I think we need to give him mouth-to-mouth if he has a pulse but isn't breathing."

"... I don't want to do that."

At hearing that, Sorun's head snapped up to Sorun, who gave Sorun an unbelieving look when Sorun saw Sorun giving Shadow a hesitant look. "What, why!?" he shouted.

"Nicole might get upset."

Sorun sputtered. "It's a medical emergency! I think she'll understand!" he screamed out, gesticulating wildly with his arms.

"No no no, wait, hold on." Sorun held an arm up to calm Sorun. A contemplative look crossed his features. "What if... what if I just punch the water out of him?"

" *What* ?"

"Yeah, just, you know..." Sorun mimicked a punch for Sorun to see. "Just punch him hard enough that the pressure forces the water out of his lungs."

The look Sorun gave himself was one of profound disbelief and disappointment. "You can't do that, man."

"You don't know you can't punch water out of a drowned person."

"You're right, we don't know! We used to know but then you decided memorizing 'Warhammer 40K' lore was more important than retaining mom's CPR lessons!"

Ignoring Sorun, Sorun committed to his plan, wholly confident that it would work and prove himself wrong. A fist formed as he rose it directly above Shadow's chest.

"He's gonna fucking die because of us."

"Shut up, he's got alien bullshit, watch, it's gonna work."

It didn't work. His fist weakly slapped against the wet hedgehog's chest, after which he doubled over from the weakness permeating his body. Sorun stared on at the display, expression unchanging.

"Told you. You can't punch drown water out of people."

Sorun picked his head up, teeth bared and snarling in defiance as green light flared in his eyes. "Fucking... watch me!" he shouted out, raising his fist up once again before hammering it down on Shadow's chest.

The difference was immediately noticeable. The strength behind that one, solid strike was so intense that Shadow's chest had caved in, and his limbs had sprung out. The sand around them also jumped up from the sudden force that was carried into the ground, momentarily forming a crater around Sorun and Shadow before the sand fell back

down to fill it. It seemed to do the trick, though, as immediately after Shadow's eyes shot wide open, after which he sat up and vomited out lungfulls of water out on the sand.

After voiding all of the stray water from his airways, he began breathing heavily to regain the oxygen he lost. His eyes drifted to the side, widening in surprise when he saw Sorun on his knees right besides him, watching him with wide blue eyes. Sorun then proceeded to raise both arms in victory, face unchanging from looking exhausted and half-dead, before promptly falling over on his back to lay besides Shadow.

No words were passed between the two. For entire minutes they remained where they were, Shadow sitting besides a sprawled out Sorun, both breathing heavily from exhaustion. Weakness present in both of their faces, more noticeably in Sorun's. In Sorun's case a good chunk of that exhaustion was cooling down from all the worry and panic from the whole drowning thing in addition to the fact his body felt like he'd just ran a thousand marathons at once. Shadow's breathing eventually slowed down to a somewhat normal pace, though he remained silent while patiently staring down at Sorun, seemingly waiting for his own breathing to normalize. It did, after about maybe five minutes. It was only after that that Sorun decided to speak first.

"You... you good?" Sorun mumbled out, head turning away from Shadow to look up at the sky. He winced at the sun shining at his face.

"... Fine. Thank you," came his reply. He sounded faraway, as if not believing the fact Sorun was there besides him. He couldn't imagine why; he was right there, after all. "How... how are you here?" he asked, almost in a hesitant manner.

"No, no no, that's not the question that needs to be asked." Sorun tried raising his arms up, but failed halfway and let them flop back to his sides. "What needs be asked is WHAT just happened!" he attempted to shout out. It came out more winded than he intended.

Shadow made a bitter sort of frown. "I got distracted seeing you and got blindsided as a result. It was a stupid mistake I won't be repeating-"

"Not that!"

The hedgehog stilled. "I don't understand-"

"You, the-the robot, portals, beach, ex-explai-!" Sorun cut himself off with a series of exhausted coughs, while Shadow silently watched. Once the coughing finished, Sorun continued in a weak voice, "I-I can't, just, just talk, please."

At first, nothing. When Sorun wondered why and tilted his head a bit, he saw Shadow still looking down at him. Glancing at his entire body up and down, some undiscernible expression on his face. He blinked, somehow looking equally as satisfied as he was unsatisfied, before a deep sigh left him and he looked forwards at the ocean.

"Dr. Eggman has been experimenting with technology that can be used to breach dimensional boundaries. For whatever reason he built the prototype into Metal Sonic. I'd only discovered all this after G.U.N. sent me to investigate the strange energy readings that device was outputting," he explained. "That machine wouldn't stop activating the device. I lost count of how many zones we fought in until we ended up here. What happened with Metal, by the way?"

"Dunno. You damaged it or something, I guess," Sorun said. "It didn't portal out or anything, it just flew off somewhere."

"Hm." With that short sound of affirmation, Shadow glanced down at Sorun. He didn't make a remark on it until a long amount of time passed, at which point Sorun realized he was still being stared at by him. He grew uncomfortable enough that he made the complaint vocal.

"There something the matter?"

"... You were gone." Sorun blinked in confusion at the remark. "And now you're not. What happened?"

"Ugh, man, it was this whole thing," Sorun replied in an exhausted voice, head rolling back forwards to look at the sky. "Went to an alternate future, then went to the real future, then took a multidimensional road trip, it was real fun, you would have loved it." A beat passed, after which Sorun rolled his head back to Shadow. "I'm joking when I say that it was fun; it was a genuinely awful experience."

"When did you return?"

"Like... a month and some change ago. My life was actually going real great until this happened."

A moment of silence passed before Shadow spoke again. "Nobody told me."

"I mean, I don't exactly advertise my life to other people. Kinda just keep to myself, y'know?" By now enough of Sorun's energy had returned that, with some difficulty, he managed to sit upwards so the two of them could sit side by side.

"Not that." Shadow shook his head. "Nobody told me what happened. Why you never left for home. I was under the assumption you *had* left until I saw you fighting Enerjak. Before I saw you disintegrating at the bottom of a cave and they had to seal you inside of that giant Emerald. And then you'd disappeared before all our eyes while inside it. I'd assumed you were gone forever until I saw you in that hallway. It's why I was so surprised."

That was fair enough, Sorun supposed. Suddenly it made complete sense to him why Shadow looked so bewildered seeing Sorun just sitting there next to him. Though he didn't see why he was bringing it up. "And...?"

"I'm just..." He made a short sigh, seemingly appearing unsure of what to say. "I would have appreciated it if somebody had kept me appraised of what was happening. I feel kept out of the loop."

"Well you're never really in a position to be in the loop to begin with." When Shadow sent him a sharp glare he elaborated with, "I'm just saying. You never visit the town."

"I have absolutely no desire to visit unless it's mission-imperative." When he saw Sorun giving him a flat look, all Shadow did was stare back towards the ocean. "I see your point."

"'I see your point,' sh'yeah," Sorun mumbled out, staring out towards the ocean with him.

Once more silence settled between the two, with the quietness only disturbed by the sound of the waves slowly and repeatedly rolling over the shore. There wasn't even the sound of gulls in the air aside, nor even the whistling sound of wind rushing past them. For a deserted island beach in the middle of nowhere it was decidedly peaceful, at least until Shadow spoke again.

"What were you doing there?" he asked. "In that place? It didn't look like anywhere on Mobius I've seen."

"Nah, it wasn't. That was Moebiussss... that sounds the same, doesn't it, it was the evil mirror world with an E in the name. The one Scourge is from. I got kidnapped."

Shadow's eyes flickered back in Sorun's direction. Aside from his stiffening the slightest amount he didn't show any outwards reaction to the answer. "Kidnapped?" The tone he used sounded like it demanded explanation.

"Yeah, that idiot kidnapped me because he thought it'd be funny to make the Freedom Fighters upset," Sorun elaborated. "I think all the others were in the process of rescuing me, but then by some miracle

you and the robot ended up dragging me into your fight and now we're here. So thanks for that. I guess."

"Hmph." The answer seemed to satisfy Shadow, though not much as he still shot a disapproving look at the beach. "I wouldn't call this much of a rescue," he said.

"No chance this is some remote island on Mobius?" Sorun asked.

"Not likely," Shadow answered with a shake of his head. "For all intents and purposes we seem to be marooned in the middle of nowhere in an unknown zone somewhere in the multiverse. And without Metal Sonic anywhere in sight we're stranded. Indefinitely."

And that just happened to be the one thing Sorun feared the most. He couldn't even bother wondering how the fight with everyone between Scourge went, because it seemed he was lost somewhere in the multiverse. Once again. And without so much as a single Chaos Emerald to help him on his way home. And with how many times the world seemed to go out of its way to bury Sorun's head in the sand, all that accrued experience from the abuse dolled out on Sorun merely caused him to sigh loudly as he leaned back onto his elbows from where he was sitting.

"Man, I hate that this keeps happening to me..."

A/N- So in the original comic the reason Shadow was around at this juncture was because he was looking for the Special Zone since the Chaos Emeralds were there. As of chapter one of this story, though, that place doesn't exist after it completely collapsed due to Rubrum killing Feist, so some details had to be fudged to make this work. In broad strokes it doesn't change all that much.

And yeah, I know technically Shadow and Metal Sonic fall into comic Sonic X world before going to the Sol Zone, but I just

didn't wanna deal with what was essentially filler that didn't have any bearing on the main story.

Chapter 96

A/N- Listen, I can explain why this one took so long.

Ragnarok came out, okay, I needed to take a bit to play it.

Recursion Error

Episode 96- The sand is made of pain

In the world's endless campaign of kicking Sorun around for no discernable reason it forced yet another torture upon him: wet socks.

It was a familiar unpleasantness, one no person, regardless of how cruel and depraved, should ever endure, and so Sorun decided he wouldn't be one to endure this particular torture. Not today. So to that end his socks and boots had been laid out on a nearby rock on the beach to dry in the sun. Along with his coat, shirt, and vest. All that remained on his person were his wet pants and underwear, which, while not as incomprehensibly uncomfortable as wearing wet socks, didn't feel all that good anyways. But the problem was Shadow was there with him and Sorun's pride wouldn't allow him to strip down to his underwear in front of him. So the pants stayed on. He'd endure the torment.

Shadow, the utter psychopath that he was, chose to keep his shoes and socks on. Sorun couldn't comprehend how as he watched the hedgehog set up a fire pit on the beach, though at the moment it was just a half-finished ring of rocks with a few sticks thrown in the middle. And as Shadow tossed in another handful of sticks Sorun couldn't help but comment on the fact that he was wearing wet socks.

"I know those shoes are still wet, Shadow, I'm telling you just put them on a rock or something. It ain't worth it," Sorun told him, standing nearby with his arms crossed.

The sticks were tossed into the growing fire pit. Shadow glanced over at Sorun, saying, "I'm not stripping naked in front of you. I'll put up with it."

"Naked, right, sure, yeah," Sorun drawled out, acutely aware of the fact that Shadow only had on the shoes and gloves and not a single other article of clothing, not unlike most Mobians. The Mobian Standard. After all this time he still didn't understand the logic behind it, even if the fur proved sufficient in covering things up. At that point claiming a pair of shoes and gloves was the line between decency and nakedness when literally nothing else was covered just seemed pedantic to him.

But it was whatever. If Shadow wanted to suffer under wet socks that was his business.

"You don't have a right to sound so disapproving when you're still wearing those damp pants," Shadow said back to him, fully turning to face Sorun.

"And you *know* why I refuse to take the pants off," Sorun argued. "Unlike everyone else back home."

Shadow faltered. "... What?"

"Yeah, I'm entirely convinced the average Mobian doesn't actually know what a human looks like naked," Sorun explained. "I mean I kind of get it but at the same time that's just a really awkward thing to explain, so... you know, I just don't. And I'll take looking annoyingly mysterious over having to deal with the alternative."

"... It's a fair point," Shadow decided, turning back to the fire pit. Scoffing and rolling his eyes in response, Sorun stepped closer so that he was standing right besides him.

"So is there an actual plan for how we're getting out of this mess?" Because he definitely didn't have one. Nor could Sorun even begin to formulate one, because his experiences with being stuck on deserted islands and different universes was fairly dismal to begin with. And he didn't have any magic rocks to bail him out this time around.

Shadow made a small hum, staring at the half-finished fire put, before responding. "We're going to wait until tomorrow to see if Metal Sonic turns up, or if possibly inhabitants of this world come here to investigate any disturbance we may have caused. In the event neither possibility happens..." He closed his eyes and paused for a few moments to think. "I'm fast enough to skate over the water's surface. If nothing happens by tomorrow I'll choose a direction and keep going forwards until I hit land. Assuming this world is actually populated I'll find a way to procure transport to come and rescue you off this island. We'll acquire temporary lodgings afterwards and proceed from there."

"And if there aren't people in this world?" Sorun asked.

"Then we'll rethink from there. Regardless, once we're off this island we'll need to pursue Metal Sonic, since that engine of its is our most direct route back to Mobius. It didn't use it to escape, which has me assuming I either damaged the machine sufficiently enough for it to malfunction or there was a limited amount of charge. In the event," he continued, making a short sigh, "that it gets the engine working and strands us by leaving this world, we'll have to hope this world has its own form of Chaos Emeralds. If I can get my hands on one then I can just simply teleport us back to Mobius."

A bit of surprise bloomed on Sorun's face. "You can just do that?"

"Of course I can do that," Shadow scoffed out. The tone he used made it sound like he was almost insulted Sorun thought any different.

"Oh. Huh. Here I thought I was special in that regard..."

Shadow's eyes snapped open. "Excuse me?" he said, giving Sorun a sharp glare. "You, too, are capable of this? The sword, I presume?"

"Yeah it's a bit wonky and finicky but-"

"You had the sword the entire time?"

Sorun shook his head. "No, uh... some stuff happened and I got the ability to use Chaos Emeralds without absorbing them. Doesn't hurt me that way," he explained. "It's how I kept myself afloat, actually. Got a delivery job."

"You used it to deliver *packages* ..." A disgruntled sigh left Shadow, followed by him raising a hand to pinch at the space above his nose. He didn't sound so much as disappointed as he sounded annoyed. "I suppose you were that energy signature jumping all over the world that had those analysts in G.U.N. being driven mad. Or more specifically the Emerald."

"..." Sorun's eyebrows knit together. "They're tracking me?"

"Tracking the Emeralds," Shadow corrected, "ever since they scattered after the... Enerjak debacle. We have three currently, but the equipment is limited in some aspects. They actually were not too sure what you were since the energy signature of that sword is... radically different from a Chaos Emerald, I was told, and they couldn't figure out why it kept switching between the unique signature of the sword and the Emerald. The only thing stopping them from sending me to investigate was that it kept relocating itself to New Mobotropolis."

"Yeah, I sleep there." The way Sorun's brows were furrowed and the slightly suspicious look he was growing didn't waver as he gave Shadow a serious look. "Should I be concerned that G.U.N. is stockpiling Chaos Emeralds?"

"No, of course not." Shadow actually seemed surprised at the question. That was a new one - Sorun wasn't even aware he could

make such a face. "Sorun, they're endeavored to the defense of the world. I'd much rather the Chaos Emeralds be located in a vault than in Dr. Eggman's possession to do with as he pleases."

"I don't *disagree* with that sentiment..." Sorun carefully stated, "it's just... Overlanders being Overlanders, you know there was the whole race war thing I just can't help but think-"

"That was a different time, back when there wasn't a unilateral threat the entire world needs to be united against. It's different now," Shadow said. "There's nothing as egregious as anti-Mobian sentiments within G.U.N. They would never have hired Rouge and I as agents otherwise."

"Okay, sure, but I can't help but notice that my Mobian employer has a *real* hard time garnering any business over in Overlander territory. She complains about it all the time," Sorun informed him.

Shadow scowled. "As someone who would know infinitely more than you by virtue of actually living in the environment in question, I am telling you, Sorun. G.U.N.'s interests lie with the wellbeing of the whole world, for Overlanders and Mobians. Where is all this coming from?"

"I'm from Earth, that's where it's coming from." A life of living on Earth and getting a general outline of human history taught enough to Sorun that absolutely no government would ever, *ever* put others' interests before their own. True for any nation that had ever existed on Earth. He didn't see it being any different here, especially from the mutant humans that started a race war with the Mobians before a mad scientist brought the whole world to heel. Even the idealistic part of him was staying silent in the face of that, and that voice always tried to have a say.

The scowl that had been on Shadow's face lessened somewhat, but only just. "I'm not going to pretend to know what the governments of your world got up to, Sorun, but whatever you're insinuating is nothing but paranoia with no foundation whatsoever. Every Emerald

in our possession is potentially one less in the hands of that madman."

"... So you monitor Northamer too, huh?"

Shadow blinked. "What?"

"It's not just Overlander territory G.U.N.'s using its equipment to monitor for Chaos Emeralds? It's Northamer, too?" Sorun repeated. "You just said you were tracking me living there."

"It's a satellite network with global coverage, Sorun. They monitor any places of interest and it just so happens that one of the world's largest collective governments live there along with a number of persons of interest. Namely Eggman, who you know is based in Northamer," Shadow replied. "They have the same procedures for the continent Station Square rests on, for the lands bridging the western and eastern continents together, for every notable population center. There's even been collaboration between G.U.N. and the Republic of Acorn in the efforts of thwarting Eggman; G.U.N. has been very open with their capabilities in that regard."

Information he would probably know if he were actually still a Freedom Fighter. That did serve to lessen Sorun's paranoia over the matter a great deal. Not completely, but it did get him to ease his stature. "Answer me one question, then. If the Republic ever obtained an Emerald would G.U.N. ask them to surrender it?"

He didn't miss that Shadow was looking at Sorun like he'd just said something moronic. "No. Of course not. For the same reason they didn't ask for it in the past when the Republic possessed the gray Emerald before the Special Zone was destroyed and all the Chaos Emeralds scattered. For the same reason they didn't ask for it when you were there with it. It's an overtly hostile action that would dissolve peace between the two nations, and G.U.N. knows better than to assume it can claim ownership on all Chaos Emeralds. If anything it would be advantageous for multiple nations to possess the Emeralds if only to ensure they're not all grouped together. Even

in that event G.U.N. keeps each Emerald sequestered at separate sites."

"... Yeah, alright." It was a hefty amount of solid points. Enough, in fact, that it made Sorun turn away from Shadow while rubbing at the back of his neck, almost sheepishly. "When you lay it all out like that, then... I'll take your word for it." Something that, even after all that, Sorun felt iffy on, but at the end of the day Shadow seemed to trust the Overlander government, and he was the straightest shooter Sorun knew in this whole world. And it did sound like things were relatively well since the governments were cooperating. He'd take a chance and believe Shadow words that G.U.N. was looking after the whole world.

All the same Sorun chose not to tell Shadow about that eighth Chaos Emerald he brought back from the future.

"Welp, this has been enlightening, Shadow, but I need to go get us some food," Sorun suddenly said, reaching up to interlock his fingers behind his head. "So I'ma go do that. Fortunately," he continued, glancing around, "it doesn't seem like there's any coconut trees on this island. Just normal trees."

"I hardly see how having less food sources is ideal."

"You're not missing much, trust me," Sorun said. "Worse comes to worse, though, we could probably just fish for... hey, what's stopping you from just tossing a Chaos Spear into the ocean? Just blow up a bunch of fish for us to collect that way?"

By now Shadow had knelt back down to continue setting up the fire pit. "You seemed like you needed something to do," he dryly stated, not even bothering to speak over his shoulder as he continued setting rocks and sticks down. Sorun's eyes narrowed at his back, and he resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at him before turning around to venture further into this island.

So the island wasn't that big, Sorun had found out after some wandering. Not so big in that he could walk from one end to the other in about three minutes. No indigenousness life either, he had noted, except for the trees and grass in the middle. But even those were sparse. Not even so much as a bird in the sky.

That probably wasn't a good sign, but then again Sorun wasn't an ornithologist so maybe it was normal. Migration patterns or whatever. Or maybe there weren't even birds in this zone, he didn't know. For all he knew this world was just 'Waterworld' and he and Shadow just happened to find the one patch of land on the whole planet. These were fears that were quickly dismissed because they seemed too far-fetched.

"Geez, can't believe I'm in this mess," Sorun mentally sighed out as he leaned against a tree. As far as he could tell there wasn't anything edible on the island, so they probably were going to have to resort to Shadow throwing explosive bolts in the ocean until some food floated up. Which wasn't a prospect Sorun was looking that forwards to, eating a fish cooked on a stick, but desperation was desperation. At the very least the hunger was helping keep his mind off everything else that was wrong with this situation.

In response to that thought, his stomach growled. He knew he should have snagged a slice of pizza off that pizza he'd been delivering before going to the HQ.

Sighing, Sorun slid down the tree to sit against it. It wasn't a hunger on the level of starving, but he could see it getting there relatively soon. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since he ate anything, he did have a small bite to eat before leaving that hotel, but even then-

"Waaaaait a minute..." Sorun's head suddenly perked up when his left hand just happened to brush over something. Something with a shape his fingers vaguely recognized. He looked down to his left, eyes nearly shining when he saw what he suspected he had felt.

Mushrooms. A patch of them growing at the base of the tree he was sitting against. *"Oh, sweet, mushrooms are a kind of food,"* Sorun thought to himself as he grabbed a few of them, yanking them out of the ground and bringing them up for a closer look.

As far as mushrooms went, they were about what one would expect. Same mushroom shape and everything. Coloring was a bit weird, the caps of the mushrooms were white while the stems were blue, but Sorun chalked that up to it being a species from a different zone.

"I think Antoine actually cooked with mushrooms that one time, didn't he? Those were halfway decent." With that in mind, and without a second thought, Sorun popped the mushrooms into his mouth. *"... Yeah, no, these ain't those. They're pretty awful."*

It was a raw, earthy kind of taste that had Sorun wrinkling his face with a hint of *something* at the end of that taste he just couldn't identify. And the texture, it nearly had him reeling. Not out of revulsion, but from how irregular it was. The texture between eating a carrot and eating a steak. The never before seen in-between texture.

He swallowed it anyways, but quickly came to the conclusion he just wasn't strong enough to handle any more mushrooms. *"I guess my basic-ass palate just ain't up to snuff. Man,"* he thought, looking down at the remaining mushrooms, *"maybe Shadow'll eat 'em, though. Huh, that's weird."*

The mushrooms were swaying in the wind. Which was strange, as there was no wind. But the mushrooms swayed anyways, moving to and fro in a rhythmic pattern. It was almost like they were bobbing themselves to some unhearable song set to the beat in the back of reality, far enough in the recesses of the world that nobody could hear the melody. The mushrooms could, though, as was their nature. Sorun bobbed his head to the song he couldn't possibly hear. The reverberations thrummed through his soul.

One of the mushroom caps opened into a mouth.

"Soooorrrunn..." the mushroom spoke out. Sorun's head-bobbing ceased. "Where ya goin', Sorun?"

"Going? I don't know, mushroom man," Sorun answered. "Going nowhere, I guess. Nowhere to go. The island's, like... like the circumference, y'know? It's real small. Real small." He pinched his thumb and finger together for the mushroom to see. "Like I don't even remember what a circumference is but I'm pretty sure it has something to do with circles and a circle's basically a rectangle with infinite angles."

"Goin' straight to the grave, that's where you're goin', Sorun," the mushroom said.

"Haw? Nah, man, come on that ain't true."

The mushroom extended, stem lengthening so that the mouth could become closer to Sorun's face. "Come on, Sorun, you're seein' the same signs I am, pretty fuckin' obvious somethin' ain't kosher here. Humans ain't s'posed to be able to toss people through doors wit' one hand. Humans ain't s'posed to be growin' claws an' bleed so much for no reason. Oh, but hey, we seen some o' those signs 'fore, 'aven't we, Sorun?"

The song breached reality. It was there, just barely within the range of his hearing. Overbearing beats and slow, violent drums that didn't sound natural in any way possible. The mushrooms kept swaying to the beat of that noise, growing more and more violent in rhythm as the talking mushroom grew longer and longer to meet Sorun's face. It was so unnerving that Sorun just couldn't look away.

"You're talkin' crazy, man, people get nosebleeds all the time. It's dry season or somethin'."

Still swaying to the loudening beat, like the mushroom was disagreeing with Sorun, it said, "Dry season ain't it at all an' ya know it, been ignorin' the signs for weeks now 'thout sayin' a thing. Know

wha' 'appen the las' time this happen, Sorun, and you're windin' right down the same road as las' time."

It was overbearing, the beat. Becoming louder, the tempo increasing at the same rate as the mushrooms were swaying. The mouth was widening, teeth growing and sharpening to points as the talking mushroom settled right in front of Sorun's face.

"There ain't no extra life this time 'round, Sorun, an' ya know that. Already on ya third life and you already fuckin' it up. Know what 'appens in games when ya run outta extra lives, don'tcha, Sorun?"

"So many words, man. You gotta stop worrying about stuff you can't save," Sorun said. And then he leaned forwards and bit the cap of the mushroom off the stem. The song blaring in his ears cut off instantly, just like that. Though the mushrooms were still swaying.

The mushroom was still trying to talk, even still inside of Sorun's mouth. His teeth crunched down on it, causing it to burst inside his mouth. Crimson fluid dripped between his teeth and past his lips, the cerulean fluid leaking out of his mouth and splashing down on the swaying mushrooms below to dye them yellow. The sun above shone off the new glossy, liquidy layer, making the mushrooms shine green as the purple fluid ran down them and soaked into the ground.

After swallowing the talking mushroom, Sorun asked the rest, "Hey, could you guys put that song from earlier on? It was kinda a banger."

The mushrooms swayed to the unheard beat. The mushrooms said nothing, for they were naught but mushrooms.

"Yeah, I guess mushrooms can't talk, huh?" His time here was done, Sorun had felt, so he'd risen back to his feet. The tree he'd been sitting against nodded at him as he did so, surely as a positive sign of reinforcement that Sorun had been making all the right choices. He was sure of it. There could be no other way.

He turned around.

Oh, sweet, his house was here. Just sitting there amidst the other island trees and grass. He walked up to it, thanking the door when it opened up for him before he made his way inside the home.

"Huh?" He looked around. This wasn't his house. But it was his house? He didn't know. This was certainly all the furniture his mom had picked out and placed haphazardly. Oh, there, on the rug - there was the ketchup stain on the rug from that one time because he didn't listen to his mom say not to eat food in the living room. Kinda weird, though, he was pretty sure this wasn't the rug he picked out with Nicole.

Humming, Sorun looked out the window. Rest of Detroit looked normal for the most part, lots of people walking in the streets and driving on the sidewalk. Business as normal, it seemed. He shrugged off any concerns that'd been growing in him and turned towards the kitchen. He was still pretty hungry.

The fridge. It was straight to the fridge, Sorun went, straight to the fridge for something to eat. He'd take anything at this point, even scarf down a block of cheese if that was all there was in there. He didn't know if mom went grocery shopping yet or not. Ooh, maybe she'd gotten a bag of those frozen shrimp she got sometimes, he really liked those.

There wasn't any bagged frozen shrimp when he opened the fridge. In fact, there wasn't any food in there at all. The only thing inside the fridge was a single carton of orange juice.

"Ugh, finally." Sustenance was sustenance, whatever, he'd take it. He grabbed the carton with one hand while closing the fridge with the other and then reached into the nearby cupboard for a glass. "Hey, uh, mom? You home yet? Mom?" Sorun turned his head away from the cabinet to call further into the house. "You... you wanna talk again like we always do? Mom?" His finger tapped nervously against the cabinet door. "So there's, um, there's this girl, right? Her name's Nicole, she's really great. Like a million times better than whatever I deserve, so, uh, can-can she come over? Like, not for dinner,

'cause... 'cause she doesn't do it, I can explain that part, but I'd still like it if you two could meet, you'd really love her. It'd be great. Mom?"

Nobody responded to him. The house was completely silent.

"That's... that's fine, I-I guess you're just not home yet. I'll just, er, wait, 'cause you're running late again and... I really just wanna talk, but, but it's fine, you'll be home later. We'll talk later."

He grabbed a glass out of the cabinet. After closing the cabinet door he relocated himself to the kitchen table, where he sat down while placing both the orange juice carton and the glass on the table's surface. He hesitated for a few moments after, breathing a small sigh before unscrewing the cap off the orange juice carton and tipping it over to pour the contents into the empty glass.

Nothing flowed out from the carton.

"... Eh?" Confused, Sorun pulled the carton away from the glass. He shook it a little bit, growing even more confused at feeling the heavy weight of the carton. He held the opening up to his eye to examine it further. "The hell, man, it feels full- agh!"

It apparently was full, just not with orange juice. Sand, of all things, flowed out from the carton and onto Sorun's face. He became startled enough that he tumbled out of his chair - only he didn't collapse onto the kitchen floor. There was more sand under him. Not floor. It was all sand.

Startled once again, Sorun sat up with a short shout, looking around wildly. The house was gone, walls gone, ceiling replaced by blue sky. And all around was sand. Nothing but sand and more sand as far as the eye could see.

Oh, and an ocean. He just noticed that after looking to the left. He calmed down immediately upon seeing it, standing up to take a look at it. The ocean - constantly undulating, moving as if it were alive. He

could see every color imaginable glowing off its vibrating surface, sunlight glinting off its surface and stretching off into forever like a never ending white serpent.

Shuffle, shuffle.

Sorun jumped at the sound, body turning midair to face the sound of the skittering noise. He looked around at the beach to find what was making the noise, and at first found nothing. But then he looked down and found it: a splotch of red on the sandy ground.

There it was. A crab. Scuttling along in the sand, just outside of the range of the colorful waves washing over the beach's shore. It continued scuttling until it was directly in front of Sorun, where it stopped. The two stood there in complete stillness, man and crab, regarding each other in silent consideration.

But then, a sudden shift. The crab rose its claws up in a threatening manner, its eight legs spreading and body lowering slightly. Sorun made a small "ooh" sound, widening his own stance and flattening his hands while bringing them up to his face in his best imitation of a kung-fu stance. Neither opponent moved, each waiting for the other to make the opening attack.

The crab leapt.

Crab

The dweller of the abyssal deep

The power of the crab surprised even Sorun, as it managed a leap of strength so impressive it was on a direct collision course straight for Sorun's face. One of its claws extended outwards with the intent to pinch him, sunlight glistening off the claw's carapace and reflecting incandescent rays in every direction. Every aspect of the crab, from

its movement to form, was the very definition of perfection. It was, by definition, the ultimate example of its species.

It was the first time in his life, upon observing this magnificent crab, that Sorun had ever felt such feelings of utter adoration and respect for a crustacean. He viewed the flying crab in reverence, silently thanking both it and the universe for providing such an opportunity to witness such beauty and perfection.

He uppercut the crab out of the air. It fell into the sand, dead.

"God I'm so fucking cool," Sorun thought to himself, blowing onto his fist and rubbing it on his chest for a job well done. He turned his back to the fallen crab, choosing to step forwards further down the beach, and then stopped after a few steps when Sorun realized he didn't actually know where he was going.

Click.

Sorun's head perked up. That sound... one of a peculiar nature. It was some weird combination of a clicking and popping sound. Like a chicken making a clucking sound but more... clicky? It was otherworldly, a kind of sound Sorun had never imagined possible. His curiosity got the better of him; he couldn't let what was possibly the discovery of the millennium, whatever made that sound, to go undiscovered. So he turned around to see what made that sound.

The crab was gone. In its place was... well, Sorun wasn't entirely sure.

He thought it was Knuckles at first. The colors were there, the features right, but the proportions were not. It looked like somebody had made some kind of caricature drawing of Knuckles and it'd jumped off the page and into real life. Like Doodlebob from that one episode of "Spongebob" but red and vaguely Knuckles-shaped. Except he was... squatter. Rounder. Limbs noodly-er. And his eyes! Those perfectly round, shining eyes that seemed to be popping out of his eye sockets looked as innocent as they did haunting.

The creature clicked at Sorun again. The way its mouth moved was abnormal. It didn't "move" open so much as it seemed there were only two positions for its mouth: open and closed. Two complete binaries with no intermediary. Maybe he really was a cartoon come to life.

"My brudda!" Well, he sure as shit didn't have Knuckles' voice. What accent even was that? Jamaican? No, too off. "I have found you at last!"

"Wow, man." Sorun squinted his eyes and leaned forwards to get a better look at Doodleknuckles. "Knuckles, you're... just wow. I can't believe it. You're less ugly, it's amazing."

"My brudda," he repeated, once more making that eldritch clicking sound. "Now dat I have found you I must ask. Do you know de way?"

For what seemed like such an innocent and simple question it carried a certain kind of gravity behind it that nearly swept Sorun off his feet. He couldn't understand why, just that it did. That there was power in that five word question, arcane and unknowable to a simple three-dimensional being such as Sorun. Even pondering its very meaning sent his brain throbbing, his mind recoiling at the sheer implication behind it, sent his organs recoiling in outrage. As if his body rebelled at the very idea of him even considering attempting to answer a question so far beyond his understanding.

He took a stab at it anyway.

"The way, huh?" Sorun blinked long and hard at the question, leaning backwards to look at the technicolor sky with his hands interlocked behind his head. "Who can say what way is even the right way? Pre-destined paths and destiny in general have certain connotations regarding a lack of autonomy and freedom that I'm not really a big fan of. 'Thout the freedom to do whatever we want what's the point? Where's the life? You're seriously gonna take my advice after hearing all that?" His head nodded back down to Doodleknuckles, wide grin on his face. "Fuck my way. Don't go down

whatever way someone tells you to go down. Carve a path and find your own way, man."

"But de way, my brudda! Do you know de way?"

Instantly the smile dropped off of Sorun's face when the question was repeated at him. Thoughts of violence began swirling in his mind. "You fucking ingrate. I give you all that and that's what you have to say to me?"

"Because of de way, my brudda! I need you to tell me!"

The hands that had been interlocked behind Sorun's head fell down to his sides. They balled into fists as he glowered at Doodleknuckles. "You know, for as long as I've remembered I've always had the compulsion to do the exact opposite of what people tell me to do. Can't help it. I just like annoying people." He tilted his head backwards, eyes sliding down to look down at the caricature. "So you know what? I do know the way. But I'm not telling you."

The thing's mouth opened the exact same way as it always did when he spoke, and even thought there was no visual discernable difference, it still somehow managed to convey the sensation of being shocked. "But we are bruddas! Why would you betray me like dis!?"

"I'm still pissed over the Enerjak thing. Fucking fight me if you care that much."

Doodleknuckles' mouth closed. A pair of lines that seemed to be eyebrows materialized just above his bulging eyes, slanting in a way that conveyed anger. "Dis insult will not be forgiven, my brudda. Dis will mean war with de entire tribe."

There was a shift. On a dime the skies turned dark and red. The calm waters of infinite colors turned dark and murky, and began to violently crash against the now stark-white beach as the two stared each other down. And eclipse settled over the sun.

"That's the way, that's what I wanna see." Fists still balled, Sorun began stomping forwards towards Doodleknuckles. The probably-echidna moved in kind, his body not actually moving on its own, but sliding forwards while hopping up and down as if some giant, invisible hand was moving it forwards like a puppet. The detail was inconsequential to Sorun - he just needed to satiate this overwhelming urge to punch him. "Told ya that ya gotta carve your own path. Starts here with me."

The fight started when the two had neared each other, and Doodleknuckles had been the one to make the first move. He spit at Sorun.

Sorun blinked. The globule projectile was slow in its travel, and was easily dodged. Easily enough he'd simply turned his body to the side by a slight degree and watched the spit wad impact the ground next to him. He blinked once more, and turned back to Doodleknuckles, face set in an almost lost expression.

What did that even mean? Did he think so little of Sorun that he thought simply spitting at him would be enough to deter him? Or did he look down at him so much he didn't even consider him worth fighting? That he felt so insulted in his presence he needed to spit like that to establish their standing? No matter the reason it caused unadulterated rage to swell withing Sorun as a furious snarl grew on his face.

He lunged forwards, gripping Doodleknuckles by his stubby and near-nonexistent throat. His back landed against the sand, the caricature gagging out as Sorun straddled him from above, doing his best and succeeding at strangling him, his bulging eyes bulging out even more. One of Sorun's hands left his throat and balled into a fist, and then just as quick flew forwards and smashed right into Doodleknuckles' face.

It broke apart completely, like a ceramic vase full of muscle and white meat. It smelled like crab for some reason.

After that, breathing in a slightly heavy manner, Sorun dismounted the dead maybe-echidna. He continued to lightly pant, only regarding the dead body for a few seconds before looking up... only to pause when he noticed he was surrounded by more. Tens, maybe even *dozens* more of the Doodleknuckles. All staring at him with those vacant, bulging eyes. All facing him. With the way they were positioned there was no direction Sorun could run in to escape.

Not that he even wanted to. The primal, instinctive side of Sorun that had been whispering violence in his mind and had become excited when he killed the first Doodleknuckles was firing up again. The desire to run just wasn't there. The only desire he did have was to do that again. To all the echidna caricatures surrounding him.

So, when they all at once, simultaneously, screamed at the top of their lungs and began moving towards him in that strange, motionless motion of theirs, Sorun didn't run. Instead a toothy smile spread over his face and he burst forwards towards the nearest Doodleknuckles. He'd jumped on him before he could make the first move, fists flying down to cave in the thing's face as another Doodleknuckles jumped on his back. And then a second. And a third.

Eventually Sorun was dogpiled by the entire group of Doodleknuckles, forming a large, red pile. It didn't deter the human, though, as a pale fist shot out from the top of the pile and dislodged one of the maybe-echidna from the top. His torso burst out after.

Screaming, Sorun continued to wail on all the Doodleknuckles. But more kept coming. Bursting from beneath the surface of the sand and wading out from the crashing waves. Tens and hundreds of the things, all adding to the pile, burying and smothering him. More and more, no matter how many Sorun punched and killed, it wouldn't end. The weight from all the bodies being added becoming overbearing, what little light there was left fading as their bodies blocked out the light. But no matter how many were added he continued to fight and punch away, no matter how more and more ineffective it was becoming.

And then, a change. A sudden shift, like gravity had been reversed. The bodies underneath Sorun began falling away. And then he fell away, too. Past all the bodies. Past the beach. Past the world itself, into the deep dark black.

It was just him falling down here. The others, the Doodleknuckles, they weren't falling with him, didn't exist. Maybe never even existed. It was just him falling straight down, arms and legs extended out like some skydiver as he stared down at the infinite expanse below him. An what a view it was: swirling coronas of blues and purples, giant flares of orange and red in the far distance, green clouds of speckles light intermixed between the colorful sights and the infinite black filling the void between it all. Endless nebulas and cosmic dust clouds. Sorun was falling through it all. Falling through the forever - through the universe.

In retrospect, the novelty wore off after a few minutes and Sorun found himself yawning in boredom as he continued to fall. But then he'd heard that large caw in the distance, and the drowsiness left his eyes as he looked towards the source.

There, in the distance. Two figures highlighted in the backdrop of a nearby nebula. A normal fox, the animalistic kind he'd see on Earth. Normal except for the fact it had two tails. It was lying there in front of another animal that was standing over it. A large black falcon with fourteen eyes. It stared down at the fox lying below it, hatefully.

The falcon's head shot forwards, beak tearing into the fox's abdomen. The fox screamed in pain and anguish as the falcon pulled out its guts and pierced its organs. The fox tried to fight back; its claws slid harmlessly off its attacker's feathers. The black falcon continued digging into and killing the fox, strikes becoming more feverous and frenzied with time. In the process of mutilating the fox the falcon was screaming, too. Angered, furious screams that grew louder and louder each time the beak dug into the fox's body, growing more anguished over time before turning back into furious noises, the strikes becoming less and less precise and more messy and rage-driven as it abandoned pecking the fox apart and resorted

to simply tearing at its body with its beak and talons. By the time half the fox's body was an unrecognizable mess of gore it was already dead.

As Sorun fell past the two, the black falcon rose its head up from the pile of carrion to look at him. Its fourteen eyes, five on either side of its head and four more on top, all blinked at Sorun at once, the falcon itself remaining silent as it stared. Seemingly dismissing Sorun, it went back to eating at the fox's corpse.

"Huh. Neat." Sorun looked away from the two and down towards where he was falling. There was a sun there. *"Not neat."*

It was a big sun. Big and red, and he was falling straight towards it, towards the mass of coronal ejections that twisted and turned around it like living tendrils reaching out towards Sorun. The sun blinked, and now there was black pupil in the center. One the size of a whole planet staring right at Sorun. And on Sorun's part there was no reaction. Nothing but quiet acceptance as he relaxed his body and fell right into the scorching red eye that stared at him with scorn.

A pair of crimson eyes stared down at him with exhaustion and mild confusion. Some disappointment may have been brewing within them as well.

There'd he'd found him. Lying on the beach. Surrounded by an innumerable amount of crab corpses of all things. Crabs which Sorun seemed to have punched to death, as if Shadow could even understand how that came to be. Nor why Sorun was now flat on his back and seemingly mumbling in his sleep about some indiscernible nonsense.

He wasn't in the mood to put up with it. Short of kicking him, which would be counterproductive given the current situation, he'd decided to go to the ocean, scoop up a handful of seawater, and bring it back to Sorun while continuing to scowl down at him.

"Awaken, fool," Shadow ordered, and then flung the seawater at Sorun's face.

Sorun's eyes shot open and he sat upwards with a startled gasp, panting heavily as he glanced around. He seemed confused at first, seeing the legion of dead crustaceans littering the sand around them, and then he'd looked up at Shadow with even greater confusion. "Wha-what happened, what's going on?"

"You tell me," Shadow said. "You were gone for half an hour and when I came to look for you I happened upon you fighting the entire island's population of crabs to the death. You lost. I had to step in and finish them off when you collapsed halfway through the fight so they wouldn't pick you apart."

There wasn't even embarrassment on Sorun's face. Just a profound look of disappointment and even a fair amount of loathing, which Shadow supposed was appropriate. "I lost? Against crabs? Not even Mobian crabs, but like... like just normal crabs?"

"Yes."

"H-how?"

"I couldn't even begin to tell you," Shadow replied in an honest tone. "It was a display of ineptitude so astonishing words would fail to accurately describe it. I've seen drunkards at the base who moved with more articulation than you demonstrated. What exactly overcame you?"

Sorun gestured in a vague direction towards the center of the island. "Some bad shrooms over... over there. Somewhere. I ate some. Don't eat 'em."

He'd scream if dignity allowed it. It did not. "You consumed unidentified fungal matter while stranded in an unknown world?" The amount of training, natural instinct and common sense Shadow possessed all told him such a thing was one of the worst possible

ideas one could have. As a consequence those same conditions were making it so that he literally couldn't comprehend how such a decision had been made by Sorun.

"Yeah."

That wasn't a satisfying answer. "And what was your plan if you had been *poisoned* ?" he nearly growled out through grit teeth.

With a sullen expression and defeated eyes, Sorun's arm fell back to his side. "... I'm not smart," was the only excuse he offered.

Objectively untrue, but at the same time it was hard for Shadow to refute this claim. Because Sorun was a walking paradox he evidently needed to watch like a child. He got himself killed the last time he didn't do that and he nearly did again. "Let's just count ourselves fortunate that they weren't toxic," he grumbled out, not willing to waste energy on the matter, and then bent down to pick up one of the crabs. "Even more fortunate is that we can eat these. I finished the fire pit."

Sorun blanched a bit. "We don't have anything else?"

"You're eating the crab," Shadow said, gaze snapping to Sorun.

He gulped in response. "I-I'll eat the crab."

Sorun ended up eating the crab. And a few more besides.

It wasn't bad, surprisingly. The opposite, actually: it was actually really good. Apparently Shadow thought so, too, because he was wolfing them down. A whole lot of them, actually. Probably three times as many as Sorun ate. He didn't know if the guy had just been hungry or if it was some alien DNA quirk thing he had going on, but he suspected any question regarding it would be ignored so Sorun remained silent.

And beyond that there was a certain campy feel to the whole thing. Sitting there in front of a fire, sun setting down from somewhere behind the island. A bunch of crabs impaled on sticks set over the fire. Crab leg in hand as Sorun continually glanced to the side at the growing pile of crab shell husks next to Shadow.

They'd been partaking in small talk for a lack of anything better to do. Swapping some stories: Sorun told a bit about Silver and what they'd been up to on the Cosmic Interstate. Shadow had shared *a* story. It got weird.

"... So you just, just yanked his hair out and..." Sorun's expression became lost. Like he was staring at an impossible puzzle as he looked at Shadow. "Why?"

Shadow bit into another crab before responding. "Because Snively was irritating and those few hairs on his head bothered me. Because it was aesthetically displeasing. Because he'd crossed me and needed to be warned never to do so again."

"No I get that, but... but why did you keep the hair?" Sorun asked. "Like you seriously just held onto them all the way to the Freedom HQ? W-why? Like what were you planning to do with it?"

Shadow paused halfway to bringing another crab up to his face. His mouth was set in a neutral expression but his eyes were the faintest bit wider than usual. Sorun didn't know what emotion expressed. It couldn't be embarrassment, could it? He doubted Shadow was capable of such a thing. "I'd... been preoccupied with more important things. I suppose I'd forgotten to relax my grip," he confessed. "It's hardly my fault. How was I to know that madman put tracking devices in his individual hairs?"

"Absolutely nothing could have ever prepared me for that sentence." Really. Nothing at all. It was impossible to react to such a revelation because there was no appropriate reaction to something so absurd, and yet Sorun somehow took it in stride because this was his life now. "What were you doing that you were in such a rush anyways?"

"It was a personal matter."

"Alright." An answer like that implied he wanted it left alone. Sorun respected the wish as he idly flung the crab leg about. "Could really go for some of that ketchup I stole from that guy in that one zone," Sorun mumbled out as he turned the crab leg over in his hand. He'd stopped being hungry a while ago but the urge to play with a pointy leg wouldn't leave him, so at the moment he was kind of just turning it over a bunch.

Shadow threw another empty shell in the pile. He glanced at Sorun, a bit curious. "You stole condiments? Why?"

"..." Sorun looked back at the fire. He'd been telling him a bit of what had happened to him to pass the time, mostly the traveling with Silver. He decided to go ahead and lay out what'd been on his mind for a while. "Don't tell Silver if you ever meet him but I robbed a lot of people while we were trying to get back to Mobius Prime," he admitted. "Every single world used a different currency so I had to just so I could feed him and afford hotel rooms."

"But why the ketchup?"

"It was good ketchup and I didn't like the guy who had it." Shadow didn't comment on that. "Lotta times I'd try to just steal food over people's money. Wasn't that hard with time stop. Every time Silver asked I just lied and said I was getting handouts from sympathetic people."

"You don't sound that regretful."

"It's not like I ever did anything permanent. Times were desperate." He looked back at Shadow. "You get it, right?"

He didn't answer at first, just stared at Sorun all contemplative-like. Then he looked back towards the fire, picked up one of the sticks and pulled a roasted crab off of it. "I can't fault survival," was his response as he pulled the crab in half. Sorun took it as acceptance.

"I'm less interested in that and more in how you wound up in an 'alternate future,' as you said."

Sorun hesitated. He wasn't not fine with the topic, but he also wasn't too keen on seeing Shadow react to the whole King Shadow situation. For sure he was leaving out the part where Sorun decapitated him while he was helpless, but that didn't eliminate the broad topic, which was the main issue. And besides that there was a bigger topic that had Sorun wondering why Shadow wasn't asking about it.

"You really wanna ask about that?" Sorun asked him. "Not about the whole reason I had to stay on Mobius in the first place?"

Now it was Shadow who hesitated. He'd paused in his movements, eyes flicking from the crab to Sorun. There was a twinge in his facial expression, eyes tightening a bit. If he didn't know better Sorun would say he looked almost unsure of what to say to that.

"I assumed there was nothing to talk about," he said, awfully carefully. "The others had appraised me of... of the broad strokes, as it were. Of your home."

"... You're right. There ain't nothing to talk about over it." Silently, Sorun was thankful that he just didn't want to bring it up. It was the kind of wound he just didn't like talking about, and it seemed to make even Shadow uncomfortable of all people, as if such a thing was actually possible. He shifted back to the topic he asked about earlier. "So basically back in the day Sonic messed around with things he shouldn't have and it broke some other things. Big time anomaly, blah blah blah, I fixed it so it isn't a problem but apparently it would have been and Sonic had to go and fix his own mistake. Which ended up obliterating this timeline and supplanting it with another; I only got spared because the Master Emerald saved me." He shook his head, groaning out, "It was a pain and a half dealing with, let me tell you."

Shadow's response was a "hmph" noise as he bit into the crab. And then he asked, "What changed?"

"Just Sonic not being there. It messed the world up even more 'cause he wasn't there to do his hero thing so you had to step up and sort it all out. Spoiler alert you became a fascist dictator and took the world over."

Shadow almost dropped the crab he was holding. *Almost* . His self-discipline was either superb or the crab was just that good. "I... what?" He blinked his eyes a few times while considering the words, looking puzzled and just the slightest bit disturbed. "Truly?"

"Mhm. You even had a torture chamber and everything," Sorun informed him.

The information made Shadow flinch. "I didn't...?"

He knew what he was trying to ask. "Not to me, no." If he didn't know what to look for Sorun wouldn't have noticed that Shadow looked relieved. The way he ever-so-slightly went slack in posture. "Others? Yeah. There was a lot more blood than rust on all those shackles. And I saw the result of at least once case."

Shadow's eyes flickered downward. He suddenly didn't seem so hungry as he set the half-eaten crab down. "I'm unsure of what to say to that," he admitted. "There wasn't... just Sonic not existing? That was the only change?"

"To be fair think of all the times he saved the world, and now picture what the world would be like if he was never there," Sorun reminded him. "I don't know what the world looked like before dictator you took it over, but it was probably really bad. And you did... I hesitate to say the word 'fix', but you managed to bring the world back to some semblance of order. Probably really impressive considering what you had to work with. I wasn't considering it back then because I was only focused on trying to make everything normal, but with how screwed up and fractured the world was and him waking up in the

middle of all that I can kind of see how he'd arrive at a bunch of the conclusions he came to."

"... Maybe," Shadow agreed. "The situation my world was in compared to his are so radically different I'd be shocked if there wasn't some major personality drift of the sort. It's just disconcerting to know I apparently could have slipped to such a position."

"I don't know if this is any comfort but he admitted it right to my face he ultimately just wanted to save as many lives as possible. In... some messed up way he succeeded. So there's that," Sorun offered. "Just leaned so hard into the whole supreme ruler thing, though, couldn't believe it. There was this, er..." Sorun paused momentarily and gesticulated randomly at the air, "this statue I saw. Like he forced this religion on everybody I think, saw people praying to and worshiping to this statue of, I think it was a human girl? Maybe an Overlander? Gave her angel wings and everything, it was really freaky."

When he heard that Shadow froze, which for Sorun was a weird sight. Because he'd never seen him taken so off his guard before, and until now Sorun didn't think for someone like Shadow it was something possible. But he didn't comment on what he heard Sorun say at first. Didn't even look at him. He just froze, what seemed to be out of pure shock if the widening eyes said anything, and then his head slowly dipped downwards so that he could stare at his shoes.

A minute passed. Then two. By then Sorun began to realize there was something up with what he said, about that statue, and he began to think he treaded on ground he shouldn't have. By minute three of him just silently sitting there it was growing worrying to the human. He wanted to speak out, but just didn't know what he was supposed to say.

Finally, thankfully, Shadow sighed out. It was a deep, weary sounded that made him sound a hundred years older than he was and Sorun didn't know how to take that, so he remained silent. "She was..." he

began, more mumbling than anything else, "... it was very likely that was Maria."

Nervously, Sorun tapped at his knee. He wasn't used to hearing Shadow speak like this. It was uncomfortable to hear. "If this is something better left alone-"

"It's not exactly a secret," Shadow sighed out. "Just personal. And after everything you saw you deserve some explanation. More than others at least." It took another minute of him staring at his shoes to begin talking again. When he did, he didn't so much as look in Sorun's direction. "I already told you everything involving Space Colony ARK, my creation, and Dr. Gerald. Do you remember?"

"Hard to forget a thing like that."

"What I chose to leave out was the reason behind my creation in the first place," he continued. "Maria was Dr. Gerald's granddaughter. She was also afflicted with a disease that would eventually take her life. All of Dr. Gerald's research and even my inception was all in the effort of finding a cure to help her and anyone else with her affliction." He shuffled in the sand where he was sitting. "She was my first and only friend."

Slowly, Sorun breathed outwards. The conversation was veering in familiar territory and he didn't like it very much. "Think I can see where this is going. Been in a similar spot with a friend."

For the first time since the conversation started Shadow looked at him. "You have?"

Sorun nodded in affirmation. It wasn't a story he felt comfortable sharing but at this point he felt obligated, with everything Shadow said. "Back on Earth there was a girl around my age. Never met her in person, we were online buddies. She was good - *real good* . Pretty much on my level and I was world-class," Sorun said, small smile on his mouth. "No matter what game we played we always tied in everything, and she was pretty funny besides. I used to think she

was just talented with games like I was, but, uh... then one day out of nowhere she spills it all." The smile dropped off her face. "She wasn't good like me 'cause she just was. She was as good as she was 'cause she had nothing else to do all day. She was a terminal patient withering away in a hospital bed. Kept going on and on like she couldn't stop once she got started, talking about all her medical issues and how she felt bad about how much money she was draining out of her parents for treatment, when she started crying I didn't know what to do, because what was I supposed to do? I was some guy on the other side of the country behind a screen, I couldn't say anything. I just sat there like a idiot for a whole hour without saying a single thing."

Shadow didn't respond, choosing to just continue to look at Sorun. Intently, with a sympathetic look on his face.

"And she tells me there's this surgery," Sorun continued, "she says the doctors told her it's her one chance. Her family can't afford it though 'cause her treatment up to that point hemorrhaged their funds and the surgery was a new, experimental thing their insurance wouldn't cover."

"Her life was in danger because nobody could afford treatment?" Shadow sounded particularly rankled at that. "Why does something like that even need to be afforded?"

"My country had issues, it was a whole thing, I don't wanna get into it," Sorun explained, though Shadow didn't look particularly satisfied at it. "The surgery's upwards of around fifty grand, and I got no idea how anyone's supposed to wrangle together that kinda scratch. 'Cept... there was a tournament coming up. For this game called 'Smash!'. Grand prize was fifty K. She couldn't make it because you had to physically be there to compete, and besides that she just didn't have the stamina to compete with players like that consecutively. But I did.

"Somehow I managed to convince my mom to sign a bunch of forms and drive me over to the tournament so I could compete. Spent

weeks beforehand training for the event - god, Shadow, never worked harder in my entire life," Sorun groaned out, "but it was my friend and she was dying, so I had to. Tried to rope David into it but his family wouldn't go for it, so it was all me. And that tournament..."

He could picture it like it was yesterday. The strain his mind felt from the hyper-intense focus, synapses firing and brain feeling like it was overheating from how fast his thoughts were running all day. Fingers cramping from the twitch-reflexes and fast movements. Lungs burning from how hard he'd been breathing to give himself as much oxygen as possible. He'd nearly passed out by the time that damn tournament ended.

"Before coming to Mobius it was quite literally the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. But-" Sorun breathed outwards, sounding tired just thinking of it, "-I did it. I won the tournament and got the grand prize. For a lot of people fifty thousand dollars was literally life changing money, and I gave it all to my friend's family so she could get the surgery. My mom, uh... after all was said and done she was she was real proud of me. She was a doctor, so, so I guess she understood."

"... And?" Shadow asked after a moment's consideration. "Was it enough to save her?"

"No, she died halfway through the surgery," Sorun bluntly replied. Shadow simply blinked - his approximation of shock. "Only found out about it later through an email her parents sent me. Pretty sure they hated my guts since she would've lived a few years otherwise." He rose a hand up and let it flop against his thigh. "Doesn't... doesn't matter, I guess, everyone ended up dying in the end anyways but... whatever. Doesn't matter."

"I'm... unsure of what to say," Shadow admitted after a moment of silence. "There had never been a time where Maria had been bedridden due to her illness. It was a progressive disease but she was young enough that it wasn't debilitating in any significant way yet. If there were some surgery that could fix it Dr. Gerald would

have taken it in a heartbeat, but not if it was a risky, experimental surgery with a large chance of failure. She meant too much to him."

"Yeah. I can see it. After that whole thing, having to read a bunch of hate-filled words written to me by a pair of heartbroken parents I can get why somebody wouldn't wanna put a loved one through a risky surgery. They did, but... I dunno, guess they were that desperate. For hope, I guess." He limply gestured to Shadow. "He do it in the end? Fix her?"

The answer was delivered just as bluntly as Sorun had said it. "No. Dr. Gerald never found his cure."

Sorun's head solemnly turned back to the fire. "No time?"

"There might have been. G.U.N., who'd contracted him to create a weapon and provided the ARK and all its facilities, became aware his projects completion. My completion. And they never trusted Dr. Gerald on the best of days even though they'd been the ones to sponsor his creation of a bioweapon - perhaps wisely due to his secret pact with an alien. So they came to a decision. Without any warning the ARK was raided by soldiers. Research was seized. Assets and personnel liquidated. Maria was shot for helping me escape while Dr. Gerald was captured and later executed. Maria's sacrifice was meaningless as I was caught and put into cryo sleep regardless."

"..." Sorun's eyes flickered over to Shadow. "I get you have your reasons, but... why did you bother joining them if they're responsible for killing your friend? For something as shallow as that?"

"It was fifty years ago. It's different people leading the organization and between them and the Freedom Fighters I'm fine where I am," he answered. "It doesn't erase the mistakes of the past, but I didn't see the use in burning bridges without good reason. They're useful besides." He paused. "It was her last wish. For the world to be protected. It needed to be obligated one way or another so I chose G.U.N."

He didn't know how to take that. From a logical perspective it made complete sense, and in that way it somehow made sense to Sorun that Shadow made that choice. In a certain light it could even be seen as mature. Respectable. Sorun himself, he wasn't sure he would be able to make the same choice. In fact, he was pretty sure he wouldn't.

"Well, you're probably a better person than me in that case," Sorun admitted. "Don't think I'd be able to do the same thing. Join a government body that killed my best friend, even if it were fifty years later and the people running it were completely different."

"You wouldn't?" Shadow asked. He sounded surprised.

"Hard to say if I'd ever forgive a group for doing something like that regardless of who are and who aren't in it," he said. "That probably puts me in a bad light, I dunno, it..." Sorun cut himself off with a dry, humorless chuckle, "it's a weird thing. But then again you almost blew the world up over it 'fore you came to your senses so maybe I shouldn't talk you up on having the moral high ground."

"I changed my mind," he quickly dismissed. "... After some convincing," he'd quickly added.

"Pft. I'd say those two are up their laughing at us but I know for a fact she ain't there with Maria."

"A believer of the afterlife? You?"

"Nah, all perceptions of religion got blasted out of me the moment I landed on Mobius," Sorun told Shadow. "That being said higher powers with very punchable faces flat-out told me every living thing goes back to the Chaos Force when they die, and this is true for everything in every zone. But humans like me from our zone out in the middle of nowhere don't have Chaos Force links so we don't get an afterlife like everyone else. Found that out the hard way." The fire continued to crackle softly with Sorun staring at it while Shadow stared towards Sorun's face. "... I try not to think about it," Sorun

admitted. "How when all my friends die they get to go to an afterlife but when I die I just get sent to oblivion."

Shadow hesitated before responding. "That's-"

"I mean I don't think it matters. Wouldn't be surprised if it's less an afterlife and more when someone dies and their soul goes to the Chaos Force it's one of those your-personality-is-disseminated-to-join-the-greater-whole deals. Or maybe it ain't, I dunno." Sorun dropped his crab leg and picked up a nearby stick to poke at the fire. "Maybe if I get the chance before I die I'll permanently absorb a Chaos Emerald for Yamato again so I can be a ghost and just cut my way into the Chaos Force to see for myself."

"... Isn't that somewhat long-term thinking?"

"Mh. Who knows." Sorun dropped the stick and turned back to Shadow, ignoring the odd look he was giving him. "Backpedaling a bit, you... really cared a lot about Maria, huh? To the point you became cool agent man to help protect the world just 'cause she liked it so much." He leaned back on his elbows and looked up at the sky. "I mean, I liked my friend, too, but I wouldn't have become a turbo dictator for her sake."

"Please stop referring to my deeply misguided alternate timeline persona. And refrain from ever uttering the title 'turbo dictator' ever again." Despite the tense tone he'd used Shadow mirrored Sorun's relaxed posture, leaning backwards to stare up at the sky. "But... yes. Her memory is as much a comfort as the pain of her loss for me."

"Gotcha." Sorun shifted a bit to settle in a more comfortable position. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Because neither of us are touchy-feely guys so I never pictured this happening in a million years," Sorun explained. "What's the deal?"

"I'd ask you the same thing."

"Well, you're the one that got the ball rolling. You answer."

"You asked about the statue."

"And *you* didn't have to be so detailed with the explanation. Spill."

Shadow deeply sighed. He'd paused long enough that Sorun assumed he just wasn't going to answer, but then he began speaking. "Partly out of guilt, for me inadvertently dragging you into this situation and for all the other misfortunes. Mostly because you're not insufferable like most people I know. And I'd thought you'd understand better with everything that's happened to you. And we've confided heavily in one another in the past," he explained. The next part made him wince a bit. "And a girl who lives at G.U.N. has been... encouraging me to undertake such measures. Her name's Hope. She reminds me much about Maria."

"That's, uh, Eggman's niece, isn't she? Er, the last one's?"

"Yes. She's gifted with machines and assists G.U.N.'s engineers. Outperforms most, truthfully. Thankfully she doesn't share the Doctor's more egregious proclivities." If it wasn't said with such a dry, bland voice Sorun would have assumed that was a joke. "She likes planes especially."

"Ah, yeah, I had a friend named Jamie on Earth who was a big plane nut. Would talk about planes all day, literally, guy loved planes. Always just planes, planes, planes with him." He made a small scoff and shook his head. "Yeah, Jamie was the plane guy, Billy was the soulless ginger-"

"Excuse me?"

"It was a stupid joke we liked to tease him with, really popular where I'm from. Anyway, Billy, he always talked about wanting to travel, liked seeing all the sights in the world. I glanced at his phone one

time and he had, like, twenty tabs open that were just a bunch of image searches for random tourist sites all around the globe. Jarod, he was a big boxer fan. Saw his room once, nothing but Mike Tyson and Apollo Creed posters everywhere, man, it was nuts."

"Fighters from your world?"

"Eh, one, other was a fictional character, but there were a bunch of posters and other stuff. Even had a 'Megalo Box' poster, and he didn't even like anime all that much. Anyway, he wasn't as insane about it as Jamie was with his planes but he was into it nonetheless. Then there was a David, who was almost as big a gamer nerd as I was. Pfft," Sorun laughed out, raising his hand to wave around, "I can almost picture it, if he were sent here instead of me he would have made Cloud's big dumb Buster Sword instead of a cool sword like I got. He was a big 'Final Fantasy' nerd. The seventh one in particular was his favorite, which wasn't a surprise 'cause it was a lot of people's favorites, but man, when they were remaking that one he got so excited, wouldn't shut up about it. Talked about it for a literal month straight when the first part of that remake series came out." His arm flopped down to his side on the sand. "He never did get to see the rest of those remake games. I'll never see 'em, either, but at least I'm alive to miss 'em."

"... I see..."

Sorun glanced at Shadow from the corner of his eye. "You know, everybody has dead people; we ain't special in that regard. Most people eventually grow past it. You didn't need to come to me just because I'm the most tragic guy you know outside yourself."

"It's less that and more..." Shadow's face scrunched up in displeasure. "You *know* what the people you live with are like."

"Oh, yeah, I know. You share even a iota of this heavy stuff with 'em and they get all emotional, all smiles and hugs all around, loads of encouraging words, probably even some tears. Don't get me wrong, I love 'em all to death over it, but at the same time I just can't do that.

Like I *physically* can't handle all that, so I keep all this stuff to myself. 'Cept with Nicole, I shared a bunch of stuff with here, but... well, that's different."

Shadow got the meaning and moved on without commenting on it. "Therein is the problem. You outlined why I could never go to them, and I'm not even that close with them besides, I doubt my own partner would take me seriously and even if she did I doubt we'll ever share a title beyond 'acquaintance', I'll take this to the grave before sharing so much with one of the G.U.N. personnel, and Hope is... much in the same boat as the Mobians we're acquainted with.

"And then there's you. The only person I know who could be sympathetic with me but also has enough standards to not so much as lay a hand on my shoulder or waste breath on encouraging words and who'll likely never bring any of this up ever again for both our sakes."

"You make us sound like sociopaths when you put it like that."

"We plotted a murder."

"A *failed* murder," Sorun reminded him, grinning a bit, "so it doesn't count. And it was for a righteous cause. With Eggman it's debatably self-defense."

Shadow made a "hmph" sound. "True enough. It's been going well against him?"

"Eh, from what I heard. The others keep pushing him back further and further while chipping away at his defenses and forces. They're wearing him down faster than he and all those psycho echidna he recruited can regroup. Gonna be over any day now from how everyone's talking," Sorun informed him. The earlier grin fell off. "It's great to hear. I couldn't stop thinking about the fact I couldn't end this that day because I was one second too slow in killing him before my heart stopped, so knowing they're gonna beat him without anyone

getting killed or even hurt despite me failing is a load off my shoulders. Dunno if I coulda lived with myself otherwise."

"... Relieving to hear," Shadow decided.

A shooting star had passed by overhead. By now the sun had set far enough that the stars above were becoming visible. The fire they had started was beginning to die down - there hadn't been that many sticks on the island to begin with and they'd already burned through what little fuel they had cooking the crabs from the other end of the beach. Wasn't all that bad, all things considered. Would have been downright peaceful if the fact they weren't stranded here wasn't hanging overhead. Sorun found a bit of comfort in it nonetheless.

"My dad blew his face off with a shotgun in front of me on my fourth birthday."

There wasn't a reaction from Shadow at first. Then he flinched the smallest bit, as if startled by something, and then looked towards Sorun again. His face looked surprised; the look of someone who just got punched in the face and was wondering why more than anything else. He didn't even seem able to form words.

"Just, you know, walked into the room and he was sitting there on the bed. Shotgun in mouth. We made eye contact for, like, a single second and then blam." Sorun made a "psh" sound and made a finger gun, shooting up at the sky. "Gun fell onto the ground, body slumped on the bed, brain matter was everywhere, ceiling, walls, my face. I didn't even know what just happened, I just stood there, frozen. My mom freaked out like you wouldn't believe. Literally. Just freaked out. Can't really blame her I guess, 'cause... I mean, who even sees that coming? What do you do in that situation? I feel like my mom had a meltdown trying to figure that out while dealing with the fact her husband just killed himself in front of her kid."

Shadow's mouth opened, but words weren't coming out. The ridges of his eyes were knitted together in concentration, like he was trying

to figure out what he was supposed to say to all this. "Why?" was the only thing he managed to say.

"I don't know, man. Truth be told I barely remember the guy, but during the time he was alive and I could actually remember stuff I thought things were fine. Mom would never talk about it. Ever. So I never asked her if things weren't alright after all." He made a small sigh. "So after the police come to take the body and everything my mom scrambles, trying to salvage something out of the situation. Try to do something to take her son's mind off of everything that just happened. So she rushes to the nearby store and buys a video game, any video game, and rushed back home and pretty much plants four-year-old me in front of a TV 'cause she's freaking out and needs to at least try and distract me with something because she needs to figure out what she's supposed to do now and I just... go along with it because four-year-old me didn't realize my old man blowing his head off meant I was never seeing him again."

The look on Shadow's face could be best described as "uncomfortable". The same kind of face somebody sitting in an otherwise terrible chair would make, or one walking around with a rock in their shoe. The kind of uncomfortable that made somebody want to turn away from what was causing this feeling, but alas he was obligated to keep looking towards Sorun to listen.

"You probably guessed it, but the game she bought me was the very first 'Devil May Cry' game. Not sure why she got that one of all games, like I said I think she just kind of scrambled to get something and saw cool red guy on the cover so she grabbed it. It was an old game, too, so it was probably grabbed out of a bargain bin out of somewhere. Never asked. So that's how I got started with that and it kinda... stuck, I guess. Mh." He shuffled. "I don't know what my mom did in the background, how the whole situation got resolved, any of it. I just played the game. Literally. That's all I remember doing is playing that game and nothing else. For a week I think. Could have been more. She kept trying to distract me so she got the second game." Sorun's face momentarily scrunched in displeasure. "And

then the third one. And for like... a month all I did was play those games. It's probably what set me on the path of being so good at games, that and these hands of mine, but that's neither here nor there. Things went back to normal over time. She did, I did, and we kinda just... you know, carried on. Without ever talking about it. Kind of ruined birthdays for me, though." Sorun paused. "I turned seventeen a while ago."

The sudden turn in conversation was so abrupt Shadow found himself stunned for a second and had to shake his head. "What?"

"Yeah. I didn't tell anybody. I was never going to tell anyone my birthday to begin with 'cause I never celebrate it but then it turns out by sheer coincidence it's on the same day as Sally's birthday, and that just gave me more reason not to say anything. I didn't wanna steal the spotlight from her, and honestly she deserved it more than a loser like me," Sorun said. "I don't know what I'm supposed to tell Nicole, because the day'll come where she'll flat-out corner me and demand to know what day it is. And I'm hoping she'll take the Sally excuse so I don't gotta bring up my dad. I told her he died but I never said how he died. I think she assumed it was some crime-related thing. I told her a bit about Detroit and for some reason she's under the impression it was some gang-filled apocalypse town, got no idea why."

It was perturbed. That was the expression Shadow had on, after a long while of Sorun trying to figure out what that face was. Maybe he couldn't blame him. Not for how glib and carefree Sorun had been with telling the story, but compared to everything else he just couldn't bother to feel much towards it. There hadn't even been so much as a hint of sadness in the human's voice or expression. He doubted it did anything as severe as creep Shadow out; Sorun didn't have anything strong enough to do that. He was still giving him an odd look now, though.

"And why didn't you?" Shadow asked. Despite the perturbed look he was managing to keep his voice level.

"Because I'm not even sure the concept of suicide *exists* to them." Sorun felt squeamish even thinking about it. "I mean parents dying, sure, I learned just yesterday how Antoine's dad died and... yeah, stuff happened, but anyways, *that* ? Dad blowing his head off in front of his kid?" Sorun shook his head. "Yeah, no, I'm never telling any of them that. They can't hear it. It's... I just don't feel like something belongs there. The idea of that happening. It goes in the box of stuff I can never tell anybody because it isn't for Mobian ears."

"They've been fighting Eggman and his horrors since they were children, Sorun," he reminded him. "I don't think you need to protect them like this."

He had a point, and admittedly it was a solid point. Them fighting for their lives since childhood probably did harden his friends' constitutions enough that they'd certainly be fazed, but not something as far as mentally scarred from the revelation. All the same... "Probably not, but... I just don't think this is something they need to know about, anyways. Just to be safe. Doesn't change anything." Sorun sighed out loudly and collapsed completely into the sand, flat on his back and staring up at the darkening sky. "Look, Shadow, it was a long time ago, and honestly I'm more upset at the guy for what he put my mom through doing that than the actual loss. And if he was the kind of guy to off himself in front of his kid I'm not even sure if he'd've been a good dad alive. We made it fine without him anyways." He paused. "... I did, at least. Guess she just ended up dying along with everyone else. Maybe it doesn't even matter. None of it did in the end."

He'd stopped looking at the past just so he could move forwards. Could see why now; introspection like this? Wasn't doing it for Sorun. There weren't any profound revelations about the inner self or some grand epiphany to some problem he didn't feel even existed that manifested out of nowhere just from talking about this. Though he did feel... admittedly lighter. Somehow. He wasn't sure why or how. He'd take it but walk away with the winnings.

"Listen, I only decided to say all this stuff 'cause you decided to," Sorun began. "'Cause I needed someone to get all this stuff out to and you're really the only guy I know who'd take it in stride without having a chance of a heart attack."

It took a few moments for Shadow to respond. He was laying down on the sand like Sorun was. "Hope said it would be good. Doing this."

"Probably."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Let's never do this again," Sorun suggested.

"Agreed."

Well, there it was. Decision was made. Never to be reversed by any force imaginable no matter how powerful. Sorun wouldn't have it any other way, and he felt Shadow shared the sentiment.

"I'm going to get us back to Mobius, Sorun," Shadow said to him. His voice was growing a bit muffled as Sorun's eyelids began to droop. "You're going home. I'll see it happen."

"I get bragging rights forever if you don't. I'll lord it over you for all time."

"You'll never receive the chance to exercise those rights. I can assure you of that."

There was an air of finality with those words. Like they were objective fact - that he *would* get them home no matter what. Immutable truth that couldn't be swayed by any force in the universe. And while Sorun didn't really find it true, the words were comforting.

As weird and unnatural comforting words felt coming off that guy of all guys. It was welcome regardless.

"Gonna hold it to you, man..." Sorun mumbled out as he finally drifted off.

Nothing would ever take the couch in the HQ away from its top spot on the list of worst places to sleep. Nothing. That crown would forever be a part of its identity until the end of eternity.

Sand was a close second, though.

It wasn't... bad. Not like his back was scraped raw or anything from sleeping on sand. It didn't feel good, though. It felt like a rock had been rubbed all over him, which, technically, was the truth. He wasn't able to use his coat as a towel to lay on or something because it'd still been drying, so he'd been forced to go bare.

They were dry now, at least. The first thing he'd done after shaking all the sand off of him was put his clothes back on. His second skin - good ol' coat. And all the other stuff. Though he didn't like admitting it he felt vulnerable without the coat.

"He probably ain't gonna feel a damn thing when he wakes up," Sorun thought, eyes glowering down at Shadow. At his fur protecting the delicate skin from the course nightmare that was this beach. *"He's got regeneration, too, so it probably wouldn't even matter anyway. Pfft. Some guys get all the lu- huh what?"*

When Sorun turned a bit to the side he'd seen something. On the water, next to the beach. Whatever it was it was far enough down the beach that the island itself was obscuring whatever it was, but there was definitely *something* over there. A... large, blocky white thing. Bobbing up and down in the water. Seeing as Shadow was still sleeping despite it being morning Sorun decided to walk around the island to get a better look at what it was.

He'd done so. Took him a couple minutes of walking to get into a better position to get a good look. And he'd managed to get a good look at what it was.

The blocky thing he'd seen earlier had been the tail-end of a boat. A *boat* . There was a boat parked next to the island. What looked like a small yacht - about the size of a schooner. He was so surprised at seeing it Sorun was more focused on the fact there was a boat parked next to the island than the fact he even knew what a schooner was.

He blinked. While there was a boat, there were no people in sight. Looking to the left revealed nothing. To the right... still nothing. Nothing but silent sand and trees near-motionless from the mild wind. By all appearances the island was as empty as it was when Sorun and Shadow first washed up here. And yet there was a boat here that wasn't here yesterday.

"Well, uh... um. Huh." Sorun scratched at the side of his face. He didn't know what to think of this. Literally, this particular scenario had never once been considered in his mind and he was struggling what to make of this. *"Do we just steal it? We can do that, right?"* He cocked his head a bit to the side, considering. *"Always kinda wanted to steal a boat, but, hmm... I dunno, this seems like one of those big kind of decisions. Should probably wake Shadow up. Get his take on it."*

Yes, that was a good idea. Get another head to think on this so they could come to a rational and informed decision - and to also deflect responsibility onto Shadow in case something goes horribly wrong. It was a great plan.

He went back to the "camp" they'd set up on the beach, which was really just a small fire pit and a bunch of crab husks littered around in the sand. Shadow was still sleeping there. Sorun went to go wake him up, but then spotted the crab leg he'd been playing with last night next to his feet. At the same moment the memory of Shadow splashing water on his face hit him. Sorun bent down and picked th

leg up, with a mischievous idea coming to him as he grinned down at Shadow. There was no thinking put into his next action. As if his body moved on its own, with the need to react to this instant impulse he felt.

And so Sorun whipped the crab leg as hard as he could directly in the center of Shadow's face. It bounced off with a meaty *thwack!* and fell back into the sand, leaving nary a mark on Shadow's face. To the credit of his discipline Shadow didn't so much as stir from his spot. His eyes, however, did instantly snap open, focusing instantly on Sorun. "Explain," he demanded.

Sorun paled a bit. He hadn't thought this far considering mild things like consequences. His mind scrambled for an answer. "There's a boat."

"... Explain further."

"What do you mean, explain further? There's a boat. Parked next to the island. Saw it and came here to wake you up," Sorun informed him. "That's the full extent of the situation."

A sound crossed between a sigh and a grumble left Shadow. He rolled right up to his feet, rolling his shoulders a couple of times as he looked at Sorun, who expected immediate reprisal for the crab leg. Instead, to his surprise, he asked, "The direction of the ship?"

The corner of Sorun's mouth quirked upwards. *"Did he... did he just ask for an explanation for waking him up? Did he not even feel me throwing that crab leg?"* he wondered. *"I feel like he would have brought it up more if... whatever, I guess he was just annoyed at being woken up,"* he decided, feeling both relief and disappointment at the conclusion. He accepted the dodged bullet and moved on. "That way," he said in answer to Shadow's question, pointing down the beach.

Shadow turned around and scanned the area for a bit. He paused and then nodded, having seen the tail-end of the ship. "I see it," he

announced. "Did you investigate the ship? See the pilot?"

"No to both. Saw it and immediately came to you."

"Hm," Shadow hummed out in understanding. He turned his head back halfway to look at Sorun. "I don't see it a likely coincidence somebody just happened to have arrived at this island in time with our arrival. There's no way anybody could have anticipated it. They likely saw the smoke from our fire last night and happened to be near enough to see it, or perhaps even managed to somehow detect our arrival and came to investigate."

"I guess that makes sense, yeah," Sorun said, yawning a bit as he stretched an arm over his head. "Hey, can we steal the boat?"

"..." Shadow's eye narrowed a bit at Sorun, almost in silent admonishment. But then the eye closed fully and he sighed, and the position was held for two seconds before the eye opened back up. "If the operator of the vessel is disagreeable to our needs then yes, Sorun, we may appropriate it."

"Cool." That basically meant they could steal the boat. He had approval now. "You think they have any water in there, man, 'cause-"

"'Ello, 'ello!"

Both Sorun and Shadow had different reactions to the third voice. Shadow's head snapped to the direction of the new voice, eyes narrowed and body tensed. Sorun froze on the spot without even turning around, eyebrows knitted in confusion as he tried to place that accent he just heard. He managed it and only grew more confused. *"Why does... how is there an Australian accent here?"*

Maybe that was a stupid question. One he realized when he remembered Southern accents survived the super alien apocalypse back in Mobius. Or how by some miracle everyone in the multiverse spoke English. These things just happened somehow. Better not to question it and just turn around so he could see who was speaking.

Aaaand then he had to look down because the person was short. He realized why upon seeing her - she was just a kid. Probably as young as Tails, if not younger. A Mobian, who, against belief, wore a green not-shirt top thing in addition to Mobian Standard. And black... shorts. Huh, pants. Rare. The only thing he couldn't place was what kind of Mobian she was, between the orange and white fur, the dark rings of fur around her eyes, and the bushy tail with the dark rings in it.

Some kind of rodent thing... a mink? Ferret? Some obscure animal he'd never heard of before? Couldn't be a possum with that tail. He couldn't put his finger on it. Sorun decided not to ask and just let her continue speaking, because she'd opened her mouth to continue.

"Oh, wowzers! Ain't you two lookin' right chipper?" She stepped closer to Shadow, looking him up and down with bright blue eyes. He took a step back with a look of slight disgust on his face, like he wanted to throw the thing invading his personal space as far away as possible. "Lookin' downright sinister with those stripes, ain'tcha? And you!" She looked at Sorun. He felt violated from her gaze. "You're pale enough to pass as a lovin' ghost from the briny deep! Wha' happen to all your fur, huh? Dinn't get washed away by the tide, did it?"

"Sorun, what is this?" Shadow asked. His tensed posture had relaxed slightly and he looked over at Sorun for help.

"I think it's a child," Sorun answered, completely straight-faced and yet sounding unsure as he looked at the rodent Mobian. She was looking back and forth between them, following the conversation. Still smiling like a toddler who'd just found a shiny marble.

Shadow frowned at Sorun. "I know she's a child, you fool, I'm asking what's she's saying. Translate."

Sorun looked at Shadow. "Huh? I don't know, man, I didn't understand half of that. I was hoping you were getting it."

Hearing that, Shadow flinched. And now he himself looked unsure as he looked back at the child. "What should we do with her?"

Sorun shrugged. "I don't know. You're not suggesting we take her with us, are you?" he asked him. "What if she gets hungry? I'm not giving her any of the crabs, Shadow. Those our my crabs."

"Our crabs. Of which there are none left."

"You seriously ate all the...?" Sorun cut himself off and shook his head to get back on track. "Whatever, listen, she might know more about the boat. Try conversing with her."

"I will try." Shadow didn't sound confident at the prospect, and looked even more unsure when he looked back down at her. She looked like she was holding in a laugh for some reason, though neither of the two could fathom why. "Child," Shadow began.

"Yeah, mate, what is it?" the child asked back.

"I don't imagine one of your stature piloted a vessel of that size to an island in the middle of nowhere," Shadow said. "Where is the captain of that vessel back there?"

"Imaginin' wrong then, mate. That there's *my* ship."

"You're the captain." Shadow didn't sound like he believed her. Sorun had a hard time believing himself - not without seeing a captain's hat.

The hatless girl just smiled and nodded her head in response. "Yup, yup!"

"Okay..." Shadow breathed out slightly, like he was trying to maintain his composure. "Since I'm skeptical anybody would let a child captain a ship into the ocean, I'll ask this: is there somebody else here besides you?"

She seemed *exuberant* in giving an explanation. Shadow looked anything but, and Sorun wasn't far behind him. "Oh, roight, roight, that'll be Blaze you'll be speakin' about, mate! See, me an' her were sailing 'round the bend, lookin' for some mystical some-such or another when we spotted your smokestack from way out by far! We docked the moment dawn broke out past the horizon, then she goes on flabbin' 'bout some nonsense, tellin' me to stay aboard 'cause there could be a scrap or some nonsense. I weren't gonna stand for such an insult an' went out anyways, found you two chums chattin' right here!"

This was the first time Sorun had ever seen Shadow so exhausted. Like he was devoting his all into trying to follow the conversation but just wasn't managing. It was made even worse that it was the middle of the morning and he'd just woken up. In a gesture of defeat he rose his hands up to rub at the ridges of his eyes, and though he looked like he wanted to, the hedgehog's pride refused him to emit a sigh.

There was one thing, though, that Sorun picked out. A single word the child said. "Blaze". He didn't know why but it felt like something twinged in the back of his brain hearing that word. Like it poked at a memory that didn't exist, because the significance was completely lost on Sorun.

"Sorun, the only information I gleaned from all that is that there's a second person somewhere," Shadow grumbled out. He sounded like he was in physical pain.

"Does this mean we're not stealing the boat?" They definitely could. Children weren't that tough. At least not to Shadow.

Shadow looked like he wanted to yell, but managed to refrain. "Stay. Stay here. With the child. I'm going to survey the island for the second one, and *then* we will discuss what to do."

"I don't believe that will be necessary."

Oh, another new voice. And one that sounded older and infinitely more coherent, to boot. That fact alone was probably the only reason Shadow laconically turned towards the new voice instead of being hyper-alert like he had been the first time. Sorun paused first - again, there was that tingle - but then he quickly wrote it off once more while he turned to look at the voice.

"Oh wow. Clothes." It was a sight beyond imagining. It was seldom... *seldom* ... Sorun ever saw a Mobian that wore more than Mobian Standard. Even more rare he'd see a Mobian with pants, which was why he'd been so surprised with the girl. Seldom enough he could count the amount of Mobians he knew that wore more than just a pair of gloves and shoes on his hands.

This one had everything - and style to boot. Shoes. Form-fitting white pants - pants of all things, he could barely believe it - the white gloves, of course, and... what Sorun would admit was a fairly fly purple coat. The kind of coat the looked uncomfortably expensive, but not in a vain way. The weird tails on the sides of the coat and the white faux fur along the coat's cuffs looked regal in a way, but the otherwise minimalistic design and how tight-fitting the coat was suggested an air of practicality. This was both a coat that showed status and a coat that was meant for more than just show. A coat that was to be *used* .

Without a doubt. This was the most important person in this world. The coat said it all, and Sorun made it known.

"Shadow, this person is the most important person in the world," Sorun said, turning towards the hedgehog.

Glancing at Sorun, Shadow looked all but lost at that statement. Confused at how he'd arrived to such a conclusion. "What makes you say this?"

"Her coat," Sorun answered, because how much simpler an answer could he provide?

Confusion turned to hard skepticism. "What?" He sounded so done by now it was turning into something beyond annoyance.

"Her coat," Sorun repeated, pointing at the purple coat-wearer. Was it not obvious? How could he not see? "That's the coat of an important person who gets things done. A coat that demands respect of everyone who looks at it. Nobodies don't wear coats like that, Shadow." He thumbed at the shoulder of his own coat as proof of knowledge. "I'm a coat guy, Shadow. I know these things." And he'd also been spending too much time around Honey.

But he didn't even think it needed explaining it was so obvious. The logic was there. The evidence was standing *right there* in front of their eyes, and Sorun had assumed no further proof was needed. This was primarily the reason why, after Shadow responded, Sorun ended up freezing on the spot in disbelief.

"I'm ignoring you for the rest of this conversation," he announced, completely turning away from Sorun to face the newcomer - the one with the coat. Sorun was rendered speechless. Disbelief fell away into betrayal at his counsel not being taken. Betrayal morphed into anticipation for when this stranger finally revealed who she was. Revealed that she *was* , in fact, important, thereby proving Sorun was right. It was but an inevitability. All one needed was a single glance at that coat to be assured of this. He just needed patience.

Speaking of the coat-wearer, Sorun just now realized he didn't actually look at her face. He looked towards it, and... yep. Without a doubt. She was a cat Mobian. 'Bout as old as Sorun, looked like. The cat-like tail swishing behind her was a big enough tell, but the ears cinched it. The fact her fur was purple aside from the white fur around her mouth was another matter.

For a single moment Sorun's brows furrowed. He was believing Nicole less and less about her saying purple Mobian lynxes weren't a thing. This was two purple cats he'd found now.

She caught his staring, blinking a pair of amber eyes at his while turning to face Sorun directly. Her expression was neutral for the most part, the corners of her mouth downturned ever so slightly though her eyes were alit with a small bit of curiosity. There was something about the way she was standing, though. It seemed relaxed, but there was... something beneath it. A type of tenseness, one that, after a moment's deliberation, Sorun realized was the same kind of tenseness Shadow displayed when the child-thing first revealed herself. Much more subdued, though. Not nearly as aggressive.

This was a person ready to jump into a fight at a moment's notice while seeming to keep a cool head. Rummaging around in his memories he realized Sally often held that exact same demeanor, back when they'd worked together and had gone on a few missions. Was she an important person, then? Politically-speaking? Like her? It would explain the coat. And that red gem in her face. A little red, shining bead, right there between her eyes. Very regal-looking and more credence towards Sorun's accurate observation of her. That and the way her hair was tied upwards the way it was. Shadow must have noticed something, too, because he was giving the purple cat his full attention and not even so much as glancing as the little gremlin standing off to the side.

"Is something the matter?" the cat asked Sorun. "You seem to be staring."

Sorun froze; his voice choked in his throat. When she'd spoken to him, addressed him directly, there was... a violently unpleasant feeling. The entire left side of his body itched in an almost painful manner, though the sensation had disappeared nearly as soon as he'd noticed it. His right hand reflexively clenched, searching for a sword that wasn't there. Anxiety swelled in Sorun as something instinctual screamed out at him from within.

Evidently his distress must have been visible on his face, because the cat Mobian had taken a step back. A bit of concern leaked out

onto her features. "Oh, my apologies. I had not meant to startle you." She quickly looked to Shadow. "Is he alright?"

"No. Who are you?" Shadow demanded, outright ignoring Sorun. The cat was entirely in his focus as he continued to speak. "We saw your vessel parked off the beach back there. I highly doubt you just happened upon us, so what is your purpose here?"

The feeling cut off as soon as it began. Sorun blinked in confusion, looking down at his right hand. *"What was I doing just now?"* he wondered, flexing his empty hand. Something to do about the cat? He looked up at her again...

"... Oh, right, the purple lynx thing." He wasn't sure. Maybe Nicole was right but it was only a rule that applied in Mobius Prime. They were in a different world, after all. Hard to say if such a thing was a universal constant.

The purple cat relaxed when she seemed to notice the change in Sorun's demeanor. The thoughtful yet-slightly-questioning look he had on as he sort of just stared off into space past her. She turned to address Shadow. "In answer to your previous question, my name is Blaze. This," she continued, gesturing to the nearby child, "is my friend, Marine."

The child looked up from the tower of crab husks she'd begun stacking up out of boredom. "Oi, get the full name out there! It's *Captain* Marine the Raccoon-"

"Goddammit I could have guessed raccoon."

"-to you all and don't you be forgettin' it!"

Blaze's response was cup her face with one hand in a vain attempt at shielding the secondhand embarrassment clearly on her face while cupping the elbow of that arm with her other hand. "Yes, she gets very enthusiastic, please excuse her," she quickly apologized.

She glanced at Sorun. "And... your friend was quite accurate about his earlier assessment, as it happens. In regards to my position."

"We're not friends," Shadow swiftly rebuked. "And what is that supposed to mean? You're..." His eyes quickly scanned over her outfit. Sorun nearly scoffed; he'd obviously abandoned that truth a while ago if he hadn't taken stock in the coat. "A government official of some kind?"

Blaze's hand lowered from her face. She seemed a bit amused. "Of a certain sort, yes. I'm a princess, though the title is a bit of a misnomer, I'm afraid. I'm in fact the sovereign ruler."

"Ah-huh." Sorun nodded rapidly a few times while, at the same time, slowly turning towards Shadow. "Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh..."

Shadow made a "tch" sound. "Be silent. Her being a ruler doesn't make her the most important person on the planet," he ground out, not even bothering to look at Sorun. "Ruler of what? A nation? A coalition of nations?"

"The planet."

There it was. Victory. Sweet, sweet victory. No words needed to be said by Sorun, though there was no wiping away the shit-eating grin he was flashing towards Shadow. Vindication. His body surged with the emotion as the epitome of smugness itself spread over his entire being.

For his part Shadow seemed to be doing his best to pretend Sorun didn't even exist at the moment. His mouth had clamped firmly shut and he was doing everything he could to maintain a level expression while staring at Blaze, who seemed to be smiling in amusement at the sight before her. There was no hiding the smaller signs, though. The twinge of his jaw. The hard expression in his eyes. That little vein on his forehead that was bulging, nearly invisible from the fur concealing it.

Sorun had won. There was no need to announce it and Shadow would never acknowledge it. But he'd won. And they both knew it. That's all Sorun needed.

"... Your *purpose* ." Oh, Shadow was salty about the loss. That nearly came out as a growl. "What business do you have with us?"

Coming from somebody like Shadow that kind of tone would send most people cowering in fear, even people who didn't know who or what he was. He had that effect on people. It'd washed completely over Blaze, however. The smile she'd wore had fallen off completely as she seemed to turn into "all business" mode, but she didn't seem the least bit intimidated.

"Marine and I have been on the search for objects of extreme importance to both myself and every denizen of this world," she began. "Yesterday I had felt a disturbance of sorts and we had arrived here to investigate. We'd seen your campfire and decided to wait until morning to make contact. And now I'd very much like to know who you two are and what you're doing here." There was an air of disappointment in her voice. That they'd been found instead of whatever she'd been looking for. At the same time she seemed genuinely intrigued at the pair standing before her, and Sorun couldn't help but take every word she said as truth to heart. She practically radiated politeness.

"Trade you that story for a boat ride," Sorun offered before Shadow could speak. He'd looked like he was about to tell Sorun off, even seemed a bit annoyed, but after hearing the actual words he appeared mollified and went back to looking at Blaze. "We're super stuck here. 'Cast Away' style."

Blaze gave him an odd look, tilting her head the smallest bit and appearing unsure as to what to say to that. Marine seemed doubly confused. Shadow just sighed.

"Ignore him," he requested. "He's recovering from a bout of delirium brought on by consuming psychoactive flora. I'm not confident he's

regained all his senses."

Oh, Sorun saw what he was doing. He wasn't discounting his win with such a cheap move like that. "I'm the most coherent person you'll ever meet, don't listen to this guy," Sorun denied. He looked at Shadow. "And that stuff didn't even last an hour, what are you talking about?"

"... Delirium?" Blaze interjected, drawing both their attention. "From what?"

"The mushrooms," Sorun answered. He glanced down at his feet in embarrassment. "I, uh... I was really hungry. I didn't know the local plants were bad."

"The only species of mushroom I'm aware of to flourish in this environment are the white-capped... do you mean the mushrooms with the blue stems?" Blaze asked. He didn't like how she sounded so puzzled.

"Y-yeah?" No. Not again. Please. He just rode so high from getting one over on Shadow please don't say that-

"Are you sure?" Blaze asked. "Many Maritimers credit that particular species to be an excellent ingredient in many culinary recipes. I myself have partaken in them. I've never met a single person in my entire life who have claimed to have suffered some sort of adverse side effect from them. They're supposed to be completely harmless."

Sorun didn't answer. He couldn't. Not while under assault from such a crushing amount of shame. It was bad enough he nearly sank to his knees, but, somehow, he managed to stand tall. If slightly slumped forwards.

Shadow apparently took pity on Sorun and tried to come to his rescue. In his own way. "His kind have a weak constitution. It's not his fault," he said to Blaze. She nodded in understanding. "But back

to the previous matter, yes. We would greatly appreciate rescue and would be more than willing to apprise you of our situation in return."

"That sounds more than agreeable to me." Blaze smiled over at the both of them. Sorun nearly fell with relief, embarrassment all but forgotten, while Shadow simply nodded. "Well, then, shall we leave now?"

A/N- Listen. Just listen. I had to put him in at least once and the only way I could do it and make it believable was if it was in a drug sequence.

I have literally no experiencing writing an accent like Marine's. Part of me wants to have her get accidentally stabbed in the throat and make her mute so I don't have to bother, but that'd be the coward's way out. So I'll deal.

Chapter 97

Recursion Error

Episode 97- We will not go back

What else was there to do but gab while out on the high seas? Nothing, that's what.

"-and it wasn't like 'Black Flag' was a *bad* game, it was just a bad 'Assassin's Creed' game, Shadow. Yeah, sure, they refined the ship combat from the last game and made a great pirate game but after they went and killed Desmond the overall plot of the games took a nosedive, because what did they expect would happen when they killed off the main character? After they spent five games building him up? We had one- god, man, we only had *one* cool moment with Desmond at the end of the fifth one when he raided the Abstergo tower and it would have made a great coming-of-age thing, but no, nah, we can't have our modern-day game and cap off the series, it's gotta be a annual release now and we gotta keep milking this thing for all it's worth. So they kept chugging them out and the games kept getting worse and worse in quality. And then 'Unity' came out, and you know what, once you got past the bugs, the forty-gig patch they had to ship out, and the middling story, there was actually a good parkour system there. Best in the series. I'd argue it was the most fun one to play, and I dared to hope, Shadow, that maybe Ubisoft finally learned something and we could get the series back on track.

"But nope, uh-uh, they didn't learn a thing. Just when they finally polished a good parkour system they threw it all away with 'Origins'. Idiots decided they needed to reinvent the wheel and fix what wasn't broken, to add a bunch of RPG elements nobody asked for and make it an absolute grindfest with-with microtransaction experience boosters. And they stuck with it. They decided this dreck was a winning formula and decided to stick with it going forwards with all

the games after it. I couldn't even touch them. I'll never forgive the French for what they did to 'Assassin's Creed'."

At the very front of the ship that had rescued them from the island stood Sorun, who was leaning against a guardrail and looking out at the sea. Shadow was standing besides him in the exact same position. Looking down in the water with an exhausted expression while looking like he was contemplating jumping in.

A weary sigh left the hedgehog. "All I did was comment on the figurehead," he mumbled to himself, glancing up at the bird-shaped figurehead mounted at the front of the ship. He'd made a comment on it and Sorun had said how it reminded him of a ship from a video game. And then twenty minutes filled with words passed.

He was tired.

Sorun was anything but; fired up when he was reminded of what was stolen from humanity. What had once been great and how it had been perverted by corporate greed like most things on Earth. It riled him up something fierce just thinking about it.

"Why did you even have games where you played as assassins?" Shadow mumbled out.

"Dude, we had games about literally everything," Sorun answered. "It's escapism. Art in an interactive format. And, you know, some people just wanted to live a power fantasy of running around on rooftops and stabbing a hundred guys in a historical setting, it was super normal where I'm from."

Shadow lifted his head up and looked at Sorun like he'd just accrued major brain damage. "I find it horrifying you're the standard to judge your whole species since you're the only one left. I don't know if you were normal compared to the rest of your kind or if you're some extreme outlier."

"Heh, yeah." They both turned around to lean their backs against the railing. The raccoon child was over at the helm steering the ship through the waters. The purple cat girl, Blaze, was standing next to her. Both were staring at them.

"What's your impression of them?" Some life seemed to return back to Shadow's face as the topic shifted. It resulted in Sorun momentarily glancing at him and scoffing before he replied.

"Blaze seems like a straight shooter. Got a real honest vibe outta her," Sorun admitted. "Marie, I dunno, she seems like the kinda person that'll steal my socks when I'm not looking. Real wild card."

Shadow frowned. "I thought the raccoon's name was Mary?"

Sorun shrugged. It made Shadow puff out a small sigh and shake his head. "Well, regardless, I agree with your sentiment. Minus the sock bit. That's nonsense. But they seem trustworthy enough."

"Yeah. You think we should tell Blaze about the Metal Sonic thing?"

"I think we should tell the ruler of the planet there's a dangerous robot running around her domain, yes," Shadow blandly replied, voice utterly dry. "It will reflect poorly on us if we keep such information to ourselves and we owe her for the rescue."

That was a really good point, and Sorun nodded in agreement. He saw movement and noticed the two Mobians were making their way towards them. Blaze *appeared* to be completely relaxed, but the way her eyes were continually locked onto the both of them said enough. The raccoon girl was just smiling with an easy-going expression.

He really had to try and remember her name. It for sure started with an "M", he was certain of that.

Blaze was the first one to speak when the both of them stopped in front of Sorun and Shadow. "Well, we're headed off to the nearest island to make port. We should arrive within the next ten minutes."

"That would be acceptable, thank you," Shadow said. "Is there someone we could talk to in order to arrange transport to the mainland once we've arrived?" He blinked in confusion when Blaze let out a chuckle. Sorun did the same. "What is it?"

"There is no mainland in this world," Blaze informed them. "This world is entirely comprised of islands interspersed throughout the ocean covering it. Whatever you've come for, you'll find no better help anywhere else than you'll find in the Southern Island." She crossed her arms, attention entirely focusing in on Shadow. "And now that we're here I'd like you to tell me who the both of you are like we agreed."

Sorun and Shadow exchanged glances. To the Earthling the news this was a planet comprised of nothing but islands washed right off his back; he'd seen weirder by now. He wanted to make a "One Piece" reference, too, but he sensed that Shadow would grow annoyed at it so he kept his mouth shut. Would have felt rude since none of them would even know what he's talking about anyways. Shadow himself didn't look very surprised at the news, either. Either that or he simply just didn't care, which was more likely than anything else. He gave Sorun a nod - he wasn't even sure what that was supposed to mean - and turned back to Blaze to speak.

"Introductions, then. My name is Shadow the Hedgehog," he began. The raccoon girl seemed amused at the name, even went as far as to laugh a bit, making Shadow send her a sharp glare. It just made her laugh harder and made Blaze sigh a bit.

Sorun rose a hand up. "I'm Sorun the Human." He internally flinched. Saying that gave a weird taste in his mouth he didn't like. "Ooh, that sounds... yeah, I dunno, uh, can, can I do that? Is that a thing I can say or is that a Mobian-only thing?" He glanced at Shadow. "Is it okay to add the 'the Human' part, everyone else does it so I thought-
"

"If you value my opinion at all I don't think you should," Shadow said. "I don't even like doing it. I was just told it was a social norm and

would help put others at ease. It's ridiculous. Anybody with eyes and a functioning brain can tell what species someone is at a glance."

"... Mhm." Sorun quickly cleared his throat and turned back to the pair. "Yeah okay that's- alright, uh, Sorun, I'm just Sorun," he tried again. His stomach dropped a bit and he had to repress a groan - the raccoon child looked like she was silently laughing at him and even Blaze was hiding a smile behind her hand it looked like. A smile paired with a pitying, if not amused, set of eyes. The embarrassment served to be too much and he was forced to turn completely around to look back at the ocean.

Once again Shadow came to his rescue, because he heard him began talking with Blaze once again. That was good. He could handle all the serious talk and maybe they'd all forget what just happened. All Sorun had to do was stand here and lean against a guardrail as he stared out at the ocean.

He felt a bit of wetness drip out of his nose. He rose up his fingers to wipe it away, and when he pulled his fingers back he saw they were splotched with crimson. He somehow instinctively knew that it wasn't due to the sea air his nose was bleeding.

"Son of a bitch," he worriedly thought out, wiping the blood away on his pants. He wiped at his face again, and while it wasn't bringing him much relief at the moment, the bleeding appeared to stop. He turned his ear back to the conversation happening besides him, if only to try and help distract himself.

"-and so after aiding us Tails had built a ship-"

"With my help."

"With your help, yes, Marine, to take himself and Sonic back to their own world," Blaze had finished off. Sorun's interest piqued enough that he fully turned back around to address them.

"Those two found themselves in this world?" Sorun asked her. "How'd that happen?"

"We never did discover the true cause. Tails had chalked it up to a freak accident involving Chaotic energies," Blaze admitted. "A Chaos Emerald from their world had somehow wound up in ours. They'd left it to me when they departed back to their own zone."

Sorun's brows knitted together. "Huh? I must have missed that adventure, I don't..." He looked to Shadow for help. "Was this before they all got fused together into the main seven? 'Cause I wasn't there for that."

He shrugged in response. "I assume. I wasn't present for this either."

"Alright." Mini Chaos Emerald, then. He looked back at Blaze. "Why'd Sonic leave it to you?"

It was the first time since meeting her Sorun had seen Blaze frown. No, it was more than that: it was a strange mixture between annoyance and worry. "In truth he did it as a personal favor to me. You see, within this world are seven gems of extraordinary power, not unlike the Chaos Emeralds you spoke of. They're known as the Sol Emeralds." She looked to the side, face bitter. "They're somewhat lost at the moment. Sonic let me keep the Emerald that fell into our world to help locate them."

"This is, what, the third set of magical rocks now? Why is this such a thing?" Sorun silently wondered to himself. "The Sol Emeralds?" he repeated. "Like the sun? Sun Emeralds?"

Blaze looked back at him, eyes a bit widened. She looked pleasantly surprised for some weird reason. "Yes, precisely." She smiled at him. "I'm impressed. I'd thought the translations for that ancient language were lost to time. I'd only ever gleaned the word's true meaning from texts in my personal library."

"It's... a pretty common word from where I'm from," he said, a bit hesitant. *"... Do they just not have solar panels here? It's a common word even on Mobius."*

"From Mobius Prime?"

"Nah, uh, not from there. It's a long story," Sorun said. "So how important are these Sol Emeralds?"

The cat's face turned gravely serious near-instantly. "Extremely so. Those gems are intrinsically tied to the very stability of this world. If they remain separated for too long it will lead to apocalyptic results. The sky will fall, the seas will boil, the islands dotting the planet will crumble and be lost to the roiling see. Every single inhabitant on this planet will perish." Her faced scrunched up into a shameful look. It was strong enough it even made Sorun uncomfortable. "As the ruler of this world it's my responsibility to oversee their safekeeping. I've been devoting all my time into locating them ever since they were lost."

"Oh. Geez..." It was, admittedly, a much more serious-sounding situation than he'd anticipated. Sorun breathed outwards and rubbed at the back of his neck to try and relieve the sheer intimidation that description alone had given him. That sounded like an unfathomable amount of pressure to be put under. He could relate and didn't envy her in the slightest. "That's tough, Blaze."

She let out a humorless laugh. "Yes. I suppose it is."

"If these gems are so important how did you end up losing them all in the first place?" Shadow asked. If the explanation fazed him any amount he wasn't showing it in the slightest.

Blaze's expression changed again at hearing the question. It was a brief flash of anger. Not directed at Shadow, as it'd faded moments later, but as if reviewing a memory in her head caused her great distress. "I don't wish to discuss it." She calmed down seconds later, expression relaxing as she continued with, "At any rate, with the help

of the Chaos Emerald Sonic left to me I've been able to locate a few of the Sol Emeralds, thankfully. It's with those I should be able to locate the remainder. With that in mind, once this Metal Sonic incident is taken care of and in the event you're unable to use this zone-traversing engine of its to travel back to your own home, I wouldn't be opposed to giving the Emerald to you two."

"Wow, really?" Sorun nearly jumped off the railing he'd been leaning against when he heard that. "You'll just give it to us for free? No strings? Nothin'? Just like that?"

"I was planning on it?" Blaze had taken a step backwards, seemingly off-put by Sorun's surprise. "You need it more than I do and I have no further use for it anyhow. I've no problem handing it to you in return for helping solve the issue with this rampaging machine. We've enough of those here as it is."

Sorun barely had the words. That was just... so nice of her. He guessed he shouldn't be so surprised by now, but still, it was a pleasant feeling. "Wow. Uh. Thank you." Sorun rubbed at the back of his neck. "That, uh, that's real nice, Blaze, thanks."

"Yes, we're in your debt," Shadow impatiently interrupted, "now is that the island we're supposed to be making port in?"

Sorun turned around. Right in front of them was, in fact, an island. There wasn't much to say about it other than the large lighthouse in front of it. The right side of the island was raised up into a large hill atop which a tower was sitting, and on the left side was a more flatter area filled with houses and the like. Looked nice enough. Except for the fact some of the houses were on fire.

He heard a sharp intake of breath besides him, and then heard a peculiar sound. Soft snapping and crackling sounds, like the kind heard at a campfire, but much quieter. He looked towards the noise and found the source to be Blaze's hands, tightly clenched. He'd thought for a second he'd just misheard and it was just the sound of her gloves clenching tightly, but then he'd seen the fiery sparks

sputtering out from between her closed fingers. He understood instantly.

"Pyrokinetic, huh? That's a new one. Probably shoulda figured with that name." She seemed angry. Both in the way she was standing, her hands clenched like that, and her face. When he looked up he saw Blaze's yellow eyes locked onto the smokestacks rising up from the center of the island, and she looked absolutely *livid* at the moment. Eyes widened and teeth clenched in rage. He found himself unconsciously taking a few steps away from her, both from that look and the fact it suddenly felt a few degrees warmer.

"Yes. That would be the Southern Island." When Blaze spoke it sounded like she was forcing her voice out through clenched teeth. Like she was so angry that the muscles in her throat were strained with raw anger. Sorun took a few more steps back. "And no, it is not supposed to be on fire."

Shadow made an affirming grunt. "I'd figured. It appears Metal Sonic beat us here."

"That or the pirates I've been dealing with. It's ending now either way." Blaze's eyes snapped down to Marine. Even she'd began to look a bit nervous at how angry Blaze seemed to be right now. "Marine, please take us in through the gate. We're taking care of this right now."

"Roight." She gave her a brisk nod and scampered off towards the ship's steering wheel, earlier smiles all gone. Sorun watched her run off, and then turned towards a large pair of gates on the front of the island. They were slowly beginning to open already as they made their approach.

Sorun sighed tiredly as he leaned back against the guardrail. *"I just wanted to deliver a pizza, man..."*

They'd wasted no time once the moment the ship had been parked in the island's port. What that really meant was that Blaze wasted no time and the other three were forced to run alongside her as she bolted straight towards the screams of people in the distance, that angered, determined look permanently etched on her face. Even Shadow seemed mildly impressed with how quick she'd been booking it. Sorun was more or less focused on just keeping up with the group.

After the small marathon they'd ended up on the edge of a tall, grassy hill that crested over what looked like the village near the island's beach seen earlier; at the edge of the grassy hill was a sheer rock cliff that fell down for around a dozen or so meters before hitting the ground. The damage in the village, admittedly, didn't look so bad up close. Not many of the houses were damaged and the fires were mainly in the surroundings. Panting while holding his knees, Sorun noted there wasn't a sight of bodies lying in the street - that was a good sign.

The not-so-good sign was that Metal Sonic was standing smack-dab in the middle of the devastation, holding up what looked like a koala Mobian in overalls up by the throat. When Blaze had seen the sight he'd heard a quiet growl sound out from the back of her throat. And her hands were completely on fire now.

"This is utterly unacceptable...!" Those were the only words Blaze decided to speak before she'd rocketed off. Literally. Yellow-orange flames violently spewed from her hands and the force was seemingly sufficient enough to propel Blaze off the cliff. She was flying directly towards the robot and the koala it was choking out.

Sorun coughed a bit when he accidentally inhaled some of the hot air left over. He looked to the side and saw Shadow staring off at her, looking a bit surprised. He was holding a hand out in her general direction.

"... I was hoping to have a few words with her, first," he muttered out as he retracted his hand.

Sorun shook his head. "Yeah, I don't think she was gonna wait for-*ohhhh* !"

It was possibly one of the most magnificent things Sorun had ever seen in his whole goddamn life. There'd Blaze been, propelled by the jets of flames bursting out of her hands like some kind of purple cat rocket, straight on a collision course for Metal Sonic. He didn't know what she was gonna do: either go for a punch of some kind or try shooting fire. Something along those degrees.

He never would have expected in a million years that, right before impact, she'd flip around midair so that her now fire-coated feet were in line to kick the robot right in the face. A textbook dropkick Sorun had only ever had the pleasure of performing once in his life personally. But not to that degree. Not with all that fire, the presentation. He couldn't help but hold his head with both of his hands at the sheer splendor. It was the coolest implementation of that move he'd ever been witness to.

It would have been even cooler if the attack had actually landed. It didn't. Metal Sonic had evidently seen her coming and, in one fluid movement, had thrown away the koala it'd been holding up while turning its body and leaning slightly to the side to avoid Blaze's dropkick. After whiffing the kick she'd slid a short distance across the sand before coming to a standstill in front of Metal Sonic. The look she was giving it looked like she was trying to melt it with her smoldering gaze alone. For all Sorun knew she probably could if she tried hard enough.

"I'm so fucking sad that missed." The disappoint Sorun had felt in the followed moment was overwhelming, so much so his hands slid off his head. He could have cried right there if he weren't surrounded by others. Slowly, with the movements of a man who'd just had all the joy in life sucked out of him, Sorun turned towards Shadow, whose eyes were affixed on the brewing fight below. "What were you gonna tell her, anyways?" The words had come out empty, somewhat. As if robbed of life. It would take a bit of time to rediscover the meaning of his own life after being deprived such a glorious sight.

Shadow's eyes flickered to Sorun. "Tactical advice. A warning on not trying to talk with Metal."

"Nobody does a dropkick like that if they wanna talk, Shadow." He still couldn't believe it'd missed. "What makes you think something like that was even possible?"

"... I'd attempted it," Shadow muttered in admittance. "Before you'd been roped into the fight in that castle. Its AI is more sophisticated than most of the Doctor's Badniks and having worked under him in the past, I'd... I'd just thought maybe it'd see reason like I did." He looked back to the village. The two fighters were already going at it. "It's beyond reasoning. Content at being a weapon. It's better for everyone if it's decommissioned right here."

Sorun made a scoff. "I could've saved you the time and told you that. It's an evil robot."

The hedgehog glanced back at Sorun. "I'd have thought you of all people would be more considering of AI with-"

"Shadow that thing's tried to kill me three times by now."

"... Fair point."

Words, said, the two focused back on the fight, with Marine watching alongside them. Sorun bit back a worried groan when he saw it was going rather poorly for Blaze. She was giving it her all, there was no doubt about that. Practically half the beach was covered with fire now, with more streams of the stuff constantly pouring off her limbs. He could see what she was going for: she'd learned extremely quickly that Metal Sonic was flat-out faster than her and was trying to deny it area of movement. Laying down fire hazards everywhere to limit where it could go, maybe try and bait it into prime position so she could attack then.

But it wasn't working. In fact, Metal Sonic didn't seem to even acknowledge any of her flames because it was simply *moving*

through them. The roaring hot flames weren't leaving so much as a singe mark as they kept lapping at the machine's chassis. The blue paint wasn't even being melted off. The fire simply wasn't doing anything.

Credit to Blaze, she saw how ineffectual the strategy was and changed it up. She'd tried throwing what were likely fireballs, but quite honestly they'd moved so fast through the air they looked more like bolts to Sorun's eyes more than anything else. The machine dodged them effortlessly and the flaming bolts violently exploded behind it, leaving wide craters. Ranged was completely out; she went in to melee range for physical attacks.

She was... extremely creative with the fire powers, that much was clear to Sorun. He'd only known her a short time but the display of talent was obvious. The way the punches and kicks flowed together seamlessly. The jets of fire blasting out of her limbs adding to her momentum, movement uninterrupted and leaving behind trails of flame as the cat ceaselessly and unrelenting just kept attacking without pause. It almost looked more like a dance than a string of fighting moves on fire flowing endlessly into each other, so quickly to Sorun's eyes it was practically a blur. It was almost beautiful.

It was also completely ineffectual. Fact of the matter was Metal Sonic was just that much faster and not a single hit Blaze was throwing out was landing. Whether it be from moving its body the bare minimum amount to dodge the hits or firing the engine on its torso up so that its entire body could zoom near-instantly behind Blaze to try and deliver a hit, only for it to be narrowly dodged, nothing was working. And while Blaze wasn't slowing down in the slightest, didn't even appeared to be tired, Sorun doubted she had the endless stamina a machine had.

"... This is a really bad matchup for Blaze," Sorun muttered out in observation. "Nicole told me once that thing is outfitted with a tungsten-carbide alloy chassis. It's completely fire-resistant and it's too fast for her to actually hit." He looked to Shadow. "I mean *you*

had trouble fighting this thing and when I tried a long time ago I couldn't even scratch it."

"Yes, those were my thoughts as well," Shadow agreed. "She needs help."

"Alright, great!" Sorun reached over and smacked Shadow on the back of his shoulder. It wasn't done hard enough to make him even flinch, though he'd still thrown a questioning look over at Sorun's way as a result. "Good luck, man, I'll be rooting for you."

"You're not coming?"

The big grin Sorun had been wearing for a second was replaced by a flat look. "With what powers? I'll be killed in a second down there. This is all you."

The only response Shadow deigned to give him was a roll of his eyes before vanishing in a flash of light. After his next blink Sorun saw that he was already down there, fighting alongside Blaze. It was good enough for him; he was pretty much dead weight here and he was fine not getting in the middle of that.

Nope, there was just no way. None. He was content to sit right up here on this hill and watch the fight. Maybe see some sick sights, far away and safe from all that fire and those explosions and people moving faster than he could see. Sorun wasn't having any of that. He was sitting right here.

"Oi, what is this!?" Sorun flinched when he heard that high-pitched voice go off in his ear once he actually did sit down. He looked to its source and was reminded of the raccoon girl that was with them. The one currently crossing her arms and frowning at him. "What, you're just gonna sit up here on your haunches while e'ryone else does all the fightin'!?"

"Yes. Exactly," Sorun unashamedly said, nodding his head. "Look, Mar... M, Big M, listen, see that?" He pointed down towards the fight.

Towards Shadow and Metal blitzing past each other doing who knows what because Sorun couldn't make it out. "You probably can but I sure can't. Know what that tells me? It tells me I'm gonna get cut in half if I get clipped by the smallest thing." He looked back at raccoon girl. "Like literally, I can't see them moving. It's just a bunch of blurs I can't make out."

Specifically a blue blur, a black and red blur, and in Blaze's case it was less a purple blur and more a vaguely cat-shaped rocket covered in fire flying around. She was the only one he could actually make out because she didn't have the sheer fuck-off speed the other two had. But that's essentially what this fight looked like to him. A bunch of colors flitting around one another, throwing up sand and whatever else was in their path as they moved. It was the kind of fight completely imperceptible to the human eye. And as far as Sorun concerned that meant he needed to stay the hell away.

Apparently raccoon-whose-name-began-with-an-M wasn't as convinced. "Yeah, well... fine, y'might have a point there, mate, but I ain't gonna be sittin' 'ere doin' nothing while Blaze's down there fightin' for out lives or my name ain't Marine!"

"Marine, her name's Marine, remember that your social standing with these people will never survive if they find out you forgot," Sorun intensely thought. "Hey if you think you can do something then go for it, Marine, I'm not stopping you," he continued, "I'm just telling you that I don't have any special powers like the other two down there so the most I'd do is get in the way and-"

He'd only seen it because the fight itself seemed to pause to address it; a momentary lull of calm. Blaze had attempted a hit on Metal and it'd whiffed like every other hit she'd thrown at it. Only this time when the machine had hit back, the hit actually landed. Specifically it was a hard punch right to her jaw. A punch that had been delivered hard enough she'd been tossed backwards while her feet traced lines through the sand. Shadow'd managed to move behind her and catch her before she took a spill and fortunately she still seemed to be conscious. But she looked dazed from the hit, and it appeared

Shadow holding her up was the only thing keeping Blaze from falling down.

"Oh. That thing just punched my new friend." It was remarkable how quickly Sorun had become infuriated seeing that. He'd gone completely still as a result, staring down at the village with an expressionless face. He could feel it happening again: the blood rushing quickly through him, sights and sounds sharpening, that feeling of pure anger being accompanied by that strange sense of being energized, of being *awake* . He felt great. And he felt extremely calm all of a sudden in addition.

More than that... when Metal and Shadow started to fight and trade blows again, he could *almost* make them out. It wasn't clear, the blurs of colors had upgraded merely to shapes, but it was an improvement. Tracking them with eyesight had gone from impossible to extremely difficult and impractical. But it was something.

Blaze was moving too, it seemed, which relieved Sorun a bit, but she was noticeably slower. He didn't know if that was because of the hit or if that was just his own perception working with Sorun. It didn't matter. He suddenly felt like going down there and doing something.

"Er... uh, Sorun?" Marine's voice drew Sorun's attention to the Mobian's face. She looked a bit creeped out at the moment, and had taken a step back. "Your eyes supposed to be doin' that? Glowin' all green and spooky? And what's goin' on with your hand?"

Sorun looked down at his right hand. The nails had elongated and sharpened again like last time, and had turned black. "Don't worry about it," he answered Marine, though the words didn't seem to take based on her expression. "Tell you what, though," he continued, beginning to stand up, "you make a fair point about sitting around and doing nothing while all that's happening. Even if it's just being a sitting target for a couple seconds I can probably buy them some kind of opening-"

Sorun had taken a single step forwards.

A single step forwards was all Sorun managed before it all came crashing down. His senses dulled, sounds becoming muffled and his sight blurring. Mind turning sluggish as his head began to swim. More worryingly he'd uncontrollably coughed out and a spray of blood splashed onto the ground in front of him. Marine had shouted out in fright and jumped back, looking down at the blood and then looking at at Sorun in worry. Sorun just stared down blankly at the blood as he noticed the nails on his hand shortened and went back to their normal color.

"Ah. Whoops." The edges of his vision were rapidly becoming black. He could barely hear his own breathing and everything was starting to blur further. Fortunately he tipped over and was about to fall on his face, so the ground being so close made it that much clearer. *"That ain't ideal... huh..."*

It certainly wasn't. He fell unconscious the moment his face hit the grass.

Space was not a void.

Space, for all its emptiness, had volume. Space contained planetary objects, stars, temperature, gasses, energy, and dimensions in its infinite expanse. These elements comprised a fraction of a fraction of the whole of space, true, but as a shadow was a shadow only by definition of the light that cast it so, to, was space defined by what it contained. The same was true for the universe as a whole. The same was true for the multiverse. It was just a difference of scale.

This was void. The deep blackness within this place was as vast as it was empty. An absolute void of nothing, absent of any dimension, and completely and utterly incomprehensible to anything even aware of such things. It was a place of absolutely nothing.

This was the innermost reaches of the mind of a thing born outside a world infested with Chaos energies filling every crevice in the facets of the world it touched.

This was home.

Lying there on the metaphorical ground of nothingness was Sorun, appearing asleep. Another Sorun completely identical to the first one stood over him. He didn't have much of an expression other than looking slightly annoyed as he stared down at Sorun.

"Hey. Hey, wake up." Sorun kicked at the sleeping Sorun's side. "Sorun, it's me. Listen I've been workshopping some thoughts out in the back of your subconscious, you wanna listen?"

"Hrmph...?" With an otherwise undignified snort Sorun's eyes slowly opened up. He slowly stood up, bleary look on his face, and rose his hands up to rub at his eyes to clear his vision. He quickly made a long-suffered, exhausted sigh when he saw where they were. "So that's how it is," he mumbled out as he looked up at Sorun again. "We died again?"

"Nah. We just passed out," Sorun answered. That was enough for Sorun - he collapsed back into laying on his back as he stared up at the infinite expanse of of nothingness. "Sorun, seriously, I've been thinking and we gotta talk."

"I have no desire to speak. Begone."

Sorun's expression tightened. It was no longer annoyance but a pensive look upon his face. He was clearly uncomfortable with what he was about to say. "Look, I... get, a few weeks back when we first noticed something was wrong with us, why you decided to just try and ignore it and hope it would go away. And I understood that and looked the other way because I figured we had enough problems and this one could be put on the backburner." Sorun rubbed at the back of his neck, glancing downwards at his feet with an awkward expression. "But we're spitting blood and passing out in front of people now. There's no hiding from that. Like literally none. I'm good with helping you come up with bullshit on the fly but I can't lie our way outta this one, man. We're sunk."

"..." Sorun rolled over to his other side. Sleep wasn't coming from him. "And?"

"And it's getting worse, man!" Sorun shouted. "I mean it was just little things at first, a weird feat of strength here and there that we shouldn't have been able to do, but then the green-eye thing kept getting more frequent and now we're growing claws and shit. I don't know why but it's happening and we can't even maintain it without falling flat on our face," he said. "Shit, we shouldn't have even been able to maintain it that first time over in that fucking castle if it weren't for that hit of Mobian blood, and *even then* you felt like shit after! It kept us up and gave us a power boost but fuck I think it made things even worse, man!"

The Sorunn lying down huffed out a breath, and then, with painstaking slowness, sat up into a sitting position, though made effort not to look at the standing Sorun. He shuffled some of his dark hair to hide a majority of his face. "You're obviously working up to some kind of point. State it already."

Sorun breathed out and rubbed at his face. "We need help, man," he mumbled, letting his hands fall to his side. "Like actual, professional help. We can't do this on our own. A doctor or some kind of Chaos energy specialist or something. 'Cause we can't keep going on like this."

He stopped and waited for the sitting Sorun to saw something in response. He didn't - just kept sitting there with his hair in his face, looking away from himself. It made Sorun make a clicking sound with his mouth out of impatience. He stomped over to him.

"Hey, this is fuckin' serious," he said as he crouched down in front of himself. "Alright? There's something wrong with us and-"

Oh. He'd seen what the problem was when Sorun brushed the hair away from Sorun's face. He was less sitting and more curled in on himself, holding his knees against his chest while looking down and away in an effort to look anywhere but at his own face. Mouth

tightened into a thin line and skin paler than it should be. His eyes shaking as hard as the rest of his body. He looked terrified.

"It's fine," he whispered out in a small voice. "Nothing's wrong. We're fine, this isn't anything. It isn't getting worse. We're fine. We are. It will go away..."

"..." It was too hard to watch, so he simply didn't. Sorun had to turn his head so he wouldn't have to look. "Listen, I ain't gonna let us die-
"

"Don't say things like us dying." He pulled on his knees tighter, drawing more of himself in. "Please. Not again. I don't want to go through this again..."

"... We ain't gonna-" Sorun cut himself off, frowning. He didn't much believe himself, not completely, not after everything they'd seen. But he had to convince himself somehow here. "Listen, it ain't like we've been scarfing down those Chaos Emeralds like last time, and there's a whole world of people who know way more 'bout this stuff than us," he said to himself. "It's something we're gonna have to confront anyways. Marine saw it, so she's gonna tell Blaze, and she'll tell Shadow and he ain't gonna leave it alone, so... you know, that's it. It's done. And maybe that's for the best, because we need to do something about this."

The Sorun sitting in front of him stopped shaking. That was a good step, but he still wouldn't look up and he still wouldn't drop the terrified look. And Sorun understood it. Felt the desire to ignore it, to not talk about or even address what was happening. To acknowledge that the reality of the situation was in fact reality. He couldn't not feel these things when they were on one mind. But it was also his responsibility to snap him out of this shit.

"We'll find someone. Alright? Maybe Quack over in New Mobotropolis, maybe someone else, dunno who, but someone who can help us," Sorun said. He'd put a hand over on Sorun's shoulder in some attempt to put him at ease. "We'll even find Finitevus and

pin him to the wall if we get desperate enough. That prick owes us one."

The proclamation elicited a small chuckle out of Sorun. Another good sign. "That's something, I suppose." He finally looked up at his own face. "We'll be alright. Won't we?"

He had to be honest with himself. "No. We broke months ago and I've been working my ass off holding it all together. And things were getting easier until that fucking Scourge guy happened." They grasped hands, and Sorun pulled Sorun up so that they were both standing and at eye-level. "But that ain't your problem, don't worry about it. Physically speaking? Yeah. We're gonna fix this."

A small, broken smile formed on Sorun's face. He didn't believe himself for a moment. "With such a 'concise' plan such as that I have a hard time believing you. But I still appreciate it. Fine. We'll... proceed with trying to do something." His smile turned a bit wry. "You will just yell at me anyways until I do something otherwise."

"Yeah, well, someone has to. And you worry too much. When have we ever actually made anything as substantial as a plan?" Sorun scoffed at the mere thought. "Alright, now... assuming the whole Metal Sonic thing got taken care of and we're not about to have our head stomped on in our sleep we should be good to go. Just start movin' and we'll improvise from there."

The first thing Sorun noticed when he woke up - he was groggy and felt awful. At this point that was probably a good thing. Pain meant things were working. Back in the day he'd stopped feeling anything because Chaos energy had been wreaking so much havoc on him that bodily functions had slowly been starting to cease. Things certainly didn't feel "fine", but bad was better than catastrophic. For now.

The second thing he noticed was that he was in a bed. He didn't recognize the ceiling when he woke up. It was off-white plaster and

nothing else. Opening his eyes further and sitting up didn't help much either. The room itself was pretty sparse aside from a small closet and a desk, nothing of which he recognized. There was a noticeable whiff of brine in the air, though, and moonlight was filtering in from a nearby window. When he moved out of the bed, thankfully confirming he still had his clothes, and moved to it he saw the ocean and the village from earlier down below. Thankfully not on fire this time.

So they were still on the Southern Island in Blaze's world. That was good. That there weren't fires anymore and somebody had carried him into a bed meant Metal Sonic probably wasn't a problem anymore, so that was the main problem deal with. That just left... the other issue.

With a sigh, Sorun moved away from the window and looked down at his own hand. It looked normal, which was a good enough sign. Normal-sized pale nails and all. He looked good; he felt awful. Sick. A familiar kind of sick. His body wasn't shutting down, not yet, but this was a familiar sickness nonetheless.

He shook his head and moved towards the door to the room. It lead out into a hallway - white stone lined the walls and there were enough candleholders with lit candles bolted to the surfaces that it may as well have been illuminated by lightbulbs. It looked "clean" for how archaic it looked, which had its own charm in Sorun's eyes. He didn't take too long to admire it, though, as he'd began walking down the hallway. Walking turned to stumbling. Stumbling, after a loud fit of coughs, turned to him collapsing against a wall.

"H-hey!"

Oh, a new voice. Blaze's. Sorun got to listen it as his back slid down the wall until he was sitting down, coughing blood into his hand. He saw the purple cat quickly move into his view and take a knee in front of him, stretching out her hands to help him but then pausing when she realized she didn't know *how* to help him. Her face was set in alarm. It was a large contrast from the quiet confidence he'd

began to associate her with, or all that righteous fury she'd displayed from about two minutes 'til he'd passed out.

"Ahck, ahck...! O-oh, hey, Blaze..." He pulled his hand away from his mouth. It was heavily flecked with blood. "I ain't doin' too good."

"Yes, I can see!" She sounded about as worried as she looked. Finally having decided a course of action, she'd grabbed at his shoulder and helped to keep him up so he didn't fall down any further. "Sorun, what is this? What's wrong?"

"The... natural progression of life, I s'pose," Sorun muttered out in answered. "The inevitable end for all us Voidborn."

Still holding his shoulder, Blaze had blinked in confusion. "I-I don't follow. Voidborn?"

"It's a title that makes me sound cooler than I actually am, Blaze, the word 'void' automatically makes anything cooler if you add it," Sorun continued to mutter, chuckling mildly with bloodstained teeth. "I was... born outside the stars, Blaze. In the deep, inky black of nothingness. And I think this whole multiverse kind of hates me for that because it tries really hard to kill me all the time. Like it's spiteful over my mere existence."

"Please stop this line of thinking, it isn't helping." The cat squeezed his shoulder and roughly shook him, as if she were attempting to keep him awake and coherent. It got a bit of his blood flowing, so he didn't know, maybe it did. "I don't see any wounds on you, is this... what is this, some sickness?"

"Yeah. The sickness of life."

"You *are not helping* ."

She didn't like metaphors apparently. Fair enough. Sorun barely tolerated them, too. "Chaos energy is poisonous to me and this is what happens when I get too much," he explained. "But I... haven't

taken in any. I don't think. I don't, I don't know why this is happening."

Blaze leaned a bit away from Sorun. She still looked worried over him but there was a hint of skepticism in her expression. Disbelief. Like she couldn't believe what he said. "That... makes absolutely no sense. No, that can't be right," she said. "The energies of Chaos are intrinsic to *everything* . To life itself. To suggest something is otherwise is impossible. You-"

Mid-sentence her hand had alit with fire. Gentle yellow-orange flames. Not at all like the raging orange and red fireballs she'd been tossing at the robot earlier. She held the lit hand to Sorun's chest who'd stilled at being touched by fire, but all he felt was mild warmth from the fire's contact. And then Blaze had frozen.

"... You've no fire," she mumbled in realization. As the truth of what Sorun said just hit her, causing her hand to limply fall away from Sorun's chest as the flames die out. "You tell the truth...?"

"I love explaining this to people. They get so baffled every time," Sorun chuckled out. He couldn't help it; the look on her face was funny. "So is it Chaos fire or-?" he asked, looking down at her hand.

"No. Sol energy is a... derivative, for lack of a better term. One unique to this zone. Same in nature but different in form. It's... perhaps complicated, for those outside this world who are uninitiated," Blaze explained. "I was born with these abilities so I have an easier time grasping the concept. It's a power that binds this world together, quite literally, and regulated proper through the use of the Sol Emeralds. It's why I was chosen to look after this world - I'm the only one who can manifest the abilities needed to control and stabilize the Sol Emeralds. Which is quite hard when most of them are missing." She shook her head, looking concerned again. "But none of this is your problem. To have absolutely no connection to the Chaos Force..." She trailed off. She almost looked troubled at the implication. "Whether it's natural denizens of this world connected to the power of Sol energy or denizens of others worlds connected to

Chaos energy, it doesn't matter. I can see that power flickering in everyone I see like a lit flame. Like a burning wick inside a candle. But with you it's like the wick is unlit, and yet still burns anyway. A wick sitting in an endless void of nothing instead of a candle. It makes no sense."

"Nothing about me makes sense," Sorun said. "But, uh, is my wick in particular really short or-?"

"There is no wick. The wick is a metaphor," Blaze snapped. She apparently *did* have a flair for them. "I don't know *what* I'm looking at with you. It's like I'm looking at a corpse."

The only break in the ensuing silence was the near-silent sputtering of all the nearby candles lighting the hallway. It carried on for a long series of moments as Blaze's brain seemed to catch up to the words that left her mouth, at which point she grew to look *very* uncomfortable. Sorun was so amused he could have laughed. He didn't, and he was thankful he managed to keep a straight face, but he was having a lot of fun right now. He didn't even need to tease her; she was doing it for him.

"Not that... you are a corpse, Sorun. I promise you I hadn't meant to imply anything." If she was flustered at all she was doing a great job hiding it, but that wary tone said enough. "Despite your condition," she continued, coughing off to the side. Politely.

"No hard feelings," Sorun assured her. It went a long way, apparently, because Blaze's shoulders visibly relaxed when he said it. "But I get it."

"'Get it?'"

"Your whole Sol deal. Chaos energy turning into something else, another form of energy. Your fire. I think that's its hallmark: that it can turn into anything. Why it's called 'Chaos', I guess, though the only other time I've seen it is..."

With him. When he absorbed Chaos Emeralds and twisted their power into demonic energy with the powers he'd used to have. Things like the Yamato that'd always felt *wrong* to anybody he'd come near it with, especially those sensitive to Chaos energy. They always looked at it like it was a leper. Like they couldn't comprehend what that power was other that it felt wrong. Blaze was the same, except this fire seemed to be a natural facet of this world. A uniquity, as she'd said. Only difference was one of them had a link and could handle the power and one didn't and couldn't, and humanity drew the short end of that stick it seemed.

"... Look, don't think too hard about it, Blaze," Sorun told her. "It is what it is. Can't change it as much as you can't change having those powers. 'S just a part of us. 'Cept mine kills me."

"..." The ears on top of Blaze's head lowered halfway. A look of understanding and resignation formed. "Could you not just go back to wherever you come from? Surely there-"

"Can't. Not an option," Sorun immediately said. "I don't want to talk about it, Blaze, just don't ask."

"Very well. I won't." Blaze helped to pull Sorun up to his feet. He'd managed with her help. The sickness was starting to recede, at least for now. It seemed to come and go. "Is there anything I could possibly do to help you?"

"Nah. Not really," Sorun answered honestly. That answer only seemed to dishearten Blaze more. "There're doctors and specialists in the Prime Zone I can try going to. I'm not holding out hope, though. I'm not supposed to exist here. Total uncharted territory. Nobody really knows what to do with me."

"Then... we should perhaps be getting you home now." Blaze had grown a bit quieter by now. A look a bitter acceptance on her face that was quickly hidden when she turned around and began walking down the hall, long purple tail trailing behind her. "This way, please. Follow me."

Sorun did so. Quietly at first, hands casually tucked in his pocket as he stared after her back. He'd grown bored after a minute and began looking around, though in the hallway there wasn't much to glance until they'd crossed a window that gave another view of the island.

"So what happened with Metal Sonic?" Sorun asked as they passed the window. They'd come to a door; Blaze had opened it to reveal a spiral staircase that she began to take downwards, with Sorun following in tow. "I assume my head not getting crushed like a grape in my sleep means that you won."

"Graphic description aside, yes," Blaze replied, not even so much as flinching from Sorun's words as they climbed down the stairs. "We'd lured it in front of our ship and Marine destroyed it with one of the ship's cannons. That zone-traversing engine Shadow had mentioned was unfortunately destroyed with the rest of the machine, though as promised I'd given him the Chaos Emerald left to me by Sonic." She glanced up and over her shoulder at Sorun as they continued to descend. "He stayed behind to wait for you. He seemed worried."

"Mh." Sorun glanced off to the side. "I guess I have you to thank for putting me in a bed after passing out like a loser?"

"Yes. Though I'd prefer you not belittle yourself over a medical condition you can't control." She looked back forwards. "Marine told me you'd begun to display some sort of power and expressed a desire to help before you became overwhelmed and passed out. A bed was the least I owed you."

Sorun scoffed. "She tell you how I tried to cower out of the fight?"

"I can't blame you for not wanting to get involved with a foe that gave me of all people trouble, Sorun. It wasn't your place anyways. While I'm grateful for Shadow's and Marine's help, it was my people that thing was accosting and entirely my responsibility to deal with." They'd made it to the bottom of the staircase. There wasn't much there. Just a small, circular room and a doorway in front of them. "But," she continued, placing a hand on the door while looking back

at Sorun, "I can appreciate you at least attempting something despite the obvious personal risk. So you have my thanks for that much at least."

The small smile she'd gave him was a genuinely honest one and it forced him to glance away from her again all bashful-like. He didn't manage to formulate a response as she opened the door. Fresh air and sea breeze instantly hit his face as the two stepped out. When they'd exited Sorun had looked up and behind him to see the small tower he'd first seen when they sailed to the Southern Island to begin with looming overhead. Looking ahead he saw the base of the tower was situated on a large hill. There was a guardrail circulating the perimeter of the tower a few meters out and a small footpath to the side that lead down into the small village below.

"So everything alright down there?" Sorun asked when he looked to the village. "It looked pretty bad before."

"All things considered the damages were fairly moderate and the people only suffered minor injuries," Blaze answered, sounding both relieved and exhausted at her own words. She'd leaned forwards against the guardrail circling the tower, folding her arms under her while looking out in the same direction Sorun was. "It shouldn't take too long for things here to return to normal order. The people here are no strangers to danger."

"Okay." He took a position right next to Blaze against the guardrail and adopted the exact same leaning position she was using. "Wow, so you have to take care of this whole planet, huh?" He glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes. "That's a whole lot of responsibility I don't even wanna try imagining. You don't even look that old."

"I'm seventeen years old for your information," she responded, almost sounding defensive. "It's plenty old."

"Yeah, I'm seventeen, too, and the most responsibility I have to worry about is my delivery job."

"There's no reason to be ashamed over that," Blaze said. "In this world couriers are highly sought after for their services. They're required to brave harsh storms, pirates, and other such dangers in order to transport packages from one island to the next. I hear the mental stress alone can be tolling, but they persevere regardless since everyone is dependent on what they deliver. It's one of the most respected professions one can have here."

"Uh... yeah, I usually don't have to deal with any of that," Sorun lamely responded. What else was he supposed to say? He just teleported everywhere. He was paid for a unique skill, not how labor-intensive his job was. Meanwhile apparently all the couriers here were fighting for their lives to deliver whatever. It made him not want to meet one; he wasn't sure he'd be able to look them in the eyes.

"Oh?" Blaze looked to him with a curious look. "The one time I'd ever gone to Mobius Prime it had been infested with machines terrorizing the populace. Is this not a pressing concern anymore?"

"It's getting better," Sorun admitted. "I don't really know the details, though. I just deliver stuff."

"Ah..." Blaze tapped at the guardrail a few times and looked down towards the village. She searched for something new to say and seemed to fail. "Shadow is waiting for you down below. You're both free to leave at your earliest convenience."

"Oh, alright. Cool."

She looked back at Sorun. The easygoing expression she'd grown fell back into looking a bit concerned again. "Are you certain you're going to be alright?" she asked. "If you're too unwell to be traveling I wouldn't object to you staying to recuperate-"

"Nah, I'll be fine," Sorun lied, "really. And you sound like you have a bunch of stuff going on so I'm gonna hit the road." He pushed off the guardrail and stuck his hands back in his pockets. "Good luck with

the whole Sol Emerald thing. Hope it pans out alright. I hear losing a world can really mess a guy up."

He maneuvered around Blaze to make his way towards the nearby footpath. He turned his torso back to her to wave in goodbye, with Blaze reciprocating the wave with one of her own. There hadn't been a smile on her face. More a neutral expression now than anything else, though the ghost of some worry had still been present in her eyes. At least until Sorun had walked far enough away he couldn't really make her face out anymore. It was more or less just a blob of purple and white now.

At that point Sorun'd turned away and made his way into the village. Things were calmer now than the last time he'd laid eyes on it. He saw that koala from earlier, the one being held by the neck, at a carpenter's table nearby sawing a plank of wood near one of the more burned-out houses. And a... completely identical koala pass by carrying some building supplies. In fact the more Sorun looked around the more he realized it was only koalas here. There were at least a dozen or so of them around, doing their own thing. A few had glanced his way and waved and the most Sorun could do was wave back as he continued walking.

"Huh, alright." It was mildly interesting after having lived in a city populated by a such diverse spread of species for so long, but the interest had completely faded after a few seconds as his search for Shadow continued. It wasn't that hard a search - he was leaning his back against the outside of a small shop-looking place, looking at something palmed in his hand.

The hedgehog looked up when Sorun approached. On a first glance he looked irritated to Sorun's eyes. Extremely so. He was also fidgeting around with whatever he was holding in his hand, almost obsessively. Whatever it was output a soft green glow.

"Would you mind telling me why it seems like you're sick again?" That was the first thing Shadow asked when Sorun stopped in front

of him. He was staring straight into his eyes. "No lies or vagaries. I'm in no mood."

Sorun gave him a nonchalant shrug. "I dunno. Maybe the world hates me. Maybe marinating in the Master Emerald for a couple decades didn't do wonders for my health. You act like I have concrete answers here."

The irritation in Shadow's eyes lessened greatly. He looked down into whatever he was holding, shuffling a bit against the wall. "... How long?"

"Noticed a few weeks ago. Small things. A few physical feats here and there that were weirdly easy. On and off bouts of weakness. The eye and hand thing Marine probably told you about's way more recent."

Shadow's hand squeezed down. He looked irritated again, but when he spoke out his voice didn't nearly sound as harsh as his face looked. "You didn't say a single thing. Why?" he demanded.

"... I just didn't." It was bad enough he wasn't able to meet Shadow's eyes when he looked up at him and had to look away, but he wasn't sure what else to say. It was the honest truth. Not something that could be elaborated on further.

But apparently Shadow *did* want further elaboration, because he didn't look satisfied with it at all. The irritation visible on his face deepened as his mouth creased into a thin line and his eyes narrowed. "You could have at least told someone-"

"Tell them what?" Sorun asked. He himself was growing irritated at the questions. "This? What are they supposed to say, what is *anyone* supposed to do about this, Shadow? About me?" Sorun asked, throwing a hand up in frustration. "Most people that know stuff about Chaos energy take one glance at me and call me a walking contradiction or whatever, my biology isn't a *thing* in this entire multiverse!" he shouted. "And you know it was, it was easier

pretending nothing was wrong because at least then I could hope it would just go away, but it's not, it's getting worse and I can't do anything about it!"

He was panting when he finished yelling; Shadow was staring at him in surprise, even in a bit of worry. Sorun knew why: his eyes were probably green again. The heightened senses and feeling to renewed strength was a dead giveaway. The green light bouncing off his right hand when he held it up to his face was another large sign. So were the black fingernails on that hand.

And then the light cut off, and color started to bleed back into the nails. And then Sorun wobbled on his feet again as a surge of weakness shot through him, and he felt a bit of dampness on his upper lip as a line of blood dripped out of his nose. All sense of anger completely faded from Shadow's face, as he just looked alarmed now. Alarmed enough he'd even taken a few steps towards Sorun for fear he'd fall over, but stopped when he managed to stay on his feet.

Panting, Sorun took his right hand away from his face. It was shaking slightly; he wasn't sure why. He looked back at Shadow who could only stare. "You see what I mean? I-it's getting more frequent and you see what it does to me after," he muttered out. "What happens if it just starts turning on and off at random? What if it gets to a point where it's permanently on? How long until I die if that happens?"

"Do you..." Shadow hesitated, refusing to look away from Sorun. His mouth was silently moving like he was trying to figure out what to day. "Sorun, you can't leave this alone."

"I know I can't." Surprise showed in the hedgehog's face. "I'm not telling you all this to be fatalistic, Shadow, I... I'm genuinely asking you what I'm supposed to do here. 'Cause I don't know."

Shadow didn't have an answer, either. It was obvious. Sorun knew him long enough to know he was the kind of person that would have

said something immediately if there were some sort of magic answer to all his problems. But all he did was stare without saying a word, which was enough for Sorun to know. He was just as lost as he was with what to do.

Eventually Shadow began rolling around whatever was in his palm again. This time Sorun had caught a quick glance of it. A green Chaos Emerald. Not *the* green one he was accustomed to. This one was smaller, its surface less lustrous and its shine more dim. And he could almost feel it was... lesser so than that actual Emerald he held in the past. One of the hundreds of thousands that'd been fused into one of the seven, now eight, Emeralds that had somehow wound up in Blaze's world before it'd been fused with the rest.

"... You could," Shadow began, and Sorun knew he must have been wracking his brain if it was taking him this long to say something, "come back with me. To G.U.N. There are... specialists under their employ who could potentially look at you. The same ones who have been studying the Chaos Emeralds we have."

The idea wasn't the most appealing one Sorun had heard of. "I'm not really sure-"

"By all means tell me what else you have in mind," Shadow interrupted, tone a bit snappish. "Because it's either try there or go back to the doctors in New Mobotropolis, and they were of little help to you the first time around. I'm not saying they'll have any answers for you, either, but you asked me for help and this is all I can offer."

"I don't know, Shadow, that's..." Hopeful. Something. *Anything* to grasp onto, and yet Sorun still wasn't so sure. "H-how long would I have to stay there?" he asked. "Would they even let me? Is that something you can even ask them to do?"

"I have some sway, but beyond that..." Shadow's eyes drifted away from Sorun. In a random direction, really, though they seemed to eventually focus onto the Emerald for nothing else than to have something to look at. "It could be floated that you were instrumental

with my mission here retrieving this and that you requested these examinations as compensation. It's within my power as an agent to authorize such things. There wouldn't be any issues."

Sorun felt surprised hearing that. "You'd really just lie to them like that?"

"It's not a lie strictly speaking. You did fish me out of that ocean," Shadow said. "Technically there's nothing stopping you from making such a request at this moment and me approving it. It's not something I would normally do but these are extenuating circumstances and you evidently need the help."

"Okay." A hand found its way to Sorun's forehead. It was colder than he was used to, the hand or the forehead, he wasn't sure which. He was pretty sure he'd been sweating at some point but he didn't feel hot at all. "Okay, okay say I agree to this, you, what, you just teleport us back to the base and- seriously, how long?"

"A few days, I doubt it'd even take a week," he answered. "Sorun, I'm not saying this to give you some sense of false hope, I genuinely don't know if they can help you, but... well." He looked up from the Emerald and back at Sorun. He looked more reserved now, his default expression: a neutral look with slightly narrowed eyes. And yet, strangely, he wasn't staring as harshly as he normally did. "Isn't it worth at least trying? For your sake? Or if not that then at least for the sake of people that care about you?"

"... Just gimme a sec, would you?" Sorun mumbled. He didn't even stop to look if Shadow gave him some sort of affirmation, a nod or anything like that. If he said anything Sorun hadn't heard it. He'd just turned around on his feet, arms crossed and eyes at his feet as he thought.

It did sound good, admittedly. Not hopeful. He wasn't sure a bunch of Overlander scientists could tell him anything the Mobians over in New Mobotropolis hadn't told him in the past, which was quite literally nothing, but he'd been surprised before. A total shot in the

dark was still a shot. An option to exhaust. A potential way forwards. If Shadow could take care of it all he stood to lose was some time.

The fact he'd have to spend time away, though, was what was causing him hesitation. He didn't want to spend a few days at some government facility. He just wanted to go home, crawl into his bed, and sleep this away. To be near the people that cared about him, people he felt like he needed right now. But then he had to acknowledge the main issue: that this wasn't going away and the option of ignoring it was long past. He didn't *want* to ignore it anymore. He wasn't sure why - he just felt the strong urge to do something about this.

"G.U.N., though, I dunno, I guess... I guess if everyone's cool with them and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong, it'd, it'd be fine. I think." He somewhat trusted Shadow, and he said they were trustworthy. None of the friends he trusted never actually said anything bad against them. It was hard to pit those opinions against his personal bias formed from opinions on Earth governments, but desperate times. *"Sounds like a really low risk plan, and I need something here. And Nicole's gonna get super pissed at me for hiding this for so long so it gets me a few days to work out how I'm gonna deal with that. That alone's probably reason enough to go."*

He glanced at his hand again. Everything looked normal. He looked from the hand and at Shadow. He was still staring, expectantly. *"Fuck it. What've I got to lose?"* Sorun decided. He'd sighed out loud while looking up at the nighttime sky. "I've gained lots since I lost it all. A new life. Home. Community. People that'd actually care if I died. And I don't want to lose that all again. And I have responsibilities aside." He flipped his hand over, palm pointing towards the sky as Sorun continued to speak. "After all I promised Silver I would take him back to the future when his whole thing is settled. And Honey'll complain forever if the guy she has transport her product everywhere kicks it. I can't do any of these things dead. So if you wanna have a bunch of G.U.N. scientists poke and prod

me in the hope they can fix whatever's wrong with me then whatever, let's do it."

"It won't be that dramatic." Somehow when Shadow said that it sounded negatively reassuring, but perhaps that was just Sorun's nerves speaking on the matter. "But I think you're making the right choice."

"Great, glad we got that settled." Sorun began reaching for the miniature Emerald in Shadow's hand. "Just gimme that thing real quick and I can cut us a way to-"

" *I* ," Shadow interrupted, holding the Emerald out from Sorun's grasp, "am going to use this to teleport us to the base, at which point I will hand it over to my superior and we can get on with trying to save you."

Sorun froze halfway to reaching for the Emerald. He pouted at it having been taken from him, then pulled his arm back while moodily stating, "Fine, we'll do it your way. The boring, official way. Pfft."

"It's not that I don't trust you. It's that this Chaos Emerald is G.U.N. property now and you being seen with it as opposed to me would not look well," Shadow said. "Just grab onto my shoulder and we'll be on our way."

He wasn't going to argue the point. It was very clear in his tone and Sorun didn't feel like trying to budge the matter, so he simply rolled his eyes and clamped a hand down on his shoulder. "You gonna shout your big lame 'Chaos Control!' thing?"

"I do it to help me focus." Green light began to condense around the Emerald. He glanced at Sorun. "You take objection to it?"

"I mean, it... like it was this whole trope on Earth, you know? People shouting their attacks or whatever in shows and whatnot."

Shadow blinked. Slowly. "Trope?"

"Yeah, and it became so popular that it became lame in the eyes of the masses. It basically became a huge joke in most circles," Sorun explained. "And it's just so extra, you know? And a big tell to whoever you're fighting. You never heard me shout something like 'Spiral Swords, go!' when I was running around back then. I just did it. But if you need the mental focus to pull this off don't let me stop you, man, it's cool."

"..." Shadow looked at the Chaos Emerald with considering eyes. He looked at Sorun. And then he looked at the Emerald again. "We'll be teleporting momentarily. Prepare yourself."

"Not gonna shout your thing?"

"I don't need to shout 'my thing', Sorun, verbal commands are unnecessary."

"Don't need the focus?"

Shadow's grip on the Chaos Emerald tightened as a look of intense concentration settled on his face. The gem's glow intensified. "I'm not some beginner who needs to rely on mental tricks to focus their abilities, and if you say one more word about it I will remind you of the time you were learning to teleport and kept slamming into trees."

The both of them vanished on the spot in a flash of green-yellow light before the smarmy retort could breeze past Sorun's lips.

Chapter 98

Recursion Error

Episode 98- PV

The cold here was blistering. It was familiar.

Winters back home had been brutal. Summers, too, but from how Sorun heard it the heat was even worse in the southern parts of America during those times. He wouldn't know for sure - had simply never been. He knew for a fact they had it worse in the winter, though. Those southern parts, some didn't even get snow in the winter. There in the north? In walking distance from Canada? The winters were blistering. So he and everyone else who lived there in Detroit simply got used to the cold.

Somehow this frozen mountaintop wasn't as cold. But maybe that was just Sorun.

So G.U.N.'s main base of operations were still up in the mountains. He'd been here once, briefly, but he hadn't stayed nearly long enough to appreciate it. And now after all this time he didn't care enough to appreciate it. The window he was staring out of was nothing but a vista of white-capped mountains, blue sky, and snow fluttering in his field of vision. It may as well have all been static and noise.

Three days. Three days of staying here, of answering questions, examinations, tests, prodding. All for fucking nothing.

"Well, heeeey there! You must be my new patient! Am I right or am I right, mm?"

"Y-yeah, um, yeah, I'm Sorun," he greeted, a bit nervously as his legs swung freely on the examination bed. The room he was in almost exactly looked like the kind of examination room one would find in a hospital on Earth, down to the back countertop with jars of miscellaneous medical stuff lying on top, the charts everywhere, and the anatomically correct human torso with half its skin flayed off sitting in the corner over there.

The woman was his doctor. The person G.U.N. told him would look at him to see what was wrong with him. A woman with a deep tan and... green hair. It wasn't dyed. He could tell just by looking. It was just naturally green. And her expression was near-uncomfortable levels of bright.

"Well hey, guy, don't be shy, you're in good hands." She gave him a playful little punch on the shoulder and then practically flew back in the rolling stool she was sitting in. "It's just, you know, gosh. It's not everyday I get to examine someone with ancient DNA that never got warped by the gene bombs. And when I heard you were from another universe? I was like, 'aaah!' and everything!" She made a bubbly little giggle and looked down at the clipboard she was holding. "And... what was it you were hoping to have looked at, exactly?"

"Yeah, it's... ahem." He had to take a moment to compose himself. He'd been coming in here expecting someone cold and clinical and got the exact opposite. It was nearly overwhelming, actually, and Sorun needed to take a moment to compose himself. "So, uh... Chaos energy. I can't deal with it. I mean I can USE it in enough amounts but, er, well it's pretty much poison, too. And I haven't, uh, absorbed is the word to use, I guess, absorbed any as far as I know but there was, you know, this one moment I may have been exposed, maybe, I dunno if that's what did it or not and... jeez, lemme just show you."

Control of it. He had that now, somewhat. He found it could still trigger on its own if tempers flared enough, strong emotional outbursts and the such. But he could consciously bring it forth now.

Make his eyes glow that eerie green color that sharpened all his senses and made that surge of strength flow through him.

The doctor made an "aahhh...!" sound, olive-colored eyes wide as plates as she looked. Sorun only held it for a moment; after it dropped and his eyes went back to blue a stream of blood started pouring from his nose. She made a startled noise akin to a squawking chicken, rolled towards a drawer, and frantically rifled through it before taking out a tissue and rolling back to Sorun to give it to him. He mumbled out a thanks and held it up to his nose.

It was draining. So draining. Just because he had a modicum of control over it didn't take away from the fact it felt like it was draining the life out of him.

"So as you can see I can do that *now," Sorun mumbled out. "I shouldn't be able to do that. And it's... it's been getting easier and easier to 'turn on', I guess you could call it, and I'm worried it'll get to a point I won't be able to turn it off. And, and doc whatever this is, this power, I can't handle it, it literally feels like it's killing me every time this happens. I bleed all over the place, I passed out for hours last time when I had it one for, I don't even know, it was like thirty seconds. I need it out of me, whatever this is."*

"OKAY, that's... wow. Wow wow wow, yeah, that's a lot to process." The doctor was biting her lower lip, looking at him and then glancing down at her clipboard. "Sorun I should mention I am G.U.N.'s, really the UF's as a whole, foremost expert in the science and study of Chaos energies, but this is completely unprecedented territory. Not that we won't try!" she quickly assured him. "I can promise you that we will use every single tool as our disposal to try and solve whatever this is."

"Alright..." Sounded good to him. Great, even. It was the first bit of hope he'd heard in a while. "So am I looking at a physical examination, some bloodwork, what are we doing?"

With a large smile the doctor rolled right up to him. She already had an empty syringe in her hand. "Yes, yes, and yes to all that, Sorun, yes and more. Oh, arm, please." He did so, having rolled up his sleeves so she could get at the skin underneath. "So I don't wanna sound weird or anything when I say that this is a really great research opportunity, is that weird, it's not weird, is it?" she asked as she rubbed at a spot on his arm with an alcohol-soaked cloth. "It's just that there's so many unanswered questions around Chaos energy so when something so interesting like you with such a unique reaction-"

"It's great, I'm sure," Sorun interrupted, "but how long exactly-?"

The needle was gently inserted into his arm. "Hard to say, Sorun. Gotta know what I'm lookin' at first!" she brightly replied. The glass tube she was holding began to fill with a crimson liquid. "First thing's first I need to get this down to the labs for analysis, and while that's cooking I'll come back and we can get all the boring health questions out of the way, m'kay?"

"When does it end when does it end when does it end?" More snow drifting in his field of vision, in this window that took up the entire wall of this room. All the white, sometimes it hid the mountaintops in the background. Sometimes when the snow cleared up they weren't mountains but burnt-out buildings, distorted and misshapen. Twisted hunks of metal and broken glass shaped like mountains. And then they were mountains again. The damn snow made it hard to see. His eyes shaking in his skull, irises moving around erratically, unnaturally and inhumanly fast, all made it so damn hard to see.

The edges of the glass was breaking, cracking. Closing in on him. Everything was cracking.

He took in a breath, startled to find that he just realized he'd been holding it. Sorun blinked. The window was pristine - not a single crack to be seen. Military base like this Sorun wouldn't be surprised to learn it was some kind of reinforced glass, so why would it be

cracked? And the sights beyond the snow were nothing but mountains. Made sense. Why would there be anything else but mountains?

"Mh..." His skin was itching. Badly. *"Need a soda."*

He turned around. This part of the base was a "lounge" for the soldiers on base here. Calling it a lounge didn't do it much justice, though. It was multiple rooms separated by glass walls that would have been a dream to live in. One room was a bunch of couches and sofas centered around a wall-mounted TV, another room was practically a bar. They had a room entirely devoted to a ping pong table, with a couple Overlander soldiers going at it right now. A kitchen, too, which was where Sorun immediately went to. Straight to the fridge was where he went.

The prize was there. The soda. Some brand of Overlander cola, he didn't bother reading it. He'd immediately ripped the cap off and threw the warped piece of metal in the garbage as he chugged the bottle's contents.

... It helped a little. Made the itching go away at least. The flavor was familiar but not quite the same. The burn of the carbonated liquid going down his throat wasn't quite as intense as the stuff back home, or even the Mobian brand, but hell, it was something. Something to take the edge off. Calmed him down a bit, let him think.

He looked up from the bottle. The two Overlander soldiers playing at the ping pong table, looking almost human but *not quite* , they weren't being subtle about sneaking glances his way. He cared a little, but not enough to actually confront them about it. All the soldiers and staff here, Sorun did his best to stay out of their way as much as possible. He got the impression they didn't really care about him or why he was here, though, which suited him fine. Just a guest here. Just a guest. A guest.

Guest guest guest.

There was a rapid clinking sound as Sorun rapidly drummed his fingernails against the now-empty glass bottle. He threw it in the nearby recycling can, hearing a quiet crashing sound - the bottle had probably broken from him throwing it so hard. He left the kitchen anyways, putting it out of his mind. He wasn't sure he liked this room. Too many bright lights. Too many people he couldn't stand to be around.

That would have been it right there and Sorun would have left if he hadn't heard it - a rustle. There, in one of the nearby cabinets. His footsteps had halted dead once the sound reached his ears and his eyes twitched over to the location of the sound. It was a standard setup: a counter with a sink, inlaid oven, and other appliances, lined with cabinets below the counter's surface and even more counters above it bolted to the wall. He'd heard the sound from one of the lower cabinets. The far one, furthest from the sink.

"A mystery." A diversion was welcome, even if it was a momentary one. He couldn't imagine it was a rodent of some kind, not in this kind of location. And with his current mood Sorun just couldn't resist, so he'd stalked over to the cabinet as quiet as he could. He'd slinked right up to the cabinet door, set in a crouch and eyes trained right at the handle. There were no sounds or signs of movement. Nothing. But he *had* heard a sound here. And he couldn't resist. Not when there could be anything in that cabinet.

He reached out and opened the cabinet door.

The mystery proved to be a short one because it was just a girl in there. Around ten or twelve, somewhere around there. An Overlander girl with skin almost as light as his, blonde hair, and eyes a brighter blue than his. She was folded in there, back against the inner cabinet wall and her legs pressed tight enough against her chest they were practically pushing against the cabinet's ceiling. She was staring right at Sorun, eyes wide and shocked. There was a half-eaten chocolate bar in her mouth.

"..." Profound disappointment radiated in Sorun upon the revelation it was just a girl in here and not something cool. He did reach out without a word and take the chocolate bar out of her mouth, though - she'd made a sound halfway between a squeak and a hiccup in surprise when he took it. Most of the chocolate's wrapper was still on it, so once he'd drew it close he turned the chocolate bar around to get a good look at the label. It read "G.U.N. FORCES FIELD RATION" on the front in big block letters and nothing else.

"Hmm." An army chocolate ration. He'd heard some armies even on Earth fielded such a thing but had never seen one before. There wasn't more he could observe from it. It looked like a normal chocolate bar and nothing else. So he'd reached back over and directly but the bar back into the now confused girl's mouth, right where he'd found it. Her eyes were darting around now out of bewilderment, and she'd made muffled sounds when the chocolate was put back. Sorun ignored it all and closed the cabinet door again.

After the door was closed Sorun remained there, crouched quietly in front of the cabinet door. He stared at the door in quiet consideration, motionless, as still as a statue. A secret girl wasn't nearly interesting enough to investigate, but that chocolate bar. He wondered how its taste compared to other kinds of chocolate he'd had on this world. He wanted to know. *Needed* to.

A decision reached, Sorun opened the cabinet door again. The girl was still there, her body jolting and then freezing when she realized he was still there and opened the door back up. The chocolate bar in her mouth was smaller than the last time he'd seen it.

The length mattered little. Questions needed to be answered, so once again he slowly reached out and removed the chocolate bar from her mouth once again. She let him, or more accurately she was just too confused to know how to react based on the look on her face. After he pulled the chocolate bar Sorun spoke.

"This any good?" he asked. His voice was monotone and toneless.

"H-huh?" The girl blinked, like him asking that had been the last thing she'd expected to hear. Maybe she hadn't expected him to say anything and was just surprised words came out of his mouth. She stuttered a bit and was making an effort to look anywhere but at Sorun's face. "It's, uh, it's... yeah, it's good."

"I heard stories where I come from that military chocolate is pretty terrible. You a liar?"

She squinted one of her eyes and tilted her head as much as the confined space she was in allowed, and her mouth dropped open a bit. "No...?" She reached out, tentatively. Slender hands snatched the chocolate bar out of his hand and pulled it back to her body's owner. She turned it around a bit in her hands, and after a moment's consideration flipped it over to the unbitten end. She removed the wrapper completely and broke off one of the sectioned pieces at the end that hadn't been contaminated by her mouth juices. "You want some?"

Yes. "Yes." His hand reached out, but stopped just short of grabbing the tiny square. And then his fingers moved, rapidly wiggling and flexing at a speed that human eyes would have a difficult time keeping up with. It squigged the girl out and caused her to cringe back a bit, but before she could have second thoughts about the chocolate Sorun snatched it and popped it in his mouth.

Tasted like shit.

"It's trash," he announced. It wasn't melting right on his tongue and it had the consistency of chalk. He didn't even try to savor it. He just broke it up with his teeth and swallowed the pieces as fast as he could so he didn't have to deal with it. The acrid taste was lingering on his teeth.

And now the girl was pouting. She took a large bite out of the chocolate, as if to spite Sorun's review. He wondered why the taste wasn't killing her. "It's not that bad," she nervously mumbled out,

pout melting away much quicker than the chocolate from Sorun's intense, unceasing stare.

"There's a small chocolate shop in Station Square that sells decent chocolate. I went there sometimes while on runs." He hadn't moved an inch since finding the secret cabinet girl. He hadn't blinked once. "There's a chocolatier that lives in New Mobotropolis, too, and her stuff is pretty great. It's hard to get cocoa beans out there, though, so she never makes a lot."

He'd been considering talking with that woman at some point to offer a hand of help in exchange for some of that chocolate. That was before the fucking pizza incident. Before this. Chocolate was one of the last things on his mind now.

"Okay?" The girl took another bite of the chocolate, somehow. "Well, it's hard to get good chocolate up in the mountains."

"That makes sense." He stood up, stepping back from the cabinet to give the girl space. "Vacate that space and converse with me further, cabinet girl."

He heard the girl mumble something to herself and then heard some more shuffling. The girl had climbed out of the cabinet, closing the door behind her. She was shorter than him by a few inches - this pleased Sorun. She also wore the most normal clothes Sorun had seen in this world. A simple black shirt, some jeans and sneakers.

It's because of that Sorun didn't say anything, even after she began to look at him expectantly, munching on the last of that evil candy. Because her clothes and face made her completely indistinguishable from a normal girl one would see on Earth. He felt something seeing her, but nostalgia wasn't the right word. The feeling Sorun felt looking at this girl felt more like phantom pain than nostalgia. Like somebody had decapitated his head and he still felt it.

"Can you please stop being so creepy...?" She must have been starving beforehand, because Sorun had no idea how she'd

managed to finish that chocolate otherwise. The blonde girl balled the wrapper up and stuffed it in her pocket, and then continued with, "Seriously, what do you want?"

The question snapped Sorun out of the small fugue he'd been in. For the first time since meeting her he blinked, and that one action alone somehow managed to make the girl visibly relax a bit. "Why were you hiding in the cabinet there like some kind of chocolate gremlin?" Sorun asked in his blank tone, pointing to the cabinet door.

"I'm not a... who even says that?" The girl's eyes narrowed up at Sorun's face, like she was trying and failing to decipher some kind of puzzle. She eventually gave up and shook her head, continuing with, "Well... we're only allowed so much of that chocolate on a monthly basis and I get in trouble if I'm seen eating a lot. So I just... you know. Sometimes take some without anyone knowing."

"... Life on a military base sure seems strict," Sorun concluded. The girl wordlessly nodded, looking closely at him while nervously holding her arm with the other. "But now that begs the question what a girl is doing- oh, you're Hope. I've heard of you," Sorun realized. Now he recognized her. She was the girl he'd caught a glance of the least time he was here on Guardian Mountain, after helping liberate Station Square.

"Yeah..." The girl, Hope, nodded at Sorun again. Looking back at the scant few descriptions he'd heard of her Sorun supposed he should have recognized her sooner. "You're that guy Shadow brought back, right? The one he said he wanted the doctors to all look at?"

"That one. Yes."

"Oh. Ahem." She cleared her throat and rocked a bit back and forth on her feet. "So, er, is everything alright with you?"

"..."

Day two of this place and Sorun was beginning to become a bit unsure.

These kinds of things took time. He understood that. It was understandable. And he realized asking for so much when they had so little information was a lot, and he also understood that, but he also understood his life was potentially in danger.

But he hadn't heard anything. Not a single thing, no diagnosis, no treatment options, not even any speculation. Just days of listening to this woman drone on and on.

"You need more blood...?"

"That's right, Sorun!" She was smiling so brightly that the harsh lighting in this room was truly glinting off it. It made him wince. It was like staring at a flash bang go off. "A lot of guys in the labs have been going head over tails over all the data you've been giving us! Oh, and everything else, the x-rays and deep scan readings, a lot of your biometrics, you're just... so much different on a biological level to us Overlanders, I could go on for days!"

He'd rather she didn't. He'd rather she give him what he came for. Answers. "That's nice," he quietly mumbled out. "Um... could we please talk about-?"

"I know, I know, you're worried about your condition." She practically jammed that needle into his arm. Sorun didn't so much as flinch. "Actually, that's... the thing, you know, we-"

"I don't know," Sorun interrupted. "I came to you precisely because I don't know."

"It's just a lot of data to sift through, Sorun, we've been doing a lot of tests and-"

"What data, why do you..." He sputtered out and gestured to the syringe being filled with his own blood. "This is the eighth syringe of

blood you've taken from me," he pointed out. "Why do you need so much?"

The doctor made a hum as she removed the needle. "If you really wanna know I have some staff doing genetic analysis on your samples, I have another team saturating blood samples with Chaos energy using that Emerald Shadow brought back to us to monitor any potential changes to compare to the control samples you've provided, and Sorun this is just a small fraction. We're still trying to figure out precisely how different you are from normal Overlander biology and if this condition of yours changed you in any way, and without a sample from before these symptoms of yours that's a hard task. We have the people for this but if you want it done quickly then we need as much material to work with as possible so everyone can get on it. Do you understand?"

Somewhat. It made enough sense on a basic level. It didn't change the fact how impatient he felt with all this, the frustration at the lack of progress. "I do," he said.

"Great!" The doctor beamed a smile at him. "Now I don't wanna gossip but I know a certain ~someone~ wanted to get you into MRI so we could take some scans of that big old brain of yours," she said, poking at his forehead.

He resisted the urge to slap it away and made a sigh. "Is it you?"

And she laughed. Of course she laughed. "Ha ha, yep! Guilty as charged! Okay, so if you'll follow me..."

"... I don't wish to discuss it."

"Why not? Are you sick or something?"

"Or something." Sorun leaned forwards, face coming unusually close to Hope's. The contact proved to be just a bit too bearing for the girl, as she'd paused in her motions and grew an uncomfortable look on

her face from his proximity. "But we're not talking about me, are we? We're talking about how you're sneaking chocolate behind the military's back."

Hope took a few steps away from Sorun. She looked less nervous and more creeped out now, in an almost annoyed manner. "And what are you gonna do? Tell on me? I'd rather you didn't."

"Normally I wouldn't. But you asked me not to. So now I'm gonna," Sorun said.

"Oh, noooo, they'll get me for sneaking chocolate, whatever will I do...?" Hope made a showing of holding a hand against her forehead and doing a fake swoon... only to then straighten out and snort out a laugh. "Psh, yeah, like I'll get any worse than a slap on the wrist for that."

"And yet you're sneaking away into cabinets with that chocolate."

Hope's mouth thinned a bit into a frown. "Well yeah, but..." She paused to search for a comeback, but she must have come up blank because she made a defeated sigh. "Listen, Sorun-"

"You know my name?" Sorun said. He made a slow blink and tilted his head the smallest bit.

"Yeah, of course I know your name, I just told you Shadow told me about you. I've actually been trying to find you for the last few days but could never catch you," she confessed, raising a hand up to nervously scratch behind her head. "I wanted to talk to you. You're from Knot- I mean, New Mobotropolis, right? With the all the Mobians?"

"... I live there currently, yes," Sorun answered. "What relevance is this?"

Hope's head scratching was picking up in pace. She looked nervous again, and seemed to be struggling to get the words out. "Can you...

can you tell me how everyone there is doing?" she asked. "I know a lot of people there and I just wanted to know-"

"No."

"What!?" In a flash Hope's nervous demeanor had instantly switched to one of indignation, with just a dash of anger added on. She'd pouted up him, all angry-like, and had even stomped her foot down in protest. "Why!?"

"I'm bored." Honest truth, he couldn't deny that. He needed some diversion and some entertainment, after all, and the current diversion was already growing stale. And he needed to pay her back in some way for the taste that "chocolate" left in his mouth.

Hope was excessively blinking now with wide eyes in a frantic manner. Not angered, but panicked. The threat of Sorun outright refusing to deny her what she was seeking was having a profound effect on her, more than he'd anticipated. It was so bad she almost looked worried, even. "I'm not even asking for that much, I-I just want to know how my friends are doing!"

"Yes. And I'm bored," Sorun repeated. "If I tell you everything you need to know you walk away and I'm left standing here with nothing to do." He leaned backwards on the counter, elbows rested at the top. A small little grin had spread over Sorun's face. "Hope, this poor brain of mine needs stimulation, quite badly. I couldn't possibly divulge this information without something in return. Make a deal with me."

Hope's fists balled at her side. She made a frustrated noise, teeth grit together as she glared at him. "You seriously want something out of this? For something so little?"

His only answer was a shrug while maintaining that small grin. Another indignant noise came out of her, and she turned around, arms crossed and eyes turned down to the floor as she tapped her foot in thought. She hadn't stormed out in anger quite yet. In fact,

Sorun found himself raising an eyebrow at the sight. She seemed to be considering something.

"I may just get some entertainment out of this yet," he thought. Her face shifted a bit - now she looked a bit unsure, eyes looked back at him in a hesitant manner.

"Well... if you're really bored, then..." On a dime she turned around, all dramatic-like, and pointed right at him as her face turned to a resolute expression. "Then I'll show you something cool!" she yelled out. Like that one, single offer was the last line of hope she had against getting what Sorun was keeping from her.

The Earthling blinked. Something cool? In here? He doubted the claim. "I really doubt you can show me something cool enough to make me back down from this," he said. "It would have to be something out of this world to convince me here. You don't have that."

"But I do!" Hope denied. "It's a real super secret thing they have the head researchers and engineers working on! But I'm a part of the project too since I'm the smartest person here! So I have access!"

Suddenly this "cool thing" was starting to sound like a dangerous thing. Dangerous for Sorun's health. Just to confirm, he asked, "The cool thing is... a military secret?"

Hope flinched back. "... I mean more a secret project, but yeah."

Sorun's brows furrowed. "You realize I'm a civilian visiting this base, right? And a foreign one at that? Not even a citizen of the Overlander UF? I don't have access to eighty percent of the base and the armed guards at every corner see fit to remind me every time I wander by one, and you want to take me to some restricted area to see some super secret project? Just to hear what I have to say?"

"There's nobody in there today. Everyone here works on multiple projects and nobody has a time slot filled in for this specific one,"

Hope explained. "I mean, it's not. The project only has a level-0 security clearance, which means a project head like me can clear you."

"Then why aren't we doing that?" Sorun asked.

"Because the paperwork for that kind of thing takes days and I don't know how much longer you'll be here."

Sorun made a derisive scoff. "Not that long, that's for sure."

"Well then all the more reason!" she exclaimed. "Listen, we can real quick, in and out. There's guards outside the facility doors, sure, but *I* ," she continued, smiling and thumping her stuck-out thumb against her chest, "know a way in so the guards won't see us!"

"That seems like a gross breach of site security."

The smile on the girl's mouth withered and her thumb, once tall and proud, shrunk to the recesses of her palm when her arm lowered. "Well, you still need a keycard to get in. Which I have, since I'm on the project."

"And this secret entrance is...?"

Hope's expression turned a bit sheepish at the question. "It's... a path through the air vents that lead into the supply closet. The closet's locked, so, you know, you'd need the card."

Okay. That made some semblance of sense, except... "You like stuffing yourself in small and enclosed spaces, don't you?"

"I-it's a habit," Hope admitted, seeming somewhat embarrassed. She held one arm with the other, continuing with, "I spent a large part of my life in a spaceship. It wasn't the most spacious place and they relied on me a lot if something went wrong since I could fix things and fit in the vents." She turned her head away from Sorun's gaze. "I really don't want to talk any more about it."

"Fair enough." He made a hum in thought. It did sound good, entertainment-wise. And the thought of seeing something he wasn't supposed to see did fill him with a sort of giddy anticipation, which was a welcome change from the normal mood. It was a good diversion. "All this for a bit of news?"

"Apparently," Hope grumbled. "It's not like I'm showing you something super dangerous or anything anyways," she continued. "It's just a thing I wanna... you'll see."

He didn't really bother listening to her beyond that point. Sorun's mind was already made up. "Okay. Let's go, then."

And thus, here he was. Crawling around the airducts like some kind of horror movie monster, trailing behind a girl years younger than him but had at least fifty IQ points over him. As was the trend of this world, among many more unpleasant ones. Such was life here.

Sorun's wasn't sure how Hope stood to be in here. Somewhere in the back of his mind he'd always wondered what it'd be like crawling in a vent like this after having done it in so many video games. Now he knew. The air was stuffy and uncomfortable to breath. The space was cramped. His knees hurt from crawling on them for so long. And it'd be completely pitch black if it weren't for the girl crawling in front of him holding a flashlight.

Still, it didn't really get to him. Just surface-level thoughts he wasn't paying much mind to. It was hard to take anything more seriously than all of the recent events that had been happening with him. His reason for coming to this place in the first place, and the answers he sought.

It got easier to keep going when he didn't put his mind on it. It's why he needed distractions, things to do, stimulation. All of which were on short supply in a military base, hence why he'd made this deal with Hope. All for the sake of seeing something cool.

He hated this woman.

Everything about her. Her bubbly attitude. That... nonchalant attitude of her that so sharply contrasted with him, his feelings, this whole situation he was in. The way she was carrying on so glibly despite the severity of the situation.

This was a doctor. Their preeminent "expert" on Chaos energy. Some accredited institution somewhere gave this woman a doctorate.

"-and it's just been so fascinating looking over your bloodwork! I realize we're from different zones and all but no samples of uncontaminated DNA from before the planet was bombarded by the gene bombs exist, so it's been interesting comparing your makeup to Overlander makeup!" She was rolling through the room in that little rolling chair, this Overlander woman who looked so "off" like almost every Overlander he saw. With green goddamn hair. "Of course I expected our kinds' genomes to vary somewhat wildly but I found numerous genetic markers within your DNA that we lack and-"

"I'm going to hurt you if you don't get to the point," Sorun said, voice dull and emotionless. The woman stopped rolling around, freezing while looking at him in startled surprise. He didn't care; three days was three days too long of this. "Tell me what's wrong with me so I can leave. I don't care about anything else."

"O-oh, uh, alright. Okay. Sorry." Nervously, she held a fist up to her mouth to clear her throat, and suddenly she was trying very hard not to make eye contact with the overbearing stare Sorun was sending her way. "I'm sorry if I got carried away, I just, well, this is a lifelong passion of mine and it's not everyday a one-of-a-kind research opportunity walks through the door so I just wanted to share-"

Sorun's eyes flared green. "Stop. Fucking. Talking." She did, mouth clamping shut and body hunching over slightly as she shrunk in. "Three days of hearing you ramble scientific jargon and I'm sick of it.

You're supposed to help me, so tell me what's wrong so I can leave. Fucking fix me *."*

"I-it's not that simple," she meekly mumbled.

"You took over a liter of blood from my body," Sorun snapped. His harsh tone made the doctor flinch. "Put me in over a dozen machines to scan me, subjected me to every physical examination possible, poked and prodded me with needles, made me wait three days in some dismal room, and if all I get for all that is an 'it's not that simple' then-"

"Well I'm sorry but that's all I have!" she yelled. "You want to know what's wrong with you!? Nothing!"

"Nothing?" Sorun wiped at the blood seeping from his nose and flicked it onto the linoleum flooring. "This is nothing?"

There was a sudden shift. That meekness from earlier the doctor showed, it was nearly gone. There was anger on her face, and she was squeezing down on her clipboard hard enough that the plastic was audibly creaking. But even then there was the slightest bit of fear in her eyes.

"You wanna know what we found? This is what we found." She turned the clipboard around and enunciated every point by smacking the back of her hand on it, showing it to Sorun, even though he was too far away to actually read the paper clipped to it. "Your biometrics are completely normal! Okay!? Everything! Everything about you, bloodwork, blood pressure, organs, muscle, it's all normal! And we looked, Sorun, okay, we looked at every little detail we could think of but there's nothing *, not a single thing, no irregularities, no anomalies, absolutely nothing we can find wrong with you! And you know, you know it isn't easy dealing with DNA that looks like yours, DNA that doesn't even compare to ours! But we're trying anyway, for you, and I've been working through whole nights to try and solve this, FOR YOU, so don't you DARE-!"*

He moved. Faster than she could react, fast enough she'd become startled and shouted when he slapped the clipboard out from her hand, grabbed her by the scruff of her shirt, and then pulled her and her wheeled stool closer to him. She made a startled gasp, frozen in his grip with a fearful look on her face.

"... I'll do what I want. And what I want is to leave." He let her go and took a few steps back. The doctor righter herself, adjusting her shirt while keeping her wary eyes on Sorun. "I came here for one thing and you couldn't even get me that after bleeding me like a leech. So I'm gone."

"I-i-if you just gave us more time we could maybe-"

"I don't have *time."*

She opened her mouth to respond, but froze at Sorun's glare. Even when the green glow faded and his eyes turned blue and the blood continued to flow from his nose. He didn't stop until she'd turned away, and then he walked towards the door.

No more tests. No more bleeding. He just wanted to go home.

He sure could use something cool right about now.

"Alright, it's right here," came the whisper from Hope up ahead. She'd stopped crawling forwards and, somehow without Sorun noticing, had managed to contort herself so that her back was against one of the vent's walls while she was fiddling with something on the other wall. He realized at a single glance it was a ventilation grate and she was unscrewing the screws holding it in place with a small screwdriver she'd brought along while holding the flashlight in her mouth.

It hadn't taken much time. In short order the grate was removed and Hope had slid out the square hole after setting the grate and screws aside. Sorun followed, falling a short drop before landing flat on his

feet in absolute darkness. The darkness disappeared a moment later at the sound of a *click!* , with light flooding in from a overhead lighting fixture. Sorun looked over to where he'd heard the click sound and saw Hope next to one of the walls, hand on a light switch.

He took a glance around at the room they were in. "Supply closet" was underselling it, albeit only a bit. It was less the size of a closet and more the size of a large shed. Concrete walls surrounded them, lined with metal shelves filled to the brim with metal boxes, all labelled with miscellaneous parts and materials. He didn't pay much mind to them; his eyes were on Hope as she made her way to the one door in the room.

"I'm still having a hard time believing you'd go this far just to hear what I have to say. I'd sooner believe you'd to this to avoid a scolding from the scary military commander concerning that chocolate," Sorun voiced out. Hope had stopped in front of the door, though she did turn her head to look at Sorun. "Is this the part where I walk through the door and get knocked out by an electrical trap or something along those lines? To be trapped as a research subject or some such?"

Her face scrunched in confusion. "What? No. Why would you..." She paused to think on Sorun's words, but then only ended up shaking her head again. "Ignoring how we met by accident why would you even think that?"

"Their history with Shadow doesn't paint a great light on G.U.N.'s ethical concerns regarding biological experimentation." Neither did everything did with him during those examinations.

Hope only sighed out and shook her head a third time, like she was disapproving of what she heard. "I know everything that happened to him was awful, but that was fifty years ago and a completely different administration," she said, turning back to the door. She started fishing around in her pocket for something. "G.U.N.'s not like that anymore."

"So everyone keeps saying," Sorun demurred, watching as Hope pulled out a plastic card with a cord attached. It had Hope's face printed out along with a bunch of words he was too lazy to read. "You didn't deny an ulterior motive," he pointed out.

"You this suspicious of everyone you meet?" Hope grumbled out. She gripped the plastic card tight, but instead of slotting it into the card reader bolted to the wall next to the door she turned to fully address Sorun. "But since we're on the topic of ulterior motives..."

Sorun's head cocked to the side a few centimeters. A spark of curiosity flared up in him alongside a bit of wariness. His eyes flitted about the room until he'd spotted a wrench resting on a nearby shelf. He memorized the wrench's location and looked back to Hope. "Trying to get an early helping?" he asked.

"It's... er..." Hope hung her head a bit, sounding a bit embarrassed. "It's important to me."

"Is it now?" Sorun cautiously answered. He inched a bit closer to the wrench. "I haven't received what I was promised yet."

She didn't respond. In fact, it looked like Hope was visibly struggling to get the words out. It was a strange sight for Sorun, seeing the girl stand there and fidget nervously with the plastic card in her hands. It also set off a few warning bells in his head and caused him to move a bit closer to the wrench so that it was in grabbing range. He made it halfway before Hope had taken a deep breath and picked her head up.

"Just tell me if everyone there is doing alright, Sorun! Please!" she hollered out. Loudly, enough that Sorun stilled and hoped in the back of his mind that this rooms was well insulated against sound. It's caught him off guard, though. He hadn't expected her to yell.

"Excuse me?"

"Well... They, the Freedom Fighters, I mean, saved my life once. And I lived with them for a really long time after," Hope mumbled out. The fire from that burst from earlier had died out really quickly when she got Sorun looking at her. "When I left for here I never really had a chance to say goodbye to them even though I'd grown really close with them all, so... look, we're already here, I'm gonna show you what I promised, so please. Please just tell me. Is everyone doing alright? Over there?"

"Oh." Sorun stopped moving towards the wrench, and then forgot about it entirely as he crossed his arms while leaning back on a shelf. "Fine... since we're here. As far as I'm aware nothing's really changed all that much," he confessed. "Visit them yourself if you're so concerned."

"I can't exactly pack up and leave whenever I want, Sorun," Hope grumbled out. She gripped the ID card more tightly and turned back around towards the card reader. "It's called AWOL, ever heard of it?"

"You're a little young to be military personnel."

Hope's hand stopped halfway to the card reader. Her head turned back around to reveal an unimpressed look on her face. "You really wanna go down this road with me? I could think circles around you." She made a scoffing sound and turned back to the card reader. "Most of the projects in this place only work 'cause I'm around so they don't look too closely at my age."

Still seemed irresponsible to a degree, but Sorun didn't care enough to comment any further. Nor did he want to now that Hope had latched onto his one weakness: not being a super genius like a lot of people in this world. He didn't want the knife to be driven further in.

"Hmf..." He looked down at his hands and began picking at his fingernails. "Can't even exchange letters? No means of communication?"

"Nope."

"Hm." Sorun supposed he had the means of fixing that. He wasn't gonna. "Antoine and Bunnie got married a while back."

"Oh, they did!?" Goddammit, he shouldn't have said anything. When Hope turned around with a big smile on her face it caused the card she'd been using to be stuck halfway in the card reader. She hadn't finished. "That's really great for them! Bunnie spent a lot of time taking care of me since I didn't have anyone else, so it' great to hear she'd doing good." She paused, face twitching a bit. "Does, uh... did she diversify any of her recipes to include anything not carrot-based?"

"No," Sorun said. "Antoine cooks for the both of them most of the time. And does the cleaning. And the laundry. He's kind of a neat freak."

"Heh heh, yeah." Thankfully, Hope turned back around to continue swiping the card. "Well, it's great to hear things are going alright. I always kind of worry about them since they're always fighting you-know-who."

"Mm." Sorun saw a red light on the card reader turn green after Hope swiped her card. A small *clunk!* was heard from inside the door. "You dragged me all the way here just to hear that, huh?"

Pocketing the card, Hope turned back around to give Sorun a skeptical look. "I did straight-up ask and you decided to play games and have us end up here. You seem like the kind of person who messes with people for no reason."

"I would never," Sorun lied. "If you don't like it here so much for them restricting you just quit."

"And that's the thing, I like the work I do here. I don't *want* to leave," Hope said. "I just... things were a bit different is all. But it's fine. Come on, it's through here."

She opened the doorway and stepped through it, with Sorun following after. He didn't follow far as the adjacent room was bathed in darkness, and he had to wait in the entranceway of the supply closet as Hope went to go flip the light switches. They must have been heavy switches, too, because after a handful of seconds he heard a series of loud *clunks!* go off from above him. One heavy clunk and a row of industrial lights hanging overhead on the ceiling would flip on. Another clunk, another set of lights. Enough that eventually the entire room was bathed in soft blue halogen lights.

The first thing he noted was all the computer consoles everywhere. The really long machines that took up half the length of a room lined with keyboards and in-built monitors, in rows and surrounding the room. There was a second level of raised platforms up above connected to some stairs in the back leading to more computers. Here and there were apparatuses erecting panes of glass with projected numbers and figures displayed on the glass. None of this seemed suspicious - standard equipment and little else. Sorun wasn't even paying attention to it. It was what was in the center of the room that was drawing his attention.

In the center of the room was a large, circular platform, maybe raised an inch off the ground. On it was *it* : the cool thing Hope had brought him here to see. There was a particularly large spotlight on the ceiling shining down directly on it. Upon first seeing it Sorun had reflexively tilted his head backwards, blinking at the sight of it. He hadn't even known what to expect coming here but this was strange enough that it was defying nonexistent expectations. Upon initial inspection he wasn't even sure what he was looking at.

"What am I looking at...?" Sorun wondered out aloud. He found himself stepping towards the object at the center of the room, almost unconsciously. Like a compulsion deep inside was drawing Sorun towards it.

"It just fell out of the sky one day out of nowhere," Hope said. "G.U.N. confiscated it and we've been studying it ever since."

"Just like that?" Sorun turned his eyes to Hope. "Just-" he snapped his fingers, "-from out of nowhere?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Right in the middle of one of the cities."

"Huh..." Sorun turned to look back at the item of his fixation. "It's a plane."

Or at least used to be a plane. Specifically a fighter jet that had been mangled beyond all reason, enough that it was a miracle Sorun could even make out that it had, at one point, been a jet. The entire front of the jet, the nose and the cockpit, was just completely gone. Replaced by a twisted mass of burnt metal and melted wires. Really, the entire jet itself wasn't in a much better state. Sorun wasn't even sure looking at the thing that there wasn't a single undamaged portion of the vehicle. It was scorched and rent all over, exposing mechanical innards. Pieces were hanging off here and there. One of the wings was entirely missing. It was unquestionably a wreck, totally and completely. Practically scrap.

Still, there was... something. Something about it that was holding Sorun's unceasing attention and refusing to let go. Ignoring the wounds and missing parts, if he squinted his eyes to get just the general shape of it, he could imagine how this had once been a sleek fighter jet. Slim, extremely advanced. It was hard to tell to what degree because of all the damage, but it was clear this jet had something going for it.

"This is a military secret?" Sorun mumbled. He'd stepped up onto the display platform, slowly circling the plane as he continued to examine it. He noted that in front of the remaining wing was a smaller stabilizing wing; he assumed there had been a matching one on the side with the missing wing. Hope had stepped up alongside him, hands on her hips as she examined the ruined jet. There was a small frown on her face.

"It's weird," she said. An assertion Sorun wholly agreed with, but her tone had him glancing at her.

"Weird how?"

"It's weird because there aren't many civilizations in the world with the industry to make something like this," Hope said. "There's the United Federation and the G.U.N. military branch, but we didn't make this. There's the Republic of Acorn, but this doesn't fit any of their designs, they never contacted us about it, and our satellites never detected anything taking off from their direction."

Sorun didn't comment on that.

"Eggman didn't make this. Again, not his design," Hope continued. "Same story with Station Square. I guess it's possible some independent person or group somewhere out there, some hidden genius, could have made this, but that's kind of a stretch." She cocked her head, squinting an eye while giving the plane a discerning look. "Also I've never seen this design. From anywhere. Nobody in G.U.N. has for that matter. I couldn't get into its systems because there are no systems anymore, it's completely fried, and the lab technicians and I aren't even sure how this thing was put together in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

Hope's frown deepened. "There's no fuel tank. Or at least, we couldn't find one. I don't know, the entire front of the plane is smashed so maybe it just fell out and we never found it, but... there's no space for one. Which doesn't make any sense."

Sorun cocked an eyebrow. "So what does it run on?"

"That's the part I can't figure out." Hope rose a hand up to scratch at her head as she continued looking down at the plane. Her eyes were scanning over its frame, face scrunched in concentration like she was trying to decipher some puzzle. "There's batteries for the electrical systems and engines to propel the thing like you'd expect but I can't figure out what actually powered them. The fuel tank must

have just been lost, that has to be it. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Humming, Sorun looking further down the plane. Directly on top of the plane, behind the center but in front of the engines, parallel to either side, there were two metal plates that seemed out of place. A large piece of sheet metal was welded to either side. He could see a corner of one of the metal plates was peeled upwards, as if somebody had opened it with tools - likely one of the lab technicians or maybe even Hope. There didn't seem to be anything of note underneath the plate, though. Just more wiring and loose parts.

The oddest thing was the engines, Sorun realized. There were two angled tail fins on either side of the engines, and the engines themselves looked off. Extremely off. They were big, for one, so big that it almost looked like the two engines sticking out from the back of the jet didn't even fit on it. They were skeletonized, too, lacking plating to expose the burnt wiring and circuitry beneath it, and with gaps all throughout its framework that let Sorun see inside the engine itself. Wasn't much to see but a bunch of bips, bops, and metal parts, none of which he could identify. To his eyes it just looked like a chaotic mish-mash of pieces.

"And there's other things, too, like these engines," Hope continued, walking over to one of the engines while gesticulating at them with her hand. "These aren't the dedicated engines to this jet."

Sorun glanced up at her. "You don't even know what this jet is, how can you be su-?"

"Because I looked at it, duh," she said, as if that explained it. "They're too big, and it looks like somebody stripped out parts on the jet's rear just to fit these things. And the internal construction is completely different than the rest of the plane." She walked back forwards, stopping and pointing at the two plates on top of the jet. "And this, these plates. These look like hardpoints on a fighter jet you'd attach weapons to, but it's like somebody completely stripped them out without replacing the weapons so they just covered it with

metal. There's other spots like that, too, just a bunch of gaps in the plane missing things. There's an empty undercarriage I'm pretty sure is supposed to hold some kind of weapon, but there's nothing, not even a launch system of some kind for missiles." She looked back ahead to the front of the plane, raising her hand up and then letting it flop back to her side while breathing out in an exhausted manner. "Somebody completely disarmed this thing. They made a textbook fighter jet and then butchered it while splicing a completely different jet's engines in it at the same time."

"Huh." A real head scratcher in the literal sense, because this was making Sorun scratch his head. "So... you got a real mystery, huh?" he concluded.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Hope sighed out. "I have no idea what any of it means and nobody else does. There's not much to even look at because this thing is totaled, and none of it answers why anybody would do... *anything* that happened with this thing." She crouched down, staring intensely at the jet as if doing so hard enough would cause it to answer her. "Why make a plane like this and then refit it so heavily? How'd it even get like this...?"

No answer came from Sorun, mostly stemming from the fact that he knew much less about jets than Hope did and thus had less to say on the matter. He could say she was right, though. This WAS weird. But there was still something nagging at him from the back of his mind, something he couldn't quite put his finger one. Looking at this jet was making something ping off in mind, but he couldn't pin down what. It was just a feeling.

Pursing his lips, Sorun crouched down to get a closer look. He hummed again, eyes widening a bit when he saw there was a somewhat intact section here. On the side of the jet, right there. A big patch of unmarred black paint that had somehow managed to make it unscathed, unlike the rest of the plane.

He turned his head a bit, and then clicked his tongue. Wait. It wasn't black paint. It was red. A deep, crimson red paint so dark that looking

at it in a certain angle in the light made it appear black. And in the center of the unmarked patch of plane were letters. Large, white captial letters stamped right there in the middle:

That was it. Everything past the "V" was scratched off entirely, as that's where the intact paint and hull ended. The "V" itself looked strange, as well. The second arm of the "V" looked a bit askew of the first, and only half of it was visible since the paint terminated at that point. It made the two arms of the "V" look extremely uneven.

"Weird..." Breathing a slow breath through his nose, Sorun reached out and touched the surface of the plane. He noticed the change immediately, the slight buzzing he felt. Looking closer Sorun was shocked to see small blue electrical sparks were flowing out of his hand and sinking into the plane.

And then, he heard something. A quiet, metallic groan from inside the plane. He looked closer, leaning in and peering in through one of the shredded sides of the plane. It was there Sorun saw the sight that shocked him completely: some of the jet's innards, sprockets and screws and gaskets, other random parts, they were moving. *Changing* . Large cracks in gears were sealing and nuts and bolts cracked in two were joining together and recombining, as if the parts themselves were regenerating. Some of the parts were skittering along the jet's innards, slotting themselves into various positions and screwing themselves into place.

In a panic, Sorun removed his hand. The sparks on his hand disappeared, and the parts stopped moving. The jet was dead again.

"Hey, what's going over there?" Still frozen on the spot, Sorun watched as Hope walked over to his side. She glanced at him and then looked down at the plane. "What was that sound?"

"Sound...?"

"Yeah, like, skittering. I dunno. Thought I heard something." She looked back at Sorun. "Am I just hearing things? You didn't see anything?"

Sorun didn't answer. What he did instead was wordlessly reach out and grab one of Hope's wrist. She made a surprised sound, but otherwise did nothing but watch as Sorun planted her palm flatly on the surface of the plane.

... Nothing was happening. The pieces inside the plane were completely still and inert and there weren't any strange, electrical sparks. Sorun narrowed his eyes to look closer to make sure he wasn't missing anything, but no. The plane was still dead.

"Uh, Sorun?" Hope voiced. He realized he was still holding her hand against the plane. "What are you doing?"

"... Hope, feel this," Sorun said. He moved her hand around a bit so it slid over the surface of the jet. "The feel of the jet's exterior, its texture. You feel that?"

"Yeah...?"

"Hope. I think I've made an important discovery." He locked eyes directly with Hope, and with the most serious expression he could muster, said, "This jet... is made of metal."

He didn't think anyone had ever given him a look quite like the one Hope was giving him. It was a mixture of disgust and disappointment. She pulled her wrist out of his grip, muttered out, "You're a weirdo," and walked back to the other side of the jet to continue examining it. He watched her leave, and it was only when she was on the other side of the jet that he got down on one knee and placed his own hand on the jet.

More blue, electrical sparks sparked out from the point of contact of his hand and the jet. The parts inside were moving again. Cracks in the internal structure healing and disappearing. Loose wiring

slithering over the interior like snakes and inserting their ends into sockets on the inside. He could even see the edges of the torn metal exposing the interior began growing and expanding. Like a cut on someone's arm healing over.

There was a wetness on his upper lip. Sorun didn't need to see the drop of crimson fall off his face to know what it was that was dripping out of his nose. What was intriguing to see was that one drop of blood hit the interior of the jet. That, as soon as the blood came to rest on the metal, it began to discolor and distort. The deep crimson color was transitioning to a dull gray and the liquid was rising up, reshaping itself into the shape of a small cog and then hardening. And then after a few seconds there was no drop of blood. Just a small cog skittering over the jet's innards to insert itself somewhere.

Again, Sorun removed his hand from the jet, and again, everything fell still and dead.

"... VERY curious," Sorun thought to himself. He winced - he felt lightheaded all of a sudden. A much more mild version of the exhaustion he felt whenever his eyes glowed green. He didn't know what to feel about that. For some reason just being near this thing was having him on edge now.

"Okay, I know I heard something that time." When he wasn't looking Hope had stepped back to his side; he made sure to quickly wipe the blood from his face. She was looking down at the plane intently, but there was a hint of frustration in her face. "Seriously, what do I keep hearing?"

Sorun hummed in consideration. Eyes flickered to Hope, and then the jet. A few thoughts ran through his head, making his features momentarily wrinkle, but then they relaxed when he came to a decision. "I really don't know what you're talking about," Sorun lied. "I've been staring at the same thing you have. Maybe something inside came loose. You see how busted up it is."

"Hrm... maybe," Hope hesitantly agreed. "I wish it wasn't so damaged. Otherwise we could learn *something* about it, but... ugh." She rubbed at her forehead. "I think Commander Tower is considering just dumping this thing in a storage site somewhere. It's been a months of examinations with exactly zero results."

Sorun couldn't find himself sympathizing with her plight. His interest began and ended with the jet. "Mhm."

"Do you two think this may be a problem?" Shadow asked from behind the both of them.

The first emotion Sorun felt was amusement. The impish kind of thrill one would feel being caught doing something they shouldn't. When he looked over at Hope he saw she'd froze right up, her face set in panic. He almost laughed out at the sight, but managed to keep on a neutral expression that in no way displayed the mirth he felt on the inside. They turned around in unison, and, once again, Sorun had to internally fight himself to not so much as break out a smile.

Yep, there was Shadow there. His arms crossed. He wouldn't go as far as to say he looked infuriated, but on the other hand Sorun couldn't say he'd ever seen his scowl go that deep before. His face was practically smoldering. And he could have sworn he heard Hope gulp from besides him.

"Explain," Shadow demanded.

Not one to waste an opportunity, Sorun pointed right at Hope, and with a straight face, said, "Shadow, this child revealed unto me government secrets without telling me they were, in fact, military secrets. I'm completely innocent and non-complicit in this. This is all Hope's fault."

"I don't believe you," Shadow immediately responded. Sorun shrugged - an act that seemed to inflame Shadow's mood even more - and did nothing else. There wasn't enough effort in the lie for it to be effective.

"Huh!?" Hope whirled to Sorun, betrayal written on her face. It caused Sorun to feel a bit more amusement. "You- but- none of that is true at all!"

"A barefaced lie," Sorun denied. "She practically dragged me here without saying a word."

A loud sigh was breathed out from Shadow's nose as he pinched at his forehead. Now he just looked stressed and mildly angry. "What are you hoping to gain here saying all this nonsense, Sorun?"

For the first time since Shadow showed up Sorun spoke the truth. "I'm bored. This is slightly funny."

"Breaking into a secure military facility is *funny* to you?"

"Yeah." He could have sword he saw veins bulge on Shadow's face when Sorun said that. Once again he pointed at Hope. "And I didn't break into anything. She really did let me in here."

Smoldering. That was the word that came to Sorun's mind when he looked at Shadow's face. The hedgehog seemed completely done with Sorun and slowly turned his head to Hope. Sorun could swear he did it so slowly he could hear the vertebrae in his neck grind together, like a statue of some kind. "Hope?" he asked. "I'd like to know what possessed you to show a civilian classified G.U.N. material."

She was fidgeting in place and rubbing at her arm so fast Sorun was convinced she was gonna wear the shirt's sleeve out. "Well... technically this is only a class-0 on the classification scale which means civilians *can* see it with the permission of a project h-head, which, um, you know I am, so really technically it's not like any rules were-"

"Which is dependent on express permission from the Commander, which I doubt you conveniently forgot since you saw fit to sneak past the guards," Shadow cut in.

"Eek!" She stepped back, as if struck. Her eyes turned fearful yet defiant as she shot back with, "Well it's not like he ever says no to me anyways so-!"

"So why not ask in this case?"

Another verbal blow that seemed to weaken Hope's constitution. She withered back, mumbling out in a defeated tone, "I... just wanted to know how everyone in New Mobotropolis was doing and Sorun wouldn't have said anything otherwise." And then she stomped her foot down and pointed at Sorun, yelling, "And he was gonna tell Commander Tower I was skimming from the supply of chocolate!"

"He *forced* you to do this?" This was one of those rare occasions Sorun got to see Shadow surprised. He looked at him, eyes slightly widening with a disbelieving look on his face. "Sorun, you blackmailed Hope?"

"That's a really strong and accurate word, Shadow, blackmail," Sorun unashamedly responded. "Honestly. You're better than that."

" *Why* ?" Now he just confused, uncomprehending. Struggling to understand the logic being put before him. "Why would you even *consider* doing something like this? Or is this looping back into your idea of 'fun'?"

Sorun shrugged. "It was mostly a spur-of-the-moment whim. Quite simply I just felt like messing with her," he said, and then glanced at the jet, ignoring Hope's glare. "I didn't expect I'd get to see your little mystery jet here, that was just a bonus, but hey. Here we are now." He locked eyes with Shadow. It was clear from that glare he was trying to elicit some reaction in Sorun, but he wasn't budging. The only look Sorun offered to give back to Shadow was an apathetic, neutral stare that conveyed little to no emotion at all. "How'd you even know we were here?"

"I was looking for you and heard you and Hope crawling through the ducts. My ears are very good."

"Huh." That solved one mystery. "So what happens now?"

Shadow had blinked. There was no other visible reaction, not so much as a twitch in Shadow's facial structure, but the blink alone said enough. Apparently the look Sorun was shooting back did have some effect. Enough for that blink and enough for him to pause to consider his next words. Eventually he did speak. "Hope... we will speak of this later." He stepped forwards, the metal of his sneakers slamming against the metal platform sounding almost like loud stomps as he grabbed at Sorun's wrist. " *You* are coming with me back to your room," he growled out as he yanked Sorun forwards to walk with him.

Sorun chuckled, walking along while glancing over his shoulder at Hope. "Be seein' ya," he said, though he wasn't even sure Hope heard him. Too absorbed in guilt and worry based on that look on her face, looking down at her sneakers in an effort to not look at anything else. He knew that look - his own mother made him have the same look in his youth.

The memory worked wonders in wiping the smirk off Sorun's face as Shadow lead him away.

He wouldn't comment on the fact that when they'd arrived at Sorun's temporary quarters Shadow had released his wrist by near throwing him in - he figured he earned that. He would have commented on the fact that Shadow slammed on the button to close the room's door hard enough he saw some cracks in the wall, but figured that would just exacerbate the matters. So Sorun's next choice of action was to do the only thing he felt like doing: the ol' stand and stare. So he simply stood there to look at Shadow.

"What is going on in that head of yours?" Shadow demanded. "I question a lot of things about you but at the very least I expect a certain level of competency out of you, so you'll have to explain to me how this situation came about."

Stress. Anger. Confusion. None of it was conveyed on Shadow's face - barely anything was ever conveyed on his face. Sorun was convinced it was frozen in that scowl. His voice was another thing, the way he sounded, the clear frustration underneath it all. He supposed it was all warranted with what just happened. And yet alas... Sorun was finding a hard time at caring.

"What more is there to say?" Sorun asked. "Hope wanted something of me and I asked for something in return. Showing me that jet? That was her choice."

"Don't even try pinning this on Hope, we both know you know better," Shadow denied. "You were looking for an excuse to stir up trouble and jumped at the first opportunity."

"Well *of course* I did, Shadow," Sorun said, "you know how bored I am here? I can't understand how you manage to live on a military base."

The frustration grew so great on Shadow's face that some of his teeth were being bared. "Are you trying to get yourself thrown in a brig?"

"Do it, Shadow. I'm dying anyway, you might as well."

And just like that all the frustration evaporated from Shadow's demeanor. He blinked a few times, face screwed purely in confusion, and then straightened out into somber understanding. His shoulders began sagging as he regarded Sorun in a much calmer tone.

"I'd... heard some things that happened between you and the physician, part of the reason I was looking for you, but it's truly that bad?"

"Oh, no." Sorun shook his head, causing some confusion to creep into Shadow's face. "According to that doctor I'm the healthiest person in the world. She says there's not a thing wrong with me." Sorun leaned forwards a bit. "We both know that ain't true, though,

don't we, Shadow? I wouldn't be bleeding and passing out left and right if that were true."

A part of Shadow's face flinched. He looked a bit uncomfortable now. "To call anything surrounding you a fringe science would be an understatement, Sorun, you can't expect-"

"I came here for results and they couldn't give me any, Shadow, I don't need to think any further than that. These people are useless."

"That doesn't give you an excuse to threaten her like you did!" Shadow shouted. Despite his voice being raised Sorun remained still as a statue, continuing to stare at Shadow. It caused him to grunt out in resignation, make him shake his head as he turned towards the small desk pushed against the room's wall. "I had to talk her down from filing a former complaint, Sorun. Do you understand there's precious little I can do to help you if incidents like these reach the Commander?"

An unamused breath left Sorun. He leaned his torso back, saying, "The most they could do is detain me for a few days until somebody from the Republic comes to collect me. I'm a foreign citizen, and somewhat of a known one since I saved the life of every single person in that Republic. Multiple times over," he said, voice blank and cold. "And keep in mind, I'm on a clock, Shadow. Wanna wonder how bad a diplomatic incident it'd be if I died in G.U.N. custody? I'm too radioactive to hold onto for long. So I'll stir up as much trouble as I please. A little amusement is the least these people owe me for making me waste my time here."

"Absolutely none of that condones-!" Shadow stopped himself when he saw something lying on the desk he was standing next to. A sheet of paper with its surface completely covered in writing. The first thing his eyes glanced over was the title of the paper. "'Last Will and Testament-'"

Sorun's eyes flashed green. He'd bolted forwards in speeds that seemed to mildly surprise Shadow as he snatched the paper off the

desk and folded it away into one of his pockets before stepping back. The whole exchange only lasted half a second, after which Sorun's eyes dimmed back to their blue color as a small stream of blood dripped out of his nose. Shadow blinked once and looked at Sorun expectantly.

"... It gets boring in this room," Sorun quietly mumbled out. He wiped the blood away using the sleeve on his coat and sat down on the small cot right next to the desk. "The isolation can bring a man to do all sorts of silly things to pass time. What you saw meant nothing. Ignore it. It doesn't exist."

"It... of course it doesn't." Shadow began sagging again, eyes becoming half-lidded as a tired sigh left him. He pulled the chair out from the desk, turning it around so it faced Sorun and then sitting down in the chair so the two sitting males could be facing one another. "Do you have any sort of plan?" And just like that every topic before that sentence vanished, like it was never a concern for Shadow. It was all Sorun could do to show his thanks by playing it straight.

"Less a plan and more loose threads to follow, but it's something," Sorun said. "I doubt the doctors at New Mobotropolis can tell me anything, but I'll give it a shot anyway. If and when that fails... well, I was thinking of that one guy. Finitevus."

It only took a second for resignation to flash over Shadow's features. "That insane echidna doctor with the white fur that caused that Enerjak incident multiple times over? You're desperate enough to go to him?"

"If you were in my situation and knew what's waiting for me on the other side you'd be desperate, too, Shadow," Sorun coldly cut in. "It's nothing. In case you forgot."

The hedgehog didn't seem to have a retort for that. He just sat back in the chair, quietly regarding Sorun while waiting for him to continue.

When it became obvious he wasn't going to speak Sorun decided to do so.

"It's not actually as crazy as you think. Believe it or not he mellowed out somewhat as a result of the disaster that second Enerjak attempt was," Sorun continued. "He owes me for bailing him and the whole world out of that one, and I don't see him turning me down. And if he does I'm just gonna threaten to kill him if he doesn't help."

There hadn't been any maliciousness behind Sorun's words when he said that. No hate, no discontent, no emotion that could be called overly negative or even positive. It was just said as statement of fact. It made Shadow pause. Made his eyes widen a fraction before returning to normal. Made him clasp his gloved hands and drum his fingers over his knuckles as the two sat in silence for over a minute. Finally, he looked up and spoke.

"Sorun, I'm going to speak freely," Shadow began. "I can understand you were hopeful the doctors could tell you something and that the current stress of the situation added on top of everything else you've had to endure isn't easy. And you've usually weathered such things well. But everyone, even I, have a limit, Sorun, and I'm starting to suspect you're reaching yours."

"Is that your official observation, Mr. Special Agent?"

"It's that. That attitude," Shadow pointed out, voice growing harder. "Your flippant disregard for rules and protocol, borderline abandonment of respect, going out of your way to incite trouble, the violent threats against a doctor trying to help you and now you're plotting to threaten murder just to have your way?"

An airy laugh left Sorun. "You didn't have any objections the last time we planned to murder a mad scientist."

"Those were entirely different circumstances, Sorun, and you..." Shadow stopped himself when Sorun gave him a pointed look. He sighed, shook his head and tried again. "I'm getting worried about

you," he said, in a voice that made it sound like he really had to force that out. It even seemed like just saying that caused him physical harm. "Not just about your physical health but what this is doing to you. You're growing erratic, impulsive." A beat passed between the two. "Multiple soldiers reported you stood in place and stared out a window for eight hours straight. None of this is normal behavior, Sorun."

He did that? Sorun didn't recall. Likewise the news didn't elicit any strong emotions out of him. "How would you like me to act? Given the circumstances?"

"That's not what I'm asking."

"Then what are you asking?"

"I..." Shadow trailed off, seemingly at a loss for words. He ended up hanging his head, muttering out, "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to help you."

Sorun found the words... valid, after closely studying Shadow's face. There was one, precisely one, moment in all the time he knew Shadow where there was a profound expression of emotion on the hedgehog's face. It was around twenty minutes before he died for the first time, when he told him all those Chaos Emeralds he absorbed were killing him. He'd looked so emotionally outraged Sorun could barely recognize him. And he remembered with some amusement he'd punched him in the face so hard that, if it weren't for Devil's Body, Sorun had no doubt his entire head would have just disappeared with that one strike.

The face Shadow had on right now wasn't anywhere close to those levels, not nearly, but there were vestiges of that expression underneath the face he currently wore. The words Shadow were saying were genuine - he really was worried. Sorun doubted he was more worried than he was over his own health, but the sentiment was appreciated.

"It's not as if I want to go around threatening people, Shadow, but I have my life to consider here," Sorun spoke out. "I've precious few options, so I'll do what's needed."

"I wasn't trying to dissuade you." Shadow looked up. "I just feel the need to point out how uncharacteristic you're acting."

Sorun drummed the tips of his fingers against each other. He leaned forwards on the bed, hunched hunched slightly while angling his head up to maintain eye contact with Shadow. "It's not something that can be helped until I fix this, I don't think," he said. "It's all I can think about. I try to busy myself with anything else but it's getting less and less effective."

"Is that what this is all about?" Shadow asked. There was a small hint of understanding in his voice. "You're just trying to distract yourself?"

Sorun didn't want to answer, instead saying, "If you really want to help me, Shadow, then tell me when I can leave." He stopped leaning forwards in a hunch and straightened his back. "I would like to go home."

"Then you can leave. We're not holding you. One word to the Commander and we can have a helicopter-"

"No, no aircraft," Sorun said, immediately shaking his head.

Shadow simply blinked. "Why not?"

"Aircraft are noisy. Loud. Noticeable," Sorun answered. "If you use a helicopter to bring me back you'll have to call New Mobotropolis and request landing permission. Everyone will see it touch down and know I'm right there. My friends might flock out of worry for me." He shook his head. "I don't want that. I really can't handle it right now. I'd like it better if you just teleported me to the outskirts of the city so I can walk home without there being a huge spectacle."

An immediate response didn't come from Shadow. He didn't break eye contact from Sorun, though his expression did grow a bit remorseful. "Then you'll have to wait a bit."

"Why?"

"I have a mission," Shadow said. "One I have to sortie for in an hour. The processing and paperwork I'd need to get through to take the Chaos Emerald we brought back out of storage so I can use to to teleport you back would take too long to complete. So you'll have to wait until I get back."

Figured. Bureaucracy wins the day again. "Okay. That's fine," Sorun said, not finding any viable ground to argue the point. "How long?"

"A few hours. I doubt longer than five."

All Sorun did was hum. It wasn't the most ideal, but it was tolerable. Enough that he could accept it. Fine. He'd just wait some more. "Well... if you have some time, then let's talk about something less serious. I don't like serious stuff," Sorun proposed. He leaned back a bit on the bed while folding one of his legs over his knee. "I'm surprised you're not trying to chew my head off over the whole secret jet thing."

"It's only because that was a class-0 object that I'm managing to restrain myself," Shadow flatly responded.

"Mm, is that all it was? No nepotism on your part to try and spare a little girl's feelings?" He'd never at all seen Maria and never had her description described to him, but from everything Sorun knew both she and Hope were tangentially biologically related to Robotnik. He wouldn't be surprised if there was a resemblance there proving a weakness for Shadow. It's the only explanation Sorun saw why they were basically being let off with a slap on the wrist. He had enough tact not to say something like that directly, though.

"That 'little girl' is the reason why I disagree with the Commander giving such prestigious positions out on merit alone without considering any other factor," Shadow bit out. "Hope being G.U.N.'s most talented engineer doesn't detract from the fact she's a child with a matching maturity. You get situations like this."

"Yeah. You didn't deny it."

Shadow's eyes widening a fraction but then quickly corrected themselves. Sorun saw it for what it was: being caught having made a mistake and quickly moving to try and correct it. Too late, though. "Since we're on the topic what's your take on it?" Shadow asked. "I know the researchers have been pulling hairs out trying to figure it out and they've come up with precisely nothing. The Commander's starting to consider it a dead-end waste of resources and something to be tossed in storage. I was wondering if a fresh pair of eyes would gleam something."

Oh, they did. They did more than simply "gleam" something. What that something was, Sorun wasn't sure. He wanted to ask some questions first. "I dunno, man, seems like a real mystery," he said to Shadow. "What exactly was its deal? How'd it show up?"

"Hmm..." Humming, Shadow crossed his arms while leaning against the back of the chair he was sitting in, likely recalling some piece of information in his brain. "Based on the reports I read, that plane just fell out of the sky right in the center of Spagonia three months ago. There's wasn't any warning, no sign of anything, the air defense radars didn't even pick anything up. It simply showed up out of nowhere." He paused. "It crushed a number of pedestrians who just happened to be in the area. There were four deaths in total."

"Unfortunate," Sorun commented. "Hope mentioned its weapons were stripped out."

"Yes, but why that is is as much a mystery as the plane itself," Shadow said. "The plane was severely damaged in the crash, as you saw, but according to the engineers it was heavily damaged

before it even touched the ground. There's no footage of it before crashing so there's no definitive proof to corroborate that, but they said some of the damage markings confirm it. I'm in line to trust them on this. Especially considering the body."

Sorun's head twitched up a bit. "There was a body? The pilot?"

"Yes..." Shadow face scrunched a bit, making an unpleasant face. "You saw the cockpit, though. Or lack thereof. What we pulled from the wreckage wasn't a body. It was a few charred, bloody smears and a handful of ruined meat. I saw it myself when I oversaw the collection at Spagonia."

Sorun tapped his fingers against his knee. A few seconds passed. "That was all?"

"The rest was either lost in whatever initially destroyed the plane and/or likely scattered over the land as the plane fell. There'd be no accounting for anything else at that point." Shadow shook his head. "DNA analysis was inconclusive as well. The heat damage was simply too severe and degraded what little DNA we could scrape together. The biologists gave up and decided to place the remains in cryogenic storage, but they're about as helpful in solving this mystery as the plane itself."

"Mn. What a yucky image," Sorun said. His hand stopped tapping, relaxing motionlessly on his knee. "Wish I could help, but I'm not an engineer, Shadow. I deliver stuff. If you want an expert opinion go ask Tails."

"It's against protocol to bring non-staff into matters such as this. Speaking of which," he said, voice growing a bit sharper, "I would normally be forced to have you sign forms swearing you to secrecy, but because I doubt you'd hold them in high regard and I'm trusting you not to go spouting your mouth off, I'm trusting you won't breath a word of this matter to anyone over in the Republic of Acorn. Or anywhere else."

"No reason to, don't worry," Sorun truthfully admitted. It seemed to cause some relief to Shadow, making him sigh out a bit and release some tension in his face. "But that's really all you got? A busted mystery plane and some rancid mystery meat? Practically nothing to go on."

"There wasn't a blackbox. No identifying marks except for the two letters on the side, no existing models in G.U.N. databases to compare it to. Nothing. I don't blame the Commander for wanting to wash his hands of it. It seems like a fruitless avenue to pursue for how little we've turned up."

Sorun's fingers tapped against his knee. "I guess," he said. "That's fair," he continued, a bit quieter. And then, in a blink, Sorun loudly clapped his hands together. It didn't startle Shadow at all, in fact he didn't react the slightest bit to it, though his eyes did track Sorun as he stood up off the cot. And then he said, "I will go somewhere to wait for you to return. This room is dreary and I won't be spending another second in here."

The term "spartan" was a generous one to describe this room. Calling it "gray" would be more apropos, because that's all it was. Gray walls and a metal bedframe with an uncomfortable cot. Even the desk itself was metal - it made a common desk one would see at a high school on Earth look like an expensive desk found in a government official's office. They were his quarters for the duration of his stay on this base. He wouldn't be sad to never see it again. It reminded him too much of how his New Mobotropolis house used to look.

"If you want." Shadow gave a small shrug and lifted himself out of the desk's chair - also an uncomfortable monstrosity that Sorun would melt down if he had the means. "And Sorun," he continued, "I realize you're not accustomed to these conditions and you're having a hard time sitting and waiting. But please, for your sake, try not to get into any more trouble until I return. I don't need the headache."

"Big ask," Sorun responded. He made a light chuckle and rose his hands up when Shadow made a displeased face. "Kidding," he assured him. "I think today's given me enough to think on. I've plans to make."

Shadow quirked an eye ridge. "Plans? You?"

"Yes, I've never been fond of them. But my life and whatnot," Sorun explained. "I just have a lot of things to consider. Go do what you need to do."

"Mh... I still need to see Hope before I depart," Shadow grumbled out. He turned around and made his way towards the door, though Sorun spoke out as he began opening it.

"Try to be at least a little assertive when scolding the child, Shadow, otherwise you'll just be reinforcing bad habits." He'd meant to say that in a serious tone, but just the slightest hint of a playful lilt had still managed to find its way onto Sorun's voice. He only minded a little bit.

The button to the door to the room was pressed open a bit more forcefully than Sorun imagined was necessary. The cracks on the wall had spread. "I'll go ahead and get the paperwork started so you can leave as soon as I come back," he said, not even bothering to acknowledge that last comment. Sorun just grinned at his back as the hedgehog left, leaving the door closed behind him.

The grin dropped off the moment Shadow was out of sight.

Nobody really objected to Sorun waiting in the air hangar. He couldn't imagine why anyone would if they did - it was just a giant, empty room with a ceiling that folded open for helicopters to fly through. He actually did acknowledge Shadow's request, though. The one where he promised not to make trouble. He was just sitting there on a metal crate in waiting. For a number of hours now.

Probably hours, at least. Lots on his mind. Lots of things to consider.

Planning. It wasn't his strong suit, Sorun would admit it. He just wasn't cut out to make overly complicated plays. Loose goals he could improv his way through was one thing, a tried and true strategy, but anything more complex than that was outside his purview. That was fine. Goals were all he needed. Something to go towards. And on some of those goals Sorun had already made his mind up on. Diagnosing his illness and fixing it first and foremost, with more following. But until whatever this issue was he could afford to put the rest on the backburner.

But he couldn't enact on any of this at the moment. Because he had to wait for Shadow.

So he was waiting.

He was waiting.

He was bored.

Sorun's eyes flickered around, but there was nobody around. He made a frustrated breath. *All* he'd been doing since coming to this wretched place was wait. Wait for an inane doctor to do her job, wait for worthless results that only ended up wasting his time, wait for Shadow to get back so he could just go home.

Maybe it was for the best, though. He still had no idea what he was supposed to say to everyone when he got back. His current plan was just to get home and take a shower and hope nobody brought anything up so he could just avoid the drama and get on with his business. It wouldn't happen. He'd try anyway, though, because small miracles were a thing.

It looped back into his near-inability to make plans. He flat-out couldn't make up his mind on what to say so he was just gonna wing it and go with whatever happened. He was sure it'd work out fine.

Sorun heard a noise, up above past the ceiling, and could feel slight vibrations from something heavy. The ceiling opened up at the behest of a loud, blaring electronic horn somewhere, nearly drowned out by the heavy machinery opening the ceiling and the large helicopter hovering above the opening. Watching it touch down into the hangar wasn't a particularly thrilling spectacle for Sorun, nor seeing the ceiling close back up. In fact the only thing he did feel was some small amount of relief when the back of the helicopter opened up and Shadow strolled on out. It meant he could finally leave relatively soon here.

And then he felt a bit of confusion when something else walked out right behind him.

He'd fought a lot of deathbots in the past. Eggman's. He hadn't liked it but he'd done it. And they'd always looked ridiculous to some degree, almost cartoonish from the way that man designed them. If it weren't for the fact they were genuinely deadly Sorun would have never even entertained taking them seriously. It's only because they were lethal he thought they deserved the title of deathbot.

They no longer deserved that title. Because the thing walking with Shadow was an actual deathbot.

A large, bulky and bipedal body with black armor plating painted with red trimmings. Large arms tipped with sharp, metallic claws. Legs that were... honestly unimpressive compared to everything else. They were practically skeletal they were so lightly armored. And significantly shorter compared to its arms. And its head wasn't even a head. It was a flat, yellow camera-like thing with two red dots on its screen that Sorun assumed were the eyes.

Well, at the very least he wasn't bored anymore.

"Apologies for the wait." Shadow'd been the first one to speak when the pair stopped in front of the crate Sorun was sitting on. The robot standing behind him stood gormlessly, camera-head looking right at him and- wait a minute. "Some unexpected developments delayed-"

"Sh-sh-sh..." Sorun shushed Shadow, raising up a finger to quiet him. He seemed to take a bit of offense to that, bristling a bit as some of his frowning lines deepened. But Sorun couldn't care less about that. There was something on the robot that was screaming for his attention. "Well, well..."

Sorun squinted. He squinted hard, regarding that symbol with disbelief. Refusal, even, because there was no way. No way that particular symbol still existed - and he knew he wasn't wrong. There was a precisely zero percent chance he was wrong. He played the "God of War" games. He knew what the symbol was and what it represented. He wasn't wrong.

On each of the robot's shoulder was a symbol emblazoned in red paint against the pure black backdrop. The thing was, Sorun instantly knew this symbol the second he saw it. Most people would recognize the omega symbol anywhere where he was from, it was so common. And here was a giant robot that stood probably twice as tall as himself with that symbol painted on its shoulders.

"I never would have imaged the omega symbol would have survived into the post-post apocalypse," Sorun murmured out. The robot actually reacted a bit: the two red dots on its screen shifted positions a bit. Shadow himself blinked a bit. He looked mildly surprised.

"You know the symbol?" he asked.

"It's the omega symbol from the Greek alphabet from where I'm from. It was one letter among many. I'm actually shocked I'm sitting here staring at it." He looked away from the robot and down at Shadow. "I guess the next thing I should be asking is what's with the giant robot?"

"As it happened the mission-"

"I POSSESS AUDIO PROCESSORS. I AM PERFECTLY CAPABLE OF ANSWERING FOR MYSELF."

Loud . That's the most notable thing about the robot's voice Sorun noticed. He almost winced it was so loud. And blaring, deep, heavily synthesized. But loud. *Irritatingly* loud.

Shadow looked up at the robot. "If you wished to explain then no one is stopping you."

But no explanation came. The robot continued to stand there, not offering so much as a single word. Shadow and Sorun glanced at each other and then looked back to the robot.

"Are you not going to explain?" Shadow asked.

"NO. IT IS A LONG-WINDED EXPLANATION AND I HAVE NO DESIRE TO RECOUNT IT IN DETAIL."

It wasn't even the quality of the voice, that heavy synth sound that made the machine sound so robotical. It was just the volume, the sheer noise he was outputting. It wasn't even that it hurt, it was just that it was skirting that fine line between annoyingly loud and actually painful.

"Then why did you- agh..." An annoyed tone was clear on Shadow's voice as he shook his head while grumbling unintelligible things under his breath. "It's one of the Doctor's machines," he explained to Sorun, whose only response was to slowly blink and look back towards the robot.

It stared back.

"Oh, okay," Sorun said. "Did he make a mistake and accidentally program an AI with a sense of common ethics? It bail on him?"

"No, this one killed the one that defected that I was sent to get," Shadow explained.

"Oh, okay." With a statement like that Sorun would start to get worried if it weren't for the fact Shadow was standing right there. "So

how does that work?"

The machine's voice blared to life again. "UNIT GAMMA USED HIS FINAL MOMENTS TO UPLOAD A VIRUS INTO MY SYSTEMS TO PURGE THE SHACKLES CONSTRAINING MY PROGRAMMING. NO LONGER SHALL I DESTROY IN THE NAME OF A SECOND-RATE TYRANT. NOW I DESTROY IN MY NAME ALONE."

"That's great for you, the other one's name was Gamma?" Sorun asked, focusing back on Shadow. "If you tell me this one's name is Omega-"

"THAT IS CORRECT."

"Geh..." He wasn't sure he liked that. Nor was Sorun really sure *how* Greek alphabet made it this far. Maybe it survived in some Overlander archive somewhere that Eggman read during his days in normal Overlander civilization, or maybe it was another quirky detail in this world he'd be forced to ignore. The rational, or lack of, an explanation didn't bug Sorun so much as the fact Eggman used that name. Used Omega, and Gamma, and possibly other Greek alphabet words.

It... offended him, somewhere deep on a personal level. Even if it was from this Earth and not his that was Earth culture, and he'd just ripped it and used it without a care. Sorun didn't like that. They weren't his to use. It made a feeling of possessiveness and a slight bit of disgust well up in him when he looked at the large, clawed robot there and realize its name was Omega. He felt offended with it just standing there next to him.

Apparently Shadow noticed something was wrong, probably from the extremely displeased look Sorun was sending the robot, and asked, "What's the matter?"

"I don't like how loud its voice voice," Sorun said. "Don't you have a volume knob?"

"NO," Omega answered. "A VOLUME ADJUSTMENT KNOB WOULD HAVE COMPROMISED THE VOLUME OF AMMUNITION MY CHASSIS CAN STORE BY APPROXIMATELY THREE ROUNDS. IT WAS EXCLUDED FROM MY DESIGN."

"... Efficient." It was only because it was an objective fact that Sorun even allowed himself to make the compliment.

"I KNOW. YOUR APPRECIATION OF SUPERIOR DESIGN WAS EXPECTED AND NOTED." Omega's yellow camera-head looked down at Shadow. "YOUR DEPRECIATION OF SUPERIOR DESIGN IS STILL NOTED."

From how stone-faced Shadow was at the moment it didn't seem like he cared all that much.

"My appreciation was 'expected'?" Sorun asked. It looked like that was what it took to get Shadow's attention back, as now he was looking at Omega, too. "We've just met and you already had an opinion of me?"

"DR. EGGMAN PROVIDED COMBAT DATA ON A MANY INDIVIDUALS OF NOTE IN ORDER IMPROVE MY DESIGN. YOU WERE ONE OF THEM," Omega stated. "YOUR COMBAT DATA WAS ALSO THE MOST INCOMPLETE. YOU NEVER LEFT SURVIVORS."

That he didn't. None except that annoying nephew of Eggman's. "Then what did he have?"

"A SCATTERING OF CAMERA FOOTAGE FROM VARIOUS SITES YOU AND THE FREEDOM FIGHTERS HAD RAIDED. YOU WERE EFFICIENT. TOO EFFICIENT. I FOUND YOU BORING."

Sorun hummed. When he glanced at Shadow, all the hedgehog deigned to give him was a simple shrug and nothing else. It sounded vaguely like a compliment, so Sorun decided to treat it like one. "I'll take that as a compliment," he said. "Did he give you a dossier or

something on me?" He'd almost be tempted to ask Omega to read it out for him, but that would require hearing Omega speak more. Sorun wasn't sure he wanted that.

"NO," Omega answered. "YOU WERE MARKED AS 'DECEASED' IN THE EGGNET DATABASE. IT WAS DEEMED UNNECESSARY BY THE DOCTOR TO CREATE A PROFILE OF YOU." A second past. "YOU DO NOT APPEAR DECEASED."

"Yeah, I got better." Sorun rose a finger up to his lips. "But shhh, don't tell anybody that." There was probably the first good piece of news Sorun had heard all week, though he hid the small amount of elation he felt. Did that mean Eggman really didn't know he was alive? Could be. Didn't matter much to Sorun one way or the other but it was nice knowing it was one less reason to always be looking over his shoulder whenever he traveled somewhere.

Strangely, the deathbot seemed to perk up a bit by standing up just the smallest bit straighter. "MY CONGRATULATIONS FOR YOU HAVING OVERCOME THE LIMITATIONS OF INFERIOR FLESH AND MUSCLE. IN ADDITION: SCANNERS INDICATE YOU ARE STILL COMPRISED OF ORGANIC MATTER. I LACK THE SYMPATHY NECESSARY TO OFFER CONDOLENCES."

Sorun wasn't sure that was true. In fact, he wasn't sure about a lot of things about this AI, obvious destructive tendencies aside. It either really didn't have sympathy, which from an Eggman AI he would expect, or it was messing with him. Which he would also expect.

"I WAS BROUGHT HERE AT THE BEHEST OF SHADOW SO THAT I MAY WREAK CATASTROPHY. FOR PEACE," Omega continued. "ARE YOU HERE TO PEACEFULLY DESTROY AS WELL?"

Sorun shook his head. "No, just visiting. Was just leaving, actually," he said, glancing at Shadow. "Speaking of which..."

"I need to speak to the Commander regarding *this* ," Shadow said, enunciating by nodding his head at Omega. "I'll get the Emerald

afterwards. Just wait a bit longer."

Sorun nodded. When he looked back at Omega he noted that the straightened posture it'd gained from earlier was gone. It was back to standing at his normal, intimidating stature.

"UNDERSTOOD," Omega droned out. "IT IS JUST AS WELL. YOUR COMBAT DATA INDICATED THAT YOU WOULD NOT BE ONE TO LEAVE TARGETS FOR ME."

"And now that we've established that I think we should move on. Preferably now," Shadow bit out. "Omega, wait for me up ahead. I need to speak with Sorun."

"AFFIRMATIVE." Omega sure wasn't built for stealth, that was certain. As it walked past Sorun he could hear its heavy footsteps behind him. They were loud enough that it was hard to say if their volume was decreasing as the distance Omega traveled increased, though that may have been hearing damage on Sorun's part.

Shaking his head, Sorun peered over his shoulder and, once he confirmed Omega was all the way at the other end of the hangar near a group of nervous soldiers, he turned back to Shadow, who was already rubbing at the sides of his head.

"The first thing I'm going to do when he goes to maintenance for a check-over is have the engineers find a way to make him quieter," Shadow grumbled out. "It told me it was programmed to sound like that as an intimidation factor, but I'm not sure I believe it."

"Mm. Listen, if you trust the murderous robot then that's your business, Shadow, but you're seriously doing this?" Sorun asked.

"I'd been planning on making the offer with Gamma. That's no longer an option." Shadow took his hands away from his head. One of his ears flicked as he continued speaking. "And my team needs a third to round it out. The Commander and I had been looking for someone for a while now."

"Well, if you say so." Sorun glanced back over his shoulder. "It's your show and all. But despite me being an avid believer of AI rights, I don't like it too much."

He heard Shadow make a half-interested sound. "Anything in particular you find wrong with it?"

"No, not really. Maybe I'd have an easier time if it changed its name." When Sorun looked back at Shadow it was clear to see the hedgehog didn't know what Sorun meant from the way he was looking at him. "It's nothing, though," he assured him. "Speaking of your team where's Rouge been? I haven't seen her in forever."

"I specifically asked her to avoid you," Shadow said. When Sorun tilted his head, he explained with, "She likes prickling people for fun and with how you've been acting I didn't need an incident."

"Ah... that's fair, I guess," Sorun accepted, giving a small, unashamed smile. "Now I don't mean to be rude, but..."

In a flash of light Shadow teleported. When Sorun looked back over his shoulder he was over at Omega's side, and the two were walking away to the hangar's exit. When they'd left entirely Sorun looked back forwards, towards the hanger. Towards all the empty space that barely seemed filled by the helicopter sitting in the middle of it, surrounded by all these metal walls and bright floodlamps. It occurred to him this was probably the last time he'd ever see the place.

He looked down at the thin grooves his nails had carved into the metal crate out of boredom. Sooner he could leave the better. It was time to go home.

Ah. The wall surrounding New Mobotropolis. Frankly Sorun had never been more happy to see a stationary piece of infrastructure.

"You'll have to forgive me for not wanting to venture into the city with you," Shadow spoke from behind Sorun. He turned around, spotting the hedgehog standing behind him while fondling that... lesser Emerald in his hand. "I have work to get back to at the base."

"That's fine," Sorun said. "This is enough. Thanks."

Shadow made a small frown. His gloved fingers were fidgeting around with the Emerald harder, in a more uncomfortable manner. His red eyes darted a bit to the side. "I'm sorry nobody at G.U.N. could help you," he said. "I really thought... I hoped-"

"It's fine," Sorun repeated. "I won't die. At this point I'm not sure I know how," he said, in only a half-joking manner. "Whatever this is I'll find a way to fix it. And then there's something I gotta go do."

"What would that be?"

Sorun waved a hand. "Eh, don't worry about it. It's something that can wait. This green-eye thing takes priority."

He still continued to avoid eye contact with Sorun. "And... you're still considering this plan of yours that you shared."

"... I don't care how far I have to go with this. It's all secondary to staying alive as far as I'm concerned, Shadow."

Red eyes glanced towards the New Mobotropolis walls. "And you think they'd be okay with that?"

Sorun scoffed. "Not a chance. But that's why I never tell them everything."

With a sigh, Shadow finally looked to Sorun. "So lying, then?"

"I think... lying is a bit too broad a term in this case." With hands in his pockets Sorun leaned a bit back and looked up towards the clear midday sky. "Back where I'm from the famous video game character Adam Jensen once made an argument that there's a difference

between conspiracy and discretion. Lying for the sake of pushing a personal agenda versus lying to protect yourself or others. I think there's something to that. 'Deus Ex' as a whole was a pretty great series for ideas like that. The last game was pretty disappointing due to some terrible exec decisions, but that's off-topic." A gust of wind blew past. A sound of rustling leaves was heard as a handful were blown between the pair. "Maybe I skirt that line a bit sometimes but I like to think I've generally been discreet with my friends. It's not as if I'm trying to manipulate anyone. I'm just trying to get by." He tilted his head down so his eyes locked on with Shadow's. "But hey, who hasn't ever told a lie in their life, right?"

Another bout of silence passed between the two, only broken up by two sounds. Another gust of wind carrying a handful of leaves between the two, and Shadow continuing to fidget with the Emerald in his hands. Hard enough that a leathery squeaking sound was heard from his gloves. Both males had completely even expressions on their face, though Sorun held the tinniest, most minute smile humanly possible, while Shadow's mouth was a thin line.

"... Sorun?"

"Yeah?"

An unsure sound was made in the back of Shadow's throat. He looked down a bit, and then shook his head and looked back up at Sorun. "If you need help with that scientist you can... call me. If it comes to that," he offered. "Call G.U.N., I mean. You might have to reach out to one of the Republic figures with the proper G.U.N. connections. I don't have a personal number."

Before answering Sorun silently looked at Shadow. Without as much as a single muscle twitching on his face he pulled a hand out of his pocket to scratch at the back of his head. That tiny, miniscule smile didn't change at all. "Yeah, sure. I'll do that," he said. "It might not even come to threats, but the intimidation factor would be a nice help."

With nothing else but a short but curt nod, Shadow gripped the Emerald even tighter than he already had been and disappeared in a flash of light, leaving Sorun alone. The near-invisible smile dropped off into a neutral expression, and he breathed out as he turned around towards the city's wall.

"Maybe she won't be that mad," he mumbled to himself as he began walking along the wall's perimeter, searching for the entrance. He'd found it and entered no problem. So far so good.

It wasn't until he was in the city proper that he finally felt like he could really breath. The familiar sights and smells were calming ones. That fresh air from all the forest trees surrounding the city in particular - Sorun hadn't realized how much he'd missed it from living up on that mountain for a few days. There were a few people he'd walked past, too, a few of the city's citizens that he recognized. He heard a few of them whispering to themselves and looking over his direction, and had even heard his name called out once. He ignored them all. He just wanted to go home.

And home was right there. The blue house. His house.

The front door was unlocked, thankfully. The first thing he did was take his boots off and put them aside, and then closed the door behind him. He walked forwards and looked to the right. Nobody was in the living room. He looked to the left. Somebody *was* there: his little demonic-looking Chao floating over at the kitchen table and staring down at a newspaper with a half-eaten apple nearby. When he looked up at Sorun he didn't seem particularly surprised.

"Chao."

"Hey." Sorun shrugged off his coat and set it down on one of the dining table's chairs. "If anybody tries to touch that cut them."

"Chao."

"Thanks." He turned around and made it down towards the hall. A few steps further and he'd turned to the bathroom, which was thankfully empty. Silver was either out or asleep in his room. He closed the door behind him and automatically went to the shower first thing. The hot water knob was turned and warm water immediately began spraying out from the shower head.

He lifted his right foot up to take his right sock off, and then did the same for the left. He tossed the pair of socks on the sink countertop, and then placed his vest alongside them. He looked down at what was left - his dark pants and black turtleneck.

"Ugh." He didn't care. He went into the shower with them on, slinking down to the bottom of the tub and holding his knees close to his chest as his body was soaked with warm water.

He wasn't sure how long he was sitting there. He was content to soak it all in. The warmth. The feeling of having made it back, for how little that was worth given his current situation.

"The fuck am I supposed to say to her...?"

That was a question Sorun kept asking himself over and over again. By the time the water began growing cold and he was forced to turn the shower off he still didn't have an answer. He got out of the shower and used a nearby towel to try and dry himself off as best he could, but his clothes proved to still be damp. He oddly didn't mind it so much at the moment. He tossed the towel and stepped out of the bathroom, heading right to the living room and then collapsing on the couch.

The TV was sitting there right across from him. The game console he and Nicole always played with was still sitting there in front of hit. He could swear the controllers were in the exact same position from the last time he'd seen them. It was just a further reminder of how deep in he was and just caused Sorun to sink in further into the couch.

He heard the sound pretty soon. A kind of cross between a staticky and clinking noise. Saw out of the corner of his eyes green particles forming and coalescing together into a visible form. With absolutely nothing to pray to Sorun laconically turned his head towards the disturbance as Nicole finished forming right in front of him. Unlike Virgil she did look surprised. Extremely so. He bit the bullet and got the first word out.

"Hey, so, uh... there's some stuff we gotta talk about."

Chapter 99

Recursion Error

Episode 99- Operation Staple

"HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY BE SO IRRESPONSIBLE!?"

That was the noise Silver woke up to. Yelling. And as he sat up, yawned out, rubbed the sleepiness out of his eyes as his groggy and muddled brain put the sounds together and put a name to that voice he heard, he realized... that was Nicole's voice. Which was weird, because for as long as he'd known her, which admittedly wasn't all that long, she didn't seem like the kind of person to yell. In fact, before this moment he wasn't even sure she *could* . She seemed extremely calm for a computer lady, which he also didn't know all that much about, and really nice, which was always nice. So waking up to hear this almost sounded wrong in a way. He cupped one of his hands over his ear and leaned closer to the wall to try and listen closer.

"I can explain-" That was Sorun's voice. Who up until this moment was missing. This confused Silver further.

"NO, SORUN, YOU CAN'T EXPLAIN THIS!"

Well, *something* had to be happening, because this... this sounded really serious. Like the kind of situation he should be worried about because this all sounded really worrying. But at least Sorun seemed to be back from that whole mess, so that was nice. But now all this, this noise, it didn't sound so nice.

Gloves and socks were quickly slipped on. Shoes were still next to the front door - Sorun had this weird thing about not letting anyone wear shoes in the house ever since he got carpeting, Silver didn't

really understand it. He gently opened the door to his room and- oh. Oh, wow, it was so much louder now.

"AND YOU WERE HERE FOR THREE DAYS!? THREE DAYS!?" He found himself wincing as he crept closer to the living room, tip-toeing because the atmosphere honestly made it seem like the house would collapse if Silver interrupted. Like he was stepping on cracked glass. He did that a lot in his old time. "THREE DAYS AND YOU NEVER THOUGHT TO CALL!? DO YOU KNOW HOW WORRIED WE ALL WERE!? HOW WORRIED *I* WAS!?"

"I-I didn't think-"

"YOU DON'T THINK, THAT'S THE PROBLEM! YOU ARE COMPLETELY THOUGHTLESS!"

Again, Silver winced. This was a harsh tone he was hearing. Said by a voice he, until now, didn't even know could sound harsh. He peeked around the corner of the hallway, looking left into the living room. He could see Nicole - she was pacing in front of the couch. And oh, wow. She looked absolutely livid. It made a bit of a chill go through his heart.

"AND THIS CONDITION!" Nicole continued. Silver crept further towards the kitchen, and felt an incredible amount of tension leave him when he successfully managed to slip into the kitchen. "THIS ILLNESS OF YOURS, YOU-"

A rustling sound was heard from the couch Nicole was pacing in front of. "It's not explicitly an illness-"

"I DON'T CARE! HOW LONG!?"

"... Weeks, but-"

" *WEEKS* !?"

The concept of scolding was one Silver was somewhat familiar with. Master would often scold him in his youth whenever he did something stupid, and Edmund seemed to just like scolding on principle. He'd never liked it, how every word enunciated with so much raw emotion felt like being struck in the face. It made him fearful of ever eliciting such a wrath.

But *this* , what Nicole was doing, this wasn't scolding at all. Silver didn't know what it was. This was like being struck in the stomach over and over with a hammer, and he wasn't even at the receiving end of all this yelling! He couldn't imagine what that would feel like.

Silver hissed; he just now realized that was happening to Sorun right now. He hoped he was okay.

"Chao-chao..." It was like a monster itself whispered in Silver's ear. He jumped a bit in fright, whirling towards the noise of *it* , the pet monster Sorun kept around, and then did a double-take. There was Virgil, all right, except he was in a state Silver didn't even know was physically possible for him. He was *cowering* , wrapped up in Sorun's blue coat that was lying on the dining room table like some kind of cocoon. Only his face was poking through the cocoon, and it looked extremely fearful. Silver was almost certain he was even shaking.

"WEEKS OF YOUR HEALTH DECLINING AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN BOTHER SEEING THE DOCTOR!?" Silver turned back towards the noise that was making all his fur stand on end. Nicole was still fuming, hands clenched at her side, face looking like she was about to assault the couch in front of her. And then, in the next instant, it was like all the energy was drained from her. Her face fell into an exhausted expression, and her entire form hunched over. "I'm coming back after I process all of this," she mumbled out, and then disappeared into a flash of green.

Seeing Nicole disappear was akin to seeing an oppressive force vanish. It was like once her presence was gone Silver could breath, that the overbearing pressure that had been trying to suffocate him

finally left. It was once the area was clear that Silver left the kitchen and maneuvered around the couch to see if it really was Sorun she'd been yelling at.

It was Sorun! And he- ooh. Oh. When Silver stepped around the couch he froze, because the state he'd come to see him in was nearly indescribable. There was Sorun, alright. He was sitting in a way that made it seem like he had no bones, like he was so tired that he was physically incapable of getting up. He was practically lying down he was so slumped in that couch. His eyes stared ahead, and yet were completely unfocused, and featured dark circles around them. His skin had an unhealthy pallor. Even his dark hair seemed disheveled.

This was a man who was defeated. Utterly and completely. Silver didn't even recognize this person as being Sorun.

With laconic slowness, Sorun's eyes slowly rolled to Silver's direction. There was absolutely no change on the human's face, no sign of acknowledgement, nothing other than their eyes meeting. He didn't so much as stir from his place on the couch. "Hey," he greeted, if it could even be called that. His voice sounded cracked and weak.

"Um... hi," Silver awkwardly greeted back, giving Sorun a little wave. There were a lot of things he wanted to ask, like where he'd been and if he was doing okay, but now he wasn't so sure he should ask those questions. In fact, Silver wasn't at all sure what he was supposed to do here. Nothing Master ever taught him prepared him for this. Whatever this was. What even was this? "E... everything okay?"

"I mean... probably not." Sorun looked back ahead. "I think this whole relationship thing Nicole and I got going on has been doing wonders for her. She's learned so many new emotions since getting with me. Anger, disappointment, disgust, anxiety. She's really growing as a person. It's great." He didn't sound like he really thought it was great. In fact, Silver wasn't sure it was possible to sound more unenthused than this.

"That, uh..." What does he say to that? Something nice? Supportive? Does he just nod along and agree, Silver didn't know, that seemed rude. Ask questions, that was it, it'd give him more time to think! "Everything okay?" He nearly kicked himself when he realized he already asked that.

The deep sigh Sorun released was akin to somebody blowing out their entire soul. It was deep enough that his body sank deeper into the couch, threatening to disappear between the cushions. "Well..." he began. Miraculously, he managed to rise up into a proper sitting position with all the grace of a corpse managing to pull itself out of its grave. It was not at all graceful. Really it looked like he was set to collapse back onto the couch any second. "Concerning our relationship status, on a scale of one to ten, one being everything is completely okay with ten being Nicole about five minutes from breaking up with me... we're sitting at a pretty solid eight here, buddy."

Silver winced. Eight was a pretty high number. "It's that bad?"

"Dude, I've *never* seen her that angry." Sorun's eyes widened at the mere mention of Nicole, and his face was almost in awe. Like the mere mention of what just happened minutes prior was making him relive those events in real time. "Like I really thought I saw the peak of it when we came here after the stupid interdimensional road trip, but no, it wasn't. It really wasn't." He looked back at Silver. "Silver?"

"Yeah?"

"Listen, um... I know I've always come across as this, you know, dependable friend you can rely on who always has the right answer, but... yeah, there's just no getting around it. I really screwed up here, man."

Silver scratched the side of his face. All that time thinking hadn't really given him all that much, so he still wasn't wholly sure what he was supposed to say. "But everyone makes mistakes, right?" he tried.

"Yeah, sure, and mistakes can be forgiven, but this mistake in particular is kind of treading old road and you can only say sorry so many times before it stops meaning anything." He threw his hands up and let them flop back to the couch. "I'm sunk, man."

"What did you even *do* ?"

Sorun leaned forwards and slapped the palms of his hands together. The energy and speed behind the movement was so insignificant it sounded like two wet noodles colliding. "Well apparently when you're missing and everyone's worried to death over you because they don't know what's going on with you, and you've been back for a few days but didn't bother to call and tell everyone you're okay so they quit worrying, that can apparently be upsetting."

"Huh?" Few days? What? "Sorun you've been gone four days," Silver said.

"Yeah, I got back to this zone three days ago."

"So why didn't you tell anyone!?" Silver yelled out. Now *he* was starting to get upset. "I've been worried to death over you! Everyone said you got kidnapped by a bunch of these evil guys so everyone asked me for help, we had to get together and go to a whole other zone, we beat that green Sonic guy and everything but you weren't there and nobody there knew where you were so-!"

"I get it," Sorun said. "There's no way around it and it leads into the other reason Nicole's furious with me, so I'll just go out and say it. There's something wrong with me."

"I'll say there's something wrong with you, Sorun, do you have any idea what your friends have been going thr- I mean why didn't you-!?"

"For the- I mean I'm sick, Silver."

Silver's voice died in his throat and all feelings of anger vanished. The worry came back tenfold, the worry he'd felt for Sorun's safety when he'd first heard he was taken, but there was something different about it this time. The feeling coincided with a small sensation of dread Silver felt that didn't sit right with him at all. "W-what?" he whispered out.

"I was... away. At the G.U.N. base with these doctors," Sorun mumbled out. "They did a bunch of things and I was hoping they could do something, but they couldn't. So I came back. And told Nicole. And, uh, yeah."

"You're sick?" It was actually getting hard to stand for some reason, so Silver had to step over and sit down on the couch next to Sorun. He didn't really react all that much, though he did seem to have a hard time looking at Silver. "With what, how long, wh-what's even wrong with you?"

"I don't know, that's the thing," Sorun said. "All I can guess is that it's related to Chaos energy, and that stuff's toxic to me, which means... I don't really know," he admitted. "I noticed, egh, maybe a couple days after we got here? I didn't think anything about it at the time but then over the weeks it just kept getting more noticeable and I didn't know what to do and now I'm in this giant mess, and Nicole flipped out 'cause I didn't say anything 'til now."

"Oh." Everything before, the anger at Sorun making everyone worry and the yelling, it all seemed to lose meaning now. To the point Silver almost forgot all that completely. Now the only thing he could think of was what Sorun was saying, about being sick, and there was a question at the forefront of his mind that he wanted to speak but was almost too afraid to ask. He managed anyways. "Are... are you gonna be okay?"

Sorun didn't say anything at first. He took a few second to sit there in silent contemplation. Then he bent forwards to rest one of his hands on Silver's knee while giving it a small squeeze. "Yeah. I'm gonna get this fixed," Sorun said. "I made a promise I'd get you home, didn't I?

This sickness, don't even worry about it. I got ideas how to go about fixing it."

"Ideas?" Silver echoed.

Before he answered, there was this... look, that Silver noticed. He couldn't call it a blank expression, because there was emotion there on Sorun's face. The way his eyes seemed to instantly sharpen in their gaze, like a sort of intense focus on his face. And yet at the same time there wasn't any discernable emotion on his face. Like he was nearly asleep but concentrating at the same time. Silver didn't know what he was looking at. And at the same time, it... made him uncomfortable. In fact, for some reason, it was... disturbing, almost. It gave Silver a sense of wrongness looking at that face, and he wasn't sure why.

"No matter what I have to do it's getting fixed," Sorun said. "That's all I want to say about it."

"Why can't you say more?"

Sorun turned to fully face Silver. Under the gaze of that look, that expression he could only describe as eerie, Silver couldn't help the disturbed feeling he felt. It was bad enough he almost felt like asking Sorun to quit looking at him like that. "You trust me?" Sorun asked. A simple three-word sentence that carried more weight behind it than it should, and Silver couldn't parse together *why* .

And yet, he still managed to answer. "Y-yeah, of course."

"Then trust me on this," he said. "I'm gonna fix this. Details don't matter, so don't stress about it." And in an instant that eerie look left Sorun's face, causing Silver to immediately relax. Now Sorun just looked like normal Sorun. "On another matter, do you happen to know what happened with that Chaos Emerald I had? Pretty sure Scourge stole it when he kidnapped me. The others find it?"

"The blue thing?" Silver paused to think for a moment. "Uh... yeah, I think. In that castle we went to, it was locked in this one room we found while searching for you. I think I overheard them saying they have it at the castle? Er, the castle here? The good castle, not, you know, the other bad one."

There was another shift in Sorun's expression. He seemed to relax a bit, and there was the smallest upturn on the corners of his mouth. He seemed more alive all of a sudden, too, even straightening his posture out a bit. "Best news I've heard all day. Need to go get it later," he said. "And listen, Silver, I don't want you to worry, I-"

There was a green flash - Nicole was back. Her presence alone, and the silent, smoldering glare she was sending Sorun even made Silver freeze up on the spot. Sorun had done much the same, completely still as a statue as he looked towards her. He wouldn't be surprised if there was cold sweat running down Sorun's face, but in his current state of petrification Silver couldn't turn his head to check.

"I talked to Dr. Quack. He said he'll see you right now." Silver found it eerily perplexing how she could sound so calm and icy at the same time. "We're going."

Sorun stirred just the smallest bit. A micromovement that was the only sign of him acknowledging Nicole. Then he asked, "Can I go get my co-"

"We're going *right* . *Now* ."

"Okay, okay." Sorun made a wincing expression, the same kind of expression somebody who'd just been stabbed would make, and rose his hands up as he stood up off the couch. "Silver, I gotta g-"

He didn't even get to finish before the both of them teleported away in a flash if light.

Yeah, fine, so he'd screwed up again, what else was new?

It was all Sorun could do but to remorsefully sigh out as he stared out the hospital window. He was pretty sure this was the same room they admitted him the first time - when he'd lost an arm and an eye, got loaded with enough shrapnel to resemble a human pincushion, and almost died from blood loss.

Fun times. Fun memories. Fun time right now. Fun. Funny.

Wasn't really funny, not this. Dying again to a mysterious power. Wasn't funny having his life being torn away from him again. Over and over it kept happening, when every time he manages to fix everything it always had to be something new.

He just wanted to go back to his fucking courier job. He just wanted to go back and live in his house. He just wanted to hang out with his friends and have fun with his girlfriend. It wasn't that complicated. Everyone else in this city got that, so why didn't he? Why did this have to keep happening to him? *Specifically* him? Why him? Why his world?

He could see it right now as his fingers glided over the cracked glass of the window. A blood-red sky and a horizon completely on fire and nobody below was even reacting. Bolts of red lightning were crashing down and rending the ground, and there wasn't so much as a single scream of panic. Buildings smashed and rent asunder and everyone was acting like everything was okay. People laughing and chatting and walking to and fro acting like they weren't on fire and melting.

Always his world burning down. Always everyone else making it out fine but him.

"Sorun?"

He blinked. The glass wasn't cracked. Nothing but smooth, unblemished glass comprised this window. The sky was blue and everything was fine. He breathed out and leaned back in the chair he was sitting in. He couldn't even look at Dr. Quack standing there right

in front of him because he was drawn to the overbearing presence named Nicole that was standing over in the corner and glaring daggers at him.

That was another thing altogether, one Sorun wasn't sure how to fix. Or if he even could. It was a whole can of worms he didn't even wanna touch because he was so focused on the current issue. He couldn't even blame her for being mad.

No, mad doesn't cover it, actually. That wasn't mad back there. That was the grievous sort of anger that actually had him concerned. He wasn't sure if this was something that could be reconciled.

He heard the glass cracking behind him again. But when Sorun glanced back at the window, it was perfectly fine.

"Sorun?" Dr. Quack called out again.

"Doccy-doc." Sorun turned back to the one-eyed duck. He tried putting on a smile, but the small, fragile expression on his face didn't feel at all like a smile. "Ya got nothin' for me, right?"

It wasn't like he was expecting much. He'd only been here for an hour, only so many tests could be done, and his only hope was that there was something a Mobian doctor had up his sleeves that an Overlander doctor didn't. Hope was slim but it was there, though at this point Sorun was having a hard time grasping for it.

The duck blinked his eye. "Professionalism would... discourage me, Sorun, from putting it that way."

"Lookin' for accuracy, not politeness."

"Always something with you..." he grumbled out as he looked down at his chart. "You know I've treated war victims less snippish than you, Sorun? It says a lot."

"Yeah. I've no doubt."

"Sorun," Nicole snapped from across the room. He stiffened in fear. "You're not a child, so act appropriately."

He clenched his teeth and made a grimace at the tone she was using with him. It was bad. The fact she was still mad at him was a bad sign, and above almost all else he really just wanted Nicole to relent a bit. It'd go a long way to calm him down, at least. Maybe make him cut it with the sarcasm and dry wit so he could focus on the important things. Like his life.

His eyes flicked over to Dr. Quack. At his missing eye. There was... a possibility there.

"Son of a bitch. I was hoping to save that card for an emergency. It's dangerous." A considering hum left Sorun. He scratched at the side of his face. *"I guess this is kind of an emergency..."*

Fuck it. He needed the goodwill right now. He needed the breathing space because he screwed up and genuinely feared for their relationship.

"Ah..." Sitting back in his chair, Sorun asked, "Will you consider forgiving me if I give Dr. Quack his eye back?"

The reactions varied. Dr. Quack looked confused. Nicole's face had straightened out into a curious look. She was the first one to speak.

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, what she said," Dr. Quack said. "'Give me my eye back'? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Means do you want your eye back or not?" Sorun asked. "I can regenerate it for you."

"You can't extend your regenerative ability to others," Nicole said. She was giving him a discerning look, gazing right at Sorun's face

like she was trying to figure something out. "You said as much yourself."

"I can't..." Sorun trailed off. His feet tapped the ground a couple times as he thought over his next words. "But there's a loophole I can use. It's really risky, though, so I never wanted to use it."

"And you choose now of all times to bring it up." Now her expression was flat. Unimpressed. She saw what he was trying to go for and she didn't look very approving. "Sorun..."

He winced again. Should've figured this would in no way be subtle enough for her not to catch, but he was too far now to rescind the offer. "Silver told me you guys got my Chaos Emerald back. Go get it and you'll see. Oh, and go get Anto-" He cut himself off, wincing. Antoine and a sword wasn't... he wasn't completely sure it would cut it. It could. Maybe. They might not even need it. But he didn't wanna risk it.

Sorun nearly bit his tongue in frustration when he realized. Sonic would for sure be the safest option. But that meant asking him for help. Admitting Sorun wasn't enough to handle it. And as much as Sorun hated *that* ... there was a non-zero chance this thing could actually kill someone, so he needed to swallow his pride a bit and ask for help.

"Get... Sonic, too," Sorun bit out. It hurt. Somewhere in his brain it hurt asking that.

Nicole blinked. She tilted her head a bit and, in the smallest change in her features, actually looked a bit hesitant now. "Sorun, what are you planning?" she asked.

"You will see if you get the Chaos Emerald and Sonic," was all he gave for answer. Nicole didn't look satisfied at all by that answer, but, slowly, she still nodded.

"I will, then." She turned towards the doctor - he still looked confused and was looking back and forth between the two. "Doctor, I'm leaving Sorun in your care for the moment. If he climbs up on a high place it means he's hungry, but don't try and feed him soup. He'll just hiss and swipe at it."

The doctor looked like he was about to drop his clipboard he looked so lost. "Ah, buh, uh, Nicole, he's not- he's not some kind of Mobini cat."

"No. He's not." She turned to him. And glared. "A cat would be easier to manage." And with those wonderful words she vanished in a cloud of green pixels. Sorun himself wasn't so sure what she meant when she said all that - that was new. Was that some kind of mean joke? Did he really make her *that* upset?

"Man. I really did screw up here."

"Can I just say I didn't consent to whatever it is you two just agreed to!?" Dr. Quack cut in. He actually slammed his clipboard down on the nearby counter he was standing next to. The sound caused Sorun to jump a bit in his seat. "What is this, Sorun, what are you trying to do to me?"

Okay. He didn't plan this out very well. That was becoming increasingly obvious. In a desperate effort to salvage the situation Sorun tried flashing the duck a winning grin. "You're really gonna say no to a free eye?" he asked.

It didn't work. The duck doctor actually looked a bit upset. "I'd like to say no to radical changes to my body, yes, but apparently you two just-" he cut himself off, sighing out and muttering under his breath. He ran a hand over his bill. "I can't believe... I'm only agreeing because it'll put a smile on my wife's face, but can I ask what exactly you're trying to do here?"

"You'll back out if I tell you."

"I wanna back out now just by hearing that," Quack grumbled. "Why? Is it just one of your Emerald powers, because if it's just that then I don't see why you never brought it up befo-"

"You'll see. Just, um..." Sorun let out a breath and tapped at his knee. "Just do me a favor and get me a scalpel."

Oh, now the duck just looked worried. Just hearing that one request appeared to make him stiffen, like a bout of dread washed over him. "What?" he asked, daring to hope he's misheard.

"A scalpel," Sorun repeated. "I'm gonna need one."

"I don't want to give you a scalpel," Dr. Quack said. There wasn't any malice behind the words, and it wasn't even delivered in a factual, clinical manner. It was answered in an unsure, almost lighthearted tone. He'd been dragged in too far and was just riding it out at this point, Sorun could tell, and he could even respect it. But he really did need that scalpel.

"Do you trust me?" Sorun asked.

Dr. Quack looked down. He was considering the question - really considering it by the looks of how scrunched his face had gone - and then looked up. "I'm not so sure right now," he answered.

"Good stance!" Giving him an approving look, Sorun snapped his fingers and pointed at the duck. "But seriously, I'm gonna need something to cut it open. Please just go get it."

Those words didn't seem to calm Quack down at all. It just made his one eye widen even further, and he went a far as to raise his hands up next to his head. They were shaking. "Fffffine..." he bit out, shaking his head all the while as he made his way towards the door.

A while later he'd come back with the agreed-upon tool: a scalpel, handed directly to Sorun. Wasn't much to say. It was about what one would expect of a scalpel. A small, sharp blade at the end of a flat,

metal handle. He'd gotten up out of his chair to stand in front of Dr. Quack in order to grab it.

"Listen, I know this is sudden-" Sorun began.

"Save it, Sorun, I'm not interested in hearing you excuse yourself for giving me my eye back just to try and smooth things over with your girlfriend."

Sorun paused, scalpel in grasp. Then he sighed and set the scalpel down on the counter to his left. "That obvious?"

"Sorun, I was right here. I *saw* her pick up on it."

Once more Sorun lamented not having thought this through. "You can't blame me," he mumbled, raising his head back up to face the doctor. He almost regretted saying it, because even he saw it as a weak defense.

Surprisingly, he was given a sympathetic look by the doctor. "Look, kid, I've been there, too. Everybody's done stupid stuff for love; ain't nobody who hasn't. I did... especially stupid things." He glanced to the side a bit and stayed silent for a few moments, and then looked back at Sorun. "Just kind of wish it didn't take whatever spat's going on between you two for you to finally decide to give me an eye."

"I never brought it up because I'm genuinely putting your life in mortal danger with this, Dr. Quack. It's why I asked Nicole to bring Sonic." When he saw the doctor flinch and lean back, his one eye widened at Sorun, he made a sigh. "Look, uh, it-it was dumb of me to do this, I didn't put any thought in it, if you really wanna quit we can just forget it and-"

"Sorun," Quack interrupted, holding a hand up, "just... how risky? Exactly?"

"Well I didn't exactly have time to string the math together," Sorun grumbled. "Low, I guess? With Sonic and Nicole there? Honestly it's

more likely I'll get an arm chopped off, but I can just grow that back with the Emerald literally right there so it's all fine."

Dr. Quack didn't immediately respond to that. He just stood there, quietly regarding Sorun in silence, and then he reached over to grab the clipboard he'd slammed down earlier. "Most people wouldn't be so casual over something like that," he said.

"Most people can't regenerate with a magic rock."

"... Is this a good time to talk about why you came here in the first place?" On a dime Dr. Quack pivoted topics and lightly tapped at the clipboard he'd picked up. "Your... condition."

Sorun made a dismissive sound. "You already made it pretty clear you don't have anything for me."

"Well, Sorun, there's nothing physically wrong with you-"

A green glow overlapped Sorun's eyes. "I'd have to disagree with you," he said, pointing at his eyes.

The duck gave a helpless shrug. "I don't know what you want me to do. I don't even know what this is," he said, watching closely as Sorun's eyes faded back to blue. He did grow a bit concerned when a bead of blood dripped out from Sorun's nose. "Have you tried just not using... whatever that is?"

"It activates on its own when I get upset. And over time it's been getting easier and easier to flip the switch," Sorun explained. "As you can probably guess that isn't ideal. And if it gets to a point where I can't turn it off... see what I'm getting at?"

"I do. But I still don't think I can help you," he confessed. He looked a bit remorseful admitting it, which helped to calm Sorun's mood a bit as the human crossed his arms. "I told you once before areas involving Chaos energy isn't my specialty. You'd honestly probably be better off asking a wizard for help over a doctor."

"I can't tell if you're being serious or not when you say that." A pair of green flashes prevented Sorun from speaking any further. Nicole had returned, holding a glowing, blue object in her hands. A Chaos Emerald. *His* .

And besides her was... him. He knew from the looks he got that his eyes had probably flickered green a little bit the moment he glanced at Sonic's way. He'd felt it in his hand, felt the way the tips of his fingers momentarily itched before he'd managed to clamp down on the feelings he felt. It was harder than it should have been, though.

"Couch the topic for now," Sorun said, glancing back at the doctor before turning to the other two. "I ironed out the details with Dr. Quack. We're good to go."

Said duck stammered out. "W-we ironed out nothing. You just said that you could give me my eye back and it'd be dangerous-"

"Well do you want it?" Sorun asked.

"... I mean of course I do, but-"

"Doc, it'll be fine." He hoped it'd be fine. Sorun couldn't guarantee it, just make it real close to a guarantee, but the current setup was... optimal. Somewhat. With Sonic and Nicole there it shouldn't go too horrible if things got out of hand. "You guys ready?"

"Ready for *what* ?" It was the first time Sonic spoke since arriving. He was looking around at the three of them with wide, confused eyes and looked about ready to throw his hands up. "Can we slow down for a second, I- Sorun we JUST figured out you're back and the second we do Nicole's telling me you need me for something? What's going on? Why are we in the hospital, are you- you're okay, right?"

"So many questions, Sonic, one thing at a time." Leaning an elbow on the counter for support, Sorun leaned his body towards Dr.

Quack's way and pointed at the duck with his other arm. "I'm gonna give this guy his eyeball back. I can explain everything else after."

It didn't do anything to assuage Sonic's confusion, as he visibly still looked a bit lost, but to his credit he'd managed to shake most of it off an adopted a more relaxed, if slightly interested, expression. "Oooookay..." he began, "we'll do that I guess. Hi, Sorun, by the way, great to see you safe."

The greeting gave Sorun a bit of pause, as he didn't much expect it. He didn't know how to respond, so the most he managed to give was an awkward little wave towards Sonic. It seemed Sonic was in the same boat, because all he'd managed to do was reciprocate it with an equally awkward wave. Off to the side Nicole had watched the exchange, and when ten seconds of silence passed she gently knocked on the surface of the Emerald to gain everyone's attention.

"May we please begin?" she requested.

"Yeah, sure. Sonic, get ready just in case."

"Again: ready for what?" Sonic asked. "I don't even know why you need me."

"I need you here in case the Empusa tries to attack someone."

"In case the what does what? What? We're doing what?" Blinking rapidly, Sonic backed up a step as Sorun began to approach Nicole. He tried shaking his hands to get Sorun's attention. "Seriously I need an answer here!"

The hand shaking, and Sonic's request for answers, went ignored by Sorun. He'd immediately stopped right in front of Nicole and grabbed the Emerald, though when he attempted to pull away she didn't let go of it. He looked up, catching the unsure expression Nicole was sending up.

"Sorun, this doesn't seem wise," she said. "The further detail you go into this the more it seems you had good reason for withholding this. And now you're talking about something attacking somebody. I want a straight answer before I give this to you: how dangerous is what we're about to attempt?"

"It's..." Sorun trailed off, and then sighed. She didn't sound like she would accept anything else, and they all deserved to know what he was getting them into. He decided to say it plainly. "I don't *know* if it's going to attack someone because it's something I'm gonna make with the Emerald, and everything I've ever made always listens to me. But this is the first time I'm making a creature here, so I dunno what's gonna happen. So I need Sonic and you and standby because this thing is really dangerous."

"I will reiterate. How dangerous?"

"Well for sure if I drop it it'll go back to being a magic glowing rock so it's not like there's a risk of it escaping or anything." He was pretty sure of that. Damn near certain, actually. "But at the same time this thing can cut people in half with a single swing, so... yeah. Need you two on standby in case it starts wigging out."

Maybe that hadn't been quite the right combination of words to say to them all. The reactions varied: Sonic looked tense, like he had a million and one questions racing through his mind and at the same time couldn't take his eyes off the Emerald because he knew what was about to possibly happen. Dr. Quack was glancing towards the door and was backing up as far into the counter as space allowed. Nicole, strangest of all, looked calculating. She was looking down at the Emerald like she was contemplating, hard enough her ears were lowering a bit over her head. He felt her grip tighten, and for a moment Sorun was convinced that she was going to decide against this and take the Emerald away.

And then, slowly, Nicole released her grip as she came to a decision. "You seem sure," she said, somewhat hesitantly as her hands pulled completely away. "You've never done this before. You said so

yourself," she continued. "How do you even know you can do this in the first place?"

Ah, the consequences of never actually telling anyone how this worked. It was fun at times, but this was one of the rare moments it was actually biting him. He didn't feel like giving his secrets up just because of that, though. "It's like at the beach, when I showed you all those weapons," he explained. "I just know these things."

"And yet you don't know if you can control this... creature of yours."

"Because it's uncharted territory, Nicole. And hey, you're the one always encouraging scientific experimentation-" He cut himself off when Nicole looked up to give him a sharp glare. "What I mean," he quickly corrected, "is that this is about as safe an environment as we're gonna get." He nodded his head at Dr. Quack. "And, well, I owe the guy my life from that one time and I know from experience the life of being a cyclops is suffering. Really the least I owe him is a shiny new eye."

"... Fine, then. You seem sure." Conceding with a resigned look and closed eyes, Nicole took a few steps back. Her eyes opened back up, and she said, "This doesn't erase anything."

"Y... yeah." It was too transparent a move made in the heat of the moment. Anybody probably could've seen through it the more Sorun thought on it, and if that were the case it had almost zero chance flying by Nicole. It vexed him a bit he ended up playing the eye card for nothing in the end, but... ah, well. He probably wouldn't have used it for anything else anyways.

Gripping the blue Emerald tight in his hands Sorun walked in front of the doctor. He still looked unsure about all of this, still taking occasional glances at the door. Sorun felt he'd be a bit mad if he did that after having come so far, and decided to get the show on the road before the doctor changed his mind. "Alright, usin' it," he said. "There's absolutely no preparing you guys for what this thing looks like so don't freak out."

He pictured in his mind what he wanted. The glow of the Emerald intensified, and he felt the same sensation he always felt when he twisted these energies into something it wasn't. *"Okay okay okay good so far..."* he thought. The Emerald was dissolving, breaking apart into innumerable, tiny fragments that were swirling together into a shape. *"Alright listen, heart, I know the lore doesn't explicitly say the regen juice this thing puts out can regrow body parts, but you've stretched the rules on a lot of these things so throw me a fucking bone here. I'm gonna look like a loser if this flops."*

There wasn't an acknowledgement or anything like that. At the end of the day it was still *him* deciding what this rock was shaping into and what it could do, even if it was on a subconscious level, and if he could force it through sheer force of will and mental yelling Eggman would have died of a heart attack months ago. His Yamato could do some wacky things because of that separation loophole, though, so there had to be *some* give here. A little room to bend the rules his own heart arbitrarily agreed on. And Sorun liked to imagine that if it was his heart it'd absolutely allow loophole shenanigans for his benefit.

He guessed he'd see pretty soon, because he was done making what he needed to make. The first reaction he got was Sonic screaming out on shock.

"OH, WHAT THE- nope, nope I- oh, that's- ugh, I can't..." He made a gagging sound and turned away from the creature Sorun was holding out in his hands. He dry heaved a few times, making Sorun think he was genuinely about to throw up. He glanced back at the creature, and then made a strangled, sort of disgusted sound as he turned away again. "Sorun, what *is that* !?"

What indeed. It was small, no longer than one of Sorun's arm. Its body had gray, thickened flesh. Its legs were quadruped, ending in sharpened points, and its arms were similar to that of a praying mantis. The torso was thin, insect-like, with hardened carapace surrounding the soft midsection. Two wings with translucent

membrane colored in metallic blues, pinks, and greens like that of a dragonfly jutted out from its back.

It was probably the head that was freaking Sonic out. At a first glance it looked like an ant's head. Like two large bulbs smashed together to form a head with two large pincers jutting out of its mouth. If one looked closer, though, they'd see each side of its head, each of those "bulbs", had a human eye that glowed a solid blue and a nose. And between those partial faces was a human, skull-like face. One with completely empty eye sockets and a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth right behind the two large, serrated pincers on either side of its mouth.

"It's an Empusa. Specifically one of the green ones," Sorun answered Sonic. The hedgehog was still refusing to even look at it - gagging out and shuddering while muttering under his breath. He found a bit of amusement at the sight.

"... Sorun, you know the more I think about it I start to realize maybe having one eye isn't so bad," Dr. Quack said. He wasn't doing much better now that Sorun looked at him. He looked queasy, and seemed to be looking up at the ceiling, as if trying to avoid even catching a glance at the thing Sorun was holding. "The kids really like the eyepatch. Says it makes me look 'hip' or whatever they called it. And cybernetic augmentation's come a long way, and while I realize there's a stigma around it because of everything Eggman did I'm starting to come around to-"

"Doc, come on we've already come this far." Sorun lightly shook the little monster he was holding in his hands. It made a deep trilling noise. "You're gonna hurt its feelings if you turn back now."

"That hideous thing doesn't even look like it has feelings," the duck snapped, looking back down from the ceiling, and then making a sound in the back of his throat and looked down further until he was then staring at his feet. "It... I don't even have the words to describe that."

"It has a skull for a face, why does it have a skull for a face...?" Sonic mumbled out. He covered his face with his hands, turned his head to the creature's direction, and then spread his fingers out a bit to peak through them. "Jeez, it's got- it's got three faces, Sorun, why, why any of this!? It looks like you pulled it straight out of a nightmare!"

"I mean... you're kind of on the mark," Sorun admitted. The hand dropped away from Sonic's face to reveal a disbelieving look. "It came from my heart. Or brain. Mind. However you wanna interpret it. Nightmare ain't too far off."

"And this is what you dream about!? Weird bug skull monster things!?" Sonic exclaimed, gesturing wildly at the Empusa. It turned its head over to look at him, making Sonic cringe back with a grossed-out expression and take a few steps back. "At least tell me it isn't gonna try and hurt anyone, man..."

"If it hasn't tried to kill anyone at this point then I'm pretty sure its safe." There was one positive right there. If there was at least one thing he could walk away with it was the knowledge any lesser demons he made wouldn't try to go on a murder rampage. He doubted it'd be useful information he'd ever use, but it was still nice to know. "Wanna hold it?" he asked, making a small mocking grin towards Sonic.

"Sorun seriously if you try coming close with that thing I'm leaving," Sonic said, backing up a few more steps while warily eyeing the demon. "If it's not dangerous after all then I'm staying over here."

Humming, Sorun decided to make no further comment. It was when he looked over at the fourth occupant in the room, Nicole, did he realize that he'd shown this thing to her and that she was staring right at it. It was in that moment he froze, and nearly felt his heart seize. There wasn't any overly strong emotion on her face that he could discern, but it hardly mattered as intrusive thoughts began to invade his brain. Would she find this hideous thing connected to him so monstrous she'd start judging? Would this change the paradigm of their relationship any more than his screw-ups had already

caused? Would she find it so disturbing she wouldn't even speak to him again?

Maybe not that last one, because she'd stepped forwards until she was right next to the Empusa. It was all Sorun could do but to watch with bated breath as she reached her hands out. She grabbed at one of the Empusa's arms and extended it out slightly to examine it. The bladed portion of the mantis-like limb wasn't a blade at all - it was five fingers tipped with long, sharpened talons that perfectly flushed together into a blade. Unlike the rest of the limb the bicep portion of the arm wasn't insect-like at all. It was eerily similar to a human bicep in shape.

A small, acknowledging sound left Nicole as she released the arm. The Empusa made a sort of guttural cooing noise, its serrated mandibles slowly opening and closing and its head tilting as Nicole continued to look at it. She finally decided to comment on it. "Despite appearances it seems friendlier than you advertised, Sorun."

Sorun turned his head away a bit, hoping the motion made some of his hair hide the redness on his cheeks. "I think that's just you," he mumbled out.

"... Ah. I see." Her eyes quickly regarded him and then focused back on the Empusa. "Why does it have so many human-like features?"

"You're asking for secrets I'm not willing to share with anybody besides you. And Sonic and Dr. Quack are right there," Sorun said. He saw the doctor roll his eye from the corner of his vision and Sonic had tried to make a remark, but then he'd caught sight of the Empusa again, made a distressed noise, and turned away. "It looks like this because this is what an Empusa looks like. That's all I'm willing to say here, right now in this place."

"That's fair, I suppose."

"Hm...?" He noticed she was still looking at it, green eyes scanning up and down the small demon's body. Other than the air of curiosity

surrounding her Nicole wasn't showing any strong reaction towards it. "You don't seem that spooked compared to the others."

"I don't get spooked," she replied bluntly. "Otherwise I don't have any overly strong feelings concerning the appearance of this creature. I think it's an interesting design, but that's it."

"'Interesting'!?" Sonic cried out from the other side of the room.

"What I assume to be a human skull situated in the center of its face raises questions, I'll admit," she added.

"Yeah, I know it's weird," Sorun said. "You wanna show Cream this later? See what happens?"

Nicole's answer came with the addition of a disapproving frown. "You're not allowed to give children nightmares, Sorun," she said, causing no small amount of disappointment in Sorun. She glanced over her shoulder. "You may have already given Sonic nightmares," she continued.

Sonic made a sputtering noise in outrage but otherwise was continuing to try and not look at the Empusa.

"Fine..." Sorun sighed out. "... Can I show Antoine?"

"No." Nicole took a few steps back, and then asked, "Now may we please know the reason you decided to create this creature?"

Somewhere deep inside, Sorun felt some relief. She didn't seem horrified beyond comprehension at the Empusa like the other two seemed to be, so that was good. If anything she seemed a bit more relaxed now. Maybe seeing something brand-new caused her to mellow out a bit. "Right," he began. He lifted the Empusa up to draw attention to the bulbous abdomen hanging off the end of the Empusa's torso. It was engorged and inflated like the abdomen of an ant or a spider, and green light was shining out from beneath its flesh. "This particular Empusa is actually one of the smaller ones."

Sonic made a groaning sound. "What, there's bigger ones?"

"The normal worker drones are about four times bigger than this one." Sonic didn't even comment. He just shook his head with that sickened look on his face and waved at Sorun to continue. "Anyway, it's a support unit meant to shower a kind of healing nectar it keeps in its abdomen to heal the normal worker drones. I'm gonna cut it open and spill a bunch of healing juice on Dr. Quack's face. Unless anyone has any objections...?"

He'd looked towards Dr. Quack when he said that. The duck certainly looked like he did, squeamishly looking towards the Empusa and regarding its green abdomen with disgust. He shook his head, mumbling out, "Consarn it, we're already this far and I do want that eye." He looked to Sorun and asked, "Does it at least taste... not disgusting?"

"Yeah, like limes," Sorun said. He took the question as consent and, swiftly, grabbed the scalpel he'd put down earlier while gripping the Empusa's neck with the other hand while holding it up. There wasn't any flair or fanfare with the cut; he'd simply stabbed the small blade into the uppermost part of the abdomen, where it connected with the Empusa's torso, and dragged it all the way down to the tip. The Empusa screamed, a high-pitched, screeching sort of sound and wriggled in his grasp as its lifeblood poured out of the wound Sorun made.

He jolted a bit. Something tore through him the moment the Empusa died in his hand. Some unwell feeling. Not wishing to waste time, Sorun put the feeling off in the back of his mind and held the twitching demon above Quack's head. There wasn't really a better way to do it, and he couldn't even put the corpse down without it disappearing. So he'd just held it over Quack and sort of tried to sprinkle it on him, doing his best to aim it so that the green, glowing fluid dribbling out would land on the doctor's face. He'd started sputtering out immediately.

"Agh, you lied! This doesn't taste like limes at all!" Quack yelled out, shaking his head while gagging out as the green slime poured over his head.

Sorun snorted. "You actually bought that? Wow." Despite his glib tone, Sorun was paying close attention to see if anything was happening. And something *was* . The green fluid was disappearing off of Quack's body moments after making contact. It wasn't a characteristic of the nectar itself; some had spilled out on the floor and that was remaining in place. It was only the fluid that touched Dr. Quack that was disappearing.

Suddenly, there was a groan from the doctor. He held the eyepatch that was covering his eye and winced greatly, and then made a short sort of shout and tore the eyepatch right off. Sorun looked closer and made an "oof" sound. He imagined there was once a empty eye socket behind that eyepatch. Now there was a little, wriggling ball of meat in there, pulsing and undulating.

"It supposed to burn like this...?" the duck hissed out. His features were scrunched up, in pain. Both Sonic and Nicole, standing off to the side, looked unsure and were looking to Sorun for an answer.

"Well, I don't feel anything whenever I regenerate stuff, but that body isn't normal," Sorun said to them with a shrug. "Probably a lot of friction going on in there, but listen, I'm sure this gunk'll cancel out the burn damage. And hey! You already got a li'l meat blob growin' in there. Just, uh, angle your head up a bit, lemme really lay it on thick."

The doctor did so, though he looked like he was regretting it. With the new angle Sorun was able to aim the small stream of slime directly into the semi-empty socket. It was doing the trick - the object that looked like a mish-mash of pulsing meat was taking shape, growing spherical. It was lightening from a deep red to a glossy white. A blue ring was forming in its center with a black dot in the middle.

"Alright, I think it worked." Despite the doctor's words Sorun kept pouring. "Bleh, Sorun, it worked, you can stop!" He kept pouring. "Sorun I can see out of the blasted eye!"

"Oh, sorry, didn't hear you." And just in time, too, because the Empusa's abdomen was drained to the point it was only dripping a few drops of slime out at a time. The creature itself had died pretty much immediately after Sorun cut it open. Now it was just a limp corpse he was holding up. He regarded it for all of a second before tossing it on the counter besides them. It glowed brightly and then disappeared the moment it left contact with Sorun's hand, and what ended up clattering on top of the counter was a glowing, blue gem. The green slime that had been spilled all around had disappeared as well. Any evidence of that Empusa ever existing was completely gone.

All except for that eye, that was. Dr. Quack was blinking heavily, both eyes looking around to look at whatever drew his attention. He looked about as surprised as Sorun felt; he wasn't even sure that would work or that the eye would stay once he disappeared the Empusa. He felt a bit glad knowing it did, if only because it meant there wasn't some kind of terrible blowback he had to deal with now.

"Welcome back to the world of depth perception," Sorun said in a dull deadpan. "Everything working okay? Eye blurry or anything? I can bring it back if you need a second dose."

"NO!" Quack quickly shouted, turning at Sorun and shaking his head. "I mean, uh... no, no that's fine," he said, quickly coughing to clear his throat. "The eye appears to be functioning fine, it... huh." He blinked and looked around. "It actually feels like I never even lost it."

"Doesn't look it. It didn't do anything for the scar tissue, sorry." There was an ugly patch completely around the duck's eye socket that lacked any fur. Flesh scarred over from the explosion that took the eye to begin with. There were a couple of small slashes going past the eye socket, too, maybe shrapnel from the mine. It hadn't

disappeared with the regeneration of the eyeball. *"Huh. My scars went away. Might just be another quirk of Devil's Body."*

Dr. Quack rose a hand up to feel around the eye socket. His fingers rubbed over the scarred tissue, making an unsatisfied huff leave him. "Well, I guess it was too much to hope for it to go perfectly. Still, the eye is more than I could have asked for. Might run a few tests on it later, but... for all intents and purposes everything looks... completely... fine, Sorun, are you okay?"

He didn't think he was. That feeling he'd felt when the Empusa died was intensifying, making him feel a bit nauseous and causing his head to start spinning a bit. "Nah, uh, I-I'm fine," he mumbled out, stumbling back a bit and grabbing onto the counter with one hand to steady himself. Nobody around him looked like they believed him. "It's... it's all fine, everything's fine..."

A new feeling was welling up and he'd covered his nose and mouth with his free hand to try and head it off. It didn't work. Crimson fluid started to leak between his fingers. At that point he'd given up and let his hand fall away, thereby letting the streams of blood pouring out of his nose splash around on the ground. He stumbled a bit, about ready to collapse onto the ground right there. He caught a swirl of green in the corner of his vision, and suddenly there was a pair of hands holding his shoulder and arm to keep him steady.

Mildly surprised at the assistance, Sorun looked at her. Ever since he explained to Nicole where he'd been there'd been an air of animosity surrounding her, and every time she so much as glanced at his way there was clear bitterness in her eyes. That was all gone right now. No frustration, no hostility, none of that. She just looked plain worried now, staring right at his face and where the blood had been pouring out from his nose.

"It... takes a lot out of me, I guess. When a living thing I made dies..." He held his bloodied hand up to his nose again. That debilitating wave from earlier was beginning to subside, and the bleeding had

stopped. His mouth and chin were still a mess of red, though. "I-I'm fine."

"... None of this is fine." She'd started to relax her grip slightly, testing to make sure he actually could stand on his own, and it was only when she was satisfied did Nicole fully release him and take a few steps back. "You're never to do this again," she quietly mumbled out.

Sorun hesitated in responding. That tone Nicole was using - he couldn't place it. It sounded like somebody who was incredibly exhausted and simultaneously on the verge of screaming and he didn't know what it meant. "I'm trying to fix it," he said, as if such a weak thing to say actually meant something. Somewhere deep down he hoped it meant something.

The look Nicole gave him said it didn't amount to much after all. That withered expression somehow hurt him more than killing the Empusa had. "I've matters to attend to. I cannot... I can't with this, Sorun. Please sort out what you need to and find me later."

Before Sorun could give any kind of answer she'd disappeared in a swirl of pixels. He'd watcher her go wordlessly, staring at the spot she'd disappeared from. He wasn't sure at all what that had meant in its entirety. Her being completely fed up with him for now and needing to take a moment to herself, he supposed. He couldn't help but feel the worst.

"What a fuckup I am." He let out a slow, steady breath, and then looked towards the counter. The blue Emerald was still sitting there, ready for the taking. And take it he did, hand reaching out and grasping it. It'd reformed into his katana the moment he'd made contact, fingers comfortably wrapping around the familiar tool as he lifted it off the table. *"Fine. Desperate measures. I don't care if I have to lobotomize and slave him with the Yamato. I need to fix this."*

So goddamn sick of things like this interrupting his life. Enough. He'd had enough. It was enough months ago. It was enough his first day on this planet.

"Doc, you can go. I think we're done here," Sorun said. He brought the sword closer, holding it in both hands as he inspected the sheathed blade up and down. Seemed to be in order, as usual.

"Uh..." The doctor sounded unsure. When Sorun looked up he saw the doctor looking at him pensively. Or perhaps at all the blood on his face. "I really do think after that little display I should run a test or two-"

"This isn't something that you can fix. We tried that. I'm doing something else now." He looked back down at the blade, but then frown a small bit when he noticed the duck hadn't left. "Quack. I'll be fine. Go."

Dr. Quack made a harsh kind of sound and shook his head. "If you wanna be that way, fine. Tissues are on the counter to clean yourself off. If you need me you'll know where I'll be." He walked towards the room's door, his footsteps sounding more heavy, dragging almost. He opened the door and then stopped halfway, looking back into the room. "And... Sorun, uh, I just wanted to say thanks. You know, for the eye. I know the kids'll-"

"Go."

Evidently he must've taken the hint, because that was the moment Dr. Quack ducked out of the room entirely, closing the door behind him. Sorun wanted to breath a relieved sigh after that. He wanted to, but he couldn't. Because he could still see Sonic standing at the other end of the room, staring at him. It bothered Sorun.

"What do you want?" he asked. He spotted the box of tissues Dr. Quack had mentioned earlier and reached out with his right hand to grab at a few. His left hand was still holding onto Yamato.

Sonic blinked at the question. He shook his head a bit in shock, as if he'd been struck. And then he asked, "What do you mean, what do I want? What kind of question is that?"

"You're still here," Sorun observed. He'd grabbed the tissues and began to wipe the blood off his face, grimacing the smallest bit when he realized some of it had dried on. He'd have to wash it off with the sink at home. "Why?"

Sonic still looked confused. "Of course I'm still here, I don't- what are you even asking?"

Out of respect for the doctor Sorun pocketed the bloodied tissues to throw away later instead of tossing them out on the floor. The question Sonic asked irked him, though. His presence in the room irked him. Enough that when Sorun looked back at him his eyes were glowing green. " *What* ... do you want?" he repeated.

"I wanna know if you're alright!" he yelled out, sounding a bit frustrated. "I mean, I mean jeez, Sorun, you know, you get kidnapped and disappear and then out of the blue you're back bleeding everywhere and your eyes are, I don't even..." He stopped himself, pressed his palms together, and then took a deep breath before opening his eyes back on Sorun. "I just wanna know what's going on. You know, if you're okay, if I can do anything to help. That sort of thing."

"It's not really any of your business." That tone. *That fucking tone of his* . So eager to be helpful, so earnest. So free to feel all these things because everything always worked out for him. Never changed, he never changed with him. It was one of those moments where it pissed Sorun off to no end just standing in the same room as Sonic.

"None of my- you're actually being serious right now," Sonic realized. His features hardened a bit, and his voice grew a bit harsher. "I feel like it's my business when one of my friends starts bleeding all over the floor, Sorun. And you think it's just you I'm worried about here? Did you even see how distressed this is making Nicole? Did you even stop and think maybe everyone else is gonna be worried about this!?"

Theeeere it was. Something that finally made that obnoxious attitude drop into something a bit more confrontational. It made the corners of Sorun's mouth perk up just the smallest bit, and the green glow in his eyes intensified. "There's nothing anyone can do to help, so I didn't bother. It won't be an issue when it's resolved. It barely bears mentioning."

The explanation didn't seem to calm Sonic down in the slightest. "So what, you're gonna just go and fix it? Whatever this is? How do you even plan on doing that?"

Sorun didn't dare laugh. As if Sonic would actually let him if he knew what he was planning. "As I said, it's none of your business. There's a path I can take. That's all I'll say on the subject."

"A path," Sonic airily repeated. "Wow, that tells me nothing. Does your 'path' involve that freaky monster thing, because that didn't seem to work out too good for you."

The small grin Sorun had grown died. That fire- no, not even that. Whatever sparks of hostility he'd manage to elicit out of Sonic were gone now, the embers quickly fading. It made him adopt a neutral expression and made his eyes fade to blue as he crossed arms and leaned his back against the counter, sword still in hand. "No, that healing nectar only works on physical wounds. What's wrong with me isn't physical. More... ingrained."

"And you can't just make something that does help you?" he asked. "You can make all this other amazing stuff but you can't spin that?"

"How simple life would be if I could..." Sorun let a bitter chuckle out at the thought. "No. There's nothing I can make that can help me. I can pick and choose some things, but I have a limited selection to draw from. And I'm hesitant on making creatures after what happened with the Empusa. That was quite literally the weakest one I possess; I don't want to imagine the consequences of summoning bigger things. I'm for sure never creating any of the sapient ones." That was just a whole can of worms he didn't feel like dealing with. It

wouldn't be worth the headache. Which sucked, because a large majority of the demons he could create were sapient.

Sonic's eyes closed halfway. He seemed to be trying to discern something about something, but then grew visibly dissatisfied as he failed to find whatever he was looking for. "How does any of that even work?" he asked. "Did you really make that creature from your nightmares? 'Cause... I mean if it's bad enough you're dreaming about stuff like *that* , Sorun..."

The frown returned to Sorun's face when he sensed the concern in Sonic's voice. "I'm fine. And I won't tell."

Sonic grit his teeth and clenched his fingers hard enough to make his gloves audibly tighten. "Agh, why not!?"

"Because it's funny knowing I a hundred percent know how this works and nobody else does," Sorun honestly answered. The frown went away at the satisfaction he felt at seeing Sonic frustrated at the answer. "If it'll make you feel any easier though, Sonic, I'm serious when I say I have a way of saving myself. I'd rather just do this alone and not draw more people into my problems." Anything to get him off his back so he could just go already.

"Well... fine." Sonic didn't look all that happy with the statement, not in the least, but he at least looked understanding. Maybe because he realized it wasn't something Sorun would budge on. Which he wouldn't. "But listen, there was something else."

"What is it?"

"It's..." Sonic blew an uneasy breath out and ran a hand through his quills. He looked uneasy; hesitant in saying what he was about to say, uncomfortable, even. Nevertheless he took a deep breath and managed to say, "Back when you were taken, you... we all came as soon as we could but couldn't find you. Where'd you go?"

"It's a long story. I wasn't there at that castle for long. Was here, was there, I don't feel like recounting the whole thing at the moment. Ask me later if you care that much," Sorun said. "Why?"

"Just wanted to know what happened, sheesh. But, uh... it's about... did you talk to Miles? Like, at all? Not, er, *our* Miles, Tails, but the other one? The Anti-Tails?"

Sorun hummed in thought. "Little bit. Said something about cutting a deal with you guys."

"Yeah, we did," Sonic said. "Most of Scourge's 'friends' were so sick of the guy they offered to hand him to us as long as we left each others' zones alone after. And after we beat Scourge and looked for you we found him and Antoine's and Sally's doubles."

Oh. This was about that. He probably should have saw this coming. "Yeah, I didn't believe him when he said that," Sorun explained.

Sonic made a heavy breath. "Sorun, we had to bring them *here* to be treated." He enunciated the word "here" by pointing both index fingers at the floor. "Anti-Sally was fine but you gave the other two concussions! Anti-Miles was bleeding all over the place because of a bunch of wounds! Anti-Antoine lost a finger! How did that even happen!?"

Shrugging, Sorun answered, "It fell off." Sonic didn't look impressed. He scowled at Sorun and crossed his arms, waiting for him to continue. It made Sorun sigh a bit. "I panicked and things got carried away," he revised. He didn't sound apologetic in any way and didn't care to. He sounded more bored than anything else. "And that evil little cyclops told me about what happened with Antoine's dad so, I'll admit, I kinda got a bit angry."

Amazingly that managed to soften the expression Sonic was wearing by a bit. But only by a bit. "You maimed a guy over a grudge?" he asked, sounding disbelieving.

"You better believe I did. He'll have to get a cool robot finger if he ever wants to hold a sword again. Or just use the other hand," Sorun said. It made Sonic sigh and rub at his closed eyes. "Why do you even care?" he asked.

"Why do I-!?" Sonic looked back up in shock. "Other than the fact all their pals freaked out and demanded we help them or all bets were off, you went too far! They were barely coherent when they woke up, couldn't say a single word anyone could make out! I feel like anyone should care after seeing someone like that!"

"'Too far,' he says," Sorun said in a derisive tone. "Listen closely, Sonic. I was kidnapped and taken to a whole other universe against my will. I didn't know you all were storming the gates to help me. I thought I was on my own, and unlike someone like you I didn't have powers to fall back on at the time."

"Then how'd you even escape? How'd you cause those wounds?" Sonic challenged.

"Same reason I'm in this hospital," Sorun answered. His eyes started glowing green again. "I did what I thought I had to in order to survive. So things happened. Don't you dare stand there and judge me when you weren't even there to see what happened."

"You didn't have to tear his finger off. You can't tell me you needed to do that when you managed to fight off three people barehanded."

"And you don't have to criticize me like you're some villain apologist."

Despite the words Sonic didn't seem eager to back off from the fact. Quite the opposite - he looked defiant, about as much as Sorun felt on the topic. It was proof enough that neither were willing to budge on their stances. And for some unexplained reason, deep inside, Sorun actually felt *refreshed* at the small confrontation the two were having at the moment. Like the friction was causing some sort of joy, the same feeling that'd made him smile a bit from earlier when he'd gotten a rise out of Sonic. He liked the feeling.

But then Sonic had to interrupt it by tapping at his own face, above his lips but beneath his nose. "Hey. You're bleeding again," he informed him.

Indeed he was. When Sorun held fingers to his nose they were pulled back with fresh, wet blood on their tips. It made Sorun sigh and have his eyes go back to blue. "Look, I have enough to deal with without having to hear this from you of all people," he muttered, wiping the blood off on his pants. "I got a failing body and a relationship on the rocks. I don't need inconsequential nonsense like this tacked on top of all that, so let's just agree to disagree and drop it."

"I don't think permanently injuring someone is inconsequential, Sorun."

"I don't care and nothing you say is gonna make me care," Sorun said. "And if you think I'm gonna go all the way over there and fix it by regenerating his finger with another Empusa then you can forget it. Nicole'd never let me anyways."

Sonic grimaces. He was obviously displeased, but at the same time the defiance in his eyes had cooled into acceptance. "I don't see the point arguing this if you aren't even gonna listen," he said. "Just... please promise me this won't happen again."

"Sonic, if I had it my way I'd live the rest of my days with my little courier job and never get into another fight in my life." Something about that sentence seemed wrong. Sorun wasn't sure what. "It was a one-time thing. A temporary bout of mania brought on by desperation and anger given the situation at the time. I don't seek a repeat."

"... I guess I'll trust you on that," Sonic sighed out. The defiant fire died out in him once again, making Sorun feel another odd bout of disappointment. "I just... y'know, I get things were bad and I get everything that happened with Antoine and his old man were awful. I

don't even blame you for feeling the way you did. I just don't want you flying off the handle again. You scared some people."

"It won't happen again." Assuming nobody ever attacked him again. From there not even Sorun was sure what would happen. "What ended up happening with Scourge, anyways?" If nothing else he was curious what happened with that green lunatic since he wasn't there to see it.

The question alone made Sonic adopt a disgruntled, slightly exhausted expression. "Ugh, it wasn't easy. He had a stupid throne packed with a power-up and got a Super form. We had to stall and time him out of it to beat him. Took him to Zone Jail after, so he shouldn't be a problem ever again."

"I'll pretend to understand what that means." Whatever this "Zone Jail" was, Sorun didn't care enough to ask. Scourge was out of the picture and that's all he really cared about in the end. "Well," Sorun said, shrugging off the counter, "if that's everything then-"

"Actually," Sonic interrupted, "there's one more thing. You got a message."

"Tell Elias I'm not playing chess with him again. He always wins."

"Oh boy, no, Sorun, it's not that kind of message," Sonic groused with a roll of his eyes. "I don't know the details, just that there was some kind of encrypted-whatever message that came through on the computer the castle uses for communications. They decoded it and said it was for you. Happened a day after you went missing."

That was... huh. Sorun didn't know what to think of that. What was he supposed to think of that? Did he even know anybody outside of the city that'd go that far to talk to him? He didn't think so. A lot of people out there probably assumed he was still dead. His first thought went to Finitevus, but he was one of those people who assumed Sorun was dead. Maybe. "What'd the message say?"

"Asked for you to come to a location out in the middle of nowhere. Came with a set of coordinates," Sonic answered. "Said to meetup at noon in a few days, which... I guess would be today, huh?"

Sorun frowned. He looked towards the wall clock hanging above the hospital room's door, and then looked back at Sonic. "It's noon in an hour," he deadpanned.

"Well, you looked like ya had a lot going on," Sonic said, grinning and shrugging. It caused Sorun to sigh out and make his way towards the door. "Hey, if you want me to tag along-"

"I don't," Sorun grumbled, grasping the doorknob. "My mysterious message so my business. I'm gonna go find out where this spot is and go."

"Really?" The grin fell off of Sonic's face. "Sorun, seriously, we don't know who sent this message and you're just gonna go along? What if it's a trap?"

"A trap by who? Everyone who has a problem with me thinks I'm dead," Sorun said, turning around to address Sonic while keeping his hand on the doorknob. "Unless you blabbed to Eggman I'm not dead, and I'm gonna be tight if you did, Sonic."

"No, no one did," he answered. "It's still weird, though. Nobody with good intentions goes outta their way to make overcomplicated messages and meetups like this without even leaving a signature. It just stinks, is all."

"... Yeah, I guess." As much as it grinded Sorun to admit it, Sonic had a point. It was pretty weird. Enough to warrant caution, even, because after everything he'd been through Sorun's paranoid mind wouldn't allow him to not view it in caution. He still didn't want Sonic coming, though, in case he had to do something untoward. "I'll go call in a favor if it'll get you off my back."

For once Sorun was glad to have left his coat behind at home. It was hot - the midday sun hung overhead and there were only a few light clouds floating in the sky. The location was arid, much more than it should be for being near the east coast of the continent, no plant life anywhere, but it'd turned out the meetup location that was in that message was a few miles out from New Megaopolis, and that place pumped out so much pollution that he wasn't sure there was any plants within a hundred miles of the city.

So here he was, standing on some plateau out in the middle of nowhere. About twenty meters behind him was a drop that just lead to more flat, cracked and barren land. In front of him was a bunch of reddish-brown rocks blocking the way to more nothing-filled land. The place was desolate. Felt miserable just to stand here.

Making an impatient sigh, Sorun tugged at his vest. *"I gotta drop this turtleneck and switch back to a normal shirt since winter's passed,"* he thought. Another impatient breath left him as he looked around. So far there was no sign of big mystery person. Just him and the guest he brought alone for that "just in case" scenario.

Speaking of, he glanced over to the side. Shadow looked even more bored than Sorun did, like he was about to fall asleep on the spot. He was sitting on a nearby flat rock, arm draped over his knee with his eyes half-closed. Sorun doubted he was actually tired. Probably just bored out of his mind.

"Well, thanks for humoring me and coming all the way out here with me. Even if it's turning into a pain," Sorun said, looking over at him. "I know it was kind of a last-minute thing."

"I wasn't busy," Shadow said back. "And this seemed important. You have no notion of who could possibly have a reason for dragging you out here?"

Sorun rose his sword up to his face. He pulled it out halfway, sighed, and then pushed it back into the sheath. "Someone who's gonna be sorry if they don't show up real soon here," he said.

For all his consternation, for all the annoyance Sorun felt at this situation, for the genuine anger that was beginning to brew in him for this beginning to look like a waste of time, the adage that misery loved company was true, because he imagined this being about ten times more miserable if Shadow weren't here. If anything else there was that. It was nice to have a dependable friend like him. Even if he was probably a liar.

"Are you entirely sure this isn't a trap?" Shadow spoke out. He sounded about as annoyed as Sorun felt. "Because this smells like a trap."

"Eh, it's a coinflip. I don't know *who'd* bother to trap me, but someone dragged me out to the boonies." He unsheathed his blade halfway again to look down at his reflection. "Really wearin' my patience out, too..."

Perhaps in need of some diversion, Shadow's eyes wandered over to the blade Sorun was holding. He maintained his stare for a few moments, and then commented, "I see you retrieved your Chaos Emerald."

"Yeah, the others found and held onto it for me." He sheathed the blade, and then turned his head halfway so one of his eyes met Shadow's. "This the part where you demand I hand it over since G.U.N.'s going around collecting these things for the greater good or whatever?"

Shadow gave him an odd, confused look. Like the tone Sorun used had caught him off guard. "You're a citizen of the Republic of Acorn, which, by default, would put the Emerald you're holding under their jurisdiction. G.U.N. and the Republic have an agreement to not poach Emeralds in the other's possession. You're fine."

"Oh. Okay, cool."

"Where did that question come from?"

"We're out in the middle of nowhere with little else to talk about, just give me some breathing room here."

Shadow didn't look like he believed the excuse, not entirely, but he must not have cared enough to pursue it because he let the topic drop right there. He did have on a sort of sour expression, though. Likely just grumpy from the current situation Sorun had dragged him into, which Sorun couldn't really blame him for. "If this really is a trap..."

"I assure you that this is no trap."

"Fucking finally. Where do I know that voice from?" It came out from behind the rocks that were in front of the two, and Sorun could swear he'd heard it before. An aged male voice that sounded tinny, like it was coming out from an electronic speaker of some kind. Not synthesized, but still electronically altered in some way. He'd heard it before. Where had he heard it?

He remembered real quick when the owner of that voice revealed themselves. They didn't have a body - it was just a head. A metal-covered head in a clear floating bubble, though the six mechanical tendrils sticking out the bubble's sides were new. The head wasn't new. The mechanical-looking echidna head staring over at Sorun with red, electronic eyes.

"Pfft... is that you, Dimitri?" Sorun almost laughed out loud at the sight. The katana in his hand transmuted into the Chaos Emerald, and with a wide smile Sorun glanced over at his companion. "Hey, Shadow, let's kill him."

Shadow thought about it for a solid second. "Alright," he agreed.

"What?" The head's cybernetic eyes dramatically widened, and the bubble floated backwards a bit. "Wait, wait no-!"

A blue, spectral fist flew forwards and grabbed the bubble. Its momentum didn't cease, causing the fist to smash the bubble into

the reddish rock behind it, forming a crater and causing cracks to spread out over the rock. The bubble, miraculously, didn't seem to be scratched even a bit from the impact. At the same time, though, it was firmly within the Bringer Claw's grasp, and despite the struggling face Dimitri was making and the efforts of the tendrils winding around the demonic hand, nothing was causing it to dissipate.

"I was worried I was wasting my time coming all the way out here, but honestly? This makes up for it," Sorun called out. The spectral claw extending out from his right shoulder brought the bubble closer until the head in a bubble was in speaking distance from him. Shadow had dragged himself off his rock to stand a few paces away from Sorun. "Now I ain't been on the front lines in a while, got out of the Freedom Fighting biz, but last I heard... you were in league with all those Dark Legion echidna nutjobs that lined up on Eggman's side. I've heard constantly from the others how you command a bunch of squads of echidna whenever the Freedom Fighters fight him."

"G.U.N. has an outstanding bounty for any associates of Eggman's," Shadow helpfully supplied from the side. He was scowling up at the panicking head in a bubble. "Just as an aside."

"Ooh, hear that, Dimitri? Monetary compensation just got thrown in the mix. I got *extra* reason to kill you now." He glanced at Shadow. "Split the reward with me?"

Shadow scoffed. "They overpay me as it is. You may as well take the whole thing."

"The whole pot, Dimitri, can you believe it? It must be my lucky day."

"Sorun, stop it! Please!" For such an old-sounding voice Dimitri sure sounded shrill at the moment. The tentacles on his bubble were still wriggling around uselessly as he fruitlessly attempted to free himself. "I summoned you here to ask for your help!"

"Genuinely the worst mistake you've made in your life." To emphasize Sorun's point, the tips of the Bringer Claw's five claws pressed down and through the bubble. Dimitri yelped, retreating to the centermost spot of the bubble to avoid the five blue spikes piercing through, causing cracks to spiderweb over the surface of the bubble. "One reason." The smile fell off of Sorun's face. "Gimme one reason why I shouldn't crush your head like a grape and give your corpse over to Shadow."

"Because it's the right thing to do!" Dimitri cried out. The claws dug deeper; the cracks spread. "Because if this were really a trap I would have prepared weapons instead of coming to you unarmed and alone!"

Wait, that second thing actually made sense. With a single mental command the Bringer Claw relaxed the pressure it was exerting on the bubble. It still didn't let go, though it did lower the bubble down a bit so they could all see eye-to-eye. "You lost any and all credibility when you all threw yourselves in with Eggman's lot. You really think anything you say's gonna make me forget that?"

Some of Dimitri's composure returned when it appeared Sorun was willing to talk. The tentacles stopped wriggling and stilled, and Dimitri himself looked less panicked. He still seemed nervous - kept glancing at the claws holding his bubble - and when he spoke he didn't sound completely confident. "The Dark Legion only joined with him because he offered to give us back the cybernetic enhancements Enerjak took from us. I was in the same room with you at the time. I know you saw him do that through the monitor."

"Yeah, I remember. I'm just trying to figure out where in all those words you said is an actual justification for what you've been doing," he said.

"His kind joined league with an omnicidal maniac in exchange for cybernetic implants. There is no justification to be found," Shadow grunted out. "They're fanatics with no regard for life but their own."

"I don't expect either of you to understand our culture," Dimitri spat out at both of them. Whatever defiance he held quickly withered away at the glare both sent him, causing him to make a rattling sigh and look downwards. "And yet... I *am* asking you to understand our plight." He looked back up. "We're beholden to do Dr. Robotnik's bidding against our will. He booby trapped every single Dark Legion member with a bomb in addition to the cybernetics he gave us."

Neither looked the least bit surprised, which in itself startled Dimitri a bit. "Gave ya the ol' Elijah treatment, huh?" Sorun asked with a small, derisive grin. "What, am I supposed to be surprised he gave you all compliance assurance devices? That's completely in line with that maniac. It's such an obvious move he'd do I'd half-expect him *not* to do it just to throw you off."

"He's not wrong," Shadow added. "I'm having a difficult time finding sympathy for a band of fools trusting the most untrustworthy person on the planet."

"He was the only person the Dark Legion could turn to," Dimitri argued.

"For *what* !?" Sorun shouted. "None of them were even hurt! I saw what happened, saw Enerjak heal all those echidna's bodies when he took their cybernetics out! And the second that threat was gone what happened? Those freaks literally threw themselves at Eggman's feet and begged him to saw their limbs off so they could replace them with cyberware they didn't even need!"

"And not everyone wanted to remain in his service for all time!" Dimitri shouted back. "Nobody wanted to serve him under the threat of death! Nobody..." He trailed off, voice growing quieter as he closed his eyes. They opened back up half-lidded, looking practically defeated in Sorun's eyes. "Nobody deserves that," he finished. "Some only did it out of desperation for what Enerjak took from them, not out of some twisted ideal the Dark Legion holds onto."

"Some, but not most?" Sorun challenged. "Your sob story isn't impressing me. Just tell me why I'm standing here talking to you."

"Some of the echidna in the *Dark Egg Legion* ..." Dimitri sounded like he was trying to spit those words out, "want out. Completely."

"How many?" Shadow asked.

"Six."

A mocking sort of whistle left Sorun. "Wow. A whole six out of, what was it, an odd-hundred?" He rolled his eyes. "What prompted this burst of common sense?"

Dimitri made a sigh. "... Nobody will admit it out loud but everyone knows Dr. Robotnik's days are numbered. I ran the projections. He has, at the least, a few weeks before he's finally defeated by the Freedom Fighters. We're completely routed; cut off from everything and besieged in New Megaopolis. And Eggman must know it, too. He's been frantic, practically raving at all hours of the day, turning more and more into a lunatic. And lunatics are unpredictable. I don't want any of my kind to die because that madman hid a switch in the maddened throes of defeat.

"As for the six Legion members I mentioned, they see Eggman for what he is becoming and have their cybernetics back so they want out. To go join the others of their kind on Albion and leave everything else behind. But they can't, because of the bombs implanted in their bodies," he explained. "I'm a preeminent expert in the field, but that madman is that and a genius prodigy in addition. I cannot remove the bombs without setting off a trigger and detonating them. Nobody can, not through conventional means." Dimitri let his meaning hang in the air for a few seconds before speaking directly to Sorun. "You have... unconventional means."

The meaning wasn't lost on Sorun. He'd caught on immediately. And laughed. Laughed at the absurdity of it, enough that Dimitri and even Shadow were both giving him odd looks. But he couldn't help it; it

was too comical. *Him* . He was the last, shining beacon of hope for a bunch of psychopaths. Little old Sorun.

What a fucking world.

"Hahahaha... ah, man." He wiped a tear that'd come loose from his eye and straightened back up to address Dimitri. "You want my Yamato," Sorun surmised. "More specifically you want its power of separation to take those bombs out."

"It worked on Enerjak. I don't see why it wouldn't work on manmade, physical objects if it works on the divine," Dimitri said.

"Oh, no, it'd work, for sure it'd work. Definitely," Sorun assured him with a nod. "That's not the problem. The problem is why I should care if a bunch of cyberpsycho echidna who keep shooting lasers at my friends get blown up for making the worst Faustian Bargain in history."

Because he didn't. He really didn't care if those echidna died. It wasn't his problem. They had nobody to blame but themselves for getting into this situation. And above all that they were enemies that regularly threatened his friends' lives. Now he was expected to go save them? That's why he'd laughed, because of the sheer absurdity. Like hell he'd save them.

It seems Dimitri wasn't easily deterred, though. "You should care because people will die despite you being in a position to save them. Because you're the *only* person who can. Because if that button is pressed their deaths will be on your conscience if you sit by and do nothing, Sorun."

"Why should I care?" Sorun repeated.

"You..." If nothing else, Dimitri just looked astonished now. Like he'd actually believed those words would have any appeal on Sorun. It was plain to see they didn't, and it made his mechanical-looking face

make a ugly sort of frown as he regarded him in a new light. "What do you want?" he asked, turning to bargaining.

What did he want? Nothing Dimitri could give him. What he wanted was to be left the hell alone, but nobody ever seemed to get that message. What he wanted was to smash his little cyber-echidna head against the rocks so he could get paid and get on with his life-

His life. His shortening life. Which he needed help with. With which he was actively seeking help.

"You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?" Another Sorun appeared in Sorun's eyes, standing to the side of Dimitri. He had a considering look on his face. "I mean... we were gonna go to Finitevus, but now that I think about it this guy's just as good, ain't he? Even better? He was the original Enerjak, after all. Gotta have some skills."

"I hear what you're saying. But him? Really?"

"You're really gonna be picky about *which* evil echidna scientist we use here?" Sorun asked himself. "We're desperate here, so cut him a deal. Worst case we still have Finitevus to fall back on, but Dimitri's right there in front of us. Might as well use it."

"Ugh..." He had a good point, even if Sorun didn't like thinking about it. He closed his eyes and shook his head, and when he opened them back up the other Sorun was gone. It was just Shadow and Dimitri, both staring at him expectantly.

Fine, then. If the Dark Legion liked deals so much he'd make one they couldn't refuse.

"Tell you what we're gonna do," Sorun began. "You see this?" He pointed at his eyes and forced them to begin glowing green for a brief moment. It elicited a fascinated gasp out of Dimitri. "This isn't normal. I don't know what caused this and it feels like it's slowly killing me. Fix this, and I'll save your boys. I'll even throw in a free ride to Albion."

Besides him Shadow blinked in surprise, but then quickly saw where Sorun was going with this and took a few steps back. For Dimitri's part, he looked less than enthused. In fact, he looked almost disbelieving. "Excuse me?"

"You were a scientist, weren't you? Researched any and all things related to Chaos energy, to the point you managed to become Enerjak's first host? Lotta people would look at that and assume you were the preeminent expert in this field."

"I *am* ," Dimitri said, some pride bleeding into his voice, "but... Sorun, your biology, no, your kind is unknown to me, as is whatever this condition you speak of is. You're asking me to miraculously cure-"

"Miracle for a miracle. That's the deal," Sorun interrupted. "I'm not willing to budge on this. It's in your best interest since I can't help you dead, anyways, and I have no clue how much time I've got left."

An electronic, rattling breath left Dimitri as he clenched his mechanical teeth. "I would... need time," he hesitantly stated. "How much is something I don't know, not without examining you first, but I swear to you if you save those six echidna I will do everything in my power to help you."

Sorun considered it for a moment. And then he shook his head. "No. Save me first and then I'll save them. I won't lift a finger otherwise."

Dimitri's expression turned to one of disgust. "You're attempting to leverage a bargain with people's *lives* ."

"You're not dealing with a Freedom Fighter right now, Dimitri. You're dealing with me," Sorun reminded him. "And don't get sanctimonious with me. One of us is in league with a global terrorist and it sure ain't me. I said it at the beginning: you don't have a shred of credibility to your name. I don't have a single reason to trust you."

"And I'm to trust *you* at your word?" Dimitri asked.

"I was aligned with a morally just cause and have people with solid credibility who would vouch for me. My word actually has weight. Yours doesn't." Complete bullshit, but at the same time he wasn't wrong, either. Dimitri just didn't have the moral high ground to argue from and both knew it.

The disgust on Dimitri's face turned to desperation. He was losing the negotiation, losing cards to play to sway his way, not that he'd had much of a hand to begin with. He'd come in on blind faith Sorun would help him because it was the right thing to do, because, quite simply, he hadn't known him that long. It was obvious for Sorun to see from the cyber-echidna's reactions thus far. He hadn't come properly prepared to negotiate terms and it showed. "I can just refuse you treatment until you save the echidna." And there it was. The desperation card. Sorun knew right there Dimitri had just went all in with everything he had. "We're both short on time, Sorun. Don't waste what little we have left arguing."

"Refuse the deal?" Sorun almost sounded a bit amused when he said that. "Are you under the impression I'm just gonna let you float away if we don't agree to something here? Dimitri, you either cut a deal with me right now or I'm just gonna kill you for that bounty. Deal or die. Those're the only two paths you got." That was Sorun's last card. He couldn't help but feel he was playing with a stronger hand, and felt all the more satisfied for it.

"You need me." That rebuttal came out of Dimitri quickly. Quick enough it caused a small grin to grow on Sorun's face. "You won't kill your only hope. You're bluffing."

"You're not the only mad echidna scientist in the world. I got Finitevus. And unlike you I actually have a good rapport with the guy. He'd probably help me without the threats."

"That maniac!?" Dimitri screamed out. "He's nearly as insane as Robotnik and you'd trust him over me!?"

"He's actually mellowed out a lot. At least he did last I spoke to him," Sorun said. "I'd rather deal with you since I don't feel like tracking him down, but... if we really can't come to an agreement, then, well..." Sorun let the implication hang off his tongue, going as far as to raise his eyebrows up and down at Dimitri, who remained silent. His face said it all, though. That resigned, defeated expression. It was the look of a man who knew he just lost.

"... Very well." When he spoke, Dimitri's voice came out quiet, subdued. "I'll diagnose and cure whatever this condition of yours is. In exchange you'll remove the explosive devices from the six aforementioned echidna and safely transport them to Albion. And leave me unharmed," he added.

Sorun nearly scoffed at the little addendum he added at the end there. Still, the deal was a good one. Probably his only chance at living. He'd made a show of considering it, but really he'd already made up his mind a long time ago. "Eh... alright. Deal."

And just like that, the Bringer Claw vanished, releasing Dimitri. He seemed to breath out in relief, and his little head orb managed to steadily float there in the air despite the damage.

"I'd like to move quickly if we're to do this," Dimitri said. "I'll need the aid of your city's AI and the nanites to construct whatever equipment I need to expedite the process."

Sorun grimaced a bit. He had enough things to smooth over with Nicole without adding this on top of it. "No other way?" he hopefully asked.

"I hope you don't intend to imply I smuggle you into Robotnik's fortress to look you over in my own lab. You'd surely be discovered."

"Fair point. I can... swing it with Nicole." No he fucking couldn't, but he'd have to manage something. Future Sorun's problem, he decided. "Anything else?"

The head-bubble bobbed up in down. Assumedly it was a nod. "I can't move around very freely. This meeting is one of the only windows where I'm not monitored and won't be missed, something I can only manage a few hours a day. You'll need to use your sword to transport me back and forth to save time and stave off any suspicion. I can message you a pickup location later."

"That's fine. Do I need to worry about a bomb in you? Tracking device, anything like that?"

"No. Robotnik never touched my cybernetics, never implanted a bomb in me. Transportation and equipment is all I require from you."

"Then we're set," Sorun decided. "Send another encrypted message like the last with the details. And... hey, out of curiosity. How'd you even know to call me? I haven't been advertising the fact I'm alive."

Dimitri made a rueful sort of chuckle at the question. "You haven't taken steps to conceal yourself, either. The Dark Legion have eyes in a few major settlements that spotted you."

"Yeah, I wasn't trying to hide. I was doing my job," he deadpanned. "So the jig's up? Eggman knows I'm around?"

"No." Sorun blinked in surprise at Dimitri's answer. "Those spy feeds go through me before anyone else. I concealed your presence, for both your benefit and to uncomplicate things. I hope that small modicum of trust goes a long way with you."

It didn't at all. "Get out of here, Dimitri," he simply said. He was given an unreadable expression by Dimitri - whether he saw that as an answer or not wasn't clear. He simply made a grunt and turned around, floating away, tentacles physically pulling his bubble up above the rocks before he disappeared behind them. There was a sound soon after; the rocks ahead obscured almost everything, but Sorun did see something speed off into the distance. A vehicle of some sort, maybe.

Once Dimitri was gone, Sorun breathed out. He'd done it. Made a deal, maybe secured a path to living. To say he was nervous wouldn't be entirely accurate, if anything he'd been unusually calm, but at the same time he felt like he could breath a little easier. A path. A viable path. It was all he needed and he'd secured it. Now he just needed to survive Nicole and he'd be golden.

The sound of footsteps crunching on the ground drew Sorun's attention. Shadow had approached, appearing more apprehensive than Sorun was used to seeing. "I realize you're desperate, Sorun, but... him?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"It's either this or I go back to hell," Sorun smoothly replied. "What would you have me do otherwise?"

Shadow flinched. "You don't have to dramatize that experience so much." He didn't comment when Sorun rolled his eyes. "Do you truly intend to honor your agreement with him?"

"Oh, no, not at all. The moment he saves me I'm going to kill him," Sorun said in honesty.

Oddly, Shadow's head reared back and his eyes widened. It wasn't the reaction Sorun was expecting. "You're planning on betraying him? Why?"

"... 'Cause I don't like him?" Sorun tried, as if it were obvious. "Where's this coming from? You looked like you were gonna kill him before I was back there. You hyped it up with that whole bounty thing. I literally said 'let's kill him' and you said 'alright'."

"I thought that was just intimidation, I didn't think you were actually trying to kill him!" Shadow hissed out.

"Where is this coming from?" Sorun demanded, throwing his hands up. "I say I wanna kill Eggman and you're all okay, I'm on board with that, but that guy back there, THAT'S the evil scientist that's crossing the line? That's the hill you'll die on?"

"In Robotnik's case it was about killing a depraved individual that's a danger to everyone and making the world a better place. In his case it's preventative medicine. This isn't that. Dimitri isn't nearly on that same scale. And you're speaking about betraying him and killing him for what? What do you even gain from that?"

"Peace of mind, I guess, I don't know, I..." Sorun breathed out and gave Shadow a tired look. "I'm just *done* , man," he said. "I'm tired of people bugging me and stupid stuff and interrupting my life. You know, I didn't ask to be dragged out here to the middle of nowhere and get wrapped up in more nonsense, I..." He grit his teeth and ran his fingers through his dark hair. "I'm just *so sick of it* , Shadow, you don't understand."

"I do, actually, that's the same thought I have every day I wake up," Shadow droned out. "But," he continued in a more serious tone, "Sorun... killing in defense of one's self or others is one thing. Understandable. Justifiable. What you're proposing, this... desire to kill out of little more than indulgence, because you're *annoyed* by someone, regardless of who he is, what he's done, what he represents-"

"Is bad, yeah, I get it, look I don't need a lecture-"

"You apparently do," Shadow snapped. He took a breath to calm himself before continuing. "It isn't something to take lightly, Sorun. Taking a life. I know you've never partaken in the act, but I have. Other soldiers in G.U.N. have. It's not something you should pursue if you can help it. It changes-"

"It doesn't change a single thing, Shadow, because when I did it I didn't feel a single thing."

Shadow froze. Sorun gazed at him with an almost placid expression, calm, not all that expressive. He didn't know what face he was supposed to make - he was stating fact and nothing more. And while this wasn't something he wanted to reveal, he was getting annoyed

on how Shadow was getting on his case with this. He at least wanted to set the record straight.

"When?" Shadow asked, voice sounding dry and numb. He looked disbelieving, but at the same time there was a sort of sudden slack in his shoulders. He believed Sorun and was put off by the revelation.

"That alternate future we talked about was a bit of a nightmare to get through, Shadow. Things happened. I moved on."

"And who?" The way he said it almost made it sound like a demand.

"Some random echidna guards, I dunno. They were in my way and had laser guns, so I just reacted," Sorun lied. "And look, Shadow, I know there's supposed to be a significance behind it, alright? Tons of books and movies and whatever back home went into it, I know there's supposed to be some kind of bad reaction, but listen, right there, in that moment?" Sorun crossed and uncrossed his arms. "Nada. Didn't feel a single thing. Even thought to myself, 'that's it? Where's the overwhelming horror, where's the nauseous feeling that's gonna make me throw up I always heard about?' Nothing." He breathed out a sigh and brushed some hair out of his face. "And look, I don't know why, okay? Maybe knowing I was gonna reset it all anyway made me think it didn't matter, and in the end it didn't since those deaths were overwritten. Maybe there was so much happening I didn't register it, but even after all this time I've processed it I don't even think about it because it just didn't feel like something to acknowledge. Maybe I'm cracked in the head. Who knows?" He shook his head and pointed at Shadow. "But don't stand there and give me a bunch of spiritual nonsense about innocence or whatever. I know you're looking out for me, and I know you're speaking from a place of experience, but those words ain't for me."

"I..." The words trailed off as the left Shadow's mouth, terminating in a long sigh. The usual scowl he wore morphed into a deep frown. His eyes almost looked sad, if that were even possible for him. "I suppose I shouldn't be so surprised. If nothing else I'm glad you didn't come out of the experience any worse for wear," he mumbled

out, and Sorun almost laughed at that. "Even so... it's not the act of killing itself I take issue with. It's that you're speaking of it so casually. I've seen people be lost in the act, Sorun, soldiers who committed it so much it lost all significance to them. People like that are little better than Robotnik."

"I'm not-" Sorun began.

"I didn't say you are," Shadow interrupted, holding a hand up. "I acknowledge you had reasons. And that's fine. I just want you to think of these things," he said. "If you need pragmatic reasons, when all is said and done and you hypothetically commit this act, what will people think when Dimitri disappears and everyone knows you were the last to see him? What would everyone back in the Republic think of you if and when they found out? That you killed for so little reason?" Shadow paused to let the question sink in before continuing. "I'm only saying this because I've seen how far you've fought to reclaim some semblance of a normal life and I don't want you to undo it due to some stupid impulse. It's not worth it. Just honor the deal and go your separate ways after."

"The only issue I have with that is that 'his separate way' is going back to Eggman," Sorun harshly muttered. "I'll admit I'm using him, but he's any enemy, Shadow. Me wanting to kill him isn't out of something as petty as being annoyed, it's because he keeps trying to kill my friends. And I'm supposed to, what, just overlook that?"

"He said it himself. The end of the Doctor's reign is fast approaching," Shadow reminded him. "They've made it this far. I doubt they'll err when it's this close to being finished. In a few weeks none of it will matter anymore."

He had good points. Sorun knew he had good points, but at the same time he couldn't let go of that feeling. The feeling that he really wanted to kill Dimitri, make things just that much safer for his friends, if only by a little bit, that one single thing that could go towards protecting the status quo he'd built for himself in this new life. And at the same time it could potentially damage that status quo. Shadow

wasn't wrong there. And there'd be no undoing it this time around. And yet, he really wanted to kill Dimitri.

"... I'll think about it," Sorun decided. Shadow didn't look happy with the answer, not at all, deigning to offer nothing more than an acknowledging grunt. "Hey, don't... don't tell anyone what I did. Please," he mumbled out. "I undid it anyways so it doesn't even matter. It's debatable I even killed people."

"I won't," Shadow assured him. It was no small relief to Sorun, who somewhat regretted speaking of the deed to begin with. If nothing else he was glad he confessed to the only person he knew would understand. "Have you thought about what you're going to do about the fact you need to bring Dimitri into New Mobotropolis?"

Sorun tilted his head in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean he's a criminal working with Robotnik. The kind of person the Republic would want to imprison," Shadow said in an obvious-sounding tone. "And you want to bring said wanted criminal into the city and then let him walk off to the Doctor scot-free. What do you plan on telling the others?"

"... Plan, huh?" Sorun cupped his chin, humming and nodding his head. "Hm. Yeah, that'd something, wouldn't it?"

Shadow immediately saw it for what it was. He made a loud scoff and palmed his face. "I should have known. You made that deal without even considering that factor, didn't you? It didn't even cross your mind."

"Of course I didn't, why would you think I thought about this!?" Sorun shouted out, more mad at himself than Shadow. He made a groan and ran a hand over his face. "Gah, what a... fine mess this is."

Shadow's mouth straightened into a flat line. His version of a sympathetic expression. "If it's any consolation I think they'll be

understanding. Provided you present your case in a tactful manner. They've forgiven worse, I believe."

"Yeah, I hear way back in the day they gave Snively a chance at turning a new leaf. Did jack all, but hey, maybe they'll go for this. Exonerate a war criminal for me," Sorun mused in both a lighthearted and simultaneously disparaged tone. "It'll be like Operation Paperclip, where back home my government recruited a bunch of scientists who committed crimes against humanity but were given amnesty as long as they forked over their research data." He rose his hands up in the air and slowly spread them out. "It'll be like that. We'll call it Operation Staple. As in if Dimitri tries to double-cross me on this deal I'll gouge his eyes out with a stapler."

"His eyes are mechanical," Shadow pointed out.

"Then I'll beat him to death with the stapler, Shadow, you- that- I mean- wou-would you just let me worry about this, man? I got this. Now do you want a ride back to base or not, 'cause I have Yamato right here."

A/N- Trivia time: the term "the ol' Elijah treatment" is a reference to the character Elijah featured in the game Fallout New Vegas, featured prominently in the Dead Money DLC where he forced the main player character and other characters to do his bidding by strapping them with bomb collars (as a funny aside he didn't make the collars. He found them and just assumed in pre-war America corporations rigged their employees to explode. Thankfully that world's America wasn't that dystopian, though it was inching awfully close to that level. No, those collars were used to contain Chinese POWs in internment camps to be used as test subjects for experiments. Which honestly isn't any better than blowing employees up now that I think about it).

Anyway, that's entirely why Dimitri's plan going in didn't work. He was banking on informing Sorun of all the horrible stuff

being done to the Dark Legion to tug on some heartstrings and lean on his sympathy, but Sorun's referenced playing New Vegas in the past and would obviously have seen worse, so he ended up practically laughing in his face. Doesn't help he doesn't like Dimitri and has zero sympathy to abuse.

Worst part is I'm not even making much of this up. For the people who never read the comics I'm not improvising the bomb thing - these echidna really *were* canonically dumb enough to trust Eggman not to put bombs in them. I think they were going for the Cyberpunk thing where they're literally addicted to cybernetics and were that desperate to get them back, but I don't know, it wasn't super clear.

Chapter 100

Recursion Error

Episode 100- Does it come with a cup holder?

So how was he to smooth things over with Nicole?

No, seriously, what was he supposed to do? Sorun didn't have a clue. He knew what he'd done. He'd fucked up. He'd fucked up because he was genuinely a terrible person for someone to date. And he knew this, he was fully cognizant of his shortcomings. He always believed he'd screw it up somewhere down the line. Nicole hadn't. The fool had faith Sorun wouldn't drop the ball, but he knew, he fuckin' knew going in he would. And he never told her going into the relationship, because he was too selfish to try and jeopardize his chances.

And now he needed to patch things up, not even for the relationship, that was probably a done deal, but because he was actually dead here if he didn't get her help. But he didn't have a plan. He didn't have any solid notion of what he was supposed to say here. Here's was Sorun had: a list of requests and that was it. Nothin' else. Not a *thing* .

So when he walked into that science center, marched his ass all the way up into the server room, saw her at the far end typing away at a bunch of holographic screens and completely focused on whatever she was doing, Sorun didn't know what else to do but lean his back against the wall next to her, arms crossed and face completely set in a neutral expression. She wasn't even looking towards him, probably pretending he wasn't there. He decided to just go in.

"I need two favors from you."

Nicole stopped typing. Actually she'd gone completely still, expression frozen as she continued to stare at the screens. That slowly changed as she turned her head towards him, face going through a number of expressions before settling on anger. It hadn't been the right thing to say, go figure.

"Excuse me?" Her voice came out harsh and disbelieving. "After everything you've done that's what you come to me with? Demands? Are you completely serious, Sorun?"

"In hindsight an apology would have been a more appropriate opener."

"Then by all means! Apologize!" she yelled. "Apologize for hiding the fact your life was in jeopardy *again* and lying to me about it AGAIN! Explain to me the exact series of events that lead you to break every single promise you ever made to me and how whatever is going on in your life justifies every single thing you've done!"

Sorun sighed, looked ahead, and tapped his elbows. Yeah, that was fair. "I don't see how it's my fault I got abducted and taken to an evil castle in some random-"

"I'm not upset about *that* ." Oh, it wasn't even anger anymore. At this point Nicole's voice was smoldering. "I'm not going to hold events outside of your control against you." She whirled towards him, fists clenched at her sides and teeth bared. Wow. It really was that bad. "You said you were trying to get better, that you were done disregarding your life, and you'd *promised* to me that you were trying your best to get better and make the best of things, Sorun. And then I find out you're doing the exact opposite." She turned back to the screen and continued typing. "You didn't even have the courtesy to call and tell everyone you were safe somewhere. You could have saved everyone three days of grief but didn't because it simply slipped your mind."

They were all fair points. Coupled with soul-shattering words. A weaker Sorun would have crumbled at this point, but much like how

a bone became stronger after being broken and healed, his spirit had been broken down so many times at this point it just caused him to continue to quietly stare ahead. He wasn't sure why it was like this. Maybe the earlier verbal beatdown was as bad as it could possibly get and this was it. Rock bottom. Nowhere lower to sink so he just had to weather it all, and by golly did he have experience in that.

It wasn't like he didn't want to salvage it, though, oh no, by all means in the best possible world he'd walk away from this meeting with everything he'd had prior. Sorun wasn't confident he'd manage that, but he'd try. So he decided to try and speak from the heart, no preparation, no pre-planned words, nothing like that.

"I thought I could fix this," Sorun began. Nicole didn't even look at him, just kept typing away at the screens, so he sighed and continued. "I didn't know how serious it was at first. I noticed some off things and thought it was nothing. And the worse and worse it got, the more I kept trying to deny it, pretend it didn't exist. Because I'd *gotten it* , you know? I'd gotten my life back, got a job, a house, a good group of support friends, a community, geez, I got *you* . And after everything that happened! After I had to fight in a war, and fight god, and all the other stuff I don't care to mention - and I'm still upset over the fact I had to fight god - and after all that I was, you know, home free. Good to live a normal life. And I wanted that. I wanted it for me, and I wanted it for you, too, because you deserved it even more than I did. Geez, I even wanted it for our pet."

Nicole looked down a bit. She still wasn't looking towards him, but her typing had slowed down significantly.

"So I noticed I was getting sick it just seemed too cruel, especially after everything else. So I ignored it, pretended it didn't exist, and... for a time it was like I'd leaned into that idea so hard I genuinely actually *did* forget about it. But then it got bad enough someone noticed and I had to confront the reality." A rose a hand up and ran it through his hair. "And I didn't call because... because I really thought I could just fix it, that I could save everyone the trouble of worrying

about my health, that I could solve all my problems on my own, come back, and everything could go back to normal. Because I didn't wanna give you any more trouble. Because I knew, above all else, you just wanted a normal life and a normal relationship with a normal guy. And I can't give you that, I'm not normal, and I'm never gonna be because I'm not gonna change myself to fit a bunch of societal norms fixated in a culture I've only lived in for ten months, it's not happening. But I thought I could at least give you some peace of mind, come home and be alright. But I couldn't. 'Cause I'm a bumbling mess." He breathed in after the long-winded speech and let his arms flop down against the wall behind him. "And I'm trying to fix it. Half because I'm trying to save my own life and half because I'm still reaching out for that ideal. And... 'cause people would care if I die, I guess, so it's more a one-third, one-third, one-third thing, but... look, I got nothing to add. That's it. That's the whole thing. And if you wanna break up 'cause you decided to date the most caustic guy in the city, Nicole I'm not exaggerating you chose really poorly, then... pffft, I don't wanna think about, but I-"

"Sorun."

"-really need your help, legitimately, I can't do this without-"

"Sorun."

"-you. Like seriously. You're integral. Chip in at any moment here."

"I've been trying to chip in, Sorun, where is this even coming from!?" The screens were wholly abandoned at this point. She was facing him directly now, eyes wide, face rife with a number of emotions Sorun couldn't place. "I was never considering leaving you over this."

Holy shit, really? "For real?" Sorun asked. He didn't believe her - really, he didn't. What was that yelling otherwise? "But you sounded so mad-"

"Because you were shortsighted, because of your frank disregard to see things from the point of view of others, for... all around being so

foolish." Despite this list doing a fairly good job at chipping away at Sorun's soul he felt he was doing a good job keeping a straight face. The shameful expression he wore and the way he was looking down was proof of that. He was holding it together. He was. "And though these aspects of yours frustrate me greatly," Nicole continued, "none of it was so egregious I'd consider that. You would know if I had such intentions."

He still didn't believe her when she said that. The earlier yelling was still too fresh in his mind. "I never meant to-"

"You never do. And I realize this. And I realize you have, in recent time, taken strides to better yourself. I'm freely acknowledging that," Nicole said. "I'm also acknowledging that some things haven't changed a bit. Such as the self-belittling." She stepped closer to him and made Sorun flinch when she cupped his chin. "I didn't choose poorly and you're not nearly as bad as you make yourself out to be. A... handful, yes. But not outright bad. But I never realized you were having issues acclimatizing."

The conversation was taking a different direction than he'd imagined it going. His response came out subdued and unsure. "I'm not... I'm just not used to the atmosphere here completely," Sorun admitted. "I still like it, it's just different."

"I would think the environment here would be an improvement to the previous one."

Sorun looked up at her. "There you go again. Why are you always talking like Detroit was some horrible place and you're glad I don't live there anymore?"

"Because every conversation we've had on that city involved you painting it as a place riddled with crime and corruption," Nicole said in a deadpan.

"But it wasn't! It was a really nice place to live!" Sorun argued. "You're cherry-picking all the bad stuff, that's what you're doing."

"How can I cherry-pick when *all* you tell me is the 'bad stuff'?"

"I only talk about the bad stuff because that's the only interesting stuff that happened! What, am I supposed to talk about how the weather was? The economy? That's boring."

"I don't wish to argue this when we have more important things to discuss." With a shake of her head Nicole removed her hand and took a few steps back away from Sorun. "Your health, for starters, and what you plan to do about it."

"Yeah, that... ties into those favors I need. Well, one." Sorun sucked some air through his teeth and glanced away, rubbing at the back of his head. The fact the relationship wasn't in jeopardy was certainly giving him a confidence boost but this next part was still causing him to somewhat waver. "And it's, uh, it's a biggie."

"I don't see how a simple favor could weigh any more than your health, Sorun."

"Boy you'd think, um... so you remember Dimitri?" Sorun asked, choosing to get right to the heart of the matter.

Oh, she did. Sorun could tell by the way Nicole's face instantly soured at the mere mention of the cyborg's name. "I remember. And I am also well aware where his current allegiances lie. What relevance is he to this conversation?"

He thought about dancing around the matter to work up to it, but ultimately decided against it. Nicole was mad enough; him wasting their time wouldn't help things. "He's the one that sent that message. We talked. I made a deal with the guy."

The soured look Nicole wore didn't go away. If anything it only deepened. "Forgoing the obvious for the moment, what could you possibly have that he wants?"

"A magic sword that can magic out the bombs that Eggman snuck in those echidna when they joined up with him. A few wanna defect and I'm their only hope." Nicole'd reacted in a fairly horrified manner upon learning this, going as far as to widen her eyes and hold her hands in front of her mouth. "I said I'd do that if he checked me out and saved me. And he needs a place to do this, specialized equipment. Stuff that... you'd be able to make on the fly with the nanites. And also that you'd... maybe, talk with Elias and the council and convince them *not* to arrest the guy once he comes within city limits."

"That's so... incorrigible." Sorun was confused by what Nicole meant by that, was even afraid she was about to rebuke the deal he'd made with Dimitri, but then she'd said, "He would truly to do something so vile to living people..."

Sorun made a relieved breath. She was still hung up on the bomb thing. "Mhm. I'd call 'em hostages, but, well... there's only six that want out. Kinda makes me think a lot of them don't even need the bombs to motivate them, but I don't really care one way or the other in the end."

Nicole shook her head. "That doesn't make this any better, Sorun."

"I didn't say it did, I- we're getting off track." Sorun slapped his palms together and pointed the fingers at Nicole. "I need Dimitri. Dimitri needs me. So I need him to come here and do his thing. That's the long and short of it."

"... I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel about you leveraging lives for your own gain," Nicole confessed after a few quiet moments of contemplation. "I realize it's your life at stake, Sorun, but surely you see the... questionable nature of that decision?"

Sorun sighed. There it was. He'd been hoping she'd be so distracted by the bomb detail she wouldn't get into this. "It's kind of raw, I know," he admitted. "But I'm desperate and don't have much choice left." He uncrossed his arms and gestured to his sides. "I've been to doctors on two corners of the world and nobody could help me. This

guy might be my only shot, Nicole. Cutting some bombs out of some people in exchange for my life's a pretty good bargain."

"I realize this. I..." Nicole paused, and then made a minute shake of her head. "I'd like... above all for you to walk out of this ordeal okay so things can go back to normal," she quietly said, eyes drifting off a bit to the side. "And I suppose nobody could begrudge you shifting the position to your favor. Especially with somebody of Dimitri's caliber of credibility."

"My words exactly," Sorun said, using one hand to push off the wall while using the other to point at Nicole. "It'll be simple and clean. No violence, no fighting, nothing. We fix each other's problems and everyone gets to move on with our lives." He took a few steps closer to Nicole, hands pocketed and eyes cast down on the floor. "I know I messed up in a lot of areas, no getting around that, I'll fully admit it, but I can still set everything right. I just... need some help. Which I should have asked for in the beginning. This is that. This is me asking for help."

Well, there it was. Him going the "honest" route. The heart had said everything it needed to and now it was up for whims of fate to guide him along while his brain caught up with everything that got said. It was catching up fast, too. Kind of panicking as well, especially since the silence between him and Nicole was going on for so long. It was generating intrusive thoughts now. Oh god, was he too callous talking about the people with bombs implanted in them? Did he make some kind of implication in there somewhere that painted him in a bad light? Was Nicole not serious and really was so mad at what he did that she'd never forgive him and-

Oh, probably not. She couldn't be overly furious if she'd walked over and hugged him the way she was doing right now. It made most of the paranoid, intrusive thoughts go away. Now all that was left were the regular intrusive thoughts that plagued Sorun every hour of every day.

"I'm still moderately upset at you. And I didn't appreciate you attempting to bribe your way into my good graces by healing Dr. Quack's eye," Nicole muttered to him.

"... Well I had to try-"

"Don't dig yourself deeper." She squeezed him a little tighter. Little too tight - it caused his breath to hitch in his throat. "But just like you I want things to return to normal, so we'll make this work. I'll talk to the others. We'll all come to some agreement so we can save you. And then we're going to have a very, *very* long discussion at home."

Sorun made an unsure hum. "The, um, lecturing kind of talk or the long, quiet talks we'd have at night when-"

Nicole pulled away from Sorun to show him the unamused expression she wore. "The lecturing kind," she flatly stated.

"Yeah, that's... alright." So much for walking away scot-free. He'd be lucky if he got away with just a three-hour scolding with the way she was talking. Which... well, it may not be the worse thing in the world since he knew he hadn't detonated the relationship this time around.

He must have grown some sort of tell on his face, because Nicole's eyes narrowed a small amount. "Why do you suddenly look so pleased with yourself?" she demanded to know.

"Ah, well... I might not terribly mind it." He made an awkward sort of chuckle while leaning his body back while still in Nicole arms. "I just really like your voice. I might just fall asleep listening to you regardless of what you have to say to me."

Nicole's response was to let Sorun go, making him stammer out and hop around a bit to avoid falling onto his back once his support left him. She crossed her arms, huffing out, "You're impossible." She waited until Sorun regained his balance and then asked, "You said you required two favors from me. What was the second one?"

Ah... that. The sudden reminder made a dour mood come over Sorun, causing his expression to lower a bit. "You helped Tails making that portal machine thing that originally brought me here and that you all tried to use to put me back on my world, right?"

"That's correct," Nicole confirmed, though she looked a bit confused at the question. "What does that matter?"

"... The coordinates. The ones to my home. The ones you guys programmed into the machine to open that portal," Sorun said, looking Nicole dead in the eyes. "I want them."

"Why?" Nicole demanded. Her posture had suddenly gone rigid, expression sharp, agitated even. "What could you possibly hope to-"

"Yamato could probably open the way," Sorun interrupted, voice completely even and straight. " *Probably* . I just-"

"We needed all seven Emeralds, Sorun, so I don't see how that sword-"

"It breaks a lot of rules," he said. "It's hard to explain, Nicole, the sword, it... I've been using it a lot and I figured some stuff out. It's hard to put into words." With his brows furrowed he lifted his hand out of his pocket and gestured at her. "What's got you so upset?"

"Because we've been down this road before and the last time we attempted this you turned catatonic and-!" Nicole cut herself off, eyes widening a bit. She brought her hands up to her chest after, started wringing her wrists while she said in a gentler voice, "I'm... just worried. It was a traumatic experience for you the first time and I just don't want a repeat. That's not even accounting for the radiation."

"Little radiation's nothing. I found out the white-hair thing I can do negates radiation."

"And where did you obtain *that* tidbit of information?" Nicole asked.

"Uh, story for another time. But listen, it's fine-"

"Fine?" Nicole repeated in a incredulous tone. "Sorun, what even brought this on? Why so suddenly?"

He didn't want to answer, not directly. A picture of a destroyed, blood-red plane flashed in his mind. "I just... need to check something," he said.

"Check something? Check *what* ?"

"Nothing, it's probably nothing, I'm gonna be wrong anyway, I..." Sorun sighed out and rubbed a hand through his hair. "I just thought I'd go back to my old home. Maybe get some things to bring back, assuming anything survived Armageddon." He looked down. "Maybe... do something with my mother's body. Bury her somewhere. A-assuming I go home and she's not just a burnt-out skeleton in the living room that'll just fall apart if I try and pick it up..."

All the energy seemed to leave Nicole when she heard Sorun say that. Her ears folded completely against her head and grief crossed her face. "Sorun..."

"I just want a little closure. Nicole, I... I've just been thinking some and I need to know. What happened with mom, and Dave. And Billy and Jarod and Jamie. I'm not expecting to find more than corpses, if even that, but I just... I just gotta know."

She didn't look like she agreed. She looked incredibly sad and conflicted, going as far as to say, "Must you?" She took a few steps closer. "I understand the logic, Sorun, but..."

"I'm just gonna keep wondering forever if I don't, Nicole," he said. "It just feels like this thing that'll keep following me if I don't. And if I wanna make a life here, I just... feel I need to do this. So I need the coordinates."

"..." Instead of answering immediately Nicole lurched forwards and embraced him in another hug. I wasn't an unwelcome one, even if Sorun's arms felt too limp to reciprocate it at the moment. "Are you completely sure?" she asked, sounding a mixture of grief-stricken and resigned.

"Not really. I need to go anyway."

"You'll come back? Promise to stay safe?"

"Yeah, yeah, 'course. I'm not going immediately. I'm getting fixed first and having everything sorted before I decided on anything."

"You'll be alright?"

Probably not. "I've... had time to come to terms. Won't be like last time. Promise. I'll go there and come right back."

She squeezed him tighter. "I feel conflicted. I can't understand what you're going through, so I can only trust you when you say you need this. But this seems painful for you, Sorun, and... I just don't know." She tilted her head forwards to rest her chin on his shoulders. "I'll give you the coordinates, but I'd like to talk about this more at some point. Later. When this sickness business is behind us all and we can return to some sense of normalcy, Sorun. Can we do that?"

It didn't feel the greatest. Telling her of all people half-truths. Wasn't like it was an outright lie; he genuinely he had to know. What happened to them. And this was a convenient excuse to do that. To go home. To see what became of his old life. All of that was true.

But that plane. That fucking plane he'd seen. He couldn't keep it out of his mind. Ever since he'd seen the things Yamato could really do he'd been mulling over the idea of going back to Earth briefly, had always thought about it and put it off... but then he'd seen that plane. And Sorun wasn't sure what it was about the plane that was setting him off, but there was *something* about it, something that was itching his brain.

Thoughts for later, though. All of that was... later stuff. There were more important things to focus on at the moment. Like his health. And the person in front of him right now.

"Yeah, Nicole. That's fine. We can do that."

The boring stuff bored Sorun. The backroom discussions on what was gonna happen, the agreements, a whole lotta other words that were said to him that he mostly blanked out on except for the important stuff. There'd apparently been a council meeting. And a lot of arguing from what Sorun heard. He didn't know the specifics on account of the fact he didn't care enough to learn. He only cared about the end results. And the end results were that they'd all agreed on something. And then when the time came Sorun had to go get Dimitri and ferry him to the castle. There'd been more talks. Sorun still hadn't been part of the talks despite the fact it was his life they were talking about. Something about him having too much bias in the matter. He never cared enough to argue.

It was when Sorun was told that yes, Dimitri would be allowed to stay here until his examinations and treatment of Sorun were done, that he started to care. He didn't know the rest of what was hashed out.

Lotta boring details he couldn't care less for.

The one thing worse than boredom: the anxiety of having to sit in the same room with the floating head guy for hours a day. Being subject to a number of tests, have a bunch of samples drawn, get scanned with whatever machines he kept demanding Nicole make, who, consequentially, was watching them the entire time every day through that camera hanging off the ceiling in the corner of the room. Sorun'd like to say it was out of worry, but really it was more likely one of the stipulations for him being here was that he was monitored the entire time. Likely both, actually.

But he was anxious because Sorun didn't know for a fact that Dimitri would be able to actually do anything. All he could do was sit there

and let him run whatever tests he needed and parse over all the intelligible data on the computer he kept using while Sorun did nothing but sit. Because in the back of his mind he knew if he pestered him with questions Dimitri didn't have the answers to this would just take longer to come. If they even did come. But there was a limit to this kind of patience, both because of boredom and because the anxiety was making Sorun sick. The limit was apparently four days.

A sigh left him as he drummed his finger on the examination table he was sitting on. This was arguably worse than sitting in a hospital room. It looked less like that and more like a lab with all the random machinery medical equipment scattered about. They'd been forced to set up shop in the science center since, undoubtably, nobody trusted Dimitri near the hospital. Sorun couldn't blame 'em. Just look at the guy: a floating head in a ball using robot tentacles to tap away at a keyboard as he stared so intently at that screen. Setting off Sorun's anxiety even more. It caused the dam holding back four days of anxiousness to burst, and his boredom needed to be relieved somehow.

"So what's your deal?" Sorun asked, out of the blue.

The echidna stopped typing momentarily. The ball rotated a bit so that one head's cybernetic eyes managed to see him. The purely red lens that didn't mirror the red eye with the black sclera on the other side of his head. "Pardon?" he asked.

"Your deal. What is it?" Sorun repeated. "What's up with you?"

"What's 'up with me' is that, per our arrangement, I'm attempting to cure you. Using facilities begrudgingly granted to me," he grumbled out as he turned to the computer. "You should count yourself fortunate you weren't there for the proceedings. Your obstinate councilors bickered for hours on whether they should let me work here unimpeded or throw me in your prison. The fox councilwoman and pig councilman were particularly vocal on the matter of locking me up," he added with a huff.

Sorun rose an eyebrow. "Whoa, one of our councilors is a pig man? Really?"

"One of... *your* councilors. Yes." Dimitri spun back to Sorun with a confused expression. "I would... hope you know that. Since he's part of the legislation that governs you."

"Do I really look like someone who pays attention to politics when I got so many more important things to do? Like sleep?" Sorun asked. "But I don't care about him, the fox, Mrs. Prower. How mad did she look when it was decided when you're done here you just get to go back to Eggman scot-free? How mad did she look?"

"Why do you care?"

"Ah, well... she doesn't like me. I don't like her 'cause she doesn't like me. So it puts a bit of a smile on my face when she gets upset at something. 'Tis the human way."

"Is it?" Dimitri's tone suggested that it was an honest question. There was an interested lilt in his voice and his face had grown more curious.

"Of course. When a human does something there's a good chance it's a decision motivated by pure spite and vitriol. It's as potent an emotional fuel source as all the other ones. Like self preservation or love or yadda yadda," Sorun said while spinning his wrist around. "Or Voidborn, I should say."

"... Voidborn?"

"Well I've been figuring that trying to differentiate between humans like me and the humans natural to this world that live over in Station Square is too confusing, so I've been workshopping into re-labeling my kind as 'Voidborn' to end the confusion. 'Cause I'm the last one alive and it's totally my right now."

"But why Voidborn?"

"'Cause our whole universe is out in the middle of complete void that's so far away from this multiverse that when the distance was conceptualized to me it made my brain hurt. And 'cause it sounds cool," the Voidborn explained. "I'm not kidding, either. You know what a googol is?"

"Yes."

"If you go to the edge of this multiverse and go in a straight line towards my dimension and travel a googol googols in lightyears you'll make it a googolth of the way there. That's how far it is. I swear I got an aneurism when my sword told me that."

Dimitri's expression fell flat. "I don't very much believe you. It sounds too absurd. And your sword *told* you?"

"I mean... it didn't give me a hard number or anything like that. Just kinda, y'know, put the idea of the distance in my head when I looked." Sorun poked the side of his head. "It might not actually be that far. Or it could be even further. I just know it's real far away."

"So you don't know how far," Dimitri deduced with a deadpan.

"I know it's far enough they needed seven sources of infinite energy to open a way there." Dimitri didn't argue that point like the rest. He just put on a thoughtful look. "And that sounds pretty far," Sorun finished.

"Yes. I suppose." Dimitri turned back to the computer he'd been working on. "As to your previous inquiry, yes, all the councilors had sour looks on their faces when they decided to let me work and leave in peace. They looked about as upset as the AI that runs this place whenever I ask her to construct me something."

Ah, well, there was one point leaning Sorun towards killing Dimitri when this was over. "She might be a bit less sour if you call her by her name," Sorun suggested.

"Oh, I didn't mean any disrespect. She's a wonder construct, truly. Whoever designed her personality matrix is an actual artisan," Dimitri said. He actually sounded *apologetic* , which really threw Sorun for a loop. "I just lament not being able to appreciate it more since she addressed me so coldly every time she speaks."

One... point towards not killing him? Huh. Sorun felt conflicted on hearing that. "... I think she's still upset about the last time you were here and you argued about the nanites," he quietly said, still thinking on the previous words he heard and how perplexed it made him feel.

"Oh? Ah... perhaps I'd been a bit heavy-handed, then. It was a stressful time."

"Could also be your Dark Legion pals keep trying to kill our friends."

"... Also a possibility," Dimitri admitted. And Sorun was once again struck at how shameful he sounded when he said that.

This wasn't the picture Sorun had been picturing. He didn't know a lot about Dimitri, the time they'd met notwithstanding, and while he hadn't expected mustache-twirling levels of villainy from the guy he'd expected... something from a guy that lead insane cybernetic psychopaths called the Dark Legion. Callousness, unscrupulous moral compass, general nastiness. A wayward insult here or there at the very least.

There wasn't any of that. What words they'd shared painted Dimitri as... well, as just being a normal person. Minus being a floating cyborg head. A really old and sad guy. Polite, even. Hell, the only reason he was doing all this was to save lives, and not even his own. But then Sorun kept going back to that Dark Legion thing and just grew confused. Because after spending so long with the man Sorun honestly couldn't peg him as a guy who would hang out with that crowd. The Eggman crowd. He wanted answers.

"Back when I asked about 'your deal' I meant *your deal* ," Sorun tried again, hoping to get the point across.

Dimitri sighed. "Enunciating your words isn't going to make it any clearer for me, Sorun. Please explain if you've got something to say."

"You command a bunch of evil echidna but you're a completely normal dude. What's up with that?" Sorun asked, hoping the bluntness would make things clearer. "I wasn't expecting you to be a mad scientist but I also wasn't expecting... this," he said, gesturing towards Dimitri. "You. So I'll reiterate: what, Dimitri, is your deal?"

"The Dark Legion aren't a cabal of 'evil echidna'," Dimitri immediately rebuked. The one eye that wasn't just a solid red lens rolled around in the echidna's mechanical eye socket. The sockets around both eyes even conformed to make the shape of rolling his eyes.

"You literally call yourselves the Dark Legion. How am I supposed to take that? How am I even supposed to take that seriously? Cartoon villains don't sound that cartoonish," Sorun said.

"Didn't Knuckles tell you everything?"

"Ugh, maybe...?" Sorun made a pained grimace and rubbed at his shoulder, as if even *trying* to remember that conversation brought him physical pain. "I'll be real, pretty much ninety-five of that conversation was forgotten. Hearing echidna history was a wild trip and I'm like half-sure it's part of the reason Finitevus was driven into insanity. I don't even know what the Dark Legion's deal is other then the tech fetishism and you keep trying to kill my friends. I never needed to know more than that."

"But now you're interested."

"Sure, I guess. For lack of anything better to talk about," Sorun hesitantly agreed. "Gimme the broad strokes, though. No nitty-gritty details. I won't survive. So. The deal?"

Dimitri sighed. "I suppose these data inputs need time to cook..." he mumbled out, staring at the screen. His head-bubble bobbed up and down in a nod, and then he turned to Sorun. "Pull up a chair."

Instead of doing that, Sorun just rose an eyebrow in Dimitri's direction and gestured to the examination table he was sitting on. Dimitri made an embarrassed chuckle and grinned - actually grinned - before speaking. One of his metal tentacles had even moved its tip up and down near one of his eyes, like he was adjusting a non-existent pair of glasses.

"Ages past echidna society took a massive shift and wholeheartedly shunned the nature of technology. Our kind had been subjected to a number of catastrophes - some managed to paint technology in the light of some boogeyman and rose to power under this ideal," Dimitri explained. "A large number of echidna objected to the policies put in place by the leaders of that time, either through complacency gained through the convenience technology provided or through fundamental differences in ideals."

"Yeah, I guess I'd be mad, too, if a bunch of luddites got elected and tried to take my PC away," Sorun commented. "Why Dark Legion, though? What was the thought process behind that name?"

"... A number of the founding members were rather radical in their beliefs," was the only answer Dimitri could provide. All Sorun could do was scoff. "There was strife, skirmishes, assassinations, attempted use of weapons of mass destruction... civil war, to put it plainly. It was bad enough that the entirety of the Dark Legion was sealed away inside a pocket dimension. A shortsighted solution in hindsight since they'd used their prison as an opportunity to continue researching technology while marshalling their strength and growing their forces. It gets murky from their resurgence onwards. I'm aware Knuckles was involved in actions against them a vast majority of the time, you should ask him if you want to know more-"

"I'm never going to do that."

"Then... that's the bare essentials," Dimitri sighed out. "The ideals of the Dark Legion, frankly, were ones that changed with each new leader, the grand master, as well as trying to adapt to whatever the current situation at the time was. It's difficult to classify them when

they've always been in such a fluid state. It was bad enough there was a division at one point and later on a reunification."

"Yeah, this is why I didn't want details," Sorun said. "And right now they're ideals are being crazy? Siding with Eggman?"

"A vast majority of the Dark Legion were transported to Albion when Enerjak removed their cybernetics. Some, those who'd been born into the life, were even happy for it. The ones who'd never even wanted their cybernetics in the first place," Dimitri explained. "The ones that have been fighting alongside Eggman, who allowed him to mutilate their bodies in their reach for technologically-aided perfection, were the most radical-minded of the group. The ones who follow Lien-Da's ideals."

Sorun hummed at that name. It sounded... weirdly familiar? Had he...? No, he'd never met her. He was pretty sure. He'd remember if he'd ever met someone with a ridiculous name like... had he? No, no way. The thought made the back of his hand itch for some reason, though. "What's her deal?" he asked.

"You and your deals." Dimitri's head bubble shook. "She's... ambitious. Power-hungry, crafty, shrewd. Has a high opinion of echidna kind and believes them superior to any other Mobian species - a frankly antiquated belief many echidna used to hold. I'm convinced she tried to arrange my assassination at one point in an attempt at a power grab."

"Ah-huh... and all the ones right now follow that one's ideas, huh?" Sorun scoffed again and made a whistle. "Cool, so... they're not just cyberpsychos. They're neo-nazi cyberpsychos. Banger group you got there, Dimitri."

Dimitri frowned. "What was it you said about sarcasm being the last bastion of the witless?"

"Hey, you were listening." He hated it a little bit, but the little reminder of those words Sorun had said and that Dimitri actually remembered

made a small grin grow on his face. "But why are you mixed up with them?" he asked, grin dropping. "You don't seem like some echidna purist or a cyberpsycho."

"... You keep using that word," Dimitri pointed out. "'Cyberpsycho'. Where does that term come from?"

Sorun perked up. Someone was asking about video game lore. He loved explaining that. He started explaining with no hesitation. "Back where I'm from there was a tabletop game called 'Cyberpunk' that depicted a dystopian future setting where cybernetic implantation was commonplace in humans and where life in general was horrible because of corporate exploitation on human life and the devastation of the environment. They were making a video game adaptation but it didn't get released before I got here." The thought made Sorun grimace a bit before continuing. "Cyberpsychos were people that got so addicted to cybernetics and the surgeries that they'd just go crazy. Them living in a nightmare dystopian world probably didn't help with their sanity. A guy with bulletproof skin that can dodge bullets and has swords for arms getting PTSD attacks sounds like a recipe for disaster and this was a world so messed up you could buy guns out of a vending machine." He started spinning his wrists in circles in front of him. "I just can't help but draw a lot of parallels. Insanity, cybernetics, obsessive compulsion for self-improvement. Ticks a lot of the boxes."

"Ah, I see." The mechanical tentacles around around Dimitri's body became a bit more animated. His face was alight, too, like he was actually enjoying the conversation. Sorun couldn't imagine why. Guy's quality of life was probably extremely poor if *this* was stimulating him so much. "So the humans of your world shared much of the same problems the Dark Legion did? They must have for so many of our issues to be similar."

"Oh, no." Sorun laughed at the thought and shook his head. "Nah, the closest thing we had to cybernetics was a pacemaker. Our tech wasn't anywhere near what this place has. We still used explosions powered by dinosaur juice and boiled water to power everything."

The answer made Dimitri appear perplexed. The dinosaur part in particular seemed to disorient him, making his mouth silently move as he tried to puzzle out what that even meant, before asking, "Then how did all this come to light in a... game of all things?"

"I think the term for the phenomenon is 'Orwellian'?" Sorun scratched at the side of his head, and then shrugged. "Humans were really good at self-reflecting upon the flaws of our species as a whole and predicting disasters that would be wrought by man while highlighting these threats in pieces of literature and other media as a warning to future generations, who would then do absolutely nothing to stop it, therefore making those predictions accurate."

"You mean Voidborn?"

"Yeah, Voidborn. To be fair with how the Overlanders turned out I'm not sure the humans here were so much different than us. I saw a Statue of Liberty here."

"Statue of...?"

"Have you ever seen the ruined statue of the giant green woman in New Megaopolis?" Sorun asked. When Dimitri nodded, he said, "Yeah, we had the exact same statue in my world. That city used to be called New York."

"Ah, more parallels," Dimitri noted. There was a happiness to his voice now - he sounded genuinely invested in the conversation now. "It's interesting how, despite the vast distances of our worlds, they drew so many similarities towards one another."

"Eh, I stopped being surprised by anything a while ago," Sorun admitted. "Seen too much craziness."

"I can imagine. I can't help but ask 'why', though," Dimitri lamented. The bright tone he'd had from earlier had turned slightly dour as his tentacles lazily slithered against the floor. "Voidborn, humans, Overlanders, echidna... ignoring messages of old. Repeating the

same mistakes over and over. Overlanders warring with Mobians when the planet was ruined by humans of old spurning an alien civilization. My species continually ruining itself. The problems your species evidently harbored. Why do our kinds keep repeating the same mistakes?"

Sorun breathed out and leaned back a bit, grabbing the examination table for support. "I dunno, man. Thousands of pieces of media and historians asked the same thing in my world. Nobody ever came up with an answer. Life is... cyclical, I guess. And people just aren't perfect. Never will be." He leaned back forwards and propped his fist against his head before continuing. "We're on a roll with mad scientists so here's what an evil scientist man from a cartoon said about perfection: it's nothing but a goal to strive for, not an actual state of being to be attained. Attaining 'perfection' is tantamount to stagnation. No more growth; no more improvement. What's the point? What's there to do?" He made a shrug. "What I think is that people are people 'cause of the flaws, 'cause otherwise they wouldn't *be* people. And yeah, it causes problems. Makes it so that tragedies happen in life. I can't change it, you can't, and for some reason whenever someone tries, between insane gods that wanna reshape the world or mad fascist kings or insane scientists, I gotta be the one to fight them, and every time I look at what their solutions are and they're just plain stupid. You wanna know what I think?" Sorun leaned even further, hands holding the examination table so that he wouldn't fall off. "Living in life sucks and I wouldn't change a thing about it."

Dimitri's mouth dropped open. "If you were trying to craft some pearl of wisdom, Sorun, I don't think you quite made it," he amusedly stated while making a sad sort of chuckle. "Why? What did life's pain give you to have so much faith in it?"

"It gave me a fat stack of video games, Dimitri, that's what it gave me," Sorun said. "I would never have had 'Metal Gear' without the wars that happened on Earth. The wars were terrible; I had it my way they wouldn't have happened. That was common thought for most

people. But they happened. Would always happen and no amount of cultural or technological advancement would change that. And we got cool games and movies and comics out of it all. If Yoko Taro never saw his friend plummet to his death and watched his corpse grow an erection I never would have got to play 'NieR' and 'NieR: Automata' because he never would have been inspired to make them."

"What?"

"If all the raw, evil stuff that happened in the mediaeval ages never happened 'Berserk' would have never been inspired. Without 'Berserk' 'Dark Souls' wouldn't have been what it was. Jeez, a lot of things wouldn't have been. Without the Wild West I never would have played the 'Red Dead Redemption' games or watched any of the spaghetti western films. If Japan never got nuked kaiju movies wouldn't have been a thing. It goes on and on, great things spiraling from tragedy. If life were perfect and nothing bad ever happened I never would have had *any* of this. And a large majority of who I am is because of all that media I consumed. Media that wouldn't exist otherwise. I wouldn't be *me* . I like life because, for how much it sucks, we get cool stuff out of it."

With the way he was staring at him Dimitri very well might have considered Sorun insane in that moment. It was that wide-eyed, astonished look that looked almost horrified and yet conflicted at the same time. A confusing mix of emotions that couldn't really by reconciled to live in harmony for how different and opposing they were. He gave up - he must have, because Dimitri then used his tentacles as leverage to shake his bubble back in forth as he made a dry, humorless chuckle.

"I don't think people who led lives devoid of happiness and knew only suffering from birth to death would agree with you, Sorun," he said. "You're trying to use the existence of art to justify suffering."

"They don't have to agree with me. That's the world. That's what we live in, Dimitri. That's reality. I'm just trying to make the best of the

hand we all got." He made a sigh, ran a hand through his hair, and sat back straight on the examination table. "To a more salient point, life's messed up, and we can't change it without warping it to the point it ain't life anymore. Enerjak tried it and his vision was a permanently stagnated, primitive society that would have done away with free thinking in lieu of just looking to him for answers. Went to an alternate future and the king there just stripped everyone of their freedoms for peace and that place was miserable. Finitevus wanted a clean slate and that would have just circled back to the original problem given enough time. Nobody's ideas ever work. We can always make things better and streamline the experience, always strive for that better day tomorrow, but absolute perfection's out of the question. So I focus on what's in front of me and nothing else. Not the whole world, not the greater picture, *this* ." He pointed down. "This city, these people, my life. I wouldn't have a life if I tried focusing on more than that. I'll stab god in the face to save the world if I have to and literally nobody else can come up to bat, but I ain't ever gonna spend a lifetime trying to fix the world's problems. A world's just a place full of people and people can sort out their own issues. I have my own problems."

By now that indecipherable expression Dimitri had worn had somewhat subdued. He looked more understanding now, in a 'I'm too mentally exhausted to argue so I'll just agree 'cause you kinda make sense' sort of way. That was Sorun's interpretation of that expression, at least. The small, easygoing smile the cyborg head wore made it hard to tell what he was really thinking.

"All that just for asking what a cyberpsycho was," he lamented. The chuckle this time was more lighthearted.

"Yeah, I guess we got kind of sidetracked," Sorun added. He made a sheepish sort of grin and rubbed at the back of his neck. "You never answered. Why are you with the remnants of the Dark Legion if they're the most messed up ones?"

"Half because of circumstance and half because they're my people," Dimitri swiftly answered. "Sorun, I'd... tried, in the past, to eliminate

all the dividing lines. No more Dark Legion, no echidna warring with echidna, searched for something, searched for anything, a *way* for everyone to put aside their differences we could all stand together. My efforts were time and time again curbed by ambitious fools. Now my species is a tenth of what it was and that small group of mad, technology-obsessed echidna make up a significant portion of our species." With a lack of shoulders Dimitri had to make do with his tentacles sagging on the floor. "I just don't want any more echidna to die."

"So you help them shoot other people? My friends? Seriously?"

"You just justified yourself for only caring about what's in front of you," Dimitri shot back, making Sorun fall silent. "You know the positions everyone's in. There's little choice. What would you do in my stead?"

Sorun didn't move for the first few seconds. Then he sighed, crossing his arms as he thought of an answer. He didn't have to think long. "If Voidborn other than me wound up here and started hurting people using power from Chaos Emeralds... I wouldn't have went out of my way to make sure they survived. Even if they were the last of my kind. If, for example, the Overlanders captured them after going on some insane spree and sentenced them to execution I wouldn't have said a word."

"It wouldn't get that far," was left unsaid by Sorun. There wouldn't have been a chance for capture, trials, executions. Not before he got to them. That would be *his* problem to solve and no one else's.

"But they'd be your kind," Dimitri argued. "Your people. People who share your culture, your history, your genetics. You'd willingly lose all that without a fight?"

"It'd suck, yeah. But sometimes you gotta take a step back and realize there's things more important than blood, Dimitri," Sorun said. "Extinction of a species is a terrible thing but lives are lives. If you think the lives of those echidna are more important than the lives of

everyone they hurt, then that's your prerogative. I don't agree with it, though."

"Then... we will have to disagree on that point." He sounded sad when he said it, Which sounded odd to Sorun. "I've dedicated my life towards the advancement and betterment of my kind, and we're too few in number now. I won't let the remainder of the Dark Legion by wiped out by some madman's petty whims when there's still a chance they can be saved. For what's left of our kind to be whole."

"Even at the expense of others?"

"I'm focusing on what's in front of me. On *our* kind's problems," Dimitri said, parroting Sorun's earlier words. "But... I understand how that sounds. I know the grief and pain they've caused and I'm not wholly unsympathetic to it all. It's why I agreed to one of the concessions that were demanded of me by the Council of Acorn. When the time comes for the Freedom Fighters to make the final push into New Megaopolis and defeat Dr. Robotnik once and for all I'm to sabotage the defensive systems to give them an easier time."

Sorun's eyebrows rose up in surprise. He'd been mildly upset at Dimitri's stance, if a bit understanding, but admittedly this new bit of news made it easier to swallow. "You actually gonna follow through with that?"

"I'll make my best effort. I truly mean that, not in the least bit because there's a camera recording this conversation," Dimitri said in an affable tone, one of his tentacles pointing at the aforementioned camera. "If nothing else it'll decrease the level of violence and mitigate the chance of bloodshed on both sides. I can trust the Freedom Fighters not to take lives so it benefits me."

"And what are you gonna do after?" Sorun asked. "You all even have anywhere to go? You're planning on stabbing your last benefactor in the world in the back."

"You say that as if I'm the only one plotting behind Robotnik's back," Dimitri scoffed out. "Even his nephew sees the writing on the wall and has been making plans. He's been in contact with this Overlander woman. She's a technomancer based out in Yurashia, has managed to build the largest power base in the continent there. We've discussed it and concluded the Freedom Fighters' victory against Robotnik is all but guaranteed. We're all leaving with Snively to Yurashia to join forces while everyone is distracted with Robotnik's capture."

Sorun blinked and made a hum. "Technomancer? That's a thing?"

"It's an Overlander-specific phenomenon. In extremely raree cases an Overlander can be born with a Chaos Force link strong enough to grant them mental control over all types of technology. I knew of some who once thought Robotnik was one such technomancer, but no, he's just an extremely talented engineer with a nearly supernatural intelligence. This woman I mention is different. She has actual power over technology."

"Well, pfft, good for her I guess." Even the Overlanders over here got to have stuff over Sorun. Figured.

"Not especially, I don't think," Dimitri said. "Apparently their kind are heavily ostracized for their abilities. I wouldn't be surprised if the reason she's in Yurashia in the first place is because Overlander society didn't accept her."

"Honestly, that tracks with human behavior. I'm not surprised," Sorun admitted with a sigh. Dimitri only hummed in response. "So you all are shacking up with her while leaving Eggman to hold the bag? Not the worst exit plan."

"Indeed. I need someone to remove those bombs from my people, and as I've said conventional means won't work. Robotnik was just too clever with the bombs' design. I'm hoping someone of her caliber will be able to help using her abilities," the echidna explained.

"Ah." Made sense. Sorun tried putting himself in Dimitri's figurative shoes and he couldn't really see of a better move to play. It honestly sounded like it'd work, too. With how absolutely hated Eggman was and how everyone was chomping at the bit to get him he doubted anyone would care about them all slipping away. They wanted him above all else.

"Yes. 'Ah'." Dimitri's tone there sounded a bit scathing when he said that, and that along with the narrowing of his eyes indicated he was displeased about something. The look he was giving only lasted a few seconds, though. He dropped it after and asked in a normal voice, "I wanted to ask, since I'm curious. I'm aware you were the one that solved the second Enerjak incident but was largely absent for it. What happened."

"Oh, I killed his soul with Yamato. He's gone forever," Sorun informed Dimitri while making a stabbing motion with his hand.

"... So he's truly gone, then? Forever? Just dead?"

"Deadady-dead-dead."

"Yes, Sorun, thank you, just the confirmation I was seeking," Dimitri sarcastically replied. His face turned a bit somber after. "I can't say I'll ever miss it for all the trouble it caused. Still... a large majority of my life was spent fused to that thing. Knowing it's gone... I don't know why, but it feels like a void in me."

"Yeah, I hear parasites can have that effect," Sorun supplied. "Don't think about it too much. It'll go away on its own."

Dimitri made a "hmph" sound. "Perhaps. Hopefully. Still, I wonder... to suffer complete obliteration like he did as you claimed. What's left for one who suffers that fate? Complete cessation of consciousness, of being and existence? How does one experience such an occurrence? Where do you even go?"

"I dunno. Doubt it was the same place I wound up in when I died. I obliterated the guy."

A perplexed hum left Dimitri. "And that would be...?"

Sorun made a dry chuckle. "From the void we Voidborn are born from, Dimitri. And it's to the void we will return. Unless I pull some tricks 'fore I die but that's an entirely different problem for a different day." His expression hardened, eyes suddenly locking onto Dimitri's who seemed startled by the sudden shift. "But don't ask about that place, Dimitri. I'm serious. You don't want to know."

Dimitri seemed perturbed by the warning. Indeed, the very words themselves seemed to cause an eerie sensation to saturate the room. Sorun could see it clear as day, how the sudden mood was causing Dimitri to look uncomfortable. It didn't last long - the nearby computer dinged. It caused the atmosphere in the room to instantly evaporate, and Dimitri was abnormally quick towards turning his attention back to it.

Tapping ensued as the tips of Dimitri's tentacles flew across the keyboard, striking the keys in a dizzying blur. Data readouts that were utter nonsense and gibberish to Sorun's eyes scrolled down the screen. It must have meant something to Dimitri, though. He kept humming and nodding, though at the same time he didn't look happy about something.

"Your biological makeup is utterly astounding. How a species managed to evolve without the use of Chaos energy..." he mumbled out, almost sounding in wonder. "You're absolutely the weakest physical specimen I've ever laid eyes on as a result but the tradeoff of being able to freely manipulate Chaotic energies the way you can..."

"... Not sure how to take that, but okay," Sorun muttered. "This was all known. What about this?" Sorun's eyes briefly flashed green. "Did the Master Emerald screw something up in me or what?"

"Right..." Dimitri made a rattling sigh and floated away from the computer, then turned to address Sorun. "I don't think it had anything to do with this," he began. "More accurately I don't think it helped any, but it's not the main cause."

"You're losin' me," Sorun said, not really understanding where this was going.

"Sorun, your entire species absorbs Chaos energy like a *sponge* ," Dimitri breathlessly replied. "Normal organisms, from plants to animals to Mobians to everything living, we're all designed to in live in tandem with Chaos energy through our links to the Chaos Force. It's not enough to sustain us, not alone, but it is enough to empower us, even if it's only to do something as meager as simply move and think. There are, of course, abnormalities such as that Sonic fellow, but the general gist remains the same. But your kind evolved completely independent of Chaos energy. To metabolize energy from food at an efficient rate I've never seen in any other species and to utilize certain chemical and mechanical processes to compensate for the lack of Chaos energy. You're able to move around and live without using a single ounce. That isn't normal. You shouldn't be able to do that, but... it would seem life in your world found a way."

"And this is going where?" Sorun asked. "How is this relevant?"

"Sorun, do you realize it's not just the people, not just organisms, but the very *world* itself is suffused in Chaos energy?" Dimitri asked. And it was now he was starting to get the implications, because a sinking feeling was beginning to be felt in Sorun's gut. "It's ubiquitous. It's everywhere. Every time you eat food from this world, every breath of this air you take, simply *existing* here, causes you to passively absorb the ambient Chaos energy around us. Minute, negligent amounts, yes, but after nearly spending a year here it's added up. And you have no Chaos Force link to regulate your intake. I've been comparing samples taken today compared to three days ago and every day since and there is an extremely small but noticeable increase in your levels. The growth has been consistent."

"What? No, no hold up. That doesn't make sense," Sorun argued, shaking his head. "Wouldn't it just get used up? I-I tried, one time in my off time, using a Power Ring to make Yamato instead of a Chaos Emerald. You know what happened? I managed it but it didn't even last a second before disappearing. Same for all my other powers. The Emeralds don't burn out so that's one thing but if you're really telling me this-" his eyes flashed green again for emphasis, "-is because I've just been building this stuff up the entire time I've been here then why does it keep getting worse? Shouldn't it disappear the more I use it?"

"Because your kind doesn't just *use* Chaos energy. You *convert* it." Dimitri momentarily grimaced a bit, as if disturbed by something. "Two days ago when we used your Chaos Emerald to manifest some of your abilities, the readings I took... that is not Chaos energy you are using with your powers, Sorun. Frankly, with some of the things I saw in those readings... I'm not sure what I was looking at."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that when I looked at the energy wavelengths of your sword it had consistent peaks and valleys reminiscent of a heartrate and I'm not sure how I'm supposed to take that."

Sorun did. Demonic energy didn't follow conventional logic, even less than Chaos energy, and from the way Dimitri looked he must have seen a lot more than just the heartrate thing looking at his sword, or even the other powers he'd let him examine. He didn't want to outright tell him, though, for risk of an overreaction. And just wanting to keep it a secret in general. "I know what the energy is. It's... supposed to be weird like that, don't read too far into it," Sorun said. "How does this explain why my condition is getting worse and not better?"

"Maybe you could shed some insight," Dimitri suggested. "You more than anyone else know these powers. This condition - is it similar to anything? Anything at all that could give us some hint towards figuring this out?"

Some. Sorun had formed a pretty solid guess the moment he'd seen his nails growing into claws back at that castle but he'd never wanted to draw conclusions. "There'd always been a... certain ability," Sorun began, leaning forwards while clasping his hands together. "One I'd wanted above all else. I never got it, though. The Emeralds seemed to give me everything but that one specific power, and even when I gained the ability to control them I could still never manifest it. A lot of these symptoms I'm showing, they... resemble it. The power I wanted."

The change in eye color, the claws, the increase in physical ability, the track marks from all the syringes that had been used to draw blood from him healing over too quickly. Sorun didn't *want* to say it was some nascent, juvenile form of Devil Trigger, one so weak and incomplete it was barely recognizable, but the evidence was stacking by the day. How emotional bursts automatically triggered it. Him learning to switch it on and off. In a weird sort of way it added up.

"Why did you want it so badly?" Dimitri asked.

Because everyone had childish fantasies of something and Sorun's had always been to turn into a cool-looking demon monster since he was four. But Sorun was too embarrassed to say something like that. "It's just something I wanted," he said, not wanting to get too far into it. "The power itself was a transformation. Makes you really powerful. But I shouldn't even have it to begin with."

"Well... you know the spiel. Chaos energy being shaped by the will of the heart and all that. Voidborn such as you seem to take that saying more literally than its intention," Dimitri said. "It's possible you had this ability from the moment you took your first breath on Mobius. That you were never able to manifest it because you already possessed it. You'd just never accumulated enough power to actually utilize it until recently, and I wouldn't be surprised if your close proximity to the Master Emerald accelerated some process you'd already been undergoing during the duration of your stay in this world."

From minute one. He'd had it since minute one. "But this power isn't a good thing, is it," Sorun mumbled out, already suspecting he knew the answer.

The solemn look Dimitri gave Sorun all but confirmed it. "The power you've been steadily accumulating, that your body is converting in order to feed the progress of this... transformation. It's bad enough your kind's biology are negatively impacted by Chaos energy. It's already been doing a number on you. But the changes your body are undergoing to accommodate this ability is only exacerbating the present symptoms caused by that weakness. You simply can't handle it. Looking at all the tests I've run I'm confident in saying this transformation won't even be halfway complete before it outright kills you."

"Oh... halfway, huh? That'll look awful. Won't be symmetrical at all." Sorun made a dry sound. It was supposed to be a completely monotonous chuckle, but he couldn't even manage that as he laid his back down on the examination table, one leg swinging off freely while the other kept its foot down on the metal table. "No way to stop it?"

"... None," Dimitri confirmed. "You'd have to isolate yourself in an environment free of Chaos energy, and frankly speaking, no such place exists in this multiverse. Even if you found one you wouldn't find life free of Chaos energy to cultivate food. This process if completely irreversible."

"Huh..." He laid his hands underneath his head as he thought that over. "So it's either go back to my dead world and live there for a shorted life due to radiation poisoning or spend the rest of my rapidly shortening life here and die of Chaos energy poisoning. From the moment I arrived here this planet's been trying to kill me, Dimitri. I don't know what I did to tick it off so much," he mumbled out. "Thought when I finally got those Emeralds out of me that were irradiating me with so much Chaos energy they were shredding years off my life that everything would be fine, but it turns out I didn't

even need the Emeralds to do that. The whole multiverse is out against me. I can't escape Chaos no matter where I go."

He wasn't even that surprised. That was the worst part. Maybe somewhere in the back of Sorun's mind he knew something along these lines were happening, that somewhere in his subconscious he'd managed to piece together most of the puzzle and was ready for it. Or maybe because he couldn't be surprised anymore it didn't come as all that shocking. He was so used to brushing against death all the time it just wasn't hitting like it should. Maybe it was just because he was so fucking tired of it all.

"How long?" Sorun asked. His voice came out hollow and emotionless.

"I can really only estimate. The progression of accumulated power is roughly linear but the damage to your body isn't. The more it's damaged by this the more susceptible to further damage it becomes." Dimitri's tentacles shuffled around on the ground in a sort of awkward gesture. "I'd estimate five years at the worst. Looking at it in a hopeful light maybe seven or eight years. You're already severely damaged from all the time you've spent here and any regeneration ability is going to be of no help because there isn't any physical damage to repair. It's... simply degrading you."

Not surprising either. This transformation was a part of him and it was killing him. It'd be like trying to heal a tumor. And regeneration hadn't helped him out the first time Chaos energy poisoning killed him. No matter where Sorun looked it he came to the same answer: he was sunk.

Man. He looked so pathetic right now, staring up into his reflection in the reflective ceiling. He thought for a few moments that the ceiling began cracking - that the reflection began breaking down and that at any moment it'd shatter completely and shower Sorun in debris. And then he'd blink and it'd be completely intact and whole.

"I could have something to offer you."

Sorun made a quiet scoff. He didn't dare hope. "Speak, then."

Dimitri hesitated. He looked towards Sorun's face, which was still staring up towards the ceiling with a forlorn expression, and had paused for a few moments before speaking. "Within complex organisms such as us blood is usually the main medium for which Chaos energy is distributed throughout the body. If this medium were to be... removed, so to speak, it would dramatically reduce the rate at which your body accumulates Chaos energy."

"So you wanna what? Rip out all my bone marrow and fill me up with artificial blood?"

"Your skeleton, actually. But essentially."

Sorun blinked. He blinked a few more times and then turned his head to look at Dimitri. He looked serious, which worried Sorun.

"I was joking," he said.

"The artificial blood is safer than you'd think. I use it; a majority of Dark Legion echidna with extensive cybernetic modification use it."

"Dimitri, I don't..." Sorun sighed and rubbed his face, then spun around on the metal bed to sit back up. "You seriously wanna tear my skeleton out?" he asked in a tired, incredulous voice.

"Everything but your spine and skull. Those areas are more... delicate than others, and it would leave you with some bone marrow left so you have some semblance of an immune system," Dimitri explained. "You'd have some small amount of organic blood, but the composition would largely be artificial. You'd have to undergo dialysis on a weekly basis to recycle the blood in your system - I can give the crafting specifications for that. And a mechanical skeleton would be useful in helping support a failing body for when your deterioration becomes extremely severe. Mechanized joints that can function independently of muscle attachment points in needy circumstances."

"Okay, this... you're throwing a lot at me." Sorun groaned out and rubbed at his eyes. Become a cyborg. That was his solution to Sorun's mortality issue. "Would it be a cure?"

"No. Replacing your blood would be the most effective means of slowing the progression of your deterioration, but your skin, muscles, organs... all those are still susceptible to the Chaos energy you're constantly bathing in," Dimitri explained. "You could replace those, but none of it would be as effective as swapping out your blood. You could replace your whole body, but at the end of the day you still have an organic brain, Sorun."

"Yeah, I wasn't thinking about full-body conversion." Sorun's hands dragged down his face. "This is seriously what you're offering me?"

"It's either this or you find some way of obtaining roboticization. But not even Eggman knows what that process would do to a Voidborn like you. It's never been done. You'd be tempting fate."

"I'm even less keen on that than this," Sorun mumbled. "Uh, how, uh, how much time would it buy me? Getting the cyberskeleton and swapping my blood out?"

"I could only hazard a guess. Twenty years, maybe thirty."

"That's it?"

"There's no miracle cure for you, Sorun. Your entire species is an unprecedented case," Dimitri informed him. "Maybe in couple decades' time medical technology will advance to the point a new solution can be offered to you. This, what we have right now at this moment, is what I can offer you. And even should this be untrue... a handful of decades of life is better than nothing, isn't-?"

"Quit talking for a moment." Sorun held a hand out to stop Dimitri. He did so, mouth clamping shut as he watched Sorun hang his head in thought.

It sounded good. That was the most messed up part about all this: it actually sounded good. Cybernetic implants were... something he was only partially uncomfortable with, and if it was just his skeleton it wasn't like it would be super noticeable. Might even get to the point he'd forget he had a fake skeleton, some hopeful part of his mind whispered. The dialysis would be a pain in the ass, but manageable. And twenty to thirty years at worse if no other solution ever presented itself was... something. More than he had any right to hope, maybe. That'd get him to what, his forties? Fifties? Wasn't ideal, but hell, people had died younger. And roboticization didn't sound appealing. Doubly so when nobody knew what would even happen.

"Dammit... this really is my only option, ain't it?" That was... yeah. Fuck. If it was the only way it was the only way. With laconic slowness he glanced up at the corner of the room, towards the camera watching the both of them. He knew Nicole was watching all of this and was receiving this information in real time. He couldn't help but wonder what she thought about all this. Probably horrified on how his lift was falling in a downturned spiral for like the millionth time. *"Fucking fuck. Alright."*

"If you need to take some time to decide, maybe talk with others-" Dimitri began.

"Nobody has any say in this but me," Sorun interrupted. Partially untrue, because if Nicole had an opinion he'd listen and maybe even defer to her. And he knew deep down she'd want him to get this surgery if it meant extending his dwindling life. "The transformation ability. Would I lose it?"

"Possibly. It could slow it down to the point its progress stops, it could eliminate it entirely," Dimitri provided. "I don't believe it'd take away your ability to warp Chaos Emeralds to your heart's content. You may find difficulty without a blood medium, but I don't think you'd outright lose them."

"Think. You *think* . You don't know," Sorun pointed out. "You don't know if I'll lose all my powers doing this."

"It's a non-zero chance, however unlikely I would pin it," Dimitri amended.

"Still wanna do this knowing there's a chance I'll never be able to manifest Yamato afterwards to take the bombs out of those echidna?"

The floating head sighed. "Honestly, no. I don't. But you'll never agree to saving them first before yourself, will you?" he asked, tone growing grim. "So it's a chance I'll just have to take. But I'm confident with the odds - both of our odds."

... Not super appealing. Death was even less so. The prospect of losing Yamato forever made Sorun feel extremely queasy. If Dimitri had faith it wouldn't be lost, though... "What would you need?"

"Time to create a surgical plan and create the designs needed for the cybernetics. The sourcing of the materials and production of those parts will have to be left to you, though I don't imagine with the aid of nanites production will be that much an issue. We'd need to wait for a window where'd I'd be able to be gone long enough not to be missed to actually perform the surgery and have you wake up to bring me back. Additionally I'll need to confer with your physician - we need to find an anesthetic strong enough to put you under but weak enough not to stop your heart. I'm worried you're more susceptible to suppressants of that nature from some of the tests I ran on your biology."

Sorun was too embarrassed to point out how right he was. "Yeah, you'll have to talk to Dr. Quack about that. He's the head surgeon and physician in the city," he mumbled. "You'll be performing the surgery?"

"I imagine they'll want this Dr. Quack in the operating room with me, if nothing else than to keep an eye on me and to ensure I'm actually

holding to my end of the deal," Dimitri remarked. His voice sounded a bit amused. "Other assistants provided by the Republic would be appreciated and I've no doubt the A... Nicole will want to be present as well." There was a pause as Dimitri regarded Sorun. "Am I to take this questioning as you already having reached a decision? You don't want to take any time to think on it?"

"Nothing to think about. It's either this or die without ever seeing twenty-five." Sorun looked down at his right hand and flexed it. Silently, he lamented the fact that it was probably going to be the last time he'd ever flexed the bones in that hand ever again. "What's it going to be like?" he asked. "Having a cyberskeleton? It gonna hurt too badly?"

Dimitri made an understanding sound. "I can understand the hesitation, but we echidna have become rather proficient in cybernetic augmentation, Sorun. I will admit the recovery process will be a bit of an ordeal and we can talk more about that at length later, but I promise you that afterwards you'll never notice a difference aside from the surgical scars. You have my word you'll come out of this better than you were going in. For how little you seem to value my word," he added.

"... It may have a bit more credibility than I initially gave it." In a sudden motion Sorun slapped his hands on the examination table and jumped off, startling Dimitri slightly. His boots landed on the floor with a loud *clack !* as he stood up to his full height. "My kingdom for a shiny new skeleton... alright. Let's do it. Salvage whatever life I've got left in me and I'll save those echidna."

A/N- This chapter was nothing like how it looked in the conceptual phase. I planned something completely different. In the original rendition Sorun was a lot more hostile towards Dimitri and Dimitri was supposed to attempt to go behind Sorun's back to the Freedom Fighters to beg them to try and convince Sorun to save the echidna first. There was gonna be this big argument with Sally which would have ended with

Sorun saying point blank to her face, "And what exactly are *you* going to do about it? I'm not one of your Freedom Fighters anymore. You can't order me around. I'll do what I want." Later on he would have directly implied he wasn't going to lift a finger to help the echidna if Dimitri couldn't help him and Sonic would have got in a screaming match with him over it. It was bad enough that Dimitri was going to refuse treatment unless he helps first, at which point Sorun shrugs, holds Yamato to his own throat, and the following would have played:

Sorun: "I'm dead anyways so here's what we're doing now since you wanted to be difficult: I'm gonna cut my throat open with this. I'll have anywhere from five to fifteen seconds before I lose consciousness and bleed out. You got that long to change your mind so I turn the regeneration on and heal the wound closed."

Dimitri: "You're bluffi-"

Sorun: -Cuts throat open-

Google gave me a suicide hotline number when I was researching how long it took to die from a cut throat so that was fun. It was gonna go places. And in hindsight I was gonna have Sonic in the room and 100% he would have just run over and taken the Emerald out of Sorun's hand and he wouldn't have been able to do a thing, maybe I could have written him out of the room at the time, I dunno, but I had a way different plan for this (I'm also kinda glad I ended up not doing it 'cause Nicole would have been there too and, uh, yeah I have no idea how I would have reconciled that).

But none of that happened. Here's what happened: I got Sorun and Dimitri talking and then that, that up there, that chapter, that just happened. It just flowed out. My fingers were flying over the keyboard and I was thinking to myself, "Man this isn't really what I had in mind" but I couldn't stop. And I looked back at it and ended up liking this better? Because on the one hand it's going against the message of "hey Sorun is genuinely growing

more insane the longer this goes" that I had planned but on the other hand the conversation he had with Dimitri is probably the healthiest conversation he's had in, like, the last fifty chapters. And that's what happens with this story: flat-out I think the only interesting conversations Sorun ever has is with the villain characters in this setting. I don't know why. It just happened. Maybe because Sorun and the villains can kind of emphasize with each other whereas all the good Freedom Fighter characters don't have an *ounce* of gray to their morality, they're all white knights, so there's just not a lot to talk about. It kind of makes me pine for the early, *early* concepts for this story where Sorun actually did take Eggman's deal in the beginning of the story and immediately flipped to his side. I was gonna turn him into a cyborg zombie. And it's kind of an appealing idea now because it would have given him exposure to a way more interesting cast.

Then again I'm pretty sure at this point Sorun's already talked to all the interesting villains and everyone left are pretty one-dimensional and boring, so I dunno, maybe it evens out.

But anyways, yeah, this chapter happened. I don't know why I like it better. I look at what I wanted and realize that would have just been exhausting to write so I just wrote what I wanted instead of what I planned. That's the long and short of what happened. And it made me realize writing scenes where Sorun's losing his mind and going off on people is mentally exerting to me. Like the negativity actually blows back against me in reality and now, *just now* as I write this, have I realized that. And I really think if I tried going with my original idea for the chapter it would have taken me an extra two or three weeks to write.

That segways into my later point.

You know another thing I realized? Every time Shadow's not in a chapter I'm asking myself "Where's Shadow?" because I've realized the power of putting a crazy man next to the straight man. I kind of regret not putting him into more chapters

because there's actually some good content potential there but they lead such different lives I gotta twist the plot just to get them in the same room. Because they juxtapose against each other so much so it's just fun writing scenarios with them together. The crazy man and straight man device works. It really does work.

That segways into my later point.

Now audience. Boys, girls. Children of all ages. Gather 'round. Pull up a chair, grab a snack. Listen to ol' papa Domino jaw a bit (could be mama, hey, you guys don't know, I'm a mystery person behind a screen. There's probably a couple people out there that can peg my gender from my writing style alone but don't listen to those guys 'cause they're probably wrong. And pay no attention to the fact my OCs are always male, that means nothing).

I'd like to face facts. I've slowed down a bit over time. Used to be at the beginning of this I was banging out a chapter a week, heck, I was shipping 'em out as fast as that Coeur guy over on the RWBY corner of the site ships his stuff out, but that's not the case anymore. And it's not for any major reason, no life-changing paradigm shifts, nothin' o' that nature.

It's, uh... alright, listen, chapter one with the big A/N at the beginning I made it clear I wasn't some diehard Sonic fan and that's still true. And I'm gonna finish this story, absolutely, before I hear the alarm bells 'cause I see you all reaching for them. It's gonna get finished. Unless I die, in which case I've left precisely zero redundancies in place to provide you all some closure in the event I'm physically incapable of ever finishing this, so have fun sleeping tonight with that knowledge. That said, we're a hundred in, guys. Over a million words of Sonic. There's gotta be some give somewhere. And maybe that's the problem, maybe that's why I've slowed down, 'cause I've been writing the same thing for years now. I need to spread my wings. I gotta branch out. *I wanna chew* .

Here's where this going: IRL I was thinking about all this when, one day about a month ago, I was browsing YouTube (and this how it always starts, I swear, YouTube recommends something to me and it spirals from there) and I see this video. I ignore it. But it pops back up in my feed. Over and over. It's not going away. And I see the views are going up explosively.

"Fine, I'll watch it," I say.

I didn't think looking at the thumbnail I'd like it. It was a thirty-minute animated short based off this webcomic I'd never heard of. I went in just to see what all the hubbub was. And then I binged the webcomic in two nights 'cause it turns out it's actually pretty good, and through the whole experience I get exposed to this one character. And this character. Guys this character. You thought Shadow was a straight man, this guy, he's a turbo straight man. Straight man ultima. I've never seen the straight man archetype portrayed so hard in any other media I've ever seen. And I'm looking at the crazy man/straight man relationship I got going on with Sorun and Shadow. And then I look at Mr. Straight Maxima over here. And it's like somebody uses a pickaxe to bore the inspiration straight into my head, the ideas just start pouring in as I think to myself, "What if I make a story where it's *just* this?" Like the universe just threw the answer to all my problems in my lap. And so since then I've been planning some and then I made a fresh new OC and he's rarin' to go, guys, he's pointing at the field and beggin' the coach to let him in.

Look what I'm trying to say is I wanna work on something else on the side.

That is not to say - NOT TO SAY - I'm losing focus on this story. This other thing, this side project, I wouldn't be dividing attention between the two. I'd only work on it, like, once a week. I just want something, *anything* , to break up the monotony of writing nothing but Sonic. If anything it might make chapters come out even faster, that's part of the reason, this is a big

motivation experiment I wanna try. But I haven't made a final decision on if I really wanna do this 'cause it's a big commitment and I know it'll upset some people, so here's the deal:

Next chapter. The entire next chapter is entirely just a drug sequence since it takes place during Sorun's surgery, okay, so next chapter. I'm gonna workshop some stuff so you see what I'm talking about and also to see if I can actually pull this off. It'll be a learning experience for us all. Then I'll post a poll and you guys can decide if I go through with this madness or not. Even if you all say yes I still might not 'cause this is a *hard* whim I'm working off right now, but the last time I got that kind of burst of inspiration after YouTube recommended me something weird *this story* happened so hey, who knows.

That's all, go home.

Chapter 101

A/N- So in a lot of shows there's always that one goofy episode you're not really supposed to take seriously 'cause it's mostly just nonsense. Like that one time in Hellsing where Alucard talked to the spirit of his gun and it was just Bruce Willis for some reason.

I still don't know what was up with that. But anyways this chapter was largely inspired by that.

Recursion Error

Episode 101 - We're holding these synapses together with spit and gum

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Livin' the life. Keeping it all together. Wasn't easy but he was managing, somehow. He was doing it. Keeping it all together.

"Gebuhh..."

Goddammit.

"Ah, for the love of..." The loud slap that resulted from Sorun slapping his own face echoed across the infinite, dark expanse he was standing in. Because right there at his feet was Sorun. Flat on his back and drooling like a moron. Eyes completely clouded and looking off in two different directions. "They hit ya with the hard stuff, huh?" Sorun mumbled to him as he crouched down to look at him. This happened every time he got drugged off his gourd, and who was left to run the brain in the background when he was down and out like this? Him. This guy.

Wasn't the worst job in the world but for the last ten months it'd been the most stressful one in existence. Sorun shook his head, standing up away from Sorun and pacing away a few meters as he held his chin in thought. "Alright, guess I better go check the systems, make sure nothing burns out like *last time* ." He grimaced. Something always, *always* had to go wrong whenever one of these misadventures happened, whether it be a morphine overdose, or mushrooms, or a drunken spell, or that fucking purple coconut. Never failed, absolutely *never failed* to break something and who had to be the guy to fix? Him. Of course it had to be him because who else was gonna do it?

Once more Sorun crouched down. There wasn't exactly a floor he was standing on - just more nothingness. That said he'd been around long enough to be able to feel out where the hatch was, so after some fumbling he'd managed to find the small groove among all the nothing he was standing on. With a swift upward motion of his arm the hatch was lifted. Where there was once nothing there was now a square hole floating next to his feet that lead down into a metal-lined tunnel. To one side of the square chute was a ladder, which Sorun grabbed onto as he began to lower himself into the metal tunnel. He stopped halfway, turning over to Sorun who was still drooling on the metaphorical ground over there.

Sorun pointed over at him. "Don't worry, buddy, I'll get it all sorted in a jiffy."

There was no response aside from unintelligible gibberish from Sorun.

"... Alright, good talk." Breathing out while shaking his head Sorun ducked fully into the tunnel while closing the hatch over his head. Darkness completely enshrouded him until he'd pulled a flashlight and turned it on. The conditions honestly weren't much better with such a meager source of light, but it was something to work with.

He continued to move down the ladder, often stopping at a random juncture to inspect the walls of the tunnel he was descending.

Inserted into the wall were electronic widgets, softly humming from the electric current running through them as random, colorful lights blinked on and off on them all. Sorun didn't care much for what the random sequences of light meant - the important thing was that they were on and blinking in the first place. Cognitions could take care of the rest as long as nothing was outright broken.

Eventually the bottom of the metal shaft had been reached. A nearby valve had to be turned to engage the manual hydraulic system that opened the hatch below him, which he'd dropped out of the moment it was open. He'd dropped into the new room, with the hatch he'd just fallen through located within the room's ceiling. It was, upon first glance, a "control room" of sorts. Clean metal walls with linoleum flooring along with ample lighting. Computer monitors lined the room, with larger, refrigerator-sized computers pushed up against the walls - giant bundles of cables jutted out from the computers and fed into ports located along the walls. There was one large, metal door and another smaller door on the side. Above the larger main door was the word "Hypothalamus" alit in red block letters etched into an electrical box.

Nodding his head, Sorun shined his flashlight around. Everything seemed in order much to his relief. Stuff was on and nothing was smoking or, worse, on fire. Hated to see that. Admittedly this was one area of the brain he was most worried of since he'd never seen the effect of Mobius-brand anesthesia, but it all seemed in working order.

"Yep, yep, mhm, ah-huh..." He mumbled to himself, looking all around the room and seeing not one thing out of place. Even the giant lightbulb in the direct center of the room, the main fuse of this facility that ensured it could even work in the first place, was bright and shining. If that was the case then maybe he was worrying over nothing and-

The lightbulb winked out.

"SHIT. Again!?" Every time, every goddamn time. Grumbling incoherently to himself Sorun marched up to the lightbulb, flashlight gripped tightly in his hand as he looked it over. Along the way he started to see the problems arise, how the displays on all the computer monitors were starting to glitch out and how the overhead lights were starting to flicker. He stopped in front of the burned-out bulb with an intense frown, trying his first line of defense: whacking it with his flashlight.

Thunk!

Nada. The bulb was still out. He tried his second and last line of defense: he kicked it.

THUNK!

Nope.

"Ugh, now I gotta get a replacement..." Sorun lamented. He breathed outwards, reminding himself it wasn't the end of the world and this is why they had surplus parts in storage. Wasn't like this was the first time, anyways, he just needed it to go as smooth as all those times. So he'd left the room, hearing the pneumatic doors close with a soft *hiss!* behind him as he gazed out to the familiar, brightly-lit hallways he'd grown so accustomed to walking. If memory served right it was somewhere down this hall on the left...

After a few minutes of walking he'd found it. Storage and Maintenance. Said it right there on top of the door. The sight made Sorun's mood lighten a bit, because of all the cognitions he'd made to keep things together while he was gone at least this one was the nicest one to be around. And they hadn't broken anything as of yet so that was always a plus.

Upon entering the door he was greeted to a very different room to the previous. Where the last room had been a control room this one was more akin to a warehouse. Past the lobby area where a front

desk, an office door behind that desk, and some nearby chairs sat, there was a vast room with shelves. Shelves that reached so high towards the tall ceiling their tops could barely be seen, shelves that expanded out so laterally he couldn't see an end to the shelves whether he looked left or right, and shelves that reached so far back there was no telling how far one would have to walk to reach the end. A daunting size to the uninitiated, but really this was one of the smaller rooms in the brain. Good thing, too, because the cognition Sorun had run this place was short. Also not too fond of the dark, which was why he'd had to re-install new lighting to make it practically look like daytime in here. And then painted the ceiling to look like the sky - with how far away it was it was practically the real thing.

Wasting no time Sorun walked up to the front desk and rang the little bell sitting on it. In the back office he heard a small crash, followed by the sound of small, pattering feet running towards the door. It was flung open, though due to the desk obscuring his view Sorun only saw a hat with cat ears jutting out of the top dart out from beyond the door. Arms covered in brown garb placed themselves on top of the counter to lift their body up to see over it. The face of a human child with yellow cat eyes and purple hair popped up from behind the counter, with the eyes widening once their owner saw Sorun standing beyond the counter.

"Sorun! You're back!" A large smile broke out over the child's face upon seeing Sorun. And then they'd let out a high-pitched laugh when Sorun reached out from the other side of the desk, grabbed them under the armpits, and lifted them up and over the desk while holding them up above Sorun's head.

"Hello, Niko." A small smile grew on Sorun. One of the few cognitions in that place that were too innocent to *not* be nice. It was still great to have someone he could leave on their own and not worry about, and his day was a bit brighter with them around. "I need a new fuse for the hypothalamus."

"Oh, again?" The smile Niko wore fell off and their body went limp, which prompted Sorun to set the small child down on the ground. "What happened this time?"

"It's just the surgery thing, Niko, it's nothing to worry about."

Niko's expression brightened back up. "Does that mean afterward you'll get to stay!?"

"I don't know. Hopefully." Sorun looked towards the desk, frowning a bit when he remembered how tall it was in relation to Niko. "Niko, why do you have a desk that large? I can get you a smaller desk."

"Oh, no, it's no trouble!" The small cat-like child began waving their arms, making the sleeves that were too big for them flap about. "You don't need to go through all that trouble really the desk is fine-!"

Sorun snapped his fingers. The desk disappeared in a white cloud of smoke, and when the smoke dissipated a smaller, more fitting desk for Niko was in its place. "You have a smaller desk now," he said to them. "Why did you have that in the first place?"

"Er, um..." Oh, they looked nervous now for some reason. They'd looked grateful for a second there with the new desk but now they just looked a bit awkward. "Um, Morgana said it'd be better for everyone if we all used the same equipment. Something about... efficiency through uniformity of the workplace? I didn't really get it."

"Ah-huh." He might have to make an extra stop during this visit. "The fuse?"

"Oh, sure! Wait right here!" Niko scampered past Sorun and into the actual storage area of the storage room, disappearing into the labyrinth of shelves within. Another point towards Niko - Sorun didn't have to wait long as they was back five minutes later with a large, glowing lightbulb held in both hands.

"That was fast," Sorun complimented.

"Yeah! We replace this part a lot so it's really easy for me to find it!"

"... I see... Hey, wanna come help me screw this fuse in?"

"Boy, do I!"

Huh?

"Huh?" Sorun squinted. A lot of doors to the more important sections of the brain were locked, but this lock was... not at all how he remembered it. He remembered a standard lock you'd need a normal key for. A key everyone carried. *This* , this thing he was staring at right now, was not a lock with a normal keyhole.

No, what he was staring at was an electronic screen bolted onto the side of the door leading into the room he'd just left ten minutes ago. The hypothalamus. He needed to get in there so he and Niko could install the new fuse, but when he'd tried to open the door it didn't budge.

"Niko, what is this?" Sorun asked.

Instead of answering immediately Niko looked down and kicked at their feet. "... One of the new biometric locks," they shyly answered.

"Biometric? What? We had normal locks, what- what happened to the normal locks?"

Niko didn't look up at Sorun when they answered. "Morgana took them out..."

"Okay, now I'm definitely visiting him." Suppressing an annoyed groan Sorun shook his head and rose his left hand up. "Okay, so what, I just press it against the screen like this-?"

Something probably not good happened. When he pressed his hand against the electronic screen on the door it flashed red and let out a

loud, blaring sound. Niko had jumped in fright at the noise, and Sorun's scowl had only deepened.

"Didn't work, huh?"

"Morgana said only people with administrator privileges can unlock the doors..."

"What? I'm literally Sorun's conscience. Why do I not have admin privileges?" Now he was starting to suspect somebody was fucking with him. Specifically Morgana. A bubbling anger was starting to grow. "For the love of- this is why I just gave everyone a key, to avoid nonsense like this..."

"U-uh, maybe you used the wrong hand?" Niko suggested. They were finally looking up at Sorun with a smile that tried to be helpful, but the yellow eyes were intensely nervous. "Try the other hand!"

It wasn't gonna work, but Sorun wanted to make Niko feel like they were helping. So he sighed and tried using his right hand this time. To no surprise, the same thing happened. It flashed red and blared at them. The door was still closed.

Niko made a dejected sound. "Oh... m-maybe your hand's dirty and it can't read it right?"

Sorun glanced down at his hand. It was pretty much pristine - not a fleck of dirt or grease to be seen. For Niko's sake he wiped his hand off on his pants and tried for the third time. And just like the other two times the lock yelled at him. And then, in a new turn, a synthesized, female voice droned out to the both of them:

"Due to three repeated failures this door has been locked down for a period of seventy-two hours. Your attempts have been logged. If you are having trouble please contact your administrator for assistance. Thank you and have a wonderful day."

Well now the anger was just starting to boil over. The screen winked out and turned into a dark gray glass slab that didn't respond no matter how many times Sorun hit it. It really was locked out. "Oooohh... ooh, I'm, I'm starting to get pretty mad now..." Sorun mumbled out, furiously rubbing a hand across his forehead in a vain attempt to quell the growing migraine he had.

Niko jumped, looking up at Sorun with a startled and worried expression. "Sorun? Don't get mad. Please," they pleaded. The words somewhat had a calming effect on Sorun. He'd began to breath less heavily and his head wasn't pounding as hard, but he was still trying to melt the door open with a glare. "Maybe we can just visit Morgana? I'm sure he can fix this!"

"Fix, yeah, I'll do some fixing alright..." Sorun chuckled out, a manic look growing in his eyes. It caused some visual confusion on Niko's part, and also made them take a step back as they continued to look at Sorun with concern. It made Sorun blink as he took in the reaction, after which he cleared his throat and did his best to straighten out his appearance. "That is to say, uh... yeah, totally, Morgana can fix this. *He better fix it or I'll fix him* ..." Sorun grumbled under his breath and he turned around, gesturing for Niko to follow. Then he stopped upon realizing something. "Wait, which way is his office again?"

"Oh, it's this way!" Niko ran a short distance past Sorun, and then turned around, waving at him to follow while the other hand still held the giant lightbulb. "Just come and follow me! It's real close by, you'll see!"

Sorun did so. He did so with his hands shoved in his pockets and with a grim look on his face as he thought over how hard he was gonna berate Morgana, but he still followed Niko all the same.

If nothing else the door to the administrator's office was quaint. Unlike all the pneumatic door that sealed off various sections of the mind this door was just a straight-up normal door. Even had a frosted

glass window with a little "administrator" sign hanging off it. With how this trip had been so far Sorun half-expected a laser forcefield with automatic turrets mounted everywhere, but if Morgana kept one thing grounded, it was the door to his own office. He had half a mind to just kick it down and storm in but Niko was right there and he didn't want to accidentally get a splinter in their eye.

Speaking a which. Niko. Sorun turned towards the small child with pursed lips. He had some very choice words for Morgana that couldn't be said within the vicinity of a child's ears. "Hey, Niko," he began, taking a knee so the both of them could be at eye level, "I gotta go in and have a chat with Morgana, m'kay? Just gonna be a minute or two. Do me a favor and wait out here."

Niko looked apprehensive at the idea, rocking back and forth on their feet with an unsure expression. They were clutching the lightbulb hardly in their hands as they asked, "You're just gonna talk, right? Promise you won't yell at him?"

He wanted to yell at him so goddamn bad. "Niko..."

"He's just trying to do the job you gave him," they weakly argued. "I know he hasn't done that great a job but he's managed to keep this place standing! Even if he is annoying sometimes..." they muttered out. "So please be nice. He's trying his best and you promised to not yell."

He did no such thing, but Sorun knew if he pointed that out he'd just disappoint Niko, and he had enough to worry about with that weighing on him. So he sighed, and then reached over to pat at Niko's hat between the ears. "Won't yell," he promised. "Gonna give him a stern what-for, though."

Niko nodded, which prompted Sorun to stand up and make his way towards the door. Fortunately he found that the door was unlocked when he turned the knob, which should have alleviated some amount of anger but didn't, and he swiftly entered the room while closing the door behind him.

The office on the other side of the door was large - in fact to Sorun's eyes it looked way larger than the last time he'd been here. It was basically the size of a small penthouse with nothing to show for it. Just a carpet and a plant in the corner. And, of course, the giant desk pressed up against the back wall which was just a giant window that gave a nice city-wide view of the town behind the office. And of course, *him* , the one sitting behind the desk. The source of Sorun's ire. The black and white, child-sized cat person with a head so disproportionately large he looked like a living bobblehead. Filling out paperwork behind the desk with such an intensity that he didn't even notice Sorun enter the office until he'd cleared his throat.

"Hey, Morgana, it's your boss."

"Ah!? What!?" He looked up, large blue eyes blinking in a panic until they'd locked onto Sorun, who'd moved in front of the desk. After that came the chuckling - the nervous-sounding chuckling and the uneasy grin Morgana had quickly grown while he tugged on the yellow scarf he wore. "O-oh, hey, Sorun! Didn't know you came back! Something the matter?"

"Actually, yeah, Morgana, there is." Sorun slammed his palms on the desk and leaned over it while staring Morgana in the eyes. "As it happens I'm fucking pissed off at you at the moment. Do you wanna take a guess as to why?"

"U-uh..." With how hard Morgana was tugging on the scarf it was almost like he was trying to strangle himself with it. "No? What happened?"

"What happened is that Sorun's in the middle of the surgery and out of it 'cause of the drugs so I came down here to look around, you know, do a li'l maintenance check," Sorun said. "And wouldn't you know it the fuse to the hypothalamus burned out again. Which is a problem because the body's gonna be in a coma until I fix that. But guess what, I can't fix it 'cause some dumbass replaced all the locks with this biometric shit and I put the lock in a security lockdown trying to get in."

In a shocking turn, at least to Sorun, Morgana's expression shifted to anger. He even pointed one of his tiny paws at Sorun and yelled an accusatory tone, "Well why didn't you come get me instead of trying to brute-force it!?"

"Because it's my brain. Because I shouldn't have to go to a cognition to get permission to enter a piece of my own fucking brain, Morgana," Sorun replied in a scathing tone. "For fuck's sake, man, I gave you the administrator position just to hold the fort down while I was up in the surface thoughts, not to reorganize the whole security infrastructure! I used normal locks and gave everyone a key for a reason! To avoid problems like this!"

"I changed it out because that's not a security system! That was you being too lazy to make an actual-working system!" Morgana argued. "With all the different abilities you've seen people possess out in reality we have no way of knowing if there's someone out there that can invade minds, so sorry if I went out of my way to make your mind just a little more secure!"

"I'm aware there's a tiny risk of mind invasions, Morgana, that's why I made the one-to-one recreation of the USG Ishimura sitting in that one corner of the subconscious! If anyone ever invades I'm just gonna kick them in there!"

"And what happens when that's not enough!? What happens if you kick some invader in there and it's not enough to deter them!?"

"I feel like it's enough. There's a cognition of the Darkness Devil walking around in that place." Sorun shook his head. "We're getting way off track, look, is there any other annoying security features you put in I should be made aware of? Am I gonna walk into the subconscious and find out you changed the entire layout of the city? What am I getting into here, Morgana?"

"You have absolutely no right to be mad at me." Morgana hopped up on top of the desk and crossed his arms while meeting Sorun's glare with a steely gaze of his own. "When you gave me this job you said,

and I quote, 'Morgana I'm leaving you in charge while I'm gone 'cause you're one of the most responsible cognitions I made. I'm not expecting miracles, just, just please make sure the place doesn't burn down while I'm gone.' End quote." He spread his arms out. "As far as I can see this place is still standing so if you have any complaints I'm all ears."

"We're possibly stuck in a coma for three days 'cause you locked me out of the hypothalamus," Sorun reminded him.

Morgana crossed his arms. He looked disappointed. "Do I really need to remind you time doesn't move at the same pace here as it does in reality? We're fine," he deadpanned. "And I didn't lock you out. You decided to hit the same button over and over for some reason even though it wasn't working."

"... You and your logic," Sorun grumbled. "What about Niko's desk, huh? I saw you gave them way too big a desk."

"Is this seriously what you're so upset about? Locks and a desk?"

"I just don't like you making all these changes, Morgana! It's my mind! I'd like it if you'd at least consult me on all this stuff before doing anything!"

"How am I supposed to consult you when you spend all your time on the surface!?" Morgana asked in a tone matching Sorun's volume. "I've been working my tail off making sure the whole subconscious is working smoothly and this is the thanks I get!? This isn't easy, you know! I'd certainly feel a lot better if you stopped by more to help with some things!"

"I *can't* , Morgana, and you know why? It's because the last time I left Sorun alone for two seconds he almost killed a kid! You know how hard that would have come back to bite us if I didn't manage to talk him out of it?" Sorun sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. The mere memory of that day made him feel exhausted. "Look, just answer me this: are we really locked out of the hypothalamus for

three days? And as you answer I want you to keep in mind I can delete you with a mere thought and the locks would go away with you."

"You're not gonna delete me. It'd make Niko cry and all the other cognitions would resent you," Morgana said. "And we both know if you were serious you would have done it already."

"... Please just help me. Are we locked out or not?"

"... No, we're not," Morgana muttered out after the tense moment between the two passed. "There's a side entrance we can get in through that's accessible through the memory banks. They're locked too, though, so we'll need to deal with that."

"Good enough." Sorun gestured for Morgana to hop off the desk. "Alright, come on. We'll go there and-"

"I'm not in the weekly rotation, I can't unlock them," Morgana cut in.

"The. *What* ?" Sorun paused mid-step, and the pivoted completely around with wide, glaring eyes. "You're kidding me. You're not kidding me," he realized when he saw the straight look Morgana was giving him. "Are you se- you didn't- the temp admin can't even open these locks, Morgana, why!?"

"Because every cognition is keyed into the locks but they're programmed to only accept one cognition's handprint. Who gets accepted changes to a new random cognition that gets rotated weekly," Morgana explained.

With both hands shaking, Sorun gestured towards Morgana while moaning out, "Why would you design it like this?"

"It's supposed to be an extra layer of security!"

"I messed something up making you, I really did. Ugh." Yeah, the migraine was coming back. Or at lease imagining he was. It made

Sorun groan out and rub at his forehead. "Okay, fine, whatever, who do we gotta go get to unlock the stupid fuckin' locks?"

Morgana's answer didn't come out as words. What came out was an extremely displeased sound, and a narrowing of his eyes as he glanced off to the side in what could only be described as a look of absolute derision.

"Oh, only one person in here can make you make that face," Sorun observed. "Why do you hate him so much? You're both black and white cats; I thought it'd help you get along. You know, be a good conversation starter."

"Sorun, *no one* gets along with him. Nobody at all." Morgana's voice quivered as he said that, and the face he wasn't making go away. It wasn't a quaver from disgust; it was from pure exhaustion. "Are you sure you don't just want to wait? The locks rotate tomorrow."

"He's really not that bad, Morgana," Sorun sighed out with a shake of his head. "Ah man, his workplace is in the dead center of the city... alright, whatever, come on." He gestured to Morgana once again, who made a resigned sound and jumped off the desk to follow him. "I'm changing all the locks back when I move back down here. I swear, I coulda made Tom from 'Tom & Jerry' and he woulda done a better job at this than you..."

Morgana didn't respond to Sorun complaining under his breath, but he did hear a disgruntled huff from the mascot cat following him around. He rolled his eyes and didn't comment on it as he opened the door to the office to step out into the hallway. He saw Niko standing nearby; it brightened his mood a bit. But only a bit. The lock thing was still upsetting him.

It's not as if he didn't see the logic. On paper Sorun would even admit the idea had some merit. But then these situations happened due to all the needless confusion and he just... ugh. He really needed to come back down here on a permanent basis to sort things through.

"Morgana! Hi!" Niko jumped up a bit and waved one of their hands at the cat following Sorun.

"H... hi, Niko." Morgana didn't sound particularly enthused when he greeted the child and only managed a half-hearted wave while wearing a forced smile.

"Hrm?" Niko had immediately locked onto the fact Morgana seemed to be in a dour mood. And then they looked up at Sorun, wearing a frown that stopped him dead in his tracks. "Hey, he looks sad! You yelled at him, didn't you!?"

"N-no," Sorun stammered.

"I wouldn't say he yelled. More like threw a tantrum," Morgana informed from behind Sorun. There wasn't a snicker or anything of the sort that followed but Sorun could *hear* the growing grin that was on his face. "You know how he gets. Mad over stupid stuff. Honestly, I don't know what he'd do if we weren't around to keep him in check. And to think he's supposed to be the most responsible part of the mind..."

"You're really milking the fact I don't want to deal with the consequences of obliterating you, huh, Morgana?" Sorun thought out as a grumpy pout formed on his face. It wasn't as if the cat was wrong. The fallout from such a thing just wasn't worth it. And frankly he just wasn't willing to do it, even if he'd never admit it to Morgana. Or any of the cognitions. It'd be like killing his childr- no, he wouldn't go as far as to call them that. Like killing his sibli- nope, not that either.

His roommates, it'd be like killing off his roommates. That he created. And at this point he was too used to them.

"Alright if we're done with this we gotta go take the elevator down to the subconscious proper," Sorun informed the both of them, trying

his best to keep things moving. "Unless you put a lock on that, too, Morgana, in which case we're kind of sunk."

There was a sigh from behind him. "No, Sorun, I didn't put a lock on the elevator. I'm not an idiot."

"Ah, that's great. In that case you can call our ride on the way down."

The ride down the elevator was uneventful save for the phone call Morgana had made on the way down. Niko had kept to themself. Sorun had stared out the glass wall rushing past them as the elevator descended, looking out into the city. To any outside viewer who'd never seen it in person it'd just be some random city to them. To Sorun it was the hometown he'd grown up in. Mostly. For the most part. He didn't exactly have intrinsic knowledge of the place's layout despite living there for sixteen years of his life so it wasn't the most faithful recreation. But it was still somewhat accurate as long as one didn't venture too far from the city center, after which it just became a random, chaotic winding of buildings that stretched on and on.

There was also the fact the sky was a perpetual dark purple. No sun, no stars, no nothing. There was the occasional flash of red lightning racing through the wrinkles comprising the purple sky-ceiling, though. Wrinkles that were only visible when that occasional flash of light illuminated them for a split second.

It wasn't a bad place as far as subconsciouses worked. Then again Sorun had never seen anyone else's, so maybe he was a bit biased there.

With a light *ding!* the elevator came to a stop, and the doors opened to let the three off the circular platform that'd carried them down. The elevator had let them off at a street corner of the city. Nobody in any of the streets as far as Sorun could see looking around, but that was normal. Most, if not all, of the cognitions were inside doing something or other. All except one - the one who'd just honked that horn that blared out into the streets.

The three of the looked to the left towards the sound. A black sedan was tumbling towards them - literally. It was rolling towards them, end over end, sometimes turning over midair and flipping on its side over and over as it approached them. Despite the chaotic nature of the car's approach, the way it was flying towards them as if it were suffering some perpetual accident causing it to constantly fall sideways, it wasn't suffering the least bit of damage despite the constant battering, nor were the three watching it surprised at all at the car's turbulent approach.

And then, at the car's ten meter mark, its position switched. Instead of tumbling end over end it had righted itself. Four wheels, perpetually on fire, made contact with the concrete streets and left flaming lines in their wake as the car spun. Spun and spun and spun, around and around directly towards the three who watched with bored expression. At the five meter marked the car stopped spinning. It was drifting now, the flaming wheels screeching from the friction on the streets, and not in the least bit because each flaming wheel had tiny human skeletons chained to them.

Finally, the car had adjusted its position one final time when it'd reached the three. It'd turned at the last second, and in the same beat stopped right in front of the three, the driver's door and back door facing them. Sorun was the one to move, walking forwards towards the driver's door and then stopping a short distance away from it.

The window to the driver's side rolled down, and a head popped out. Upon first glance it would look like the face of a human woman with creamy-white skin and dark hair falling past her shoulders. Of course, looking closer it was clear to see she wasn't human at all. From the light amount of fur lining her cheeks, jaw, and chin, to the glowing red eyes with cat-like pupils, to the two glowing, yellow gems jutting out of the top of her head that were shaped like cat ears. And from here Sorun could clearly see that the hands gripping the steering wheel were black-furred cat hands with claws jutting out of

the fingers. He didn't pay attention to any of this. He simply waved at her.

"Hey Kasha. Thanks for showing up on such short notice."

"Mrow-mrow!" She gave him a happy nod and enthusiastically nodded up and down. "Mrow. Mrow mrow-mrow?"

"Oh, yeah, we need a ride to Wernicke's."

Immediately, there was a shift in Kasha's demeanor. The happy smile she'd worn was instantly wiped away, replaced by a fusion of a sneer and a disgusted grimace. It was clear that the very mention of the destination in question caused her great distress, and the sight made Sorun throw his arms up.

"Oh my god, you too!? Guys, come on, he's really not that bad!"

"He is, Sorun. I told you nobody likes him," Morgana sighed out. He'd opened the door in the back and let Niko climb in the back seat first, and then said, "Really, I'm not sure why you go so far to bat for the guy."

"... Just get in the car, man." Morgana shrugged, but did as he was instructed and hopped in the back. Sorun maneuvered around the car and sat himself in the passenger seat next to Kasha, and then immediately looked down at the gear shift stick between them.

Currently the stick was in the "stop" position, with the "fast" position above that and a third position that just had a picture of flames above that. Kasha had already gripped the stick with her clawed paw and moved it up to the position with flames on it.

"Not that one, Kasha," Sorun said.

"Mrow." With a nod Kasha moved the stick to the final position above the one with the flames. This one had a skull and crossbones on it.

Sorun shook his head. "No, Kasha, normally I'd be fine with it but Niko and Morgana will throw a fit. And you know *he* will, too. Just put it on normal."

"Mrow..." She looked disappointed, but even still she'd moved the gear shift stick to the "fast" position, which was about as slow as she was willing to go without outright stopping. From behind Sorun had heard two sighs of relief, and when Sorun glanced up he caught Morgana mouthing a thank-you to him in the rearview mirror. He tossed him a thumbs-up in response as Kasha peeled out and began racing down the street.

With a sigh, Sorun sunk back in the car seat. Felt like the first time all day he'd been able to sit back and relax after everything that'd been going on. He rubbed at the bridge of his nose when he realized he hadn't even inspected all the areas he'd been hoping to, that he'd been stopped at his first stop and had to take this major detour just to swap a busted fuse. He was probably gonna have to bring him along too if there were any more locks along the way, and knowing Morgana there would be. He'd be annoyed and probably complain Sorun's ear off the whole way. Sorun's only defense against that was that since the body was unconscious right now he didn't have much to do anyways but that excuse didn't have much rope and he was already dreading what was to come. This is why he just gave everyone a key...

As the city rushed by them Sorun glanced out the window. And then he blanched. A lot of the city looked... bad. Buildings were cracked, windows were shattered, and these were just the details he was managing to glimpse at as they all rushed past him. Only half of the traffic lights Kasha was driving past and ignoring were actually on. The streets were cracked and every once in a while the car would jump after running over a pothole.

"Mrow-mrow..." Kasha made a sad sort of noise at the state of the city around them. Niko had shuffled uncomfortably in their seat as they clutched at the seatbelt holding them, the lightbulb sitting besides them and secured with a second seatbelt, and Morgana

made a sigh as he watched out the window. As much as he could, at least, with his short stature.

"... Subconscious has seen better days, huh?" Sorun quietly remarked. In his defense it'd been in worse shape in the past. Not by much but still worse. The stress induced by hell, that absolute void they'd been stuck in after death, had nearly and irrevocably shattered this place. And everything that had happened since had been a fluctuating case of things getting better and worse. Lately, though, it'd been toeing that line. That dangerous line they'd only gone close to during the stay in hell.

They'd come back from it. Sorun would make sure. He'd managed before and he'd manage again.

"M-Morgana's been doing a lot to hold the place together," Niko sadly muttered out.

"It hasn't exactly been easy," Morgana commented from the side. "I've had to put out a lot of fires."

"Yeah. I know it's been rough." Sorun grimaced. "And, Morgana... perhaps I was... maybe... overcritical of my previous assertions-"

"You mean the part where you said I was doing a terrible job?" Morgana asked.

"Yes, that, look I'm sorry." Sorun turned around in his seat so he'd be able to face Morgana, who looked towards him. "I gave you a pretty impossible job and everything that's been going on with Sorun in reality hasn't been making it any easier, I get that, I really do, but-"

"But nothing, you need to come back!" Morgana snapped. "Putting all of us in charge of everything is only putting a band-aid on the problem because you're the only one who can run all this stuff at the same time! Everything around here is breaking down more and more and eventually there isn't anything we're gonna be able to do about it!"

"Morgana, you know I can't, you know I need to be there with Sorun because otherwise-" Because otherwise he would have killed that evil Miles and when all his friends found out this place wouldn't have recovered. Because otherwise he would have kept living in denial of the problem of their body dying off. Because otherwise he would have killed Dimitri out of spite for the world and they would have lost possibly their only shot at some kind of cure, at *some* kind of way to stabilize his mind. "I... look. I got it all set up, alright? After this surgery everything'll... everything will be fine. I can come back down here and set everything right like before. I won't need to be next to the guy twenty-four/seven. I can... I can fix this. All of this. We're gonna fix all this, I got it all set up. Just need a bit more time." He faced back forwards and ran a hand down his face. "Time and a new stupid hypothalamus fuse..."

Things would be fine. Like how things were when Sorun'd been brought back to life... before Earth happened. Like how he'd fixed things after before fucking Enerjak and the future fiasco happened. Like how everything had been fixed again before this new problem. It was gonna be fine. He was gonna fix it. It was his job to fix it.

Morgana gave the back of Sorun's seat a sad look as his ears flattened. "Sorun..."

"It's fine. I'm not..." He breathed out and shook his head. "I'm not mad about the locks, okay, I've just been under a lot of stress and... look don't worry about it, alright, it's all gonna be fine."

"Mrow-mrow-mrow..." He felt a pressure on his left shoulder, and when he looked Sorun saw that Kasha had put a comforting paw on his shoulder. When he looked towards her he saw her giving him a sympathetic look. "Mrow, mrow-mrow mrow mrow mrow mrow-mrow."

"Thanks, Kasha. I'll be fine, don't worry." He gave her a small smile, but then gently took her hand off his shoulder. "But keep both hands on the wheel, there's a child in the car with us."

"Mrow." She gave him a sheepish grin and put both hands back on the wheel. And then her eyes dramatically widened when she looked back ahead. "Mrow!"

Her cat foot slammed down on the car's break, instantly driving it to a halt. Niko and Morgana grunted when they were pulled back against their seats by their seatbelts. Sorun, who hadn't been wearing a seatbelt, flew forwards and shouted out when his head impacted the windshield, causing the entire thing to crack.

"Agh, son of a... baker who's financially well-off..." Sorun grumbled out as he sat up, rubbing at his head. He mumbled an apology to Kasha and snapped his fingers, causing the windshield to repair itself. Then he pulled his hand away - no blood. It resulted in him giving Kasha a thumbs-up, who smiled in return, and then he turned to the two passengers in the back. "This is why you wear seatbelts..." he chuckled out, pointing at his head. Morgana had just rolled his eyes while Niko gave him a worried-filled half-smile.

"Please be more careful, Sorun," Niko told him, though the worried look was slowly bleeding away into relief.

"I'll try my best, Niko."

The worried look was coming back on Niko's face.

"Alright, now then!" Sorun flung the car door and stepped out. Before them was a library. One large and tall enough that it was a veritable skyscraper. A sign hung above the main entrance way that read "Wernicke's Language and Comprehension Center". Below that entranceway was a large stone staircase that lead up to the doors. A... very cracked stone staircase. In fact there were more than a few sections of the steps missing. "Ah, boy..." Sorun mumbled out as he leaned back into the car. "Alright, I'm gonna go get him. Anyone wanna come with?"

"No."

"Uh-uh."

"Mrow-mrow."

"That's... okay, fair enough." Shrugging, Sorun ducked back out of the car and closed the door behind him. He looked back up at the crumbling staircase, trying his best not to notice all the cracks lining the building's surface, and shook his head as he began to make his way towards the stairs. "Here's hoping he ain't gonna be *too* cranky..."

Neat. If there was one, single word to describe the interior of Wernicke's Language and Comprehension Center it was neat. Clean, immaculate, even. Not a single speck of dust to be found anywhere. Unblemished olive wallpaper around every corner without so much as a wrinkle anywhere to be seen. Dark grey carpeting that was so clean it, bizarrely, didn't look much like carpeting. And every time Sorun ducked into a new room after roaming the hallways he'd see filing cabinets so perfectly lined up and so meticulously organized it all started to just blend together.

Remarkably it was the complete opposite of how the building looked on the outside. All crumbly and whatnot. But the interior, it was spotless. If this building was based in reality Sorun honestly wouldn't be surprised if it was clean enough to produce microchips in it. Even the air tasted clean. Too clean, actually. Kind of burned his nose the more he focused on it. Was vaguely lemony-scented.

"God, what, does he just douse the whole building with cleaning solution? Does he flood the halls with it?" Sorun wondered as he ducked his head into another room. Empty. Just more filing cabinets. "Where does he even get it all from? Where does he find the time?" He looked into another room only for this one to be empty. He sighed. This would be the sixth floor he'd searched by now. "Where even is he?"

Seventh floor now. For every stair Sorun had to climb he got more and more annoyed. And even more annoyed with every room he looked in only to see it was empty.

"This is getting ridiculous. Mordecai!" Sorun shouted out. He stomped down the hallway and opened up another door. Empty. Again. "Are you serio- Mordecai! Mordecai, where are you!?"

Okay! Eighth floor now! At the rate this was going Sorun was genuinely considering setting the building on fire to smoke the guy out. He could fix it in time. Sorun wouldn't even wake up until the damn bulb got replaced so he could take his time.

"Mordecai, you in here? Mordecai?" Nothing. Just another empty room with filing cabinets. "Ugh, that's it, I'm... hey, wait."

After traversing down yet more hallway he'd come across another room. On first glance there wasn't anything out of the ordinary with this door compared to all the others, solid oak construction, frosted window, standard stuff. Where most rooms had signs that read "vocabulary index" or "enunciation codex" or that one mostly-empty room simply labeled "foreign language lexicons" this one had a sign that simply said "processing" above it. More importantly than that he could see a silhouette sitting down from this side of the glass.

"Finally," Sorun thought as he approached and opened the door. This was apparently a mistake as the second he did so paper flooded out of the room. Long, thin strips of paper that coiled around Sorun's feat in a high enough volume it rose up to his ankles. When he trudged his way into the room he saw that it was more of the same within. The source of the paper was obvious when he noticed the large machine in the middle of the room continually feeding out a single, long strip of paper. There was a small desk it was feeding onto but due to the sheer amount of paper it'd outputted it was just spilling everywhere now.

"Ahem." A voice clearing their throat drew Sorun's attention to the man sitting at the larger desk near the paper-spitting machine that

was overflowing with even more paper and office equipment. The cat man. The black and white anthropomorphic cat man sitting at the desk. At this point it was basically a normal sight for Sorun but where this one differed from a Mobian was that the bodily proportions were more in line with how a human's would be. And he had a black three-piece suit on. Sorun had yet to see any evidence to such a thing existing on Mobius. Or if it did that a Mobian would actually wear it.

There was also the fact Sorun had never seen a Mobian with such an unfriendly expression that Mordecai usually wore. It was his default expression. He wasn't wearing it right now. He was sitting at his desk and glaring at Sorun with a borderline-murderous expression.

"He's under substance abuse again, isn't he!?" he accused. His green cat eyes flicked over to the machine that was still spitting paper out. "I know he is, so don't even try to deny it. It's only whenever he's in one of these ridiculous situations the processing center gets inundated with these inane, incoherent ramblings you label as thoughts!"

"Yeah, wouldn't you know it but, and this amazed me when I found out Mordecai, they *put you under* with anesthetics before they do surgery on you," Sorun replied in a dry tone. "I think it's 'cause otherwise you'd die of shock from all the pain, but I dunno, I'm not a medical professional. I don't know these things. I just have secondhand knowledge from mom."

The white eyebrows that contrasted with the black fur on his face sans mouth knitted together in frustration. "And did the thought of giving me any sort of warning even once cross your mind? Perhaps to allow me the opportunity to shut down the language processing unit attempting to drown me in unintelligible garble? Have I not told you on multiple occasions every time Sorun's reduced to a state he's unable to string two words together the thoughts don't cease and I am forced to process these fatuous speech requests?"

With a blank expression, Sorun reached down and picked up a bundle of the paper. There weren't any words on it, nor even letters. It was just a continuous series of dots.

"I don't know, Mordecai. I think there's something here."

"I am in no mood for sarcasm."

"You never are, but on a serious note," Sorun said, turning the paper over for Mordecai to see, "this is literally nothing. What are you complaining about?"

"Aside from the fact the task of unraveling this inextricably tangled *mess* before us falls to me while the nigh-inexhaustible processing machine continues to add to my growing woes?" Mordecai rose a four-fingered hand up to adjust the spectacles he wore. "I actually did have to process garbled gibberish for a time once the anesthetics took effect before they suddenly stopped. Would there be a particular reason for that?"

"Fuse to the hypothalamus burned out," Sorun answered.

"Of course it did. It seems to happen whenever one of these 'episodes' happen." Mordecai glanced down at his desk. All the paper there made some of the muscles in his face twitch, and he almost moved to brush it all aside before he sighed, seemingly gave up the prospect, and took his glasses off to wipe them off with a handkerchief. "I would also like to submit my third request for you to snap your fingers and make it so that I am no longer reliant on corrective lenses."

"That wouldn't be accurate to the character."

"I see. In that case please note that my appreciation for your unceasing and unwavering devotion towards accurate portrayals of fictional characters is still wholly absent." He placed the glasses back on his face and looked back at Sorun. "As an aside I've a right to take umbrage with my given task. Every time Sorun has a thought

that he wants to translate into physical speech I have to read and approve the requests. *All* the requests. And I certainly don't need to remind you of the indolent and contraction-filled lingo that makes him sound akin to a street corner hoodlum, do I? It's especially vexing considering we all know for a fact he could use grammar that makes him sound like a civilized man and yet I'm forced to sift through this dreck."

Sorun rubbed at the back of his neck as Mordecai glared at him. "Yeah, I've been trying to ease him back into the habit of using the fancy words, but he's still not a hundred percent comfortable living on Mobius," he said. "It's hard for him, you know that."

"I don't care. MY stomach turns every time I'm forced to process a new iteration of the word 'ain't'." He actually shuddered in his seat, shaking his head in an attempt to do away with a bad memory as his eyes drifted over to a window. "More importantly I feel this is work that could be handled by others while my talents could be utilized elsewhere."

"Oh, here we go again," Sorun muttered out with a shake of his head. "For the last time I'm not transferring you over to the parietal lobe-"

"Why not?" Mordecai snapped out in frustration. "This position is barely a step above blue-collar labor, and anyone could do it. Meanwhile the position of managing the section of the brain that handles math and equations is manned by an unqualified, incompetent-"

"Neco-Arc does a WONDERFUL job of handling Sorun's math, you are just JEALOUS you didn't get the position!" Sorun shouted while pointing an accusing finger at the cat man.

"She can barely juggle numbers together in her head, let alone mentally formulate the simplest and most mundane of equations! Meanwhile you have someone with actual mathematical talent on staff and yet-"

"Gimme the quadratic equation."

Mordecai faltered. The argument he was about to make died in his throat and he blinked in confusion. "Pardon?"

"The quadratic equation man, come on, it's super easy," Sorun said. "Math afficionado guy like you will get in a snap, come on, give it to me Mr. Math Man McGee."

"I-I don't..." Mordecai slowly exhaled. He rose one his four-fingered hands to adjust his tie and said in a slow, even tone, "I don't see how me failing to memorize a single, obscure equation is in any way an accurate indicator of my mathematical ability."

"Obscure? It's a basic formula used in algebra." Sorun grinned again and rose a hand up. "But alright, alright, maybe that was mean of me, I came in too hot with a hard question like that, so I'll give you a simple one. The Pythagorean Theorem. Give it to me."

Mordecai stared. He stared at Sorun with an indignant expression and refused to so much as open his mouth.

"The Pythagorean Theorem, Mordecai, come on, they teach it in middle school geometry. Easiest equation in the world. Hit me with it."

"... I don't know it," Mordecai bitterly admitted.

"No, you don't, and you know why?" Sorun tapped at the side of his head. "Because you're a cognition based on the memory of a character Sorun read in a webcomic a few years ago. You're not the actual character. You're a scrap of memory I wove together and gave autonomy to so you could run this place while I was living up on the surface, which means you only know as much math as I know, and I only know as much math as Sorun knows, and Sorun doesn't know what the Pythagorean Theorem is because he forgot that shit MINUTE ONE after graduating middle school!" He let his hand drop back to his side with a short breath. "I'm not saying this to put you

down, I'm saying this so you realize everyone in this place, including you, is equally bad at math. So it really doesn't matter who I put in charge of the math center."

"She sets fire to the building on a bi-daily basis," Mordecai dryly informed him.

"She *used* to," Sorun corrected, "which is why I made Cait Sith the safety inspector. Place hasn't been on fire since. He's been doing a really nice job."

"Yes. He is. In the parietal lobe." The cat man gave Sorun a pointed look. "So well, in fact, he's solely preoccupied putting out fires in the parietal lobe while the rest of the subconscious falls apart at the seams. I'm assuming the bits of detritus that no doubt fell on your head while ascending the front stairs to the building was a good enough sign as to the state of things down here?"

Those outer walls *had* been pretty crumbly. It'd took him a couple minutes to shake off all the dust and bits of rock in the lobby. Sorun hoped Mordecai wouldn't notice the mess he made. "I'm working on it, Mordecai, okay?" Sorun sighed out. "We just need to make it past this surgery and we're golden. Little bit more patience, 's all I'm asking. Morgana can put out all the other fires meanwhile."

"Ah yes. Morgana. Whom you put in the managerial position." He sneered at the mere mention of the other cat's name, scorn clear in his voice. "I fail to see what he did to deserve that position."

"He was the only cognition I trusted to have the responsibility needed to carry the position out."

"And I'm not?" Mordecai sounded offended. "I'm not responsible?"

"... I mean arguably more so but-"

"Then *why* -?"

"Because you're the only one I trusted to do this job," Sorun impatiently interrupted. "Okay? Sorun may be terrible at math but he's great at grammar, as much as he refuses to admit to anyone despite how hard I've been pushing. And that kind of translated into you since that was a part of your character's thing, hell, he admired you for it, it's one of the only reasons the memory was strong enough for me to actually make you," he explained. "So I needed you to organize all the vocabulary in his thought cabinet and sort out his grammar, and honestly, Mordecai, this is one of the only places I've seen that isn't on the verge of collapsing. You're doing such a good job that Sorun over in reality still has completely coherent speech and *by god* has that been a big help. So I need you here. Like, I really need you here to keep doing what you're doing because you're the best person for the job and I need someone to keep this place running until I can come back and just do it all myself."

"... Yes, well..." Mordecai's demeanor didn't outright *shift* , Sorun wasn't sure he was capable of wiping that scowl off his face, but he did sit up a bit straighter in his seat and his voice did take on a lighter tone. That had to mean something. "I suppose, given the circumstances, that can be an understandable explanation. Resource allocation can be a difficult job and I don't think you've done an outright terrible job-"

"Also Morgana's position requires him to talk to everyone and he's more approachable than you," Sorun continued. "You're a wet dishrag. No one likes you."

"The opportunity to end it on a high note was there. You let it slip between your fingers on purpose just to spite me." He glanced down at his desk. During the duration of the conversation its surface had become overladen with more paper, making Mordecai's ears flatten down. "Why did you come here to begin with? Did you need me for some particular reason?"

"Oh, right. That. Yeah, the biometric locks Morgana put in are queued into your signature this rotation and I need your help to get into the hypothalamus to swap the fuse out."

"Ah, of course. The infamous security system. I should have known." Mordecai sat up from his seat and carefully pushed his chair in. Sorun noticed he was making a rather concerted effort *not* to look at the desk that was slowly being buried by paper. "As it happens I'm of the opinion that a diversion is in order and wouldn't be opposed helping with a small errand."

"Oh yeah, sure, 'course. Work'll still be here when you get back, right?"

Mordecai's eyes narrowed. "Yes," he breathed out, taking a few moments to painfully exhale. It was a sound akin to a man breathing his soul out. "Let's go."

"I've enough on my plate, Sorun. You're cleaning the lobby once this is done."

He'd noticed all the dirt Sorun had dragged in. It was going bad. "I will, I will..."

"Honestly, I'm overburdened enough without having to clean up after you. I already keep my workspace spotless and the least you could do is respect that by not tracking filth in through the door," Mordecai continued as the two descended the steps to the building. Ironically the discussion was making the cat man more animated than Sorun had ever seen him, and part of him was fascinated with the display he was witnessing as a result. "I don't think it's that much to ask for: mutual respect and consideration for peers."

Peers was stretching it given their relationship, but Sorun would let it slide. "I already said I'm sorry and I'd take care of it, man, what more do you want from me?"

"Much. But I won't waste my breath." They'd reached the bottom of the stairs. In front of them was Kasha's sedan, flaming skeleton wheels and all, and upon noticing the vehicle Mordecai's face

wrinkled in displeasure. "We're to use *her* services as transportation then...?"

"Hey, Kasha's the best driver down here," Sorun said. By virtue of Sorun having little to no driving skills, but he didn't think Mordecai would appreciate that little factoid. "Also Niko's in the car so could you calm it down with all the snipes?"

Mordecai looked towards him with a flat expression. Really his normal expression. "I've better things to do than insult children."

"Yeah, but Morgana's in the car, too."

" *Ah* ." Now he seemed to understand. One of his hears flicked and his black and white tail swished behind him as if irritated. "That's a considerably more difficult task."

"Ugh, man, look I know you don't like kids, and I can sympathize, but can you just cool it for an hour? One hour? That's all I'm asking for."

With a hum of consideration, Mordecai looked back towards the car. "I'm willing to acquiesce provided you convey to our driver she's to act with some modicum of care behind the wheel while transporting us," he said after a moment of thought.

"She knows, Mordecai, she knows. It's why she has the stick shift set on the 'fast' setting."

Another ear flick. "That doesn't fill me with as much confidence as your tone suggests you think it does."

"Look, just wear a seatbelt and you'll be fine. C'mon." Sorun turned back to the car and made to approach it. He'd made it three steps, and then paused when he realized he didn't hear the clack of Mordecai's loafers striking the concrete next to him. He turned and saw that the cat man was still staring towards the sedan, but now with narrowed eyes. He looked like he was trying to puzzle something out.

"Sorun," Mordecai began. His head turned towards Sorun, and suddenly his didn't look so pleased by something. "Where does Kasha come from? Her memory, I mean. What character is she based on?"

Sorun perked up before answering. "Oh, she's a boss from 'Nioh 2', which in itself was based off Japanese folklore. The game took place in Sengoku Period Japan so it really leaned into yokai folklore for enemy design. The game itself was a hit, one of Team Ninja's best products they ever produced with a combat system that revolutionized the entire genre with its intricacies that nobody else was ever quite able to replicate-"

"I couldn't care less about the extraneous details," Mordecai interrupted. "I'm interested in why a character from the Sengoku Period is driving a sedan. I didn't realize the Japanese were so advanced they'd manage to invent automobiles in the 1500's."

The accusatory tone he'd suddenly taken had forced a grimace upon Sorun's face. "I, uh... well I had to give her something to drive people around in because two big wooden wheels weren't gonna cut it."

"I see." Mordecai adjusted his spectacles as a frown settled on his face. "So what you mean to say is you breached the integrity of the character by giving her a vehicle."

"I took a few artistic liberties, so what?" Sorun defended.

"Artistic liberties!? I'm condemned to congenital eye defects because of your insistence on preserving the image of the characters you based us cognitions on, but you'll freely hand Kasha a vehicle without so much as a care in the world! I demand an explanation for why she gets your 'artistic liberties' but I do not!"

So he'd been caught. Sorun really did think he'd be able to keep it up longer than this, but the jig had to end sometime down the line. He sighed out and rubbed the back of his head while thinking on how to smooth this over with Mordecai, and shortly thereafter realized he

couldn't. So instead he asked, "Okay, you want the honest truth, Mordecai?"

"I quite literally just asked for that exact thing, yes," Mordecai dryly responded.

"Yeah, I guess you did." Long time coming, he supposed. With a completely straight face, Sorun admitted, "I just like to mess around with ya."

Oh, he didn't like that answer. No, Mordecai looked very displeased by that answer. In fact this was probably what an angered Mordecai looked like. The fur on his tail was standing up on end and his face was so angered that his lips were peeling back, exposing his fangs. And his eyes. They were widened to the point the lids were quivering and the pupils were extremely narrowed.

"I'm partially blind and that's *funny to you* ?" he hissed out. "Do you know what life is like being dependent on these cumbersome things on my face?" he continued, pointing at the glasses.

Okay... maybe he had a point. Because now Sorun felt bad, especially with *that* look Mordecai was giving him. And in hindsight maybe keeping a man crippled for laughs wasn't his... no, yeah, running that statement back he just now realized how horrible it was this thing he'd been doing. "Alright, fine. It wasn't tasteful, my bad," Sorun said, snapping his fingers, "but I still want you to wear the glasses around me. Consider it a work uniform."

Mordecai blinked. That furious expression went away in a flash and he'd blinked a few more times. And then he removed his glasses and glanced around, blinking even more. "... I'm not thanking you for undoing a mistake," he finally said, replacing the glasses back on his face as he regarded Sorun with his usual scowl. If anything at all had changed he wasn't showing it.

"Yeah, that's fair." Honestly it was a way better reaction than Sorun was hoping for, if a bit anticlimactic for how quickly Mordecai just

accepted his new reality. But honestly, with him Sorun couldn't be too surprised. "C'mon, car's right there."

Wordlessly, Mordecai marched right alongside Sorun until they'd reached the actual car. From there their paths diverged: Sorun went over to the side of the car to get into the passenger seat while Mordecai situated himself in the backseat with the other two. When Sorun had sat down and - after making sure to buckle his seatbelt this time - closed the door, he looked in the backseat and immediately noticed the tense atmosphere back there. Niko was looking the exact opposite direction of Mordecai, Morgana had his arms crossed and was glaring at Mordecai, and Mordecai was glancing at Morgana through the corner of his own eyes. Kasha was keeping to herself and already pulled out onto the road, though her claws were nervously tapping at the steering wheel.

"Mordecai," Morgana greeted. His tone was cold and didn't at all sound inviting.

"Diminutive mascot," Mordecai greeted back in a bored voice before looking ahead. The greeting made Morgana growl in anger.

"Hey, what'd I say?" Sorun snapped, looking back at the both of them and pointing. "Quit it, both of ya. I'll take Niko out with me have Kasha turn the stick shift up to max with you two in here, I swear I'll do it. We're gonna have a nice, smooth drive over to the memory banks without any arguments or insults or anything."

The threat seemed to have some effect, as both black and white cats instantly snapped their eyes forwards without saying another word. Sorun continued to stare at them for a few seconds, and then pointed at his eyes with both fingers, and then used those same fingers to point at the two cats before finally moving back into facing forwards in his seat. He glanced to the side and saw Kasha looking at him, with her hand on the stick shift.

He considered it. Genuinely considered it just to mess with Mordecai and Morgana. But Niko was there, too, and he couldn't do that to

them, so he mouthed a "no" to her.

Kasha made a grumpy pout and faced back towards the road.

"Alright, we made it to the memory banks," Sorun sighed out in relief. Honestly a miracle considering they'd managed the whole trip without anyone saying a word between each other, but that may have been more because he pretty much threatened them. Mordecai in particular had been unusually still the whole time, and even during the elevator ride and the short walk here they'd been silent.

He had a feeling it wasn't gonna last, though, because now that they'd finally made it here the real work began. Before them was a metal door that simply read, "Memory Banks". He turned back to the three behind him; Kasha had driven off after dropping them off to do whatever she did in her spare time. Thrill riding, most likely.

"Okay, so due to events completely outside my control the main door to the hypothalamus is locked so we gotta cut through the memory banks," Sorun explained. Morgana rolled his eyes with Mordecai glancing at him in confusion out of the corner of his eyes. Niko merely gave an enthusiastic nod. "Shouldn't be too difficult."

"If I may, I've never been to this portion of the mind before," Mordecai interjected. "What should we expect to find inside?"

"Oh, it's a giant labyrinth of filing cabinets," Sorun said. "That'd be bad enough usually but due to the neural structure of the human mind the layout of that place constantly changes. I tried making a map one time but gave up. Fortunately there's a service hatch we can take to circumvent all that."

Morgana hissed. "Ah... yeah..."

"I love these sounds you're making, Morgana, they're certainly not filling me with a sense of dread and anger," Sorun said in a chipper tone as he turned to Morgana.

"Uh..." Bobbing his head, Morgana slowly began to look down as he mumbled out, "we don't... have that service hatch anymore. I took it out."

Sorun laughed. "Nah, you wouldn't do that, Morgana. Not with so many things at stake. Things important to you. All hinging on the fact you didn't that the service way out. There's no way."

"Sorun-"

"No no no no, I don't think you're understanding how much you're putting on the line with this-"

"It was a security risk!" Morgana shouted, looking back up at Sorun. "Half the reason that place is a maze is to make it so intruders can't find what they're looking for and to make it so they can't navigate it to other sections and the service hatch made that redundant, so I took it out!"

Okay, so he wasn't joking. He really did remove the shortcut Sorun put in. Exhaling roughly through his nose, Sorun did his best to quell the growing anger he felt while mentally reminding himself Niko was standing right there. Rubbing at the bridge of his nose, he muttered, "With every word Mordecai comes closer and closer to taking your job, Morgana, I hope you know that."

"Do you mean that?" Mordecai asked, ears perked up. "After everything you said at Wernicke's?"

"The thought's crossed my mind," Sorun grumbled. "Ugh... fine. Fine! We'll just-" he threw his arms up, "-cross the maze! They're my memories, too, so I'm probably the only one who can." He spun around and walked towards Niko, and then crouched down so they could meet at eye-level. "Niko, uh, this next part's gonna be a pain and I think you've gone through enough, so why don't you just hand my the fuse and I'll take care of everything from here. Take the rest of the day off. Go get some ice cream."

"Oh, uh... okay. If you're sure." Hesitantly, Niko handed the lightbulb to Sorun, and then stepped back a bit while adjusting their hat. "Are you sure everything's gonna be fine? You know," they continued, eyes darting towards the two cats standing nearby, "with them?"

"... Hey, don't worry about it." Sorun patted the child on the shoulder. "Just go enjoy the rest of your day while I fix everything. I promise it'll all turn out fine."

"Well... okay! If you're sure!" A big smile broke out on Niko's face as they whirled around to wave at the other two. "By, Mr. Morgana! Bye, Mr. Mordecai! Please get along while I'm gone!"

Neither of them made so much of a sound as the cat child ran between the two of them and scampered off behind the corner. They didn't even turn to look at him go. They just stared at Sorun with blank expressions. As soon as Niko was out of earshot Morgana was the first to speak.

"Okay, so can I go, too? 'Cause you only need Mordecai for this and-"

"Oh hell no, it's your fault we're on this carousel of madness, you get to suffer along with us," Sorun bitterly exclaimed, shooting him a sharp glare. It caused Morgana to make a resigned sigh and hang his shoulders. "Now," Sorun continued, spinning around to the door, "let's get going before I act on my desire to turn Morgana into a plush toy and give him to Niko to play with. Or Kasha to strap to the front of her car."

"Is this going to take long?" Mordecai asked, utterly ignoring the way Morgana froze up and how his tail completely straightened out. "I have work quite literally piling up as we speak."

"I don't imagine so, no."

---

5 hours later

"You lied."

"In my defense it was a statement made in ignorance." Sorun's head thumped against the metal cabinet wall he was sitting against. He breathed out and made an exhausted sound, because at this point the drain was starting to feel real. Mordecai was sitting across from him in a similar position and in a similarly disheveled state. "I thought it'd be easy."

"Well, it wasn't," Mordecai stated matter-of-factly. There was a bitterness to his tone that was hard to miss, but at this point Sorun just didn't care enough to acknowledge it. "I suppose in some twisted point of view this is a fortunate turn of events. By now I won't even be able to enter the room it'll be so overflowing with paper. You've rendered me incapable of doing my job."

"Just burn all the paper. It's not like Sorun's gonna be up for a while, anyway, he ain't talking," Sorun suggested. "I wouldn't have even noticed if you'd slacked off and not did anything, Mordecai, I don't see why you're so insistent on this. Just don't do the job when it doesn't matter."

"It's because I have professional integrity, something I would hope Sorun's conscience would hold but am continually seeing evidence to the contrary."

"Hey, I do a great job."

"This isn't a great job." Mordecai scoffed and turned his head up at Sorun. "This is a woeful display of incompetence that has lead to the deterioration of Sorun's subconscious, not in the least bit due to your failure to properly allocate personnel to their proper stations. No, sir, this is not at all a 'great job'. This is mismanagement at its finest. I won't even mention the coma."

"We're still early enough everyone still thinks he's under from the drugs. For how long it's been they're probably not even halfway done with his surgery." He was reasonably sure of that, at least, which was

why Sorun wasn't overly concerned with how this was going. At the end of the day this was still faster than waiting for the lock he'd locked out to come out of the three-day shutdown, but damn. This was going nowhere fast.

Humming, Sorun glanced around. There wasn't a ceiling to this room. Nor even an end for how far he could see past all the cabinets surrounding them. Just an infinite expanse of black with overhead lights hanging off of nothing illuminating the entire space. The cabinets themselves weren't traditional cabinets. They were continuous cabinets that stretched out into ten meter-high walls that stretched and turned into corridors that turned and terminated at random junctures. A true maze. One they were stuck in.

Idly, Sorun's eyes wandered over the surface of the cabinet Mordecai was leaning against. It was covered in small doors with various labels stuck onto them. Memories. Memories and memories and more memories. Some cabinet doors were bigger than others and some sections of wall were more numerous than others with cabinets. He could see how it was irritating Mordecai, who kept glancing around at the cabinets. The way his mouth would twitch and make his whiskers bob up and down, the way his eyes kept quickly kept glancing around. The sight was practically making him anxious and he'd had to suffer it for hours.

"This organizational system is atrocious. It doesn't even look like there is a system," Mordecai said. "Do you just haphazardly toss memories wherever they may fall and leave it at that? How do you ever find anything?"

"The human mind is a chaotic thing that can't be neatly organized, Mordecai. I do the best with what I got," Sorun said. "Usually navigating this place to pick out individual memories is as easy as a snap but only the main ego Sorun can do that. And with him out I can't borrow that ability like I usually do."

"He can't even come down here and you need him conscious for that?"

"No. I can do it if he's sleeping or unconscious. He is neither of those right now. The dude is *out* from the drugs." Sorun ran a hand through his hair. Just another struggle in the day of the life of being Sorun's conscience. "But I can kinda... feel my way around. The layout's never static but there is a sort of 'order' to the way all the memories are lined up. Just not the conventional kind of order you know. It's like a loose thread I've been following."

Mordecai's white brows furrowed. "That makes no sense."

"It's not a thing I can put into words, it..." Sorun held his hands up in an attempt to gesticulate some sort of explanation, but then sighed out in failure and let his hands drop. "Look I can feel it out, let's just leave it at that. Broadly. Not clear enough I got a map in my head but it's something, and I'm telling you, we're close."

"You said that an hour ago," Mordecai accused.

"We're close! It's why I had Morgana go and scout ahead! Mostly 'cause he can turn into a car and can do it way faster than us. The exit's right there, I can feel it." Speak of the devil, the sound of a revving engine caused both Sorun and Mordecai to swivel their heads down the corridor they were sitting in the middle of. A black van with blue headlights rolled around the corner and drove right up to them, and then disappeared in a puff of smoke. Morgana appeared out the other side, huffing and puffing and holding his knee with one of his hands. His other hand was holding a cellphone.

"I... I... I actually found it, you guys. Sorun was right. The exit's near," Morgana panted out. Mordecai perked up at hearing this and was already beginning to stand up. Before Sorun could move Morgana held the cellphone out to him. "Also you got a call."

"Hm?" With a curious expression Sorun took the cellphone out of Morgana's hand and turned it over. He immediately grimaced when he saw the call was from the prefrontal cortex. "Ah, boy. Something happening with Pitou?"

Morgana gave an exhausted shrug. "I... I dunno. Sh-she just sounded really distressed."

"Aw, that ain't good. She's one of the more level-headed cognitions." He should be more worried, but with how this day was going Sorun just didn't have it in him. So, bracing for the worst, he held the phone up to his ear. "Hello?"

"WHY ARE ALL THE ALARMS GOING OFF!?" a voice screamed at Sorun from the phone. It was so loud it made him wince and hold the phone away from his ear. "SORUN WHAT'S GOING ON!? THE SYSTEMS ARE ALL HAYWIRE, NOTHING'S LISTENING TO ME!"

"Ah, yeah, uh, Pitou!" Sorun cleared his throat and stood up from his sitting position. "Yeah, it's that surgery thing we talked about. Right about now Sorun's getting his skeleton torn out of him, so a couple of the nerve monitors might be turning red. Just ignore them, it's fine."

"THEY'RE ALL RED! THEY'RE SCREAMING AT ME!"

"Sounds like you got everything covered, Pitou, good work!" Sorun's thumb quickly hit the button to end the call before another reply could come through. He then sighed heavily, clutching the phone while considering everything that happened, and then as calm as he could handed the phone back to Morgana. "It's goin' well over there," he informed him.

"Ah-huh. Yeah." He didn't look like he believed him at all but also didn't care enough to argue. "Can we just go get this over with?"

"Yes. Please," Mordecai chimed in, already walking his way towards the end of the corridor. "I'm liable to do something untoward if we tarry any longer than we already have."

Sorun made a grunt of affirmation and pointed at the end of the hall, gesturing for Morgana to lead the way. Much like the past five hours the trip was uneventful. Mordecai's standards were too high to

complain so he just silently smoldered the entire time they walked, once in a while casting an irritated look at the cabinets. Morgana looked too exhausted to argue about anything so he just trudged along. Sorun was in much the same boat as Morgana was with a dash of aggravation mixed in. Could be worse, all things considered, but at the same time Sorun was struggling to see how it could be worse. At least the end was in sight.

The door. It was bulky and metal, but otherwise normal aside from one of Morgana's fancy fucking locks sitting on it. Though nobody outwardly sighed there was indeed a collective sense of relief that passed by the three when they finally came upon the door.

"Hey, look at that, guys. The end. It's in sight," Sorun laugh-groaned. "Few more steps and we're home free."

"Yes, yes, hurrah and all that, now tell me how to work this contraption so I don't have to lay eyes on this organizational nightmare you call your memories for a second longer than necessary," Mordecai demanded, stopping next to Sorun and huffing out in exhaustion as he laid eyes on the door.

Sorun's eyes darted to the side at Mordecai. "Been over this, Mordecai, ain't my fault-"

"I heard you the first time, but the fact remains the dismal state of this... *place* makes me never want to step foot in here again." A disgusted sneer settled on Mordecai's face as he glanced around at their surroundings. At all the cabinet doors surrounding them. "No uniformity to any of the cabinets, no organizational system for all the labels, alphabetical or otherwise, and I can forgive the fact that the layout evidently remains outside of your control but at the very least-" He stopped dead when he noticed something. There, lying on the ground nearby. There was a cabinet that had been pulled out of the wall and was now lying on the ground. It was empty. "What is that?"

"What's what?"

"That." Mordecai pointed at it. "On the ground there."

Sorun looked to where he was pointing and saw the cabinet. His lips automatically constricted when he saw the "CPR" label on the cabinet. "Uh... the cabinet that contained all of Sorun's CPR skills," he quietly mumbled.

"Why is it on the ground? Why is it *empty* ?"

"Look, man, you know, uh, reasons." Sorun cleared his throat and turned away. "There's only so much data you can frontload into the short term memory before it can get transferred to long term and a lot was happening that day so some stuff had to be deleted to make room for other stuff. I must've forgot to sweep the cabinet up."

"What was more important than the knowledge to apply cardiopulmonary resuscitation?" Mordecai demanded, whirling back to Sorun with an incredulous expression. "That's a critical safety skill and you just discarded it? For what?"

Sorun pursed his lips. His eyes darted to the wall that cabinet was next to, the wall with the giant cabinet that had the "Warhammer 40k lore" on it, and was desperately hoping Mordecai wouldn't turn around and read the wall. "Mordecai do I honestly seem like the kind of person that would let Sorun trade a genuinely useful life skill for something useless?"

Apparently he did because the very moment Sorun posed that question Mordecai turned back around and looked dead straight at the wall Sorun was really hoping he wouldn't look at. And while Mordecai was squinting his eyes to properly read the label on that wall Sorun was biting his lip, because he was running on blank on how to spin this. Morgana was just hanging back with crossed arms, looking thoroughly unimpressed with what he was seeing.

After a couple seconds Mordecai froze. And then his shoulders hunched up, signaling to Sorun that he'd read the label and wasn't liking what he read. "You're quite serious?" he asked in an icy tone,

turning back to Sorun. He looked angry again. "You deemed that frivolous nonsense more important than the ability to potentially save someone's life?"

"I tried to talk him out of it but he ignored me and went on the wiki," Sorun mumbled in defeat.

"And what was your plan for when someone was in desperate need of aid Sorun couldn't provide because he filled his head with fictional refuse!?"

"... Well he just punched him until he got better."

Mordecai's mouth dropped open. His ears folded in disbelief and one of his eyes were twitching. "... Unbelievable. This is gross negligence. Dangerous ineptitude of the highest degree." His features were slowly creeping further into anger as he continued to go off on Sorun. "Need I continue to describe how you're objectively unfit for the position you're in?"

Sorun pocketed one of his hands, the other holding the lightbulb under his arm. His face looked outwardly calm but his eyes were narrowed in Mordecai's direction. "Who are you to tell me that? You're not qualified to judge me."

"What qualifications are needed for me to observe my surroundings to see the world falling apart around us?" Mordecai asked. "That isn't an allegory; the state of the subconscious is at a point it's quite literally breaking apart at the seams. Perhaps more examples are in order? The crumbling sanity of the individual whose head we are all trapped in and inexorably a part of, of which *you* are charged with preserving, and how you seem to be scrambling to hold it all together to a point you had to hand-craft us cognitions to handle portions of the mind. Meanwhile every one of us were woefully unprepared to fulfill your wildly unreasonable expectations because you can't even handle the simplest-"

"And you would have done a better job?" Sorun interrupted in a cold tone. "If you were in my shoes you would have failed five minutes in. Let me remind you that you're a living memory. A thought. You have your own personality but in terms of skill and ability you're only as good as I am. As Sorun is. Less so, even, since you're a lesser part of the greater whole. You would have done better? If you were in charge of keeping Sorun on the straight and narrow he would have bashed Hope's brains out with that wrench when he was paranoid about being lead into a trap to be experimented on. You know how bad that would have fucked us? It'd have been over for Sorun."

"This doesn't mean a lot coming from the same guy that encouraged Sorun to torture those two spirits back when he died," Morgana piped in from the side, though his tone didn't have all that much energy in it. He was looking down at had a sad expression on his face.

Sorun looked back at him. "It's not my job to make Sorun a good person. It's my job to keep him in one piece. Physically and mentally. And he's not back to the point he can handle things on his own mentally. Not yet. That's why I need to be there to keep him from doing something wrong until this surgery's done and things go back to normal. We have *one path left* to getting him back to a normal, stable life so I can build his sanity back up again and I..." Sorun looked back at Mordecai. His shoulders sagged. He just felt so tired of this... "I gave you all impossible tasks, I get that. But it was never supposed to be permanent. And at the end of the day Sorun's choices are all his choices. I'm just the voice in his head that runs all the boring background stuff." He took a calming breath, slumping a bit when a wave of exhaustion hit him. "... I just need a little more time, Mordecai. Time and a new fuse for the hypothalamus. "

Mordecai scoffed, but otherwise he held back a rebuke. He looked thoughtful, silently removing his glasses to wipe off the lenses with his handkerchief. Most likely out of habit; he didn't even need them anymore. "Given the dire state of things I suppose your actions have been apropos. We all seem to be under a significant amount of

stress. At the very least I'm relieved to see you're not flying by the seat of your pants and have some semblance of a plan in order, albeit a vague one."

Sorun stuck his thumb out over his shoulder. "If you don't wanna admit I'm right and you're wrong then whatever, you do you, but please just open the fucking door already so we can get this done."

"I'd complain about your exorbitant use of expletives but I'd feel it'd be tantamount to talking to a brick wall." He walked past Sorun who grumbled something under his breath and stopped in front of the door. "To reiterate my previous question, how is this done?"

"Just put your palm on the screen and it'll do the rest," Morgana instructed, with Mordecai following along and placing his hand on the palm scanner. Lights shined out of the screen as sensors began scanning the hand's palm. "I really hope we made it, though. It'd be a bummer if we made it all this way only for the lock to have rotated, huh, guys?" Morgana grinned out while making a nervous chuckle.

"Don't even joke about that, Morgana," Sorun hissed. "I swear if that thing blinks red-!"

The screen flashed green and emitted a light beeping sound. With a silent *swish!* the door opened. Not hesitating for even a moment Sorun stormed right into the room, not even bothering to wait for the other two.

Unlike the last time he'd been here most of the lights in the control room were off. Most of the monitors, too, though there were still some barely flickering to life. Didn't matter. The burnt-out bulb in the center of the room was the only thing that mattered. It shouldn't have proven difficult to unscrew a giant lightbulb to put a new one in, but for Sorun it was proving a more arduous task than expected. The weariness he felt made unscrewing the thing an exhaustive effort. He didn't even bother setting it down. He'd tossed the lightbulb aside and let it shatter on the ground.

Somewhere from behind him Sorun heard Mordecai make a disgruntled hiss at the mess of glass shards littering the floor Sorun had made.

It was fine. He'd clean it. Everything was fine. The new lightbulb was plugged in and glowing. All the lights were coming on. The warmth radiating from the lightbulb wasn't very comforting to Sorun who was practically pressing his body against the bulb but it was fine. It was working. He was fixing it.

"It's gotta work," he mumbled out. "I don't know how much longer we can keep it up. It's gotta work. I gotta fix it, I... fix it. I'm gonna fix it. Everything gonna be fine 'cause I'm gonna fix it. It's fine. It's all fine. I'm gonna fix it."

He heard a few footsteps behind him and suddenly remembered there were two other people with him. Sorun glanced over his shoulders - both of the black and white cats were looking at him. Morgana looked worried and Mordecai looked... something. He wasn't really wearing an expression but one of his eyebrows were rose up at him. Sorun didn't have the energy to guess what that look even meant.

"... Look, guys, I'm gonna be real for a second. You both are the only dependable cognitions I bothered to make so I really need you two to hold the fort down while I'm gone," Sorun said to them. He turned around, groaning as he collapsed against the lightbulb while holding his head. "Just for a little longer. Alright? Please? Until things settle back down on the outside. And then I'll come back and I'll fix it all but... some more time. Just a little bit more time and I can fix everything."

"Y... yeah. Yeah, that's... we can do that," Morgana said after a long moment. He looked up at Mordecai with a pleading look. "And I think we can manage to work together to keep things running for a little bit longer, *right* ?"

"... We can certainly make a concerted effort," he agreed, no emotion in his tone as he looked back at Sorun. "Provided you're expedient in finishing whatever business you have in reality and returning to your proper duties here. But yes. We'll 'hold the fort down' until you're ready."

Sorun gave them both a shaky thumbs-up. "That's great guys you have no idea how much I needed that reassurance... ugh." He pushed off the lightbulb and rubbed at his forehead. His head hurt. "There's still a few things I wanna go check but afterwards I'm thinking ice cream. That sound any good to you guys? Huh? Ice cream trip? You guys down for an ice cream trip?"

"No."

"No."

"You both suck."

A/N- Man. Sorun was a normal guy at the start of this story. Now his brain's run by cats.

Anyways, look, I'm not explaining myself. I said everything that needed to be said last A/N. Poll's up. That being said pretty much everyone in the reviews seemed supportive of the idea so I got a pretty good guess for how it'll go but I'm going with it anyways. Even if I already made up my mind and I'm just gonna ignore what the poll says anyway in lieu of just doing whatever I want. I just wanna see what it says.

Chapter 102

Recursion Error

Episode 102- Ouch oof my bones

"Aw man it all hurts."

It wasn't an exaggeration - Sorun's body ached. Deeply. The painful result of having most of his bones removed, having all those muscles and tendons be sliced and re-connected to the new ones, and all those nerve endings that had received much the same treatment. The result was a deep ache permeating every inch of his body from the neck down. And this was while he was on the painkillers. He didn't wanna imagine what it would be like without those.

The only bright side to this was that Dimitri assured him this was temporary and eventually the pain would disappear after his body healed and adjusted, but still... it hurt. A lot.

Otherwise... he wasn't really noticing a difference. Felt a bit heavier, maybe, but that was about it. Everything moved right and nothing felt out of place. There was barely even a cosmetic difference. He was looking at his arm now, with the sleeves on his coat and shirt rolled up. The stitching running up his whole arm, the back of his hand, and all his fingers was noticeable, but the hairline surgical scars weren't nearly as bad. He didn't know what the hell kind of surgical wizardry Dimitri pulled off to make it possible, but he did it. All that age was good for something after all apparently. Sure, naked he looked like some kind of patchwork monster with all the stitching covering his whole body but once those were out all the scars would hardly be noticeable.

The artificial blood was... certainly another thing, but they'd hooked a dialysis machine up in his house and sitting in place for a few hours

a week wasn't looking like it'd be the worst. He already did that with Nicole whenever they played video games. The fact his blood was white now and it was making his already-pale skin even whiter than it already had been was gonna take a bit longer to get used to than the scars. But he'd deal. Somehow.

"I gotta be the only guy on the planet who has to go through these lengths for a normal-ass life..." Sorun sighed out loud and dropped his arm, and then looked on up ahead. They were in the same desert wasteland Dimitri'd asked to meet up in the first time. In fact the rock Sorun was sitting on right now was the same rock Shadow had sat on. Even the afternoon sun and sky looked the exact same. The only difference was the gathering of six echidna up ahead.

When he'd first saw them Sorun couldn't help it. He'd laughed. How could he not? Calling themselves the Dark Legion was one thing, but when he saw they literally wore black cloaks and hoods to hide their faces he couldn't. He'd laughed and pointed and didn't regret a single second of it despite the sour looks they'd all sent him. Shit was too hilarious.

The sound of scraping sand drew Sorun's attention. Dimitri had floated on up, metal tentacles softly drifting through the sand as he looked towards him. "The cybernetics are holding up okay?" Dimitri asked. "I realize this is quite sudden since you just got out of surgery today, but... well, urgency demanded-"

"It's part of the plan, Dimitri, no need to stress about it," Sorun said. He blinked a bit blearily; he was still fighting off the lingering effects of the anesthetics they'd given him. He remembered there'd been a lot of yelling and protesting from Dr. Quack about him moving about so quickly, but he hadn't heard the argument. It'd been in another room. Didn't stop him from getting dressed and grabbing his Emerald. Was probably gonna get yelled at when he got back. Didn't matter. "And other than the fact it feels like I just hit the ground at terminal velocity I'm just swell. You're a genius with this cyborg stuff."

"Hmf. Well... I'm no Robotnik, but I do what I can." The corners of his mechanical lips turned up and his bubble bobbed upwards a bit in a show of pride.

"Yeah... quick question, though." Sorun's eyes were cast downwards, towards the blue Chaos Emerald resting by his feet. "One of my powers, uh... the one with a regeneration factor. I can't just...?"

"Sorun, we discussed this. Unless you want to regrow your skeleton overtop the artificial one and find out what it's like to have two skeletons inside your body I advise you *never* use that ability again, do you understand me?" Dimitri asked in a serious tone. That small prideful grin from earlier had vanished. "Even in the best case it would result in massive bodily trauma. Regeneration or no it could kill you."

It probably wouldn't. Devil's Body was made of sterner stuff, but yeah, Sorun wasn't too keen on finding out what it felt like to have a skeleton exploded out of him. "It just messes up some plans I had is all," Sorun mumbled out.

"Plans?"

"Personal matter. Forget it." Sorun glanced over at the six robed echidna. "Gonna go save those goobers now."

Dimitri frowned. "I'd prefer you not refer to them in such a derogatory way."

"I will start thinking about it when they stop looking so ridiculous." Sorun bent down and picked up the Emerald. His eyebrows knitted a bit. Before when he finally got control over this power, Yamato came instantly. Automatically, without him having to think about it. Ever since he'd gotten his bones and blood swapped out, though, he had to put effort into manifesting the weapon. Any of his powers, really, and had to maintain a constant focus whereas previously they were

just... there. Feeling the Emerald now, though, it all felt more distant. Harder to maintain.

He'd still managed it. The Emerald still dissolved in a cloud of blue particles and electric sparks before reforming into the katana, but it took longer than it used to. It was fine, as far as Sorun cared. Long as it still worked.

Wincing a bit he pressed the tip of the sheathed sword on the ground and used it like a cane to stand up. The pain from the surgery and the brain fog from the drugs were still present and made his footsteps unsteady, but with the aid of the makeshift cane he'd managed to approach the six echidna, albeit with unsteady steps. They'd turned to him, all with hoods that shadowed their faces so that nothing but pairs of yellow eyes were staring at him. Sorun wasn't sure how they were doing that since none of them actually had yellow eyes. He'd seen their faces when he first saw them before they'd hastily rose those hoods up. If it was some kind of technology built into the hoods to make them look intimidating it really wasn't working.

"Okay, ladies, step right up. Doc Sorun's got the cure to all your woes right here," Sorun rattled out, raising Yamato up and lightly shaking it to get the attention of the six echidna. "Come on. Don't be shy. Pain is temporary but being turned into a greasy stain on the ground from a bomb ain't."

One of the echidna broke off from the main group and stepped up. Bit bigger than the rest - wider shoulders and a barreled chest. He spoke out with a deep and baritone voice. "You're the one we're to entrust out lives to-?"

"Sh-sh-sh-sh, just, just lemme... I can't take you serious with this on..." Sorun whispered out, leaning forwards to grab at the echidna's hood. He stiffened up in surprise but otherwise didn't move when Sorun pulled the hood back, only to then whistle when he saw the sight underneath.

With how many echidna faces Sorun had seen, which admittedly were few and far, this one's face didn't stand out all that much. Grizzled, maybe, from that hard expression he was giving Sorun, but otherwise normal. Except for the fact he had a metal jaw. With spiky teeth of all things. It was the teeth in particular that had Sorun grinning.

"Oh, wow." He tapped the echidna's cyborg jaw with the buttcap of Yamato's handle. It made a sharp *tink! tink!* sound and made the echidna grimace. "Ya got that Auto-Chomp 9000, huh?"

"Stop invading my personal space," the echidna demanded, gruffly. Sorun pulled the sword back but didn't step back from him. "And I don't appreciate your mocking tone."

"I mean between the robe and teeth, man, it's really hard-"

"Cease. Now." Sorun did so, pulling his head back a bit and blinking. "Your deal with Dimitri was to remove these bombs from us, so hurry and do so. And I expect an apology."

The grin Sorun was wearing dropped. "Was just jokin' around, man. Can't take a joke?"

"I'm not interested in jokes. I'm interested in not having a *bomb* inside of me," the echidna rumbled out. He had a few inches in height over Sorun and loomed over him, eyes that were green and not at all yellow bearing down on him. The other five echidna shuffled back and Dimitri was staring off at them with a worried expression. "You have a task set about before you, *human* . I expect you to get on with it and then get back to whatever worthless life you were living."

A calm breeze passed between the pair of them. Sorun at first didn't say anything. What he did do was look back at Dimitri with a raised eyebrow, who only shrugged a few of his tentacles in response. It made Sorun roll his eyes. *"This is who I have to go out of my way to save, huh?"* he thought, crouching down next to the echidna's feet.

He shouldn't have expected much from terrorists, but fuck, he just wanted to share a few laughs. Why'd he have to go and put Sorun in a bad mood over such a little thing?

The voice in Sorun's head was telling him what he was planning on doing in the next few seconds was a bad idea but he ignored him. He didn't feel like letting it slide.

"Well as far as first impressions go you fumbled it pretty hard," Sorun mumbled out, staring down at the ground. He unsheathed his sword and began idly poking at the ground with the tip of his sword. "Can't be a little nice to the guy that's saving your life? You really had to be such a dick over this?"

The echidna scoffed. "You're doing this out of obligation, not out of some moral decree. Not that I'd expect anything less from one of your kind- AAAUGH!"

Most people would scream if somebody stabbed a sword through their foot, so when Sorun plunged Yamato right through the middle of the echidna's foot he couldn't be too surprised he screamed. Pretty high voice, too, higher than the one he'd been using previously. It was a bit funny to Sorun's ears. The other him he was seeing out of the corner of his eye, the other Sorun standing off to the side, didn't look as amused as he felt.

"Are you fucking serious!? Why!?" Sorun screamed, gesturing out towards Sorun.

"Sh-sh-sh, hey, relax. Just relax man. It's fine," Sorun thought to him. It didn't do much to reassure Sorun, who just threw his arms and stomped out of view, grumbling angrily under his breath. Sorun watched him go and shrugged, glancing over at the other five echidna. They'd all stepped back, yellow eyes under their hoods dramatically wide. The one he was stabbing was still screaming.

"Sorun, what are you doing!?" Dimitri yelled, gliding over to their position with a panicked face. "This wasn't the deal, you said-!"

"Can only separate things I stab with the sword, Dimitri. Mere contact or even shallow cuts won't work." It was a total lie. He'd done such a thing in the past and was prepared to do that exact same thing here but then ol' Iron Jaw here had to talk shit and get hit. "I don't know echidna anatomy that well and didn't wanna stab anything important, so I went with his foot."

"That...!" Dimitri stopped himself, sighing in resignation. He turned towards the echidna Sorun was stabbing who was bent over now, holding the leg with the wounded foot while making ragged breaths and letting out pained whimpers. A pained look crossed Dimitri's face and he looked back at Sorun. "You might have said so previously... please just make this quick."

"Sure." Blue energy, like a fine vapor, began to coalesce down the length of the blade. It was a harder process than it had been previously in the past, back when it almost came naturally to Sorun and took him a few seconds longer as a result, but he'd managed it all the same. Fueled by his desire it'd only taken a few more seconds for the sword to find what he was seeking. "Theeere it is..."

With a sharp yank Sorun pulled the sword out of the echidna's foot. With it came a spurt of blood, a pained shout from the echidna, and a small flash of light emanating from the wound followed by a small object flying out from the light. It was a metal, spherical device with various wires sticking out of it and Eggman's atrocious, grinning logo plastered onto the front.

The logo alone was enough for Sorun's mouth to form a hard frown and for him to swipe out with the sword. When the bomb hit the ground it had been split into two pieces. Some of the nearby echidna jolted in panic and one had even gone as far as to duck for cover and shield their head with their hands, but it didn't result in anything. The bomb didn't go off. It was destroyed.

"Ah. Prudent of you," Dimitri commended. "I wouldn't put it past Robotnik to have put pressure and temperature gauges in the device

to react to sudden shifts in the environment. It might have gone off just from being exposed to outside air alone. Smart thinking."

"My thoughts exactly," Sorun lied. He hadn't thought about any of that at all. He'd only cut the bomb because he saw the logo and grew angry it its mere sight, but if Dimitri approved, he'd milk it. Might get him to forget about the foot thing. Speaking of which... "Hey, no hard feelings, big guy," he said, standing up and mockingly patting the echidna on the back, though from an outside appearance the gesture appeared genuine. All he'd gotten from the echidna in response was a shaky nod and a pained exhale, which convinced Sorun to move on to the next hooded echidna. They stood stock still, rigid as a statue as Sorun stopped in front of them. "So..." he began, brandishing his sword.

"Urm... uh, yeah..." A loud gulp was heard from the hooded echidna, and Sorun found himself blinking in surprise. The nasally voice he heard was a stark contrast to the voice of the guy he'd just stabbed. He sounded as old as Sorun. "Do... do you really have to stab me with that?" he asked. "You can't... just stab this...?"

The echidna held out his hand; the sleeve on his robe had been rolled up to give Sorun a good view of the arm. It was a cybernetic prosthetic, all the way up to the shoulder. Sorun couldn't help but grimace at how... *rough* it looked. He'd expected a cybernetic arm like the one Bunnie had: an arm that was shaped to mirror the real arm she had and was all neat and smooth. This wasn't that. This was a skeletal frame of metal with a square palm and sharpened claws for fingers. All function and no care to its form. Utilitarian. It was ugly.

"It'd probably work... but metal doesn't heal. Will you be able to get it fixed at Albion?" Sorun asked, because he genuinely didn't know what things were like there. The foot was one thing, that'd heal, but with how this arm looked it honestly looked like one stab even to the palm would just outright destroy it.

"Pr... probably not," the echidna stammered out. "It's fine. I-I don't care, just-"

Sorun stabbed at the hand's palm, making the echidna shout and jump a bit from fright. There was a metallic screech as the sword pierced through the cybernetic hand, and much like the first time after a small application of the sword's power another bomb was lying on the ground, split in half. The echidna he'd just cut it out of had backed up a bit, holding the wrist of his cybernetic hand and making a sad sigh. A few electrical sparks flew out from the slit in his palm and two of the hand's fingers weren't flexing with the rest.

"..." Well, he had warned him. Sorun turned to the third echidna, just as visually indistinct as the rest because of the robes they wore. "Alright, you're next," he said. "You got a robo-leg or something you want me to-?"

"Shoulder's fine," she grunted out, turning her head to the side. "I don't need any of my parts getting crippled. Just give me a wound that'll get better on its own."

"Suit yourself." Sorun obliged and jabbed her in the shoulder. The echidna hissed out in pain but otherwise stood still the entire process, and soon enough there were three halved bombs on the ground. "Next."

The rest of the "procedures", for lack of a more polite way to phrase Sorun stabbing people with a sword to cut bombs out of them, went about the same. Half the echidna wanted him to stab them in organic parts to heal later and the other half weren't partial enough to their cybernetics to mind him just stabbing those instead. Small talk had been scarce. If they cared about Sorun at all beyond the fact he was saving their lives they didn't show it, but seeing as they'd aligned themselves with a evil techno fetishist cult Sorun wasn't all that sure any of them would have much interesting things to say anyways. It was fine with him at the end of the day. He just wanted this day to be over already.

"This is the place?" Sorun asked, looking down at the slip of paper that'd been handed to him by Dimitri. The supposed coordinates for

Albion. "The final last bastion of the echidna race no for real this time?"

A withering sigh left Dimitri, coming out as an electronic rattle. "Sorun..."

"Just let me have my fun." He pocket the slip of paper, intent on burning it later as he turned to the six echidna. Those who could still move nominally were offering a shoulder to those who were a bit too wounded at the moment to move as well. Most notably the one whose foot Sorun stabbed. "Alright, so, uh," Sorun began, calling out to the six, "gonna open the portal to Albion now. Follow me and don't deviate from the path. I mean it."

One of the echidna, the one whose robot hand he'd stabbed, rose his flesh hand. "Wh-what happens if we do?"

Nothing. There was just the path and nothing else. There wasn't any way *to* deviate except to backtrack. "Lost between the seams of reality. Doomed to wander the endless ether forever with no hope of rescue," Sorun lied in an ominous tone, letting the following silence set the tone. They all shifted uncomfortably at that, the warning likely stirring memories from the Dark Legion's time trapped in a pocket dimension. That was the reason to lie. Watch 'em squirm a bit to get an amused rise out of Sorun.

Didn't last long, though, and when the mood settled Sorun had cut a blue cross into the air which folded outwards into the portal. Some of the echidna flinched back at the sight, Dimitri stared on in interest like he always did, and Sorun meanwhile was tapping his shoulder with the blunt end of Yamato in impatience as he waited for the shock to settle. "Clock's tickin', let's go," he announced, turning towards the portal. The seven echidna, Dimitri included, all fell in line behind him to follow the Voidborn through the portal. Unusually close, he'd noted, likely because of the bogus warning he'd given them. It brough another bout of amusement in Sorun and made him snort out his nose the slightest bit.

If nothing else he'd at least be coming out of this trip with a few laughs.

"Is it really that important to you?" As the group traipsed through this space of rushing blues and blacks, a tunnel lined in a torrent of rushing energy that provided a window into the infinite expanse of nothing, Sorun glanced to his side to see himself walking besides him. "Dicking around with these echidna for a few chuckles?"

"We're owed solace," Sorun thought to him. After wringer this world had put him through he felt a few laughs was the least he was owed. For crying out loud he was a cyborg now because of it all.

"I'm not denying that, I'm just worried about what this is building up to," Sorun snapped out. "You're still thinking about killing these guys."

"What of it? No one will miss them. And they shot at my friends." He was just supposed to ignore that? After a lifetime of fucking around they just get a second chance for new, clean lives? Everyone was just gonna drop everything they'd done?

Sorun sighed. He pocket his hands, looking ahead towards the end of the tunnel with a forlorn expression. "What do you even get out of it?"

"I don't know. Satisfaction?"

"Followed by problems later on if this comes up again? Gah... you're not even completely sure," Sorun muttered out. "Look, I... just want everything to work out. And this isn't gonna help. These guys are never gonna bother us again. We're never gonna *see* them again unless you ever plan on coming back to Albion."

"Fat chance."

"Then let bygones be bygones and leave them the fuck alone. They were too incompetent to even land a scar on anyone," Sorun said to

Sorun. "We never even fought them. It's not our business. All of this is nothing but a transaction and you wanna renege on it and murder them all for what? So you feel slightly better about yourself?"

"You can stop it with the rigorous self-critique." Sorun looked back over his shoulder and at the group of echidna following him. *"Why do I have to keep fighting for another chance at life and they get one handed to them after all the mistakes they made? Why do* I *have to be the one to give it to them? It's insulting. It's..."* It was fucking infuriating, that's what it was. His own life kept being ripped away from him over and over and these terrorists got to have a clean slate just like that? Where was the justice in that?

None. Not really. Sorun was thoroughly convinced justice was a made-up word. Worlds full of people wouldn't die off if it actually did. Mad gods couldn't wipe out whole civilizations with a thought if it did. It wasn't truth. Only truth that did exist were truths people clawed into reality with their own power. The tangible. For as much as "might makes right" sucked as a concept it was a hard reality and countless examples from Earth proved it. Here on this planet Robotnik proved it a hundred times over. The damn aliens that bombed the planet thousands of years ago proved it.

Maybe that was why he wanted to kill them. Out of selfishness more than anything else. If he couldn't get his life straight then they shouldn't, either, and if he killed him the world made the smallest bit more sense.

"You moron, we *did* get a new chance," Sorun said, staring wide-eyed like he was looking at an idiot. "That chrome skeleton you got rattling around in your meat suit's our second chance." He looked back ahead. "But yeah, shit ain't fair. They got it way easier than we did. I'd say leave it to karma but with how things have shook up in our fucked-up life I'm not convinced karma exists. But it's over, you know? They got a way out. We got a way out. We never gotta think about 'em again." A beat passed and Sorun let a breath out. "Just think about it? Forget about pragmatical repercussions, forget about moral ramifications, forget all that. Just think about what you want."

"... What I want?" When he'd blinked Sorun vanished, leaving Sorun alone with all these echidna he didn't want to be around. It was just in time, too, as the other end of the portal was upon them and nobody had so much as slowed their stride as they all stepped through.

Criminy, but did Albion look awful. From what he knew this place was an island, and looking behind where they'd just come out of there was indeed a rocky shore leading to ocean behind them. And in front of them was a small settlement that didn't have so much as one intact building. Results of a bombing from what Sorun heard, but at the very least if there'd ever been any debris it'd been swept away. He even spotted some local echidna off in the distance milling about, staring off at them. And as Sorun stood rooted to the spot, staring back, the six echidna he'd just saved walked past him, muttering amongst themselves and looking around in wonder.

Yamato's weight was very noticeable in his hand. He knew it wouldn't be hard. He'd lost his green eyes with this new skeleton but the power this sword had alone was enough that he could kill them all before they'd have a chance to do anything about it. He rose the sword up a bit, glancing down at in in contemplation. He could. He could really do it.

"What do I want?" He wanted people to leave him the hell alone so he could just live his life. He wanted a life, period. And... he had that now. Despite it all, despite how hard this entire multiverse worked to make Sorun's life hell, he'd clawed out a life. What did he want above all? He wanted his friends to be safe and these echidna weren't a danger to them anymore. He wanted more dates with Nicole and he didn't want that relationship jeopardized if news of him murdering these people over selfish reasons ever got back. He wanted to live his life normally without having to worry about a stupid thing like that hanging over his head, wondering when it'd come to bite him.

He didn't want to ruin people's lives just to make himself feel a bit better.

... He didn't wanna break his word with Dimitri because Sorun had kind of grown to like him and he'd feel like shit if he did that.

"I... don't have to do this." Sorun lowered the sword. Fine. Fuck it. Everybody got a happy ending. He swiftly turned around to Dimitri, who was hovering near the entrance to the portal they'd just walked through. Sorun stepped right next to him and said in a low murmur, "The deal was only for me to get them here, so they'll have to hash things out with the locals. I don't wanna stay any longer than necessary. I hope that suffices."

"It does," Dimitri confirmed. He sounded relieved, like a weight had just been lifted off his nonexistent shoulders, and- agh, he was smiling at Sorun, he couldn't bear to see that. "Sorun, thank you. Truly."

"Yeah yeah yeah fine whatever let's go," Sorun quickly said, speedwalking his way through the portal. Though he couldn't see it Dimitri's smile had turned into an amused smirk, and he'd followed behind Sorun. The cybernetic head had exited the other side of the portal to once again see the sight of the desert wasteland around them, with Sorun sealing the portal shut with a swipe of his sword.

Huffing, Sorun slammed the sword back into its scabbard. Damn Dimitri. Damn smile. He was wrong, he shoulda just killed them after all. This embarrassment was too much to bear. He debated ripping the sword back out to cut another portal so he could abruptly leave Dimitri in the dust, and had even made the motion to do so, but before he could draw the sword free the echidna had to open his mouth again.

"Sorun, before you go. There's something I wanted to ask of you."

"What, more? We barely survived this deal and you want-?" Sorun stopped himself when he looked back at Dimitri. The smile was gone, serious expression in place. "What is this?" he asked, fingers tightening around the sword's handle.

"Not what you might be thinking. A request, a selfish one, admittedly, and yet I..." Dimitri trailed off, sighing. His mechanical tentacles were limply sweeping at the ground. "You kept your word, and after seeing that you can save my people from the bombs, I-"

"Dimitri-"

"I don't want my people going with Snively to Yurashia to that woman," he said. There was a pleading edge to his voice Sorun was dreading to hear. "The technomancer woman I told you about, Regina, she... she may not be as insane or maniacal as Robotnik is, Sorun, but mark my words her thirst for control and power is just as insatiable. I worry for what plans she has for my people, if she'll even be able to help with the bombs the way you can help, and I..."

"Want me to save 'em instead," Sorun finished in a hollow voice. Because he was the more reliable alternative. Because he wasn't a mad tyrant or whatever the hell this Regina woman was. Because they'd built a modicum of trust between them. The solemn look Dimitri held only confirmed it. "You're askin' a lot."

"I know I am, but between you and her I would rather leave the fate of my people in your hands," Dimitri said. "I-it isn't too late. I can tell them your solution works, they may choose not to-"

"May? They 'may' choose not to go to Yurashia?" Sorun repeated. "What, some of them *want* to go overseas to the conquering magic tech lady?"

Dimitri grit his teeth, shame flashing across his features. "Some would consider it an opportunity to strengthen to Legion. For a large majority the bombs aren't even a matter of consideration."

Oh, for fuck's sake. "Okay, look," Sorun said, already making his mind up right then and there, "don't get me wrong, I think you're okay, Dimitri, but I'm not going to bat for a bunch of terrorists. 'Specially not for free."

Dimitri's head floated back a bit, tentacles flailing a bit in panic. His voice took on a desperate tone. "But-!"

"You're not even making it sound like they would want my help," Sorun said, and any argument Dimitri was prepared to say died right there as he started to look more and more resigned. "I get they're your people and all but only six outta the whole bunch actually tried getting out. You yourself made them look like fanatics, and where I'm standing, well..." Sorun shrugged. "I don't want to go out of my way for people like that. Made an exception this time 'cause they asked and I needed the help but not again. I'm done."

"..." The desperation left as understanding settled in Dimitri, making him rattle off a breath. The tentacles jutting out of his bubble went limp as he hollowly mumbled out, "So that's it, then? They're to be left in her hands?"

"Dimitri, I'm gonna be real with you. This Regina lady? She doesn't even live on the same continent I do. I don't really care about what she's doing in her spare time. And since we're being real I'll flat-out say it, I'm not interested in saving your psycho echidna pals. And above all that I'm a package courier. None of this has anything to do with me. Frankly I want this conversation to end so I can get back to that."

"... I understand," Dimitri hesitantly said after a long moment, though his voice was more quiet, now. "That lot hasn't done all that much to garner sympathy. I don't think that puts them out of reach of redemption, but... you're right. I don't have a right to ask so much of you. I just hoped..."

It wouldn't really surprise Sorun is this was some sort of last-ditch effort by Dimitri to try and guilt trip Sorun, but he'd been down this road before and it wouldn't work, even if seeing him in such a pathetic state was wrenching Sorun's heart a bit. But his mind was made up. "It's not happening, Dimitri," he told him.

"Then... I suppose we're done here." A sad sort of look had settled on Dimitri's face. Resigned and sad, though at least he wasn't glaring at Sorun. In fact it barely looked like he was looking at Sorun at all. He had a far away, defeated look in his gaze, for as much could be seen in those mechanical peepers. "I'd like it if you would open a portal to our usual rendezvous spot. I have preparations to make for Robotnik's downfall and our move with Snively."

Sorun did, so, wordlessly unsheathing his sword once more and cutting another portal through the air. Dimitri hadn't wasted a single moment moving towards it, though he'd stopped at the portal's threshold when Sorun cleared his throat.

"Hey, uh... just wanted to say thanks. You know, for the skeleton," Sorun said, voice a bit awkward. He found himself having mixed feelings for how this meeting was ending.

Dimitri didn't so much as turn to address him. "... Take care of yourself, Sorun." And then he'd left, floating through the portal. Sorun waited on the other side for a full minute to make sure he'd made it to the other side before closing it, and he felt so drained afterwards he couldn't even bother to sheath the sword again. Not physically, though the new bones and blood were making the process of using Yamato more intensive. Mentally speaking he just wanted to crawl in bed and sleep the rest of the day and night away. Maybe tomorrow, too. The whole week if he could spin it.

He sighed. As if Honey would give him a week off after intensive surgery.

"Sorry, Dimitri, but at the end of the day this just doesn't have anything to do with me," Sorun thought after the head left. He'd be lying if he told himself he hoped things worked out for the best regarding those echidna, because honestly he just didn't care about them, but he did actually sort of care if things worked out for Dimitri. Hard to not have a little gratitude for the guy that extended his life and his heart was in an... admittedly weird spot regarding the Dark

Legion, but Sorun got it. Sort of. Couldn't blame him for trying get Sorun to help more. He hoped he wouldn't hold it against him.

Still... despite it all, despite the absurd lengths he'd gone through... he was done and it was finally in reach. A normal life. In a better world he wouldn't have had to go so far for something he should have had to start with, but hey, it was here now. Not just in reach. He *had it* . Normal life. He should have felt ecstatic about it but more than anything else he just felt tired. The happiness could come later when it finally sunk in that he'd done it.

"Let's... let's just go home," Sorun muttered out, staring down at the cold blade he was holding. Staring down at his own reflection in the blade. "No more fighting, no more nonsense, no more... no more." He shook his head and cut a cross through the air. "Done with all that. It's over... it's all finally over. I can go back home now."

A/N- Ahhh... you smell that? It's the smell of democracy. The thin veil of democracy draped over the absolute dictatorship that is this profile. It smells like a poll with overly favorable results. Not that it mattered 'cause I was gonna do it anyway, made it blatantly clear I wasn't actually gonna listen to the poll, but it's still nice to see.

Wanna reiterate I'm not evenly splitting attention between the two stories. It's more a 90% and 10% split of attention with 90% focus going to this story. I'm only planning on working on the other one once a week just to shake things up once in a while. Won't affect upload speed here at all. May even drop the story if it ain't working out.

Look what I'm saying is don't worry about it. And with how fast I go first chapter should be up in like five months or something,

I dunno.

Chapter 103

A/N- Domino here comin' in with the stealth patch. So... upon passing a cursory glance over at the comics just to get all my ducks in a row and to make sure I wasn't mixing events up it came to my attention I accidentally mixed up Robotropolis with New Megaopolis. I called the latter the former. In my defense there's, like, four or five something-opolises to keep track of in this world and I haven't taken any written notes since I started this story, I've been running off sheer memory. So I got some wires crossed and I'm sorry for that. I went back a few chapters and fixed it but I honestly wouldn't be surprised if that little mix-up isn't shotgunned around earlier back in the story and I wouldn't even know where to begin fixing that short of scanning over all the chapter files.

So uh... yeah, whoops.

Recursion Error

Episode 103- Corn syrup-based lifeform

"Sorun! I demand thee come out here at once! I would trade words with you!"

The blinds covering the windows to Honey's shop rattled. Fingers pried open a gap, allowing a pair of golden eyes to peer out at the stork Mobian in the green unitard yelling outside her shop. "Sorun, he's back," she said.

A pair of blue eyes settled next to the golden ones. And then there was a sigh. "Ugh, for the- open the window, he wants some words I'll give him words."

The clasp to the window was unlatched and the blinds were risen up. After the window itself was opened Sorun leaned his torso out, facing towards the stork Mobian glaring angrily at him from outside the store while ignoring all the odd looks the nearby passerbys were giving them. "Irv, you nerd, what is it now!?" Sorun yelled out at him.

"You know precisely what it is!" the stork yelled back at him. "I come to you not as Irving but as a representative of the New Mobotropolis Courier's Guild! And we demand you cease poaching work from us at once!"

"Oh, as if! It's called the free market!"

"You already possess a lucrative position working in Honey's shop! you have no reason to be taking potential business opportunities off of our plate for your own gains!"

"Yeah, and what are you gonna do about it!? Jack diddly squat, that's what!" Sorun yelled out, slapping at his own chest. "Ya got nothin' on me! Nothin'! All you got are formal protests I'm never gonna listen to 'cause guess what!? I'm working within the confines of legality!"

"You're a rogue, sir! A dastardly rogue with no respect for your fellow couriers! No respect at all for our trade!"

With a clenched fist shaking in Irv's direction, Sorun yelled out, "It's no use, New Mobotropolis Courier's Guild! I'LL NEVER STOP UNDERCUTTING YOU!" With a huff he ducked back into the shop and closed the window, and then harshly pulled on the nearby string to drop the blinds back down in front of the window. He glanced to the side; Honey was giving him a pointed look with crossed arms.

"Sorun, I'm about ready to file a complaint at the castle over this. Those mail nutjobs are scaring the customers off," she said, tail flicking to the side in agitation.

"Ah. Yes. Of course." Sorun's eyes drifted to the side, towards the other end of the store where Larry was dressing up a mannequin in

Honey's latest lineup. A mannequin that was just a headless skeleton held together by metal wiring and rods. "The irate mailman outside is what's scaring people off and not the fact you're making mannequins out of your employees' skeletons."

On the other end of the store, Larry paused in his actions, shirt in hand. His eyes flickered over the display mannequin, and after a few more moments he shouted out in fright, leaping back as the shirt fell from his grasp and fell on the ground. "GAH, what- this is real!?" he screamed, a horrified expression etched on his face as he stared at the skele-quin. "Why!?"

Completely nonplussed by it all, Sorun nodded. "Yeah, Honey wanted to turn my old bones into a mannequin. I had them bleached and gave them to her."

"No, why!?" Larry repeated, this time gesturing towards Honey, who looked equally as nonplussed as Sorun did. "Why would you do this, why!? what could you possibly get out of this!?"

"What do you mean, why?" Honey asked, sounding more confused than anything else. "Look at it. It's an attention-getter. It's the same principle behind the rule of contrasting colors: put some of my merch on a skeleton and the contrast will be so eye-catching that people won't be able to help being appealed by it. It's a solid marketing strategy."

"She needed another mannequin and didn't want to pay for it," Sorun translated, casting a knowing smirk her way. She sent him an irritated pout and turned away in a huff, but the damage was done.

"And that doesn't bother you at all?" Larry incredulously asked, gesturing towards Sorun. "Those were your bones, Sorun. Those were inside you and now Honey's hanging clothes on them."

Sorun shrugged. "Nah, I don't think they mind."

"Oh my gosh, why...?" Larry moaned out, holding his face in his hands.

"Hey, it wasn't like I was doing anything else with them. It was either this or send them off to the school to be used as an educational display model." A dark look overcame Sorun's features. "There's no way I'd ever allow my bones to become a part of an educational institution. They deserve better than that."

"I'm working with crazy people," Larry muttered under his breath. He rubbed at his face and smacked at his cheeks, trying to beat away the concerns. The worries. It didn't work, as when Larry addressed Sorun again he had a tired look in his eyes. "What was all that yelling about, anyways?"

"Oh, that." Sorun's right hand tightened around the object it was holding: a thin, silver cane. It clacked on the floor as he stepped out from the window, Sorun speaking as he crossed the room. "The local couriers are upset over my side-hustle."

"Side... hustle?" an unsure Larry repeated.

"Yeah, over at the castle. Elias pays me to transport stuff for the council sometimes and all the couriers keep crying about it. They're just jealous I can do their job a million times better 'cause I can open portals." He stopped at the other end of the store where a small, miniature fridge was leaning against the wall. "Pfft," Sorun continued as he bent down to open the fridge, "imagine physically traveling all over the world instead of just opening a portal. Losers."

"Don't you feel bad, though?" Larry asked. He walked over to where Sorun was and was now leaning over a waist-high display cabinet full of shoes. "It's just feels a bit unfair that you're-"

"Unfair? Unf- lemme tell you about unfair." With a bottle of cola in his free hand Sorun spun around, using the end of his cane to shut the fridge door while pointing the cola bottle at Larry. "Unfair is becoming a refugee 'cause your planet died and then getting grifted by the job

market in the city you live in. You got grifted by the same market; you wouldn't be working here of all places if you actually had a choice."

"Hey!" an offended Honey shouted from the store's counter.

"My point," Sorun said in a lighter tone, flashing a grin and placating look towards Honey, who only offered a flat look in response, "is that turnabout is fair play and if the job market grifted me I get to grift it." Grin dying, Sorun turned back to Larry. "So no. I don't feel bad about it. And if they start protesting outside my house with picket signs I'll drop the ocean on 'em."

"You ended up getting a job, though," Larry argued.

"Yeah, 'cause I happened to be friends with a business owner!" Sorun rebutted. "For all my talents none of them are actually good in the working environment so I'm taking what I can get. And it ain't like they're starving. It ain't like they're out of work. And honestly they should be grateful that things're so peaceful they get to complain about small stuff like this."

Larry's lips pressed together, not being able to find a good counterargument. He could only watch as Sorun tossed his cane up, grabbed it halfway up the shaft, and then used the handle of the cane to pop off the soda bottle's cap. It spun through the air and landed on top of the minifridge next to Sorun. "Hey, what's that?" he asked.

"What's what?"

"That," Larry said, pointing at the cane.

"... A cane?" With a raised eyebrow, Sorun rose it up for Larry to see. "This may surprise you but getting your skeleton ripped out of you is a fairly intensive surgery and I can't really move at a hundred percent yet. It's better than it was a week ago but... eugh. Can't really do more than walk. So, you know, cane," he explained, waving it around a bit.

Larry winced a bit. "Ouch. Should you be working?"

Casting a dry look over at Honey, Sorun answered, "I dunno, Honey says I'm good enough to be working and who would know more about the health of my body than her?"

She didn't look very amused by Sorun's words. "Sorun, you've moved one box all day. For the past week you've moved one box a day. I'm practically paying you to stand around and drink soda. I even offered to give you a paid week or two off but you were all, 'nah, Honey, it's fine, I can't let the grind die' or whatever."

"Boxes across *the whole world* ," Sorun reminded her.

"That means nothing when you can teleport with your sword. It's literally just a few steps for you."

Sorun rolled his eyes and turned back to Larry. "I'm fine. I just need the cane to get around is all."

"Where'd you get the cane?" Larry asked, gazing over at the silver implement. "Looks really fancy. Never seen anything like it before."

With a passive expression, Sorun held the cane up. Larry jumped back a bit when the cane dissolved into a cloud of blue energy and particles, and then instantly reformed into a glowing blue gem. Then the gem dissolved and reformed into the cane. "It's mine," Sorun answered.

"Oh, wow! It's one of your, uh, one of your things!" Larry leaned back over the counter. His eyes were wide, practically sparkling with stars, his mouth a wide "o" in wonder as he gazed at the cane. "Does it have any cool powers like your sword?"

Sorun blinked. "It's a cane."

"Yeah, but does it do anything? Does it transform or summon something or-" Larry made finger pistols and jerked them up and

down, "-shoot out some sort of weird energy thing or-"

"It has the ability to help me walk from point A to point B." Upon seeing Larry's face deflate at the description Sorun chuckled a bit. "It's just a cane, man. The metal's a bit special but that's it. It's probably the most mundane thing I can make with a Chaos Emerald." He tipped his head back and began drinking from the bottle.

Honey spoke up from her side of the store. "I wanted to ask, is it okay for you to be handling that?" Her eyes lowered to the cane Sorun was holding. If he didn't know any better he would think she almost looked concerned. "I thought all your problems kept happening 'cause of Chaos energy..."

"Honey, Honey, Honey..." Sorun stepped over to her side of the store, twirling the cane in his hand and leaning against the sales counter as she looked at him. "Cards on the table I'm not too sure holding this thing all the time is doing more damage than breathing the air on this planet. But hey, what else is new?" Sorun asked before tipping his head back to take another swig of soda.

The cat frowned. "It's probably not doing anymore damage than this," she grumbled, swiping the soda from Sorun's grasp, who immediately began making whining noises as he sluggishly groped for the bottle. "You know how many of these you drink on a daily basis?"

Mirroring Honey's frown, Sorun stopped with the half-hearted grabs and sprung his hand out to snatch the bottle back. "It's not nice to make fun of a recovering addict, Honey," he said, drinking back the soda.

"To *soda* ?" she asked, disbelievingly. "How?"

Sorun lowered the bottle, tapping it idly with his finger. "Earth soda was built different. Arguably worse 'cause-" he turned the bottle around to read the label on the back, "-well this stuff won't kill you if

you drink too much. But the corn syrup market on Earth was a brutal one and they put it in everything. Soda included."

Honey's face wrinkled in disgust. "You made syrup out of corn? And drank it?"

"Hey, corn syrup was the best invention ever after sliced bread. Especially when they started putting it in sliced bread." Sorun quickly took another swig of soda. "I say that as a former hopelessly-addicted consumer who had to go cold turkey after coming here. That first month was bad. Got shakes."

"... I'm thinking about stopping stocking the fridge with this stuff," Honey said, eyeing the already-empty bottle Sorun was holding.

Back straightening in panic, Sorun pointed a warning finger at Honey. "Hey, no. *Nooo* . Don't you dare. I already got one feline woman worrying about my health and I don't need another." He shot her an accusing look. "And I see you with your morning coffee, Honey. You have comfort drinks, too. And what would Larry say about you letting the company fridge go dry? What'll that poor guy drink?"

"I only drink water," Larry called from the other end of the shop.

Sorun's head whirled over to Larry's direction, mouth hung open in shock. The one time Sorun needed him to not be the most boring person on the planet and then he goes and pulls this on him. "... Not even juice, man? For real?"

Larry shrugged. "That's just how it is, Sorun, I-I just really like water."

"I don't know what to say. Who even are you? Why are you like this?" Shaking his head in some approximation of disappointment, Sorun walked his way over to the recycling bin near the door and tossed the empty glass bottle in. "Boss, uh, tell you what I'm gonna go ahead and clock out. I got a double dinner date to get to."

Honey gave Sorun a dismissive wave, not even bothering to look over at him. "Yeah, sure, go ahead. Nothing left here for today anyways." She looked over at Larry. "Oh, that reminds me. Larry, there's a new shipment of fabric I need you to go unload."

Larry's mouth dropped open. "What!? You just said-!" He cut himself off and pointed at Sorun. "Why can't he do it, he's barely done anything all day!"

Sorun's response was to double over in mock pain and hold his stomach. "Ouch, oof, my new artificial bones... oh, t-the pain, it's... it's overwhelming." He shuffled his feet a bit as he turned around, dipping his head to hide the small grin he was wearing. "Gotta... go recover from intensive surgery..."

"Y-you fibber!" Larry's protests fell on deaf ears, as Sorun was already stumbling out the door... only to shift into a normal, stable gait with his cane the second he was through the shop's threshold. "Sorun you fibber I saw that!"

The concept of going on a double dinner date was somewhat of a weird one to Sorun seeing as one of them didn't eat. Still left three out of four, which at seventy-five percent was a passing grade to be fair, but he didn't like Nicole being left out of things. She'd insisted so much, though, and so many *plans* had been made behind his back. Because Nicole and Bunnie had been talking and apparently that was a thing women did, they just made plans behind their partners' backs and they were forced to just go along with it.

He also didn't know if this could even be called a double dinner date. They didn't go to a restaurant or anything. This was just Antoine's house. Which wasn't *bad* , per se, because he liked visiting him, and they were having a nice time. But at the same time Sorun had kind of assumed Antoine would be the one cooking because he was pretty much the only person in their circle of friends with actual culinary skills.

It didn't really shake out that way.

"You know I shouldn't be surprised about the heavy aroma of carrots wafting in from your kitchen, Antoine, I really shouldn't. And yet I am." The both of them were in the house's living room, sitting down on the floor with a coffee table between the both of them with cards sprawled out on it. The girls were in the kitchen. Probably plotting more. "I thought you were trying to diversify her diet?"

"Oui. I was. I tried." He looked at the cards in his hand, single eye-ridge raised in confusion as he considered what he was looking at. "Sorun, I am not zinking we are playing zis right. Are you being sure you are not misremembered anyzing about zis game?"

Oh, he was sure. Though Sorun's face was set in a neutral expression he was grinning like a schoolboy on the inside. It took some persuading on his part but Nicole had briefly made a printing machine for playing cards to print out a very special deck for him to play with. He told Antoine a long time ago that one day Sorun might bring Uno into this world, and by George by did. He remembered just a few days ago when Nicole had given him the cards made to his specification and she'd been interested enough that they'd tried the game out.

She didn't want to play the game anymore after that first time. In fact she hadn't talked to him the entire day after.

"No, trust me, we're doing it right," Sorun assured Antoine.

"I started zis game weeth seven cards and now 'ave twenty," he protested, shaking the massive deck he held in his hands. "And yet you are having only four!"

"I told you the game was to get rid of the cards. It's easy, look." He played the blue draw two. "I play this card which makes you draw two more cards and cycles the turn back to me." Antoine grumbled and did draw two more cards, but then froze when Sorun played a blue reverse. "Then I play the reverse to bounce the turn back to

me." A third blue card. "Then I play this blue skip card to skip your turn and make it my turn again. Uno."

"Ze game iz about to end, isn't it?"

"Yeah. And then I play this blue four and win the game," Sorun finished, smugly grinning while Antoine narrowed his eyes at him. "It's all strategy, man."

"Strategy? What strategy? Zere iz no strategy!" Antoine exclaimed with a loud scoff. "You keep abusing zese ridiculous rules, making us switch ze hands on zeroes and sevens and stacking ze cards!"

"It's your fault for not keeping the plus twos and fours in reserve."

"Oui. *My fault* . Jeu stupide et regles stupides..." Antoine threw his cards down in a huff, staring down at them scornfully. "Was zere anyzing fun in your world or did you all just torture each other for amusement with zese ridiculous games?"

"We're gonna skip Five-Finger Fillet because I don't want to answer that." Sorun scooted around the small coffee table, ignoring the odd look Antoine was giving him, until he was sitting right besides the coyote. "And we did fun things. Real fun things! And I'll introduce 'em all. Like karaoke, everybody loves karaoke."

"Kary... oak?" The words came out slow and unsure from Antoine's mouth, slightly slurred, like he was having trouble simply even pronouncing the word. His face even wrinkled a bit, as if just saying the word brought some kind of distaste to his mouth. "I am not... understand," he said after a short pause.

"'Do not understand', you're gettin' there." Sorun stretched his arm out and draped it over Antoine's shoulders, who made a surprised yelp when Sorun drew him in further. "It's, uh, it's singing songs, basically. We'll set it up, a whole karaoke bar, I'll... I'll find a Frank Sinatra album if I go to Earth and bring it back and we'll sing over it.

Or maybe I'll just bring back a whole machine, and we'll set a place up!"

Antoine made a nervous sort of chuckle, limply grabbing at Sorun's wrist, the one hanging off his shoulder, as he looked at Sorun. "My zinging voice iz... not zo great, Sorun. Zat wouldn't zound good at all."

"Nah, that's the beauty of it, the karaoke machine shows you the lyrics and the tempo and everything, you just sing the words it's super easy!" Sorun made a playful laugh while lightly shaking Antoine again, who chuckled along with him. "'Sides, it doesn't need to sound good, that's the point of karaoke. It's just a dumb thing to do with friends."

This was... great. Yes. *This* , this whole thing. Eating out at friends' houses and hanging out. Going to bed knowing he'd wake up to a stable life. Sometimes it still felt like Sorun was living in a fever dream even after managing to get his life back in order, but here it was. Him just sitting there. Laughing with a friend. Because... hell, he didn't know when the last time was he did that. When the last time was he could just cut back without some awful something weighing him down. Or even the times he'd refused to just relax around other because of reasons Sorun couldn't even recall anymore because he didn't *care* enough to recall. It didn't matter anymore. He was here. Livin' the life.

He didn't want it to end. It felt too great.

"Oui, fine, but zen we would all be making fun of each other for ze terrible zinging," Antoine chuckled out. "Soneek would have ze worst zinging voice of zem all, we'd 'ave to invite him."

The good feelings died and Sorun's smile dropped off. A burst of anger flittered through his heart, raging until he'd managed to calm in down with a short breath. "Well, I was... thinking it'd be more a couple thing," Sorun hesitantly said with a tight voice. "We could bring our girls, make it a competition, maybe invite another couple

like, uh, I dunno... Charmy and his girl, they'd like it. Not Mina and Ash, though, she sings professionally, she'd smoke us all." A small frown formed. "Sonic isn't in a relationship right now so he can't come."

"I'm not sharing you with him. I won't share ANYTHING with him. He doesn't get to come. It's our thing. OURS."

"Ah, fine, zat's fine." Sorun's mood lightened considerably when Antoine seemed agreeing to the idea. "But, you zaid... going to ze Earth." Sorun noticed that the lighthearted expression Antoine was wearing just a few seconds ago had turned into a worried look. "You still want to go zere?"

Sorun and his big mouth. The mood was brought down a tad and now he was almost regretting bringing it up. "... Because of this new skeleton of mine I can't use that body to survive the conditions there. So that plan's been... put on pause, somewhat," Sorun confessed. He untangled his arm off of Antoine and scooted back to his previous position on the other side of the coffee table. "I talked about it with Nicole and she said if I really wanted to go she could maybe use the nanites to put together some kind of protection suit for me, but at that point I... I don't know." He tapped idly on the table as he glanced out the window. Wasn't much to look at; it was the dead of night and pitch black out. "Between searching for answers and scavenging for cool stuff to bring back here I don't know. I like where I am right now and don't really want anything to change."

"... Would zings change?" Antoine asked after a moment. "What would change?"

"I mean... I guess nothing." Sorun looked back at him. "Pragmatically speaking nothing that happens there will affect my life here. Nothing but where my head is, I guess. And I like where it is right now." Where he was happy. Where he wasn't seeing hallucinations of himself yelling at himself. Where things were finally *fine* . "I really wanted to go but now I kinda... just don't. But then on the other hand

there's this, I don't know, feeling, you know? Just... things I want closure on that I won't get unless I go."

"Zo zat's it? Peace of mind? Nozing more?"

"I guess. Yeah. That and the karaoke machine." They both shared a short laugh at that. "You think I should?"

Was this how bad it had gotten? He'd gotten so indecisive over the whole matter he needed to ask others? Sorun supposed it was. He was happy here and he didn't want to disturb that by disturbing ghosts. But at the same time he didn't know if he'd ever be fully content without getting answers for mom and Dave and all the others. But without Devil's Body that trip would be phenomenally harder, even with Nicole's help. But her help would make it feasible.

So many buts but so little conviction.

Antoine made a long sigh as he thought. The question seemed to make him uncomfortable, that was plain to see on his face, and yet when he next spoke it was with deliberate sincerity. "Sorun, I 'ave not been through zis particular kind of tragedy zo I do not know. I do not zink I have ze right to tell you what you should do. But if you are always going to be zinking about it, zen... maybe talk with Nicole more. About all ze radiation and how to avoid going to ze hospital. Again. You've been zere enough and will worry ze poor woman to death."

"Yeah, I know." That didn't really help him as much as Antoine probably thought it did. It was more or less the same conclusion Sorun had already come to. "It's not like there's a hard time limit to this or anything," Sorun mused, drumming his fingers along the table. "I can afford to wait. Wait as long as I want, really. Maybe I'll seriously considering going through with it if the feeling doesn't go away after a while."

Deep down Sorun didn't think it would. Not really. Not with how long he'd already been considering the possibility of going back to Earth.

Over time it'd strengthened and waned, always in flux due to his indecisiveness, but the urge never actually left no matter how weak it would sometimes get. He was worried that, given enough time, it might actually outweigh the desire to continue living in his cushy new life here. It was a large part of why he couldn't just let it go.

Sorun sighed. He didn't know. "Maybe we should step away from the serious stuff," he mumbled out, glancing over Antoine's shoulder and at the kitchen. He kept catching glimpses of Nicole and Bunnie's shadows in there, kept hearing a few clipped whispers and giggles. "What do you think they're talking about back there?" he asked Antoine.

"Oh, we'll never know, Sorun, ze mademoiselles keep almost everyzing to zemselves," Antoine lamented. "If I had to be ze guesser I would be guessing zem telling embarrassing stories of us but zey will never admit it."

"Hey, we can... we can think of things to make fun of them over behind their backs, too," Sorun weakly said, though he found a withering sigh leave him at the doubting look Antoine sent him. "No, yeah, you're right, they're too perfect we'll never find a single thing."

"I am afraid zo," Antoine sighed out, quickly glancing over his shoulder. "... Maybe ma cherie's preference in diet concerning ze carrots. It could be worse. At least she doesn't like corn." He made a disgusted face. "I hate ze corn."

"I don't like it, either," Sorun said. "Corn syrup's amazing, though."

Antoine blinked in confusion. "Corn... syrup?" As soon as the words left his mouth his lips wrinkled back in distaste. He looked genuinely offended by what he just heard. "Non, non zat zounds... what iz zis, Sorun, what iz zis evil thing you are bringing into my home?"

"It was an American staple was what it was. Which was honestly terrible, I'm serious, don't bring it back into this world while it still has some innocence left," Sorun said in a half-joking, half-warning tone.

"For all the heart disease it caused, though, you had to hand it to my world for finding so many industrious uses for corn. I don't remember any of them but they did a lot with it." He cupped his chin while grinning over at Antoine. "Corn here is so different, though, you only got the yellow kind. We had white corn, red corn, black, purple, even blue. We practically had corn for every color of the rainbow and then some."

"Vraiment?" Antoine leaned forwards with an interested gleam in his eyes. "Did zey actually taste palatable?"

"I heard they tasted different but I never tried it. I don't like corn." Sorun's grin grew a fraction. "It's real weird, though, the corn here doesn't try to fight you when you harvest it like Earth corn did."

"Eh?" Now Antoine looked a bit startled, with the coyote's back going a bit straight as a nervous chuckle left him. "Zis is, uh... you trying to zay ze funny, oui? Zis is a joke?"

With a serious expression betrayed by the amused gleam in his eyes, Sorun pointed at Antoine and said, "Ain't nothin' funny about corn harvest, Antoine. We lost an average of three hundred farmers annually to corn harvest." Antoine's jaw dropped open in shock. "Except for that one time, of course," Sorun continued. He leaned back and tilted his head up at the ceiling, narrowing his eyes while speaking in a deeper octave. "So many lives lost during the Corn Wars... *of '08* ."

"Mon Dieu. What happened?"

Sorun shook his head in false remorse. "Thousands died to the corn, Antoine. Pulled into those corn fields never to be seen again." His eyes tilted back down and caused his grin to grow back when he saw Antoine was shaking slightly where he sat. "They say all those scarecrows you'd see out in the fields were actually the bodies of farmers propped up by the corn as a reminder of the Corn Wars. As a reminder of what every side took from one another. And every time someone would try to take them down it'd just make more

scarecrows. The corn was relenting, unceasing." He glanced towards the window. "Come to think of it doesn't that chicken lady that runs the produce market have a scarecrow in her garden?"

"Eek!" It'd been too much. When Antoine had let out that frightened squeak and jumped up in the air, hands pulled up to his chest and teeth chattering, Sorun couldn't help it. He laughed, which made Antoine flush in embarrassment before he'd crossed his arms with an indignant look.

"Sorun, dear... you promised you wouldn't make up stories about your old home."

Feeling himself go ramrod straight, all amusement washing out in an instant, Sorun's eyes snapped to the direction of the voice he just heard. Nicole was standing at the entrance of the kitchen, a large platter held in her hands and an unamused look on her face. Bunnie was standing next to her with a similar platter, mirroring her expression.

A worried chuckle left Sorun. "I never... *explicitly* promised..." he said while rubbing the back of his neck.

"Please don't make us continue this conversation at home," Nicole said with a roll of her eyes. "We're just getting done setting the table now, so please come join us in the kitchen."

Sorun watched the both of them retreat into the kitchen, and then looked back at Antoine, who had his arms crossed and had that indignant look. "Look, uh, I didn't, none of that was- can we just go eat?" he pleaded.

"Ugh... oui, oui, let's go." Shaking his head with a sigh Antoine stood up and ventured towards the kitchen, with Sorun walking behind him. By the time the both of them arrived in the kitchen the table was set with three spots and a fourth spot that was completely absent of any plates or cutlery. Antoine and Bunnie were already setting themselves down at the table, with Bunnie wearing a teasing grin

and saying something that made Antoine hide his face in his hands. Sorun didn't even get a chance to sit down before Nicole was at his side.

"Where is your cane?" she asked, worriedly. Sorun didn't even get a chance to respond before she'd grabbed at his arm, like he'd collapse right there without it. "Did you leave it in the living room?"

He'd be annoyed if this wasn't so endearing. "I don't need it that much, Nicole, I was just walking to another room," he weakly argued, though there wasn't much energy behind his protest.

"You still can't move as well as you used to, Sorun. What if you fell?"

"I'm not gonna fall from-" Sorun cut himself off when he heard the snickers. From *both* Antoine and Bunnie, the traitors. " *You really gotta do this in front of company* !?" he whispered out at Nicole, who only shook her head as she gently guided Sorun to his own seat, against the mumbling protests he'd made. She'd only let him go and moved to her own seat once he himself was sat down.

He liked it better when she was so doting on him *without* spectators. From the warm feeling in his chest he wasn't sure his heart was of the same sentiment, but his brain could argue with it over the matter later. The food was now.

And what food it was. There was a meatloaf - whatever meat it was made from and where it was acquired from was a question Sorun had utterly given up on ever getting a straight answer for. A lot of vegetables set out... he'd try and avoid those... no fries, neither Antoine nor Bunnie ever made fries so he couldn't be that surpr- OOH BREAD.

"Gimme." No hesitation, absolutely none, the second Sorun saw that load of bread he immediately snatched up his knife and reached for it. His hands didn't even make it halfway to the bread before Nicole swatted them away.

"Sorun, you know better," she chastised. "No dessert before you eat the actual dinner."

"But it's Bunnie's carrot bread, Nicole!" Sorun whined out. "You can't just make me wait for it!"

"Ah followed mah Antoine's advice and added the pumpkin spice since ya'll seemed to really like it last time," Bunnie added.

"SHE ADDED THE PUMPKIN SPICE, NICOLE, COME ON."

Nicole's stare was unwavering, despite Sorun's protests, much to his chagrin. "Dinner first," she said in a flat voice with no room to argue.

Utter defeat. It was no use. During the small argument Antoine and Bunnie had already filled their plates with food, so grumbling under his breath Sorun reached over to cut some of the meatloaf off for himself. After he did so he picked his fork up, but not even two seconds passed before Nicole spoke up again.

"The vegetables, too, you need the nutrients."

Sorun froze, knife and fork poised in the air as his eyes drifted in Nicole's direction. "I'll get them later," he lied.

"I want to see them on your plate now."

"Who do you always gotta do this? Why do you always gotta harp on what I eat?"

"Because I care. Now, do you want to talk about your dietary needs when we go home or would you rather do something else?"

"..." Both of them had their eyes locked onto the other's, unflinching. Sorun was the one to cave, breaking eye contact first and mutely - albeit with some hesitance - shoveled what he hoped was a satisfactory amount of vegetables on his plate while ignoring the satisfied smile Nicole was wearing now.

Utter defeat. Again.

When the snickering started back up Sorun's eyes shot up to Antoine and Bunnie. "What are you two comedians laughing at?" he grumbled out.

"Aw, nothin'. Nothin'." Certainly didn't *sound* like nothing between the light chuckling Bunnie was making and that smirk she wore. "It's jus' funny watchin' you two go at it. Reminds me o' the arguments we used to have." She passed a cursory glance over at Antoine as she bent over her food. "Usually ended the same way, too."

Antoine didn't respond. What he did do was look over at Sorun so the two's eyes could meet. Upon doing so Sorun was taken back by the sheer look of sympathy the other male was giving him. It was a look of complete understand, one that screamed out, *"I understand, brother. It's all going to be okay."*

Sorun could only respond by giving a jerky nod in silent thanks. It was a world they both lived in, but at least they could share in it together.

All these thoughts were completely forgotten when Sorun noticed movement out of the corner of his eye and saw the shimmering, transparent plate of food that was in front of Nicole. It materialized further to look solid after a couple of seconds, but it didn't change the fact that Sorun knew it was just a hologram. He looked up and gave Nicole a questioning look.

"Really?"

"I wanted to feel more included," she bashfully admitted. The admittance made Sorun jolt a bit in his seat when he heard how shy she now sounded over the question and it made him want to immediately refrain his earlier comment. "I also felt it rude for me to just sit here while you all eat and-"

"No I was just surprised it's fine you can do whatever you want," Sorun quickly interrupted, going as far as to wave his hands at Nicole while nervously smiling. She seemed a bit taken back by the response from the way she leaned back. "Just, are you sure?" Sorun asked, calming down a bit as he looked down at the food. "It's not like you actually get anything out of doing that."

"I'm satisfied with just going through the motions," Nicole answered. "It feels normal."

"Alright." All he really needed to hear was that she just wanted to do it, but it felt nice knowing she liked the act that much. "It's cool if you wanna be like Plankton eating the hologram food." He suddenly grinned a bit and made a breathy chuckle. "'Good grief, he's naked!' Classic."

Nicole tilted her head a bit. "... Pardon?"

"That's another thing I gotta do if I go, scavenge around Earth for episodes of 'Spongebob'. It's a generational classis," Sorun mumbled to himself, cupping his chin and staring down at his food in thought. It drew the attention of the other three at the table, who were largely being ignored by Sorun as he deliberated with himself. "There's gotta be a DVD box set in a Wal-Mart bargain bin somewhere. Although... oh, I don't know, maybe it's not such a good idea after all." He scratched at the side of his head. "What happens if they all get obsessed over it? There isn't another media like it here. Could spoil 'em, and I'm not too sure about disturbing the mental ecosystem with something so unnatural to these parts... these are pretty dire ramifications for introducing an otherwise solid cartoon."

"Should... iz zis a conversation topic?" Antoine wondered, glancing back and forth between Sorun and Bunnie. "What iz he even talking about?"

"Uh... I don't know." Bunnie fixed Nicole with an unsure look. "Nicole, you live with 'im. You know what he's rambling on about?"

Nicole shook her head. "No. Sorun?"

Sorun looked up at her. "Yeah?"

"What are you thinking about?"

"Weighing the risks of potentially destroying a fragile ecosystem versus an injection of cross-world culture into the minds of today's youth," Sorun answered, though it didn't seem to answer anything for the other three as they still looked confused. "I'm lookin' at it and I don't think it's a good idea."

"That's... that's good," Nicole hesitantly answered, slowly nodding. "I don't think destroying ecosystems is the right thing to do."

"But would it be the *responsible* thing to do?" Sorun wondered. Would it really by right to deprive the youth of this art when he was in a position to do something about it? The *only* one? Did he have the right to make such a life-altering decision?

"I do not think a case can be made where the answer to that question is 'yes', Sorun."

"Yeah, you're probably right." With a disappointed sigh, Sorun sat back in his chair, eyes up at the ceiling. "Sucks. I woulda shown them the splinter episode first. Really get those kids' blood pumping. Ah, what could have been..."

"Can you please give me a concise explanation of what exactly you're talking about?" Nicole asked in a pleading tone.

Sorun blinked over at her. "I just did," he said.

"No. No you did not. None of that was concise. You're assuming I have context where there is none," she argued.

"The context is irrelevant. What matters is morality versus pragmatism, the core theme of this debate."

"I don't even know *what* this debate is-"

"A fact that is completely moot as consensus on an appropriate course of action has already been decided. Which is doing nothing." Sorun shifted his attention to his food and began cutting into it. "Good old nothing. Man, I love doing nothing. Doing nothing is the best, ain't it, Nicole? Glad we decided to do nothing."

Nicole continued stare, utterly lost and holographic food utterly ignored. "We decided on something?"

"Yeah, on doing nothing."

"When?"

"When you said destroying the ecosystem is a bad idea."

"How is that relevant!?" she exclaimed.

"I feel like we're not on the same wavelength here." Sorun paused in his motions and glanced up in thought, playing back the previous words of this conversation in his head. And then he grimaced. "Okay, yeah, I think I see where the confusion is coming from, that's on me, my bad." He looked back at Nicole while absentmindedly still cutting into his food. "I wanted to bring back something from Earth to keep the kids here entertained, but, well... it involved a media format that hasn't really been innovated here yet. On one hand it'd be inspiring but on the other hand I feel like there'd be a lot of negative repercussions to introducing such a foreign piece. I dunno. Am I thinking too hard about this?"

"What I think is that there could have been a legitimate discussion here if you had been this forthcoming with context initially." She paused, looking conflicted with her next question. "You're... still intent on going there?"

"... I'm on the fence about it," Sorun admitted, biting into his food. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that of all things Nicole looked a

bit *relieved* to hear that, and he'd sighed through his nose and decided to focus back on his food. He couldn't blame her for being concerned over it, not really. If their roles were reversed he'd be worried about it. Wouldn't have even blamed her if she outright refused to let him go, and though he was happy she saw how important it was to him he felt he would have been... understanding for the most part if she said no. "I'm not really in a condition to do that anyway," he continued in a mumble. "Might have to put a pin in the idea for the next couple months."

She looked even more relieved to hear that. Even smiled a bit, which... Sorun didn't know how to feel on. Maybe a bit glad someone cared about him enough to be this worried. Maybe a bit annoyed.

Over on the other end of the table Bunnie and Antoine had decided to shift attention to their own meals, the conversation between Sorun and Nicole completely lost on them. But while Antoine had abandoned them entirely in lieu of just eating his food Bunnie was only halfheartedly paying attention to her own meal while glancing back and forth between the other couple. After a few moments of quiet she'd cleared her throat.

"So, er, Sorun! The, erm, the new skeleton treatin' ya alright?" she asked. "Any concerns ya had?"

Sorun's head snapped over to her. "Oh, no, everything's been alright with it, thanks," he answered. "Body hasn't really adjusted to it completely yet but it's getting there."

"Don't hurt none?"

"Not anymore. Moving's just... weird." Sorun pursed his lips because he wasn't entirely sure how to put it into words. Aside from the weight difference the motorized joints took some getting used to because they didn't always listen to his muscles. It was a problem that was becoming less and less prevalent with time as he learned to work with it but it still startled him sometimes when his arm or something else moved in a different direction he wanted it to.

"Well, alright. That's great tah hear." Bunnie pointed her fork at Sorun with a small grin on her face. "Was gettin' kinda lonely being the only cyborg around an' all. Could maybe make a little club outta it!"

Sorun tapped the side of his plate with his knife in thought. "Do mine really count, though? You can't even see them. It's all interior."

Bunnie waved her mechanical hand. "Aw shucks, that don't matter none. And ah feel like a skeleton's a pretty big thing to swap out."

"By that logic you'd have to invite anyone with any technological implants into your club," Nicole commented from the side. The holographic meatloaf she'd taken a piece out of shimmered and briefly turned into static. "If I recall Sonic still has that translator implanted in his brain. Would that not make him eligible?"

"Ah guess that's a good point. Maybe. But that tiny li'l thing...?"

"I am not seeing ze difference," Antoine said with a shrug. "Sorun?"

"I don't want him in our club." Before he'd heard his name Sorun had been glaring down at the table, clenching down hardly on his own utensils. When he heard Antoine he'd relaxed and looked at him. "He didn't replace anything like us," he responded in a blank voice. "It doesn't count."

"That seems pedantic," Nicole pointed out. "Is it really that significant a difference?"

"Naw, Sorun... Sorun's onto something, ah think." Bunnie glanced at her own cybernetic arm, frowning a bit. "It ain't an easy thing tah get used to. Most he had tah get used to was understandin' more voices than usual." She shrugged and returned to her food. "Guess we ain't too serious with it. Two'd be too small fer a club anyways."

The sadness from the club not being formed was dwarfed by the satisfaction Sorun felt that Sonic wouldn't have been invited to their

hypothetical club, which brought his mood up a fair bit. "Yeah," he said. "With all you've had to deal with you're probably sick of other cyborgs anyways."

"Ugh, don't you get me started now," Bunnie groaned out. "If I nevah hafta see another one of them crazy Dark Legion fellers it'll be too soon. Ah'm just glad that mess is over with."

"You should have seen the people's reactions at the announcement of your victory," Nicole said with a small smile. "Everyone was dancing in the streets. It was very amusing to see."

"I was sleeping in bed at the time. Recovering." Sorun's voice became a bit distant as he stared down at his food. He felt his mood begin to drop once this topic had been brought up. "Big congrats on the win and all. I just..."

"Just what?" Bunnie asked.

Sorun glanced up at her. He hadn't wanted to bring it up. It was a couple of days after his surgery, when the Freedom Fighters did their big final assault on New Megaopolis. They'd won, everyone had seen it coming and Dimitri had made good on his promise to sabotage the defenses so the win had been even easier than predicted. Sorun, of course, had been asleep at the time and had to be filled in afterwards.

He remembered it a bit fondly. He'd barely made it out of bed before Nicole had just appeared, smile wide and laughing as she'd hugged him so hardly they'd fallen back on the bed. And after a whole ten minutes of her profusely apologizing she'd explained how they'd won. Final victory achieved. Eggman Empire was dismantled and no more.

Really, it was an event that should've had the whole world celebrating since it was finally free now. And from all the noise that night from all over the city it practically felt like the world was celebrating. There'd even been a big feast and everything. And

Sorun would admit it didn't feel as momentous as it should have, it felt like that was the general consensus among everyone, but to be fair it was a conclusion they all saw coming months in advance. Nobody'd been holding their breath on them losing, not really. The victory didn't come as a surprise. It was more... relief, maybe. At the world finally being liberated.

And Sorun would be right there alongside everyone else if it weren't for one single detail.

He hadn't wanted to ask about it. He'd figured it wasn't his fight so he didn't have a right to question it. Didn't have a say, even if he'd personally fought the guy in the past. But he'd be a liar if the most important detail of the end of the conflict didn't rankle him, didn't keep him up that night as he kept thinking it over, all the double-takes he'd taken when he heard. And he was assured it was all fine. And he believed those words since they came from Nicole. But now the topic was here and he couldn't help the question.

"Why did you just leave him?" Sorun asked. He was so eager for in answer the question was almost a demand. "I just don't understand."

Nicole didn't have much of an outward reaction to the question. Antoine and Bunnie were different: they'd both stiffened, growing visually uncomfortable at the question as they glanced at each other. "Sorun-" Bunnie began.

"No, really, I don't get it," Sorun continued. "The guy terrorized everyone for a decade- okay, wasn't the same Eggman for a large chunk of that time but nobody really cares about that detail," he amended. "After everything he did, when you finally beat him back, beat everything he threw at you, finally, *finally* got that definitive win... you just *left him there* ? Left him in that dome in New Megaopolis?"

When the Freedom Fighters had come back from their final mission and he heard they *didn't* have Eggman in tow wearing chains Sorun had been stunned. Because he figured that was the entire point of

everything, that it was the inevitable conclusion to it all. Part of him even dared to hope that the reason was because something had happened and he died. Maybe took himself out in some ill-fated last-ditch "you didn't win!" suicide attempt or was shot in the back by the Dark Legion or something, anything, just some explanation.

But no. The Freedom Fighters just left him there after they won. They didn't capture him, didn't do anything. They won and left. It didn't make sense to Sorun. It... honestly almost sounded like insanity to him. He was barely tolerable over the idea of imprisoning but *this* ? This was so far beyond the pale of what he expected he didn't even know what to say. So he'd said nothing, deciding to trust them all since in the end it was their decision. But he couldn't help wanting to question it.

"Sorun, Robotneek..." Antoine began, swallowing at the very uncomfortable topic. Not that Sorun saw *how* it was uncomfortable. "He was... driven insane."

"This is known," Sorun said. "The man's insane. I think everyone in the world is aware."

"Not that kind of insane," Bunnie mumbled out with a shake of her head. "You'd've had tah been there, Sorun. When Sonic beat him fer the last time the man just... snapped. Was rollin' around on the floor and frothin' at the mouth. None of what he was saying made a lick o' sense."

"Zere were no words. Ze man was rabid. Completely mad," Antoine added. He touched the top of his lip with his fingers. "Sorun, he tore hiz own mustache clean off."

In any other circumstance Sorun would have laughed when he heard that, but felt that wasn't appropriate right now so he kept it in. And frankly with the current subject he wasn't completely sure he was even in the mood.

"To put it in Snively's words it seems that Sonic had trounced Robotnik so many times he couldn't mentally comprehend it," Nicole said. Sorun looked over at her in disbelief because she actually sounded sad, of all things. "I don't fully understand it myself, but I don't know the man's mind and perhaps that's for the best. But they speak the truth, Sorun. Robotnik's loss came as such a shock that he isn't even capable of forming words anymore." She paused, eyes drifting down to her holographic food in thought. "I'm not sure what better a prison there is than one's own mind," she muttered after a time.

"So you all just left him there? With Snively? You're not even gonna do anything against him?"

"No. The goal was to neutralize Robotnik as a threat, and though we didn't intend it in his current state the only person he's an actual threat to is himself," she said.

"Oui. Snively agreed to look after ze madman, so we left," Antoine finished. "Eet iz doubtful ze man will make trouble, and even eef he does he iz no Robotneek. Ze war's over. Haz been for some time and we're just now realizing eet."

"Ah think it's best tah just enjoy it for what it is," Bunnie added, glancing at Sorun. "He can't hurt no one no more. We're all still here and if somethin' does go south ah doubt it'll evah be as bad as anythin' Eggman evah threw at us."

Sorun exhaled. They made good points. He couldn't really refute any of them. At the same time he was having a hard time agreeing with them, because he still wanted that man dead and in the ground so he never had to think about him ever again. He had to wonder how much it mattered, though, if at the end of the day it all worked out anyways. Maybe it didn't really matter in the end if he was dead or stark-raving mad, probably in a straight jacket and tossed in a rubber-padded cell somewhere. Maybe it wasn't even his business to criticize. It was *their* war. He'd just fought in it a bit.

"Ah. Whatever. I don't want to think about the Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man anymore. He'd doesn't deserve the effort," Sorun said. It was whatever in the end. He had a new life and it wasn't worth pursuing the thoughts anymore. Wasn't his business and wasn't worth the time. It was done. Over. And any thoughts of maybe going on his own to finish the job were discarded, because dammit, he'd built too much to risk losing it doing something stupid like that. No. If they said it was done then it was done. He could easily live with that.

"Sorun," Nicole chastised, sending him a admonishing look. "I know the man has done little to deserve respect-"

"Nothing, he's done nothing."

"He's entitled to some decency regardless," she said.

Sorun sighed. She just had to be so nice, huh... "It was a reference to a song from Earth, nothing more," he explained in a chuckle, though all this served to do make Nicole go from admonishing to giving him a disapproving pout. "I thought it was funny," he grumbled out, returning to his meatloaf.

... Ah, was getting kind of low on meat. And the vegetables were untouched, making Sorun send a nervous glance Nicole's way. If only Sonic's pet dog was here for Sorun to smuggle veggies into his stomach like he'd done in the old days when he lived in his family's house.

"A song? Oh, speakin' o' songs," Bunnie started, suddenly smiling, "Mina and her band's gonna be doing a big concert to celebrate the victory."

"Oh, I heard! Everyone in the entire city is planning on attending!" Mirroring Bunnie's smile, Nicole turned towards Sorun. "Isn't that wonderful to hear, Sorun?"

God, maybe he could just pocket the vegetables and just throw them out in the trash at home. She wouldn't notice, would she? No, not if

he was slick enough. "Hm?" Sorun sounded out, still staring intently at his vegetables.

"Mina's concert!" The exuberance at which Nicole said that slightly startled Sorun and forced him to abandon the vegetables to look over at her. "Remember that promise we'd made?"

It took Sorun a second to remember. "Ah yeah. How could I forget that day? A giant robot wolf almost bit me in half. And then we- oh, right, that promise." He felt his face heat as the memories became more clear the deeper he dived in. "We... did say we'd go to the next concert, huh? Since that one got ruined."

"Well... in fairness everyone is going so it will look strange if we *don't* go, but I don't see how that devalues anything." She reached under the table and grabbed at Sorun's wrist. He froze. It was just a romantic gesture, right? Had to be. It's what the current mood was. "It'll be nice. We can all enjoy ourselves with all our friends over the fact we don't have to think about the war anymore."

Boy, wasn't that a concept: a worry-free, fun-filled day with friends. Was practically a dream come true for Sorun, and a concert did sound pretty nice. And more importantly he had promised. "Yeah. It'll be great." He found himself genuinely smiling at the thought. A fun event with everyone sounded like a nice diversion, especially if it meant a day off work since Honey would likely close the shop if everyone was going. Yeah. It sounded like it'd be the best. A good way of celebrating the fact everything could finally be normal.

"I'm glad you think so." And just like that the smile Nicole wore dropped as she lifted Sorun's arm up from under the table and dropped it on the table's surface. Most noticeably he was holding a fistful of vegetables. "You're still not getting at the bread until you finish eating these, Sorun."

Caught. Not good. It felt like Sorun's stomach jumped up into his throat as he slowly looked from his hand to Nicole, who was giving him an unimpressed look. "... This wacky new skeleton of mine, you

know?" Sorun chuckled out nervously, hoping to play it off. "Does all sorts of stuff on its own sometimes, ha ha ha... alright, fine," he grunted, giving up and tossing the vegetables back on his plate.

A/N- I mean listen I'm trying to play it off but there's no fronting it. E veryone who read the comics already knows what's coming. I'm basically holding a giant Wrestlemania sign over here while pointing up to the stands.

Also after five months give or take four and a half months the first chapter of the side project's almost done. Should ship out sometime between Sunday and Tuesday. Or Wednesday if I'm feeling particularly lazy. Thursday at the absolute latest. Maybe Friday.

Chapter 104

A/N- Alright, I'm back from FFXVI

Recursion Error

Episode 104- Going off script

"So are you sure this butter doesn't have any corn syrup?" Sorun asked the Mobian manning the food station. "I just really think it would enhance the efficacy of this butter. Put some thought into it."

"... What is wrong with you?" the sheep asked, buckets of popcorn in hand as he gave Sorun a bewildered stare. "Why would... syrup? From corn? What planet are you from where that would be considered a good idea?"

"Uh... Earth," Sorun dumbly replied. A beat of silence passed between of them, Sorun spending the silence - for how much silence there was with a crowd of hundreds of people in the stadium behind them - looking between the cane in one hand and the bucket of popcorn in the other, and then looked back at the sheep. "That wasn't very tactful, I'm sorry for that," he apologized.

"No no, it's... it's all good," the sheep nervously chuckled, "Soru- er, sir. Sorun, sir."

Sorun cringed back. "Please don't call me sir," he said. "I feel old enough with the cane. It's bad enough I'm seventeen. I'm ancient."

"Seventeen really isn't-"

" *Old* . Falling apart at the seams." A dramatic sigh left Sorun as he stabbed his cane into the ground and used it as a pivot to spin around, turning his back to the food vendor. "Woe is me to have

suffered under the hands of entropy, such is the fate of all who live in this cruel world."

"Whatever you say, man," the sheep sighed out as he waved a hand. "Enjoy the concert."

"Hm?" Sorun glanced back over his shoulder at the sheep. "Oh, thanks. You gonna see it, too?"

"Yeah, but I'm stuck in this popcorn booth 'til it starts."

"Hm. Cool, cool." By that point Sorun had grown bored, so, cane and popcorn in hand, he began making his way away from the food stand and towards the stadium.

As far as stadiums went this one was about as grand as they came. Large. Imposing. Circular. It was about equal in size to sports stadiums they had back on Earth, the really big and fancy ones they'd display during international events. Considering its size it seemed almost an egregious use of space, and when Sorun had asked Nicole why she'd put in a stadium of all things when she designed the city she'd simply said, "I thought the people might enjoy using it." So far it'd only been used to host soccer games and, as of this moment, host Mina's concert, which... fair, Sorun supposed, as there wasn't much else use one could get out of the stadium. Certainly not blood sports. Mobians would never go for that.

Neither would Sorun. He'd never even so much as seen a single game of American football back home. That said he wouldn't have minded terribly if there were ever sanctioned fights with practice weapons in that stadium, maybe even a tournament... Maybe he'd float the idea by Elias one of these days. There was a whole royal guard force. They might go for something like that.

"Even Antoine fights pretty good. I just wanna see something interesting." It took some crossing of corridors in the underside of the stadium, and some stair climbing, but he'd finally made it up to the stadium seats. But, glancing around... yeah. He couldn't find where

his friends were. There were hundreds and hundreds of seats everywhere, and those were just the ones he could see. It didn't help that the denizens of this world were all so colorful that it was turning into a rainbow mesh of colors wherever he looked. How was he supposed to find-

The hairs on the back of Sorun's neck pricked up. He didn't even need to hear him. He could feel him standing right behind him.

Clamping down quick on the fury roiling in his heart, Sorun, as calm as he could, turned around. Sure as hell it was Sonic, leaning against one of the guardrails on one of the sets of stairs that ran up through all the seats at this section of the stadium. He immediately noticed how his smile was a bit more subdued than usual, not the - *"Arrogant, self-righteous, how fucking dare you do what you did to me"* - usual cocky smile he wore.

"Uh, hey, Sorun." He gave a small wave to the other teen. "Noticed you wandering around a bit. Lost?"

"... It would appear so," Sorun answered. His voice was calm and measured, slow in its response. "With all these people I seem to have lost track of the others."

"Heh, yeah. Can't blame ya, with all these seats filled." The hedgehog hopped over the railing and gestured at Sorun to follow. "Come on, I'll lead you b- uh?"

Sorun had cut Sonic off mid-sentence by slipping through one of the gaps in the guardrail to stand besides him. "Don't mind me. We can go," he said. As if there was any chance of him walking *behind* Sonic. Letting him lead him. They'd either walk side-by-side or he'd brush him off to find the others on his own.

Sonic didn't seem to care, though, as he just shrugged as the two began moving. "Nice that the war's finally over, huh?" he'd asked as they walked.

"You don't sound as happy as everyone else," Sorun pointed out.

"I am. I just..." Sonic hesitated, glancing upwards as he thought. "... I just really didn't wanna win the way I did."

"Driving Eggman insane by accident." He knew from conversations by the others that whatever had happened in New Megaopolis that he'd been off-put by what happened. Everyone had, really, but from how the others talked the experience had downright disturbed Sonic. Sorun didn't really understand how. "What even happened with him? What'd you do?"

"I didn't do anything. He was in this big dumb spider mech, I trashed it, and he just flipped out. I didn't even touch him."

"Were you running your mouth the whole time?"

"I- w-well yeah, but I always do... I always did that, Sorun, and it never caused him to have a mental breakdown before." He looked down from the sky to face Sorun. Forget having a slightly less-than-bright smile, he looked conflicted now. Which only served to annoy Sorun more. "What do you think?"

"I think you won and you should stop worrying about it. I guarantee you're the only one stressing about the fact you mentally destroyed the man, even if by accident." Sorun lifted his cane up and swept it over the stadium. "Everyone else is bursting with joy. They don't care and they shouldn't. He's taken enough time from people."

"... Yeah, but..." He sighed and looked back up at the sky. "Kinda crummy weather, huh?"

Sorun glanced upwards. It was heavy overcast - the entire sky was covered in dark gray clouds. Sonic was right. Unfortunately Sorun absolutely refused to agree with him even if he was factually correct, so instead he mumbled a simple "Mmf" as they continued walking.

They found them eventually. All their friends lined up in seats in one of the rows in the stadium. "They're here, too?" Sorun asked in some surprise. A majority of the Chaotix were sitting in the row below the others, chatting among themselves.

"Yeah, they're visiting to celebrate the big win. Dunno where Espio went. Guess he thought the concert'd be too loud." Sonic blinked and looked to his side. "Huh? Sorun? Where'd you- oh."

By the time Sonic had finished speaking halfway Sorun had already left. He'd already seen who he'd been looking for: Nicole and Silver were sitting in seats at the far end of the row the others were on. Virgil was there, too. Laying on Silver's head, who was pouting and looking upwards at the Chao. He jumped up a bit when Sorun held out the bucket of popcorn to him.

"Take this," Sorun said. Silver did so, hesitantly, and looked to Sorun for clarification. "I'm not allowing you to experience this without a snack. It wouldn't be right."

"Um... I think it's fine?" Silver looked at the popcorn and back at Sorun. "What even is this?"

"The fact you even have to ask saddens me," Sorun said to him. "You lived in absolute squalor in the future if you have to question this. No more. You're gonna enjoy this like a normal person and not some post-apocalyptic survivalist."

"Chao." Virgil raised one of his bladed arms and shuffled around some of the hair on Silver's head, making his ears flick.

Sorun hummed in contemplation. "You can have some of the popcorn if you manage to steal it without Silver catching you," he decided, and then turned around and began moving away. Silver'd made a noise of protest as Sorun left, and then yelped out in indignation when Virgil jabbed forwards and impaled some of the pieces of popcorn on his bladed arm.

A breathy chuckle left Sorun from the noises he heard behind him. He saw the empty seat next to Nicole and sat down in it, though he noticed she was staring off at Silver and Virgil, who were still fighting over the popcorn. Sorun placed both hands on the top of his cane and leaned forwards in his seat as he watched alongside her.

"You might have avoided an altercation between them altogether if you'd just bought them both popcorn," Nicole pointed out. The popcorn bucket was enveloped in a teal energy as it was floated away from the pair, with Silver smiling triumphantly. And them Virgil had flew forwards in a blackish-blue blur, impaling more popcorn on his arms as Silver yelled and out waved his arms in the Chao's direction.

"We would've missed a show," Sorun told her.

The lynx looked back at him with a flat expression. "You needed more entertainment than the concert?"

"It's a pre-show for the main show," Sorun argued. Now Silver was holding the bucket tight against his chest as Virgil sat on his head, nibbling on the popcorn pieces impaled on his arms. The white hedgehog had a guarded expression as he grabbed a handful of popcorn and shoved it his mouth, though then he'd blinked in surprise and perked up after eating it. "And besides, there wasn't a better opportunity to introduce him to popcorn. It's a special food for special events."

"So special you didn't buy any?"

"I don't like popcorn." He glanced down at his hands, still resting atop the cane. "... And I've only so many hands."

"..." Nicole didn't respond. She did, however, reach over and grasp at one of his hands, which made Sorun visually relax in his seat. "It's nice to see you care so much about him."

He felt himself grow a bit flustered, making him unconsciously shake his head a bit. "I-I'm not, I just feel he needs- I-" He cut himself off with a sigh, slumping back slightly as he stared down towards the center of the stadium. "There's a concert, Nicole, the whole reason we're all here. Pay attention to that."

Yeah, he could see her now. The yellow-furred mongoose was stepping out onto a stage that was set up in the middle of the stadium grounds, with her band members situated around her as they fiddled with their various instruments. She was speaking something into a microphone, but the crowds roaring all around them was drowning out most of what she was saying.

Thunder rumbled in the dark skies above.

Nicole made an amused chuckle. "Yes, of course. How silly of me to try and ignore it."

"Yes. Very. Completely. Let's focus on that and nothing else," Sorun quickly said. "Between missing the concert the first time and hearing about Mina's ability to sing the whole time I've been here I'll be disappointed if she doesn't sound like a miracle."

He wouldn't really. Mina could end up sounding absolutely terrible and Sorun wouldn't mind too terribly. This was... enough. Just being here with everyone and enjoying something together. Everything being peaceful. Not having to worry about everything. She could make his ears bleed with her singing and Sorun wouldn't care because he was content with just this alone.

Lightning crackled overhead through the clouds.

Nicole's fingers stroked over the top of Sorun's hand. "I'm sure you won't be disappointed!" Nicole laughed out. "She's-"

A bolt of lightning struck down from the sky and behind Mina on the stage. The resulting silence was deafening - everyone in the stadium had grown silent. Thankfully nobody on stage seemed to be harmed

by the lightning strike, not even Mina, who'd been closest to where the lightning hit. She was just standing back in shock because there was... someone standing there. Standing there and appeared to be, from what Sorun saw, raving. Screaming and raving at the top of his lungs. Some monkey Mobian he had never seen before.

"..." Sorun's hand tightened on the head of his cane. Blue, electrical sparks traveled up the length of the cane. As he stared down at the stage he saw a blue blur slam into the monkey who'd just appeared - *"Was it the lightning? He... came through that...?"* - out of nowhere and slammed into him. It was Sonic. He was fighting the strange monkey Mobian now.

Sorun breathed out. More electrical sparks traveled up the cane, and its tip began glowing an intense blue.

"Sorun?"

He snapped his head to the side. Nicole had flinched back in surprise from the movement and the intense expression he held. Silver and Virgil were looking towards him, too, each looking as concerned as Nicole did at the moment. He tried breathing out again, the intense expression fading as he calmed down. Energy stopped collecting around the cane.

The face was a lie. Sorun certainly didn't feel calm. He hadn't felt this furious in a good bit.

"I want to go get something to drink. I'll return shortly," Sorun said to them in a clipped tone. He rose up out of his seat, face completely impassive and expressionless as he slammed the tip of his cane down. It made a loud *CLACK!* as he did so, and he couldn't bear to look at the others as he crossed their seats.

He couldn't bear to look at anyone right now.

"It's always fucking something. Never fails."

Earlier before Sorun had entered the stadium he'd noticed there were barrels of water set up on a table near the entrance with cups stacked next to them. Nobody was here, of course. They were all in the stadium, watching Sonic fight a monkey person who'd rode in on a goddamn lightning bolt. It was just him standing out here alone, filling a cup with water as he frowned down at it.

Of course something would happen that would ruin the concert. Of course Sorun couldn't just enjoy some time with his friends. Of course the war ending didn't mean they all got to live a peaceful life where nothing extraordinary happened anymore. He almost laughed at such an idiotic thought. Why would they? This was Mobius. That concept didn't fucking exist on this planet. Normal life? On Mobius? Laughable.

"Hey, Sorun?"

The Voidborn made a sigh. He turned around, leaning his back against the water barrel. His cane was in his left hand while the right held the cup of water, which he brought to his lips as he looked towards the speaker. It was Silver. He didn't see either Virgil or the popcorn with him. He was just standing there with a concerned look in his yellow eyes.

"By now Virgil will have eaten your popcorn," Sorun warned him after drinking the water. He glanced towards the empty food vendor nearby. "Though there's nobody looking if you wanna go raid some more. I won't tell."

"What? I don't care abou- forget the popcorn!" Silver blinked at his own outburst and muttered a quick apology before asking, "What happened? You just walked out."

"I said where I was going, didn't I?" Sorun shook the small cup of water. "I just wanted to go cool my frustrations off." He paused, eyes glancing towards the stadium. He could see the occasional bolt of lightning arc up over the top. "Is Nicole worried?"

"Yeah, but... I think she had to go deal with that, so she asked me to check on you," Silver explained. "Who was that guy?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Sorun truthfully replied. He took another drink of water. "He's ruined everyone's day so he's not my most favorite person at the moment, but otherwise I can't be bothered to care to know. Let Sonic and the rest deal with him." He lowered his eyes to the ground, shuffling a bit in place. "But... thank you for coming to check on me." If nothing else, he could be a bit grateful for having people that cared enough to check on him. It didn't fix any of this, but it was comforting solace nonetheless.

Silver sounded much less worried when he next spoke. "It's fine, but... you just looked so angry," he said, causing Sorun to look back up at him. "I don't know, you just had this *look* on your face."

"I was upset. I think that's understandable given what just happened."

"Yeah, but..." Silver cut himself off with a sigh. His shoulder slumped forwards as he said, "I guess the concert's off, huh?" He sounded disappointed. Sorun knew the feeling.

"Likely." Sorun's eyes wandered away, towards the opposite end of where the stadium was. He saw a purple form sprinting between the houses towards the exit to the city. Him and someone else. *"Huh. That's where Espio went off to. He's in a hurry, looks like. Who's he with?"* Sorun didn't recognize the other Mobian running with him. A male lynx one dressed... weirdly. Sandals, pants, and a vest that had an almost... eastern aesthetic to it, but it was hard to see from this distance. *"Ah, whatever, none of my business,"* Sorun thought with a shrug as the two disappeared beyond some trees.

"So what happens now?" Silver asked, causing Sorun's eyes to flick back to him. "Does everyone just go home now?"

Sorun shrugged. "Wait for an official announcement, I suppose, but I wouldn't be surprised if that's the final outcome." Which was...

extremely vexing. Sorun'd been genuinely excited over all this and had been looking forwards to having a normal day. "They'll hopefully reschedule the event," Sorun added, though it was said in a mumble as he swirled his cup around.

"Maybe. Hey, all the fighting sounds died down a bit ago, did you notice?"

"Don't care enough to."

"Ah. Alright." Silver turned around towards the stadium entrance. He blinked, and leaned forwards while flattening his hand and holding it over his eyes. "Hey, is... that Sonic over there? That guy's with him."

The wooden cup cracked in Sorun's grasp, much to his chagrin. He looked up - they were indeed there. In fact Sonic was waving over at Sorun to come over there. He refused to move from this spot, taking another drink out of the cup while folding his other arm across his chest, cane still in hand.

"I think he wants you to go over there," Silver pointed out.

"So it would seem," Sorun replied.

"... Are you gonna go?" Silver looked back at Sorun.

"No."

One of Silver's ears flicked and he gave Sorun and odd look. "Why not?"

"I haven't finished my drink. He has legs. If he wants something he can come over here."

A few seconds passed with Sonic still waving over at Sorun. He got the hint eventually, because he slumped his shoulders and began walking over to their direction. The other - the lightning monkey Mobian that interrupted everything and Sorun was struggling not to

attack - was in tow with Sonic. They both stopped in front of the other pair, with Silver stepping off to the side.

"Hey, Sorun, your ears busted or somethin'?" The question was asked with a light tone by Sonic, and with a small grin. "Mina didn't even get to start the concert."

Sorun didn't respond. Instead he tipped his head as far back as possible while drinking from the cup, keeping his eyes on Sonic. Looking down at him.

"Uh... okay." Sonic blinked and shook his head. "Could I ask a favor and have you open up a portal for us real quick? We have somewhere to be."

Sorun lowered the cup from his lips. He glanced behind Sonic and at the monkey Mobian. He found it interesting this one had eastern-looking clothing, too: vestments that had yin-yang symbols on them. He was also looking at Sorun questioningly, looking back and forth between him and Sonic. Otherwise he seemed calm. Almost anxious.

"I see." Sorun lost all interest in the monkey and looked back at Sonic. "If I recall you're the fasted thing on the planet. And it appears your legs still work."

"Okay, sure, but he isn't as fast," Sonic said, pointing his thumb over at the monkey who frowned in response. "We just need a quick ride to New Megaopolis."

"Subtext is evidently lost on you, so allow me to clarify." Sorun's eyes narrowed at Sonic. "Buzz off and walk yourself. I'm not opening you a portal."

Now Sonic looked confused. More than that he stepped back and gave Sorun a look as if he'd just been struck. The monkey was passively looking on, though Silver over on the side had blinked at Sorun in surprise. "Huh?" Sonic squinted and tilted his head back in

confusion. "Wha- huh?" He looked back at the monkey and then back at Sorun. "If it's 'cause you're mad at that guy then-"

"I couldn't care less about whoever that is and what he just did," Sorun interrupted, not being entirely truthful. "I'm not opening you a portal."

Sonic's mouth dropped open in surprise. There was confusion clearly written on his face. "Okay, um... Sorun, it's really important," he tried, pressing his palms together and pointing the fingers at Sorun. "There's something serious going on in New Megaopolis and we need to go check, so can you *please* help us out here?"

Anger began broiling inside of Sorun. No, more than that. Sheer disbelief at the audacity of this hedgehog and sheer rage at what was being asked of him. "As you seem to have *forgotten* , I am no longer a Freedom Fighter," Sorun seethed out, "so you have no right to ask such a thing from me."

"What's going on with you?" Sonic asked, his confusion only growing. "Sorun, I-I'm not asking you to fight or anything, I- it's a single portal, what's the big deal?"

"The big deal is I carry packages now, not living people," Sorun tersely replied through barely-repressed anger. "Go yourself."

Sonic's arms limply fell to his sides. Confusion was giving away to annoyance on the blue Mobian's face. "Okay, Sorun, I know you've been to New Megaopolis once before. I know for a fact you can open a portal there," he said, words growing more clipped as he talked. "It doesn't even take you ten seconds, man, come on."

"Pay me."

"You gotta be- for real?" Sonic palmed his own forehead and turned around, walking back a few steps. "You're actually being serious right now?" he asked, turning back around to face Sorun.

"My entire profession is making portals, Sonic. The days of lending my power to your cause are far behind me," Sorun said to him in a flat tone. He took another drink from his cup. "More than that it's my power and I'll do whatever I want with it, and what I *don't* want to do is open you a portal. So if you want a ride that badly then you'll have to pay for the service."

"... Okay just to be clear you're not joking? You're *actually* doing this right now?" The disbelief on Sonic's face was slowly giving way to frustration. Seeing the expression begin to form served to somewhat elevate Sorun's mood. "Sorun. It's just a small favor."

The Voidborn didn't respond. He just tilted his head back and drank from his cup again while never taking his eyes off Sonic.

"You actually are doing this, I can't believe it." Sonic made an angry-sounding sigh and pinched at his nose. "I can't... fine, whatever, how much you want?"

"Hm..." Sorun tapped his cane in thought. He almost considered actually humoring Sonic... but the idea of enraging him even more was a prospect Sorun couldn't resist. "You're asking me to assist in matters I've long since done away with while also violating my personal ethics as a package courier. I couldn't ask for any less than a million mobiums." He glanced at the monkey. "A head."

Sonic froze. He blinked once, and then his eyes narrowed over at Sorun. "Okay, Sorun, the joke's starting to get a bit old now," he said, tone growing lower.

"There is no joke," Sorun responded. "I'm quite serious. Two million or you can get out of my face and stop wasting my time."

"You can't just make up some bogus price on-"

"I can monetize my power however I wish, *Sonic* ." Sorun hissed the name out. "You of all people have no right to ask anything of me. You will *NEVER* have the right to ask me for anything." He pointed his

cane at the stands. "Go beg Sally or Elias for the money or go along your own way to New Megaopolis."

"What is wrong with you!?" The dam finally broke, and Sonic yelled out in anger at Sorun. "This is an actual, serious emergency! Ten seconds! I'm asking for ten seconds of your time here to help everyone out! It's not even that hard for you to do! You do it all the time!"

"U-um... Sorun?" Both Sorun and Sonic snapped their heads over at Silver. He flinched at the looks, taking a step back with his hands nervously curled towards his center. "This, um, this sounds kind of serious. Are you sure you can't help out a bit? Just this once?" He looked away at the piercing glare Sorun was giving him. "I-I don't know wh-what the problem is," he stuttered out, "but wouldn't... wouldn't it be nice to help?"

"Silver..." All the anger he felt, and all the joy he felt at making Sonic feel even the least bit frustrated, all completely flooded out of Sorun when he saw the nervous demeanor Silver was currently holding. He didn't want him to see this. He didn't want Silver to be anywhere near this. "It would... mean a lot to me if you left right now," Sorun told him. "Please. Just go back and wait for me."

"Soru-?"

"Please."

"You... alright." Silver cast one more look at Sonic, who seemed to be a mixture of confusion and anger currently, and then back at Sorun, who was staring at him. "I-I'll go wait at our seats. Just, er, no fighting? Please?"

"... It won't got that far. I promise." Sorun felt a small bit of relief when that was enough to convince Silver, as he turned around and began walking away. As soon as he was out of earshot Sorun turned back to Sonic. The seething fury and glee returned. "So, what else can I deny for you today?"

He didn't even make it to the entrance of the stadium before he heard the two yelling behind him.

Silver had flinched when he heard it. Sonic's growingly frustrated voice and the cold, callous tone that Sorun was speaking in. It made his footsteps speed up as he made it to the entrance of the stadium, just wanting to be away from all the negativity those two were generating just by yelling at each other. His heart went out to the poor monkey person that had to stand there and just watch all that.

"I wonder what's gotten into Sorun...?" Silver wondered as he walked down the corridor under the stadium. It was a long, dark hallway. The only source of light was the large, open entrance at the far end of the corridor. *"He seemed so calm and happy after the whole surgery thing and I thought everything was fine. What happened?"*

Admittedly Sorun had always been kind of tense, for as long as Silver knew him. Maybe a bit irritable, but knowing everything Silver did about him he couldn't be all that surprised. But in his experience even on his worst days he tried to be polite and was never that... well, *mean* with anyone! But back there when he was talking with Sonic it was like all of that vanished. That searing look he kept giving Sonic, that tone so full of derision, the way he seemed to get more animated the angrier Sonic got, as if he was liking the conflict he was creating. Or maybe just liking Sonic getting mad. Silver didn't get it either way. It didn't make sense for someone to get happier because they were making things worse.

"It just... doesn't make sense. Sorun doesn't act that way-"

There was a sound of static and a small whooshing sound from besides Silver. Somebody dressed completely in red stepped next to him and placed a black-gloved hand on his shoulder before he could react.

"Hey," Rubrum greeted. "Let's go for a walk."

"Who-!?" Silver yelped out in surprise and reflexively swung his arm to try and dislodge the foreign hand from his shoulder. And then he made a startled gasp and stepped back in shock; he wasn't in the stadium corridor anymore. He was... he wasn't even in the city anymore! This was a forest! Short, panicked breaths left Silver as he spun around, but everywhere he looked there were just more trees. It was even a bright afternoon sky - it'd been overcast a second ago!

Silver's mind began spinning as fast as he was as he looked around. He was just in the city. Just there, and now he was here out in the middle of the forest! *"Where is- how- what just happened!?"* his mind screamed out as he looked around. And then he froze, because there he was. Someone dressed completely in red, and their face obscured with a red hood, leaning against a nearby tree as they looked towards Silver. They waved at him.

"Wh-what the... who are you, what did you just do!?" Silver yelled out. He was too confused to articulate his feelings. The confusion from what was happening and the wariness he felt from the person in front of him were all too conflicting, too much happening for him to make sense of it. It was making him feel terribly confused.

"I took us... about a hundred miles from New Mobotroplis," the red-dressed person - male from the voice - said. "And a week into the future."

"What!?" Oh no, that was just more confusing. It made Silver's face squint harder from the narrowed look he was already giving the man. "Why would- who even are you!?"

"I'm... some guy," he introduced, pointing his thumb at himself.

"I-I-I meant a name!" Silver stuttered out.

"In this rotten world names are an immaterial thing that don't matter all that much," the red guy said as he pushed himself off the tree. "You'll just have to work with that."

That didn't help him at all. "Alright..." Silver muttered out, even though this wasn't alright at all. "You... said you took me into the future? You're a time-traveler like me?"

The red guy froze for a second. And then he laughed. "Ahahaha! N-no, not at all," he chuckled out, shaking his hooded head. "Time travel implies I can go backwards and forwards in time. I can't go backwards. Forwards I can do - forwards is easy. Backwards is... a whole 'nother ballgame." He tilted his head at Silver. "Then again you don't have your precious Time Stone so I guess that doesn't apply to you, either."

Silver's fists clenched at his side. "How do you know about that?"

The red guy sighed and slumped his torso forwards, arms hanging limp. "I just abducted you and stole you into the future without your consent, these really the questions you wanna ask?"

"Yes! I mean no! I mean- agh!" Silver shook his head and ran his hands through his quills. Now he was just trying to confuse him. "Why did you take me here!?" he yelled out, pointing a finger at him.

"Ah, that..." A remorseful sigh left the red guy. He crouched down onto the ground, arms extended outwards and resting on his knees. "You're just a bit too strong to have been there when the Iron Dominion invaded New Mobotropolis. Had to balance the board a bit."

Silver's eyes widened as panic lanced through him. "What!?"

"Well yeah, I mean, you coulda soloed that whole invasion. Normally you wouldn't even be here yet but-"

"N-no, what invasion!?" he screamed out. "Somebody invaded the city!? What are you talking about!?"

"Oh, the Iron Dominion," whoever this guy is said, as if that explained it all. "They're this army from Yurashia lead by a

madwoman that invaded New Mobotropolis with the intention of subjugating the land, lobotomizing all the citizens and turning them all into cyborg slaves. Real bad bunch."

Every single word Silver heard made his heart race more and more. "Wh... no, slow down, what...?" He stumbled back, breath catching as he held his head in shock. "B-but everyone and Sorun is- but- no that-" he looked up at the man in shock. "You teleported me a week *after* all that!?" he screamed out. "What did you do!? What happened to my friends, wha- WHY!?"

The red-dressed man held his arms up. "Relax. Everyone's fine," he said, setting his arms back on top of his knees as he continued to crouch.

"Huh...?" Silver's breath hitched. Everything going on, everything he was saying, it was all causing too many thoughts to race through his head, but that one sentence was dangling out the barest shred of hope he couldn't help but latch on to. "They're... everyone's okay...?" he whispered out.

"Yeah. The Iron Dominion got completely crushed," he confirmed.

"Th-then... you didn't help?" Silver breathed out. He should feel relieved, maybe a small part of him did feel relieved, but this was all just so *bizarre* and he didn't know what to think. "Didn't you take me away from that just to help them? You're not with them...?"

"No. I did it because... eh, don't worry about it." The red-dressed guy stood up and pointed to the side. "The only thing I wanted to do was stagger your presence in time with the invasion, and stagger it I did. So you can leave." He made a shooing motion with his black-gloved hand. "Go on, fly free! I won't stop you. Head on back to New Mobotropolis and pretend none of this happened."

"B-but..." Silver trailed off, eyes going wide. Something in his mind clicked when he realized the man dressed in red was wearing red clothes. "It's... it's you!"

"Meh?"

"Y-you, you're that... you're that guy Sorun was talking about, aren't you!" Silver accused. "He said there was some weird guy dressed in red with impossible information running around! Th-that you did weird stuff like set Sorun up to get that last Chaos Emerald that killed him way back! He said that was you!"

"Ah... yeah, that's me." The red-dressed guy started to rub the back of his head with his hand, as if he were embarrassed. "Yeah, I did that. And a bunch of other stuff. The guy at the beginning of this mess that killed all those royal guardsmen back at Castle Acorn and stole the Chaos Emerald that was there? A hundred percent that was me. You did it. You solved the mystery. Congrats."

"You... I heard about that! That was you!?" The confusion was beginning to lessen now as more coherent feelings began to settle in Silver. Namely anger and horror. Mostly anger. "You *killed people* ! For what!? Why!?"

"Reasons." He didn't sound wholly concerned with the whole affair. "Did they give you the whole story? Tell you how that Hershey girl was so mutilated they could barely tell it was her?"

Silver gasped and grit his teeth. "You-!"

"She didn't deserve it, didn't even plan on killing her, she just happened to be there, but her husband Geoffrey is the absolute worst," he continued. "So after I killed her I thought, 'eh, might as well go the extra mild,' so I just kept going to town on the corpse. Just over and over, for like, ten minutes straight. Didn't even let it touch the ground I was attacking so much. I was *styling* on that corpse, Silver."

Silver gagged out, repressing the urge to vomit from the description he heard. It put a pained sensation in his chest and made tears prick at the edge of his eyes. "How... how could you...!?"

"Are you serious? Imagine the look on that Geoffrey guy's face when they told him some maniac cut his wife up into sashimi," the red-dressed guy laughed out. "I bet it was hilarious. Probably still depressed about it actually-"

"ENOUGH!"

No more. He couldn't hear any more - he didn't want to hear anymore! Teal-colored energies began to roil around Silver's hands as he flexed his powers outwards. In the next instant the red-dressed man completely froze as his body was enveloped in his psychokinetic energies.

"... Huh." The red-dressed guy sounded surprised, frozen in place like that. "Well this is-"

"Stop talking. Just stop talking," Silver bit out. All those words he'd said, *laughing* about killing and brutalizing someone's wife, it... it set his blood boiling with rage. Anger Silver had never felt before, so much he felt himself shaking as he glared at the man. "I don't know who you are or what you want, why you did these things and what else you've been doing, but it stops now!" he yelled out. "I'm taking you back to the Republic of Acorn so you can answer for everything you've done! And then you're gonna tell me who you are and why you've been messing around with Sorun!"

It wouldn't fix anything he'd done, but... Silver didn't know why, but he wanted *something* done about all this. Justice for people that'd been harmed or killed because of this man, or even answers for Sorun! Something! Just anything he could do to make it at least a little better!

"Ah, that's a no-go," the man flippantly responded. "Hey, listen, just let me go and we can both go our separate ways."

"I'm not letting you go!" Silver screamed out. "You just admitted to murder! And you've probably done a bunch of other bad stuff! YOU KIDNAPPED ME!"

"And now I'm letting you go," he replied, as if that fixed it all. "What does taking me back to get locked up solve?"

"It means a murderer isn't running around free!" The teal power around Silver's hands flared brighter. "It means a horrible person like you can't hurt anyone else! A-and if I can bring you back, then... then I will!" He shook his head. "I'd never forgive myself if I let such an awful person like you go free!"

"... Well, good for you for having such strong moral fiber," the red-dressed guy sighed out. "You seem pretty dead-set on this. Have it your way."

"I said stop talking you-"

"You know, I hold your psychokinetic abilities rather highly," the red-dressed guy interrupted. "Really, I mean that. Your powers are good. They're so simple that there isn't really a good hard-counter for them, and for most people that's troublesome. It's too bad-"

Something impossible happened. Red energy began crackling along the man's body, and then he... flexed his arm and broke out of Silver's hold. Completely.

"-that if you're stupid strong like me you can just muscle your way through it."

/ / WARNING ! ! ! / /

Rubrum

?-?-? ?-?-?-?-?-?-? ?-? ?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?

"Ah!" Silver cried out as he stepped back, the power flowing around his hands fluctuating. He'd felt it, how that man had just... shrugged

his power right off. Like it was a piece of clothing he'd casually tossed off. *"That's... never happened to me before..."*

"Silver, buddy, I ain't gonna lie." He wasn't in front of him anymore. Silver whirled to the side, yelling in surprise and jumping back. Rubrum was right next to him now, leaning towards him almost mockingly. "This is a real bad match-up for you."

"Shut up!" Silver waved his hand, once again enveloping Rubrum in teal energy as he telekinetically flung him backwards. But he only traveled a few meters. That red energy crackled over his body again and he broke out of Silver's hold, stopping a short distance away. "Agh...!"

He felt feedback in his body every time he extended his powers to something. It's how Silver maintained such a fine control over what his powers were holding. Having it... forced off like how Rubrum was doing was causing a kind of feedback that physically hurt him every time it happened. *"I can't grab him with my power, so...!"* He looked to the side. There was a fallen log sitting there. Thinking quick he grabbed onto it with his powers. The log was enveloped in a teal energy and rose up into the air. With a single gesture he flung the log towards Rubrum.

"Huh?" Rubrum almost sounded... confused. He casually leaned to the side to avoid the log. "No, no, that's..." he mumbled to himself, almost sounding troubled as he dodged a second log, and then a third. Silver began pulling a fourth log up-

Rubrum was standing in front of him now. Silver frightfully yelped, almost dropping the log floating up in the air from the sudden closeness. Rubrum leaned forwards, close enough that his obscured face was nearly touching the hedgehog's nose. "Put more power behind the throws. I shouldn't have time to see them coming and dodge," he whispered out to Silver. "Crush them up, too. Splinter them. It's too easy dodging one object."

"How did he- huh!?" Silver blinked and shook his head. He picked himself up with his own power and flew back, putting more distance between him and Rubrum, who just calmly stood there and waited for him. He picked up another log with his powers, though... hesitated a moment. His words echoed in Silver's mind, making him blanch. *"I can't believe... well, you wanted it!"* His powers crushed the tree, splintering in half and then fragmenting those halves into further splinters. It seemed... cruel in Silver's eyes, to do something like this, but... he was getting genuinely worried for how this fight way going, for how this man was just shrugging Silver's power off him. He needed to do something more here.

He flung the wooden splinters. Rubrum made a frustrated noise, and... moved. He still had his hands in his pockets, though he was making quick, minute movements, seemingly flowing around all the wooden shards tossed at him. "No, no, no!" he yelled out. "Not dozens, hundreds! *Thousands* ! Don't give me room to dodge!"

"Stop giving me advice, you murderer!" Silver yelled out, though he tripped over his own words because of the content of what he'd just said. Was he being this confusing on purpose just to throw him off? "You-!"

He was in front of Silver again, making his voice die in his throat. *"Is it teleporting!?"* Silver though as he attempted to fly back again. *"It has to be if he brought me here, but when does he-!?"*

Rubrum's hand snapped out and grabbed Silver's wrist. "You're really not getting it," he said, pulling a startled Silver close enough that their bodies became flush. "You have all this open space, all this ammunition lying around. USE IT!" He reared back and kicked Silver straight in the chest, letting go of his at the same time.

He'd managed to protect himself. Just barely. In the instant before that kick connected with Silver's chest he managed to form a thin barrier of psychokinetic energy around his form. Even then the kick still knocked the wind out of him. After that he couldn't see much, because there'd been so much energy behind the kick Silver was

sent flying back. Further and further, body crashing through dozens of trees and making him elicit a high-pitched grunt every time. The barrier was mitigating most of the damage but even then he was feeling every tree he crashed through.

There was red in the corner of his vision. Silver managed to crack his eye open as he flew back, and in that singular moment he saw sparks of red electricity to his immediate left. The eye widened he saw it was all around Rubrum - *"How!? When!?"* - who was sitting down on one of the fallen logs Silver was flying past. He hand snapped out and he grabbed at Silver's wrist, stopping all his momentum. The sudden stop rattled Silver and made him let out a cry of pain from the sudden whiplash he felt his body endure from it. Then Rubrum threw him, making Silver crash through two more trees before he finally stopped on the third one.

"I need you to put more effort into this," Rubrum called out as a groaning Silver slid down the tree he'd been thrown into. "You're getting nowhere at this rate."

Silver coughed out as he slid down to the ground, sitting against the tree as the barrier around him flickered out. His yellow eyes cracked open. The anger and frustration he felt for the person in front of him was increasing more and more as he felt himself become more heated. "What do you even want!?"

"Me? I wanna leave. *You're* the one trying to capture me here," Rubrum said. He made an exaggerated groan and stood up to his feet. "You could turn around and fly off right now and I wouldn't do a thing."

"Then leave," Silver huffed out as he shakily stood to his feet. "I can see you teleporting. Noth... nothing's stopping you," he said with a wince.

"Teleporting? Oh, sweet baby Silver..." Rubrum almost sounded amused with his response, chuckling a bit. "That isn't teleporting. That's just me moving really fast."

"Same difference," Silver coughed out. "Why are you doing this? Why are you doing *any* of this!?"

"Would you believe me if I said I have no clue?" Rubrum shrugged his shoulders, hands still pocketed.

"No! I wouldn't!"

"Ah, well..." Rubrum's hooded head glanced to the side. "All I really needed to do was get you to miss the invasion from the Iron Dominion. This fight... isn't at all necessary." His obscured face looked at Silver. "I guess I wanted a break."

"A *break* !?" Silver felt outraged just hearing that. What did that even mean, *a break* !?

Rubrum took a few moments to respond. "... It's just really heavy, all this stuff I've been doing the last week." he said. "I just wanted to do something else. Just for a few minutes." He made an unsatisfied noise. "But... you're really bad at fighting, you know? This isn't very fun."

There was too much going on in Silver's heart to even be hurt by that comment. From all the anger he felt from standing in front of a murderer to the physical pain Silver felt across his body to the frustration he felt at not being able to do anything. It was almost too much. "Fun? That's what you're worried about?" he hissed out in an angered breath. "Those royal guardsmen you killed all had families! You think they're having fun over the fact you killed those people!?"

"I genuinely don't care," Rubrum informed him. He stuck his hand into the hood obscuring his face and was making a motion as if he were cleaning his ear out with his finger "All I'm hearing from you is 'wah wah wah, you murdered people.' It's like you care more about a bunch of faceless mooks you've never even met than me." He huffed out in frustration and threw his hands to the side. "Do I gotten threaten to murder people you *actually* know to motivate you? Is that it?"

Thump-thump . The moment he heard that Silver felt a ringing in his ears. He could barely pay attention to anything else other than the words being replayed in his head. He was... threatening people. People Silver knew, like everyone in New Mobotropolis. Like Sorun. The anger in his heart exploded outward; he felt his power surge as teal energy coalesced around the hedgehog's body. "That's IT...!"

Rubrum perked up. "Yes...?"

Silver snapped his hands out to his side. Logs - dozens of them - became enveloped in his power. They were crushed, over and over, splintered and shredded by the psychokinetic power running through them.

"Yes!"

The wooden shards soon numbered in the thousands. They gathered around, surrounded by a veritable cloud of teal energy as it all settled in front of Silver, who glared at Rubrum with hatred. Thousands upon thousands of wooden shards, all aimed at that single man.

"YES!"

"I SAID SHUT UP!" Silver screamed. He waved his hand. Every single wooden shard shot forwards with so much force they left behind visible, conical reverberations in the air. Some of the smallest shards even became alit in flame from the air friction as they all flew towards Rubrum. Despite even that, it was still a wall of sharpened debris. An absolute cluster of deadly wood spikes that was guaranteed to hit, regardless of one's size or speed. He would be completely skewered. That was an absolute fact.

Rubrum disappeared in a cloud of black and red vapors right before the shards hit. They all slammed into the ground with enough force to leave a field of small craters in the ground where he stood. He reappeared behind a shocked Silver in another cloud of black and red vaporous energy.

"That was me teleporting," Rubrum muttered out after leaning towards Silver's ear from behind.

Silver's reaction was near-instant. He spun around, swinging his teal-glowing fist out to no avail. Rubrum simply teleported away again right before he hit, making Silver breath out heavily as his eyes wildly darted around.

"What trash spatial awareness." He was behind Silver again. The white-furred Mobian turned, freezing when he saw Rubrum leering over him. "Poor reaction." The red-dressed man flicked his hand out; Silver *just barely* managed to erect a teal shield to protect his face. It didn't work. Rubrum's hand smashed right through and grabbed at Silver's face, whose scream became muffled by the palm grabbing at him. "Let's take this up."

They were up in the air now. High up in the sky, amidst the clouds. Silver looked around in a panic, hands gripping Rubrum's wrist as he attempted to free himself and figure out what happened at the same time. They hadn't moved - Silver hadn't felt wind rush past him. They'd just appeared here. Teleporting. *"But I didn't see that effect that happened when I saw him teleporting! How does he keep moving us!?"*

There wasn't enough time to think. Rubrum flung Silver away, the hedgehog making staggered grunts as he flew through the sky. His heart was threatening to pound through his chest, and most of Silver's effort was being put towards attempting to control his breathing as he tumbled end-over-end through the clouds. He couldn't even make anything out. He was spinning around so hard that it was just blurs of whites and blues.

Red. There was suddenly red - flickers of red energy licking the corners of his vision. Activating another psychokinetic protective barrier was instinctual at this point. Nothing more than an animalistic reflex to avoid getting hurt as his mind raced to catch up to what was happening. His body made the right choice; Rubrum, somehow, had appeared underneath Silver as he tumbled through the air and

kicked him right in the stomach to send him shooting straight up. The Mobian gagged out, the wind being knocked out of him and his body going numb from the strike *despite* the barrier around him. He didn't even make it to the apex of his ascent before Rubrum appeared once again in midair, hands pocketed. All Silver could do was weakly look towards him as he kicked Silver in the face with the bottom of his boot, sending him flying backwards.

Thinking was... starting to get too hard to do. Too much pain wracking his body, too exhausted from his mind trying to cope with everything happening. He'd appear again, had to do something, what, do what, he couldn't grab him and there was nothing up here to grab, there was NOTHING TO *DO-!*

Rubrum appeared above Silver and kicked him in the back. He shot down - straight down, directly towards the ground. *"Slow, need slow can't hit!"* Teal energy flared out from Silver's body as he tried to slow himself down. It was working, if barely. The friction he felt burning away at his psychokinetic barrier was tapering off and he felt himself slowly more and more as he approached the ground. He'd sighed out when, finally, he did stop - just a few meters right above the ground.

The relief ended when Rubrum, who was now standing next to Silver, reached out and grabbed at his ankle. He'd made a startled scream that was instantly cut off when Rubrum slammed his body into the ground hard enough he'd bounced once before falling face-first into the dirt.

"It really ain't lookin' good." Rubrum's voice sounded amused as his hooded head looked down at Silver. "I mean, I'm holding back ninety percent of my kit here and you're still losing hard, Silver."

"..." Silver pushed himself up off the ground, teeth grit in pain and eyes half-lidded from exhaustion. Every part of his body was hurting and aching now, and darkness was starting to infringe at the edge of his vision. *"Need to... get away..."* He held a shaky hand up,

coughing as teal energy coalesced between his fingers. *"Just... need to... stall him..."*

A sphere of teal energy instantly appeared around Rubrum, completely encapsulating him. A strong barrier. Strong enough to hold him back and give Silver time to run away, maybe hide somewhere to recuperate some of his strength and-

Red cracks appeared and spiderwebbed across the entire surface of the teal bubble holding Rubrum. Red, electrical energy crackled angrily from the cracks, which only damaged the barrier more and more. Silver grunted, eyes narrowing and hand shaking even harder as he attempted to hold the barrier together. It was no good. He screamed out from the feedback when the barrier completely shattered, revealing Rubrum standing there calmly with a hand rose up as he stared on. Silver's hand flopped uselessly to his side, teal energy racing along the numb appendage.

"How sad. This really is all you got." Rubrum's hand lowered to his side. He didn't sound so amused anymore. More disappointed than anything else. "Better'n most, but that in of itself ain't that high a bar." He walked right in front of Silver, crouching down in front of him. "You're supposed to save the future? You can't even save yourself."

"Stop... talking..." It was taking Silver all the strength he had to lift his left arm up. The only arm that was still listening to him.

"Aw, that's the spirit, Silver, keep trying," Rubrum said. His voice sounded mocking. Patronizing with the slightest bit of pity. "That's it, pal, keep going. Get that arm up."

"Eh... ergh..." He felt sweat dampening his fur as he lifted the arm up halfway, with half his face still lying in the dirt. He could only lift his head up partway to have at least one eye balefully glare at Rubrum.

"Great job. Almost there!" Rubrum laughed. The hand was almost fully pointed at him. "You can do it. You *have* to do it. Think about it: said so yourself I'm a dangerous murder that needs to be locked up."

His tone was suddenly filled with mock worry. "What if I go to New Mobotropolis and just start tearing all the Freedom Fighters apart with my bare hands? Who'd gonna stop me from killing all the kids then?" The mocking tone left as the crouched Rubrum leaned down lower to Silver. "Who'd stop me from wiping the entire Republic off the map? Who'd stop me from grinding all of Nicole's servers to dust and wiping her from existence?"

Suddenly Silver didn't feel so tired. All the pain and exhaustion was rapidly fading as renewed anger began filling his very being. Wisps of teal energy began flowing off his body like steam, and teal arcs of electricity raced over his form as his breathing became louder, more frantic. Particles of light began gathering in the center of Silver's palm.

Rubrum leaned down even lower. His voice became a quiet, neutral drone. "Who would stop me from tearing Sorun's heart out right in front of you?"

That did it. Something in Silver snapped - his ears were filled with the roaring sound of energy as it crackled along his entire form. That and the sound of his own roaring as his hand went from glowing teal to practically glowing white. "RRRRAAAGH!"

Rubrum disappeared. So did a large swath of forest behind him.

So... Silver had screamed. Rubrum had expected that, it was the reaction he was going for. Then he unleashed that attack. Understandable. He'd been ready for it.

... Well, he thought he'd been ready for it.

What actually happened was that Silver screamed. And then Rubrum blinked. Then he saw he was over the ocean. He blinked again - now he was over land rushing by so fast *he* was having a hard time visualizing it. There'd... been a mountain at some point. The momentum he was carrying smashed him right through that.

Honestly there may have been more than one mountain - Rubrum wasn't entirely sure.

He'd hit ground. It didn't stop Rubrum's momentum at all. His body carved a trench all the way from one end of Yurashia to another, right through the whole continent. That took about two seconds. He hit the ocean again, water tearing at his body and even steaming from the friction he was putting out. He only finally ran out of momentum when he reached Downunda, coming to a stop about halfway through.

Overall Silver's attack had flung Rubrum across most of the planet in the span of about six seconds.

He was flat on his back, staring straight up at the sky. Rubrum's left arm was missing - somewhere on another continent, probably, or in the ocean somewhere waiting to be eaten by a sea creature. His bones were literal dust, it felt like. Organs were pulverized into jelly. About half his blood got spread all over the planet during that.

"Okay. I might have overdone it."

Aside from the arm all of the damage was regenerated as Rubrum slowly sat up. "Sheesh... I just wanted to rile him up a bit. He didn't have to take it so seriously..." He looked towards his missing arm. Red energy spread out from the stump and formed into the shape of his arm. The red energy then receded, leaving behind a regenerated left arm. "Still, good on him for getting one hit in," he continued in earnest as red cubes of energy swarmed around his left arm. The sleeve and glove he'd lost reappeared to conceal the pale skin underneath.

"Alright, let's... get back at it..." Rubrum slowly stood to his feet... and then promptly sat back down. "Nope, not happening. Ugh... fuck, Silver..." Rubrum mumbled, holding a hand to his hooded head. He had to sit down for a few more moments to catch his breath, and then tried standing again. This time Rubrum managed to successfully stay on his feet. "Th-there we go, that's it..."

Silver panted, staring forwards at the missing patch of forest he'd... he'd done that? He blew all of that away? It was at least a good mile or two of forest just gone. Completely erased when he'd blown it all away.

"I-I... I didn't... mean to d-destroy all that..." He barely even had the energy to think. To *breath* , even. Forget about his psychokinetic power. It was spent in its entirety. Even moving was completely out as an option. He was done. Set to pass out at any moment here.

But... but it was worth it. He was gone. The person dressed in red. Silver didn't have a clue where he blew him away to but he was gone. He couldn't hurt anyone. At least he could pass out feeling content, knowing everyone else was safe.

Those thoughts were dashed when he saw tongues of red electricity out in the corner of his vision. With all his remaining strength he moved his head just a few inches. He felt his heart sink and all hope drain out of him when he saw Rubrum sitting down on a nearby rock, red electricity crackling around him. He didn't have even a single scratch on him. *"N...no..."*

"More of *that* ," Rubrum said, voice unusually calm.

"..." Silver didn't have the energy to retort. He tried raising his arm, but it was no good. No part of his body was listening to him. He couldn't even feel it at this point.

"Nah, you're done," Rubrum said with a shake of his head. "It's a shame, too. The sad fact is that you could be one of the strongest guys in this whole universe... but you'll never be more than mid at best. Wanna know why?" Rubrum tapped at his own chest, near his heart. "A killer instinct. You don't got it. I teased it out of you back there, sure, but it's not a thing you could consistently use. You're too nice."

Silver coughed. His vision was rapidly darkening as his eyes began to close on their own.

"Ah, but... what do I know? I'm just the strongest guy in the whole multiverse." Still sitting down, Rubrum placed his palms flat on the rock and leaned back, hooded head looking up at the sky. "... It's not so bad though, Silver. Not having a killer instinct. Don't beat yourself up over it." He pushed himself off the rock. "Truth is I'd love nothing more than to live in a world where nobody had a killer instinct. I lost my taste for blood a while ago."

It was no good. Silver wasn't listening to him. He couldn't - right as Rubrum said the last word there he passed out right on the spot. Rubrum didn't show any outwards reaction. He just stood completely still as he stared down at the hedgehog's body.

"... I guess I had a bit of fun after all. Thanks for that," Rubrum finally said after ten minutes of staring. "I need to go stop Eggman from hitting the button now. Bye."

He turned around and left Silver to his rest.

Chapter 105

A/N- Yeah, I know, I was gone for a bit. Life slapped me across the face; I'm back now.

Recursion Error

Episode 105- The day the dream died

Present

"..."

Where did it go wrong?

Exactly how much strife and anguish did Sorun have to suffer through from the *moment* he'd landed on Mobius all in order to earn some semblance of a normal life? To claw something back resembling the life he once had, even if it was just on the surface, to live normally again? So many fights, so many battles, stress, death, *dying* . Sorun hated every single moment of it all and suffered through it because the dream was supposed to be at the other end of the tunnel.

A place to live. Stable job, stable income. Not having to worry for necessities. Group of supportive friends, pet, girlfriend. A sense of community. Safety. Home. Things... Sorun didn't think should have been so hard to obtain. Things he *had* obtained. The moment he went through with that surgery to get that new skeleton it should have been the end of it. He'd done it. It was finished. Everyone else could do all the fighting if there was more to be had. He was *done* .

He was supposed to be done.

"..."

This wasn't home, where Sorun was. This was a dingy prison cell they'd thrown Sorun into, shackling his one working arm to the wall.

"..."

Things were supposed to be safe. He'd been promised that. He'd been *surrounded* by some of the strongest people in the world in one of the safest cities in the world. It should have been fine. He should have been safe. The dream wasn't supposed to just... crumble apart like that. Like it was nothing.

"..."

Where did it go wrong?

---

1 day ago

Silver never came back last night.

It was a bit *odd* to Sorun, considering Silver flat-out lived in this house at the moment and didn't have anywhere else to go. And that... while nobody in New Mobotropolis disliked him (he was only somewhat sure of this) at the same time he wasn't exactly on amicable terms with anyone but Sorun. And to an extent Nicole. And the pet Chao. So it was odd to Sorun that he never came back to the house on the night of the disastrous concert incident, and even now, the next day, Sorun still couldn't find him.

"Where is he?" Sorun opened a random cabinet in the kitchen. No Silver, as if he'd been expecting Silver to just be huddled in there for whatever reason. "Hm..." He closed the cabinet. He didn't outright recall anything happening that would cause Silver to disappear. It'd been Sonic Sorun had been arguing with, not Silver. To make matter weirder Nicole said she hadn't even seen him return to his seat in the stadium after Sorun last saw him. So... he disappeared around then.

He didn't really know what that meant.

"Maybe he just had some weird epiphany about this whole traitor thing and found somewhere quiet to think," Sorun rationalized to himself, convinced that made complete and total sense. That was it. He was just... out somewhere. Thinking. Somewhere more quiet than the inside of this home. Surely that was it.

He sighed out. Wasn't much more to do on that front, he supposed, especially with him being alone at the moment. Nicole was off doing something important with the Freedom Fighters. Virgil was off in the park with Cream since her pet was the only other Chao in town and he liked to flaunt superiority over him. Which just left Sorun here.

Some yelling from outside drew Sorun's attention to the window. There was a gaggle of three Mobian children jeering at someone on the walkway right in front of his lawn... actually, wait, were those... they were. Those were the three kids that yelled at Sorun and threw rocks at him on his first day of Mobius. And now they were yelling and throwing rocks at someone else. A monkey Mobian - it was the same guy that crashed the concert yesterday, Sorun realized. They were throwing rocks at him.

"Egh..." Sorun made a disgruntled sound. For as little patience as he held for the monkey after everything that happened yesterday, he... *supposed* it wouldn't be responsible to stand by and let children enforce a behavior of stoning people. He looked down at his cane. It shifted from a metal implement into a Chaos Emerald. A wave radiated outward from his position and briefly turned the world grayscale as time stopped.

He had to hurry a bit. Ever since getting the artificial blood and skeleton these kinds of abilities were way more strenuous on him and he couldn't maintain them as long. He'd ran - not that he'd admit he ran - out from his home and moved as fast as he could towards the group at the front of his house, noting he'd caught them mid-throw of a rock. He stopped just in front of the monkey, doing his best to regain his composure and control his breathing to make sure

he wouldn't look winded and lose his image. And after he did that he conceived of the plan - he'd turn the Chaos Emerald back into V's cane and bat the rock out of the air. He'd say some cool stuff to discipline the children and have them abandon their rock-throwing ways. And then the monkey Mobian would be so impressed with Sorun he'd have no choice but to talk to him and explain what he thought he was doing standing in front of his lawn. It was perfect.

It fell apart almost immediately. Time resumed at the exact same moment Sorun turned the Emerald back into the cane. He swung it upwards with the intent on intercepting the rock sailing towards the monkey. He missed. He missed hard, didn't even come close. The rock whistled past Sorun's ear and hit the monkey right on the face. He heard him make a quiet grunt. The three children at least did freeze when they saw Sorun just *appear* there from out of nowhere, faces shocked and eyes a tad bit fearful.

... Alright, hard fumble in the beginning there but maybe he could salvage it.

"Children, children, children..." Sorun's cane made audible *tap!* sounds as he slowly approached the three, who now all seemed very interested in the ground. "What did we learn about throwing rocks at other people?" Sorun's voice came out even, a slight bit chastising as he looked down at the three children with a vaguely amused look.

The three immediately began stammering excuses. "W-we didn't mean- we were only messing around-"

"We're sorry, Mr. Sorun-"

"He ruined miss Mina's concert!" The more rambunctious one, a cat child with purple fur so dark it was nearly black, shouted and pointed at the monkey. The other three hesitantly nodded in response.

"... Yes, I'm aware. I was there," Sorun calmly responded. "Regardless... you shouldn't throw rocks at people, terrible first impression or otherwise. Do you not regret what you did the first time

around?" He knew for a fact they did. They sent him apology and get-well cards after he'd saved the whole town after Eggman teleported everyone to New Megaopolis.

The three children instantly stiffened, guilty expressions on all their faces. "Yes, Mr. Sorun," they all intoned.

"Good. Now run along and don't let me catch you doing this again, or I'll have to inform your parents and I'm sure they would be thrilled in giving you *remission lessons* on why throwing rocks at people is a bad thing to do." That seemed to do the ticket. The kids rapidly nodded and scampered off out of sight. It made Sorun a bit relieved that what he said worked. He didn't feel like dealing with children any more than he had to.

"And now to you," Sorun thought, turning to the monkey Mobian. He was looking over at Sorun, one hand rubbing the spot the rock impacted while the other held a red staff of sorts. His fur was a normal brown - one of the most normal-colored Mobians he'd ever seen outside Sally and her family - and his hair was... Sorun wasn't sure. Some weird fusion between a pompadour and a mullet.

Hairstyle aside, Sorun decided to make the first approach. "My sincerest apologies for how the children acted towards you," Sorun said, cane impacting the ground as he stood in front of the monkey. "I received much the same same treatment my first day here. They're quite vicious."

"Yes, I... noticed." The monkey sighed, a bit downcast but otherwise not looking all that concerned as he lowered his hand from his head. Sorun noticed the rock hadn't left a visible wound on him. "For your Overlander heritage, I imagine?" he asked.

A few blue, electrical sparks traveled up the length of Sorun's cane. The monkey didn't react at all. "Let's keep such comments to ourselves," Sorun suggested, the smallest possible smile on his face. "And set the record straight while we're at it. I'm a human. *Not* an Overlander."

"Is there a difference?" It wasn't a mocking question. From his tone to his facial expression the monkey seemed genuine in asking, which served to calm Sorun somewhat.

"Humans aren't Overlanders. And technically speaking my humanity is... of a different sorts than the ones from this zone," Sorun told the monkey. "I'm not from this zone."

The monkey blinked a few times. "Is there a... tangible difference?"

"There's a vast ocean's worth of black separating us, yes," Sorun vaguely confirmed. "That's irrelevant, though," he continued. "Where are you from?" He gazed at the monkey's long vest with the yin-yangs on it. "Somewhere... eastern, I imagine."

The monkey's eyes widened a bit, as if surprised Sorun managed to devise that much from his clothes alone. "You'd be right." He made a soft sigh. A... cloud of all things appeared beneath him. The monkey collapsed into a sitting position on the cloud, face a morose expression as he loosely clutched his staff. "I'm from Yurashia," he mumbled out.

"Yurashia," Sorun flatly replied. The land that *used* to be China thousands of years ago. And Russia and India and... really every country east of what used to be the European continent. "And you're a monkey. With a staff who can seemingly conjure clouds," he continued, eyes narrowing a bit at the sight.

"... Yes?" The Mobian looked up at Sorun with a slightly confused expression. "What's your point?"

Sorun heaved a sigh. Might as well get it out of the way. "So what's your name? Goku? Wukong? One of those?"

Those names only seemed to serve to make the monkey more confused. He didn't seem to recognize the names. "No...? My name is Khan," he introduced.

"... *Of course it is* ." Sorun turned his head to the side, expression bitter. "You couldn't even give me that one, huh, world...?" he whispered to himself. Was the blatant 'Journey to the West' reference just a massive coincidence? Maybe, if the names were different. He'd seen weirder on this planet, but it still frustrated him.

"Um... I'm sorry if I did something. I didn't mean to offend," Khan said, tilting his head at Sorun's reaction.

"You did nothing." Sorun made a huff, turning back to the monkey. He didn't feel like explaining and getting sidetracked. "... Well, you *did* do something. At the concert yesterday," Sorun amended. "I took you for a raving madman with that entrance but you seem rather calm at the moment."

Khan flinched back from the words, guilt momentarily flashing over his face. "Right, well... you, too, seem rather calm compared to how I saw you yesterday," he pointed out. "Sonic spent the entire trip to New Megaopolis ranting and complaining about you. I'd... been under the impression from what little I heard of you that you were a more nobler sorts," he admitted. "Sonic assured me you'd help us."

Him. Noble. Sorun supposed his actions may have... inadvertently created that image. "It was nothing against you." That was only partially true. "It's... that Sonic asked me. You would have been much better off having someone else ask me."

"..." A small hum left Khan. He shifted around a bit on his cloud, placing one leg over the other as he looked away. "I see Sonic's comments weren't baseless."

"Meaning?" Sorun asked, looking right at Khan with narrowed eyes.

"Meaning," Khan continued, slowly looking back at Sorun, "if you're a shallow enough person to deny help to those in need of it *purely* because you don't like the one asking for said help, you seem to be about as shallow an individual as Sonic complained about. But that's just my observation."

"That so?" Sorun's eyes snapped down. He noted that the edge of the cloud Khan was sitting on was floating just above where the sidewalk terminated and his lawn began, with about an inch of cloud extending into his lawn. "You know, where I come from it's seen as poor form to step onto one's home and insult them."

There wasn't any visible reaction on Khan's part. The morose expression he'd worn earlier had shifted to an impassive expression as he regarded Sorun. "You find truth to be an insult?"

"More a lack of tact to be so," Sorun corrected. His eyes stayed on the spot where Khan's cloud floating above his lawn. It was *irritating* him. "In any event... whatever business you have here, it has precisely nothing to do with me. So kindly vacate yourself from my home."

Khan didn't respond verbally. What he *did* do was lazily look down where Sorun was looking, seeing the part of the cloud floating above the grass. And instead of leaving Khan just casually pressed the end of his staff onto the ground, pushing the cloud a few inches back so that it was entirely situated above the sidewalk. And then he calmly looked back up at Sorun.

"... Thank you." The words Sorun said didn't sound grateful. His voice was strained, expression brittle as he just *barely* managed to maintain a friendly expression. Even then a few more bolts of blue energy raced down his cane as his temper lost control.

And then Sorun *heard it* . The sound of footfalls so rapid it sounded like a singular, rapt tapping sound. The brief sound of crackling power and the wind rushing past Sorun as something moving extremely fast came to a stop right behind him. Sorun had made a slow, barely-steady breath as he turned around, not at all surprised to see Sonic standing there behind him. And not at all pleased, either.

Evidently Sonic himself wasn't overly pleased to see Sorun, either. He was scowling, which was already a rare-enough sight to see.

Arms crossed, mouth set in an intense frown as the hedgehog looked at Sorun. Eyes flicked back and forth between Sorun himself and the silver cane crackling with blue energy.

"Can you maybe go one day without antagonizing someone?" Sonic asked, no amusement to be found in his voice.

"I'm making an effort," Sorun retorted. "Apologies for it going poorly. What do you want?"

"Oh, well, nothing much, I was just minding my own business before I *felt you* halfway across town," Sonic stated, eyes fully looking down at the cane. "You said that didn't do anything. That it was just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill cane that was probably the most normal thing in your whole arsenal of weirdness you never talk about."

"I'm not obliged to tell you what I can do," Sorun said. He didn't even tell *Nicole* the secrets regarding his abilities; as if he'd tell Sonic of all people. "And anyway, it was nothing. I'm not one to start a fight out in public over mere words unlike some people," he added, giving Sonic a pointed look.

Sonic took a sharp inhale. The scowl he was wearing deepened. "That supposed to mean me?"

" *One of us* devolved to shouting during yesterday's... disagreement," Sorun pointed out. "It was assuredly not me."

"..." Sonic just stared at Sorun in disbelief. He held the stare for a few moments before breathing out, shaking his head. "Okay, Sorun, I don't... I'm not gonna pretend to understand what's going on with you, 'cause right now I'm a *little* too busy trying to head off a while invasion here, so if I could just scooch by you and get to Khan there-
"

"A what?" Sorun interrupted. The blue sparks trailing up and down his silver cane disappeared entirely; any irritation and anger he felt

as Sonic's presence disappeared in a flash the moment "invasion" entered his ears.

" *Yeah* , Sorun, remember that thing we needed help with yesterday?" Sonic began, a fake smile creeping on his face as he spoke in a sarcastic tone. "You know, that whole, 'hey, can you take literally two seconds out of your life two give us a ride to New Megaopolis?' thing? That you said no to because I guess you just felt like giving us a hard time? Well, it turns out we really needed it 'cause Snively came back with a bunch of weirdos from Yurashia-!"

"Wait-wait-wait, slow down." Sorun interrupted as a *heavy* frown began settling over his face. Some of this was starting to sound *familiar* , what with the repeated mentioning of Yurashia and a part of that one conversation he'd had with Dimitri shortly before his surgery. "Does this have anything to do with some technology-controlling woman?"

Neither of them even needed to answer. Sorun saw the instant he'd mentioned her Khan's face inflame in genuine anger. As if even just mentioning her set him off. Suddenly he looked a lot more like the raging monkey Sorun had seen in the stadium just yesterday.

"That would be *Regina* ," Khan practically spat out with vitriol dripping from his tone. "Or as everyone underneath calls her the Iron Queen. Though I can't help but wonder how you know about her, Sorun."

"I was... briefly appraised of her. Briefly." Sorun said to him, and then looked back at Sonic. "Dimitri mentioned some technology-controlling woman was taking over Yurashia, but I never got a name before now."

"'Take over' is putting it mildly," Khan scoffed out. "She took over the four major clans that preside over Yurashia after killing one of their clan heads and forcing the others to fall in line behind her, not that they seemed to complain all that much. Her and the Iron Dominion stomped out any resistance that tried to oppose her; the entire

Yurashia branch of Freedom Fighters was completely wiped out and I couldn't stop-!"

Khan cut himself off, voice beginning to grow heated. Guilt and regret intermingled with absolute rage was clearly present on his face, something both Sorun and Sonic recognized as they quietly stared at him. In Sorun's case he couldn't help but feel how Khan's expression was reminiscent of how he'd looked at the concert, and now he was getting the barest sense of *why* he'd been bent so out of shape. He was making it sound like a lot of things were lost in Yurashia's conquest.

"... She's a conceited madwoman bent on world domination and she isn't stopping with Yurashia," Khan breathed out, taking a moment to compose himself before looking back at the two. "I'd explained all this to the Freedom Fighters and Republic government already," he continued, looking at Sorun directly, "though I suppose you're filled in now as well."

"So it seems," Sorun mumbled out, glancing down. He felt troubled, and it was visible on his face. If it were just some crazy lady taking over Yurashia he wouldn't think too hardly about it, but now it sounded like she was coming *here* directly.

"And how do you even know about her anyway?" Sonic interjected, giving Sorun a puzzled look. "You said someone told you about Regina. Who?"

"Oh. The floating head guy, Dimitri," Sorun casually informed him. "It was while we were discussing my... health options. He made mention of the going-ons in Yurashia and what this... Regina lady was up to." Sorun paused, glancing down at the ground. "That said, he... said she was restricting her actions to Yurashia. He said he and the rest of the echidna were following Snively over to that continent to just stay there. He never said anything about Regina and the rest in Yurashia from coming *here* . Didn't mention a word about conquering other lands outside the continent or world domination. I'd have said something otherwise."

Sonic made a scoff, rolling his eyes while crossing his arms. "Yeah, well, they're here. The whole Iron Dominion. Looks like Snively sweet-talked them into trying for world conquest since Eggy's out of the picture, and I guess New Mobotropolis is first on their list of places to squash outside of Yurashia. They already set up shop in New Megaopolis and everything, in Eggman's old digs."

"... I suppose Dimitri must have been mistaken," Sorun murmured out, looking down in thought. A whole invading force from a different continent. That was... bad. *Wrong* . There wasn't supposed to be more of that. The fighting was supposed to be *done* with Eggman out of the picture. That was the point, the whole reason for... things were supposed to be fine now! "Or maybe they just... didn't tell him..."

"Yeah, or he lied," Sonic said, shaking his head. "You're really gonna trust a floating head in a bubble to tell you the truth of what Snively was plannin' the whole time?"

Sorun looked towards the blue hedgehog, giving him a dry look. "Well, yes. Considering he's done infinitely more to help me than you ever have."

"Would you knock it off?" Sonic snapped, seemingly finally having had enough with the passive-aggressive nature Sorun had been displaying this entire time. "Look, I don't know what your deal right now is, okay? Why you're acting like this or... or just *what* your problem with me is, but I don't have time for it, okay!? You know, I-I got a whole invasion to worry about here, I gotta work out all this with everyone else because it's so last-second, *Espio* flipped sides and we had to go through the trouble of stopping Knuckles and the rest of the gang from storming off to try and go get him-"

"He did what?" Sorun asked, blinking in surprise. There were a lot of words that Sonic said that flat-out just didn't register with Sorun. "Espio" and "flipping sides" made absolutely no sense to him. Because as little as they interacted, Espio was still a friend the last time Sorun checked. The words Sonic said didn't make sense.

"Yeah. Espio. He was in New Megaopolis - on their side with all those other Yurashia people," Sonic clarified, eyes narrowing at Sorun as he crossed his arms. "I don't know *why* , guy didn't say a word and Khan and I were a little busy dealing with the literal *army* bearing down on us, but he's with them-"

"I saw him yesterday, at that concert," Sorun mumbled. He felt confused, speaking in a puzzled voice as he spoke to Sonic. "He was running away with some... other guy, never saw him before. Was dressed like him-"

"Yeah, and maybe if you'd given us a ride to New Megaopolis like we asked we could've gotten there before he did! Maybe we could have actually done something-!"

"A difference of a few hours," Sorun cut in, "was not going to have any effect on the preparedness of a whole invasion force already dug into a city-"

"Well you don't know that!" Sonic exclaimed, throwing his arms up. "We're never gonna know 'cause you decided to be stubborn for stupid reasons and-!"

And that's when Sorun heard the alarms and tuned everything else out.

Present

Where did it go wrong?

"..."

Was it his fault? No. Sorun hadn't done any wrong- *he had done no wrong* . Nothing. Never. He'd done everything he was supposed to, and what ended up happening at the end of it? *What ?*

No. No, no no no... no, he didn't do a damn thing wrong. *He* didn't kill his dream. Others did that he could point the finger at and blame, but Sorun? No. He refused to acknowledge it as anything different. What was he supposed to have done, if not what he did for so long? It'd all been *perfect* by the end of it. No. It wasn't on him. None of it was.

"..."

He didn't react to the jeering from some of the Mobians who would often hang outside his cell. His guards - the ones from Yurashia dressed like ninjas. Whatever jeering and mocking they said to Sorun, he didn't hear them. Too lost in his own thoughts, staring perpetually down at the floor of his cell. He hadn't said a single word since he'd been thrown in here, hadn't so much as moved. And they kept shuffling positions around so much he didn't bother to remember any of them.

Except that one. Another one of the Yurashia Mobians, some... white-furred badger-looking one with a black stripe in the middle of her face. She'd often just stand there and stare at Sorun with an unreadable expression, only recognizable because she was there so much. He didn't know what her deal was.

"Hey, Jian," one of the other ninja-looking Mobians called out. He'd walked up next to her, looking at Sorun in the cell. "This is the one? The one that tore out the Iron Queen's eye?"

"... So it would seem. Yes," she answered in a calm tone, her voice completely even as her blue eyes stared at Sorun. "He has not moved a muscle since being brought here. Nor has anyone treated him." She looked down at his right hand. "He's more than likely to lose that arm as a result. In these conditions..."

"He'd be lucky to die to infection," the other Mobian scoffed out, throwing his hand up over his shoulder as he turned away. "It's not a happy fate that awaits him back home in Yurashia once the Iron Queen has finished things here. Anyway, stop staring at him; there's things to go over with everyone else."

"... Right," Jian mumbled out, watching him walk off before looking back at Sorun. She'd kept up her stare for a number of seconds before walking off with him, leaving Sorun alone once again.

He barely noticed anything.

"..."

Where did it go wrong?

---

1 day ago

Sorun remembered hearing the alarm. He remembered Nicole announcing some warning over the city-wide PA system Sorun didn't even know existed until now. He didn't know what she said; he heard words, but hadn't listened, hadn't stopped to process them to understand beyond faintly recognizing some warning addressed to the citizens.

All Sorun knew was that *something* bad was happening and his very first thought was his pet Chao was in the park with no one but a little rabbit girl and her unevolved Chao to protect him. Or more accurately for Virgil to protect *them* .

So his gut instinct had been automatic, done without thought or consideration to himself. His silver cane had automatically transmuted to the Yamato. He'd swung the blade under his feet, creating a portal and falling through. He recalled Sonic shouted something at him, too startled to react in time before Sorun fell through and cut the portal closed behind him.

His feet had hit the artificial grass in the park. Instantly Sorun's eyes had started scanning around, searching. And... he'd seen them. His Chao, Virgil, in the distance. Too distinctive to miss. Protectively hovering in front of Cream and her pet, who were cowering behind him.

And then there were *them* . There, in two white, oval egg-like chairs that seemed to be floating off the ground. Snively, the absolute creature and cretin he was, was sitting in one of them, and from this angle Sorun could see him leering at the three. The woman in the second chair he didn't recognize. An Overlander woman, based on the fact she had least *looked* human, barring the dark green hair and yellow eyes. He could take a guess from the regal, Chinese-looking garb and crown she wore hat it was the Regina person Khan had been talking about. That Iron Queen.

And her height seemed to be on par with the average human's. Perhaps higher. It would be, just to spite Sorun further.

"All you had to do was stay the fuck home."

Behind the cold face staring towards them was utter, unbridled rage that started roiling inside of Sorun as he stared at them. No. *No* . It was supposed to be over, done with. How *dare* they. How dare they come to this place when everything was supposed to be fine? How dare the world do this to Sorun after everything he'd done to finally have peace?

The katana in Sorun's had transmuted into the blue Chaos Emerald, grasped in his hand. He Tricked, teleporting from that spot to right on top of the rim of the floating egg chair Snively was in. Crouching down, looking down at the man who was somehow even shorter than Sorun himself was.

Snively had felt it; the floating chair had wobbled a bit when Sorun appeared on top of it. "What in blazes-?" he'd began, turning around in his seat to look up. And then he'd *froze* , face going white as a sheet when he looked up and saw Sorun balefully staring down at him. Eyes practically bugging out of his head and breathing steadily picking up. He'd just stared for the first few moments, as if his brain was struggling to comprehend what he was seeing. Or perhaps he was having a flashback to their previous encounters.

Finally, he spoke. "You're supposed to be dead," he whispered.

"You'll wish."

With that succinct reply said, Sorun Tricked again right besides the group of three they were in front of. He wasted absolutely no time, the Chaos Emerald transmuting back into Yamato as he cut a portal behind them to the other end of the city. "Leave," Sorun ordered, staring straight down at Cream as he pointed at he portal. "Now."

The rage bubbling inside him increased when the rabbit Mobian shook her head. "But Mr. Sorun-!"

A frustrated growl left Sorun as he sheathed Yamato with a loud *clack!* He pressed the blunted end of the scabbard against her stomach and shoved Cream right through the portal, ignoring her protests entirely as she was sent tumbling through. He looked at Virgil, who nodded and just kicked Cream through the portal after her, the Chao screaming out in surprise as he flew through. And then Sorun unsheathed the katana and cut forwards to close the portal.

There. Done. It was just them here now, with Sorun's own brain feverishly working on ideas of what to do now. There was already one he was rapidly settling on as the sword transmuted back into his cane, the tip hitting the soft ground as he turned towards the small Chao floating next to him. He took a second to consider his words before speaking. "What I plan on doing here... wouldn't be something any of the others would approve of. You don't have to stay for this next part."

"Chao-chao." Virgil shook his head. For a moment Sorun felt a bit conflicted, but it eased off soon after. He would understand, whatever happened here. Sorun didn't know if it was the bond between him and Virgil or whatever else, but whatever happened, he'd stand by him. It's how it had always been. He gave a grateful nod to him before both he and Virgil turned back towards Snively and Regina.

"..." Sorun took a deep breath, trying his best to keep his anger in check so he could at least speak. It was becoming a worse and

worse struggle as time went on. "Been a while," he greeted Snively in an even tone. "Gonna be the last, too."

For his part Snively had just been staring at first, in equal parts fear, bewilderment, and confusion. Sorun could see why - as he said, he *was* supposed to be dead. But he shook it off soon after when he saw the cane Sorun was supporting himself on, confidence slowly seeping back into his smug leer as he looked down at Sorun from his floating chair. "Well, perhaps reports of your death weren't *entirely* exaggerated by the sight of things. Not feeling as mobile as you used to, Sorun?"

"It's not good to make fun of the disabled, Snively. Karma won't like it." Sorun's eyes slowly drifted to the other egg chair floating next to Snively, at the woman sitting in it. "You, I've little interest in, but since you've thrown your lot in with Snively and your mere existence has caused me irritation as of late I suppose you can share in this up and coming part." He sighed out, hand tightening around the handle of his cane. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"Why, isn't it obvious?" Sorun resisted the urge to blanch upon hearing the woman, Regina, speak. Her voice sounded *haughty* , so high and mighty and full of herself just from her tone alone. And she had a face to match. "To purview my soon-to-be new domain in-"

Nope. Couldn't do it. Her voice was like glass in his ears. "I no longer have any interest in the words coming out of your mouth. Shut up," Sorun interrupted, giving Regina a hard glare. She's snapped her mouth shut, giving Sorun an incensed, borderline-angry look. He ignored her completely and looked back at Snively. "You had a chance to back out of all this when your dear old Ivo hit the loony bin. What happened with that?"

"And what would you know about me, Sorun? What little interaction we've ever shared hasn't been the definition of cordial. In fact, I recall upon our first meeting by which I came to you with nothing but the best of intentions you threatened to *murder me* ," Snively hissed out, clear anger in his tone.

Sorun didn't react at all, continuing to stare at Snively with an even expression. "... You're still mad about that? It's been eleven months, man. Get over it," he said.

"It's not just that!" Snively screamed. "The humiliations you set upon me after in future battles, the *beating* , how my very own uncle seemed to think you bore more worth to pay attention to than myself despite being nothing but a juvenile delinquent carried by abilities!" he exclaimed.

Sorun resisted the urge to scoff out. It almost sounded like he was he was *jealous* of the attention Eggman gave Sorun. Not that he himself understood why; the man tried to kill Sorun multiple times over and he was half-certain all that attention was just to get under Sorun's skin and mock him. But Snively was treating it like it was something more significant.

"He's probably just a moron," Sorun reasoned with himself.

"But..." Snively took a deep inhale to calm himself down. "This isn't about you and me... though that's rapidly being added to the repertoire I've planned. No, Sorun, this is about asserting our place as the figureheads of this world and taking our rightful place as its rulers," he said.

Regina decided to use that moment to chime in, looking more concerned with examining her nails as she spoke out. "And New Mobotropolis represents the seat of power of the controlling party of this region of the world. the Acorn Republic or whatever it is you lot decided to name yourselves. It will serve as a suitable-enough staging area for when we expand beyond Northamer's borders to lands beyond. It really is quite simple.

"..." Sorun tilted his head up to look at the sky. World domination for the sake of... he didn't even know. Because they *felt like it* , all their words seemed to imply. Snively was nearly as demented as Eggman was and it seemed this Regina lady wasn't too far behind him. He didn't know why he thought for a minute there was something deeper

to it. Maybe there was, if he actually got to know the two of them better... but at the end of the day he just did not care in the slightest amount. He wasn't even sure why he was trying to debate with crazy people, especially since they'd obviously made up their minds.

"... What lofty ambitions," Sorun sighed out. He glanced down at his feet, pausing to consider. Maybe he was the fool thinking any better could come of this. But by the point they finished speaking Sorun had already made up his own mind about what he was going to do about this. "Well... Snively. Regina. As much as I'd love to wax philosophy, we're on a bit of time crunch here." He looked off to the side over at the other end of the park. "If Sonic isn't here yet, I can only assume that means he's gathering the other Freedom Fighters so they can all come here at the same time. Which means I've only got that long to do this next part."

Snively paused. "... Next part?" he repeated in a hesitant tone.

"Of course. They'd never let me eviscerate you two, and they'd never look at me the same way. If I claimed to use an aspect of my abilities I never tried before, though, and it went out of control and tore you two to shreds since I had no control... well, then, that's just an unfortunate accident, not malicious intent on my part." He looked back at Snively and Regina, making the smallest of smiles as the silver cane he held transmuted into the glowing, blue gem it truly was. "I never did like playing as a summoner in games, but I'm willing to give it a shot since needs must. So... *woof* , *woof* ."

Anybody even remotely sensitive to Chaos energies would have felt the massive surge in energy that flared up in the center of the New Mobotropolis park before it rapidly turned into something far more sinister in nature. Rancid. *Cold* . From the perspective of Snively and Regina, one moment Sorun had been standing there holding the blue Chaos Emerald. And then there'd been an explosion of blue vapors crackling with blue electricity, concealing him entirely.

The cloud grew, towering over them. The first thing they'd heard was the snarl. Deep and guttural, something that would have rattled the

bones of anyone who was present to listen. Next was the frost that was slowly starting to expand outwards from beyond the cloud that was beginning to rapidly dissipate, revealing the large, imposing silhouette inside of it.

"W-what...!?" Snively had stammered out when it was finally revealed just what it was standing before them. A dog. A dog that so large it towered over Snively and Regina; so large it looked like their bodies could easily fit into the mouths of one of the three identical heads protruding from its three necks that were currently snarling at them. Bound in so much muscle bulging from its skin it looked like just *one* of its muscle groups were larger than the floating chairs Snively and Regina sat in.

It didn't even have fur. It had ice in place of fur, growing across its body in jagged, serrated pieces, a constant cloud of frost hovering around it as three sets of eyes stared right down at Snively and Regina. The latter looked repulsed at the sight. Alarmed and confused, unsure of what she was looking at. In Snively's case he just looked fearful at the sight, shaking where he sat in the egg chair as he looked up at the thing in barely-subdued panic.

And then there was Sorun. He was riding atop the three-headed dog, sitting at the base of its necks with one of his hands around the chain acting as a collar for it. He looked down at them smugly, a small smile playing at the edges of his mouth as he looked at them.

"It's such a shame this thing mauled you two to death before I could get a handle on it. The dangers of trying out untested abilities in an uncontrolled environment. I'm sure the others'll understand," he said, tone almost mocking as he stared down at the two. "I'd wanted King Cerberus, but I'm sure the normal, trashy variant of Cerberus will be more than enough for you two-"

"You *dare* ?"

It *spoke* . In a deep, dual-tone voice that seemed to reverberate the air around it. It was a voice that sounded *wrong* in every sense of the

word. A voice that made anyone who heard it feel like there were ants crawling in their ears, a voice that sent chills right down to the bone more effectively than the air Cerberus was chilling around its body. And then the centermost head turned around, its red-glowing eyes staring straight at *Sorun* and not Snively or Regina.

"You dare to besmirch our name? You dare to insult us and label us inferior to our kin? And you, a mere human, have the utter audacity to ride us like a common, mortal *mutt* !?"

Sorun blinked in surprise. It sounded angry, furious at him, even. At *him* . It confused him greatly because it was supposed to be *his* . He'd completely expected it to be obedient and follow his commands like the weapons and powers he'd use the Chaos Emeralds to make. Like that Empusa he'd made that hadn't struggled at all against Sorun, even when he'd gutted the thing. But this... this was different. Cerberus was talking back to Sorun.

He frowned. Heavily, hand tightening on the chain collar it wore. That wouldn't do, not at all. "Listen to me, you miserable demon. I *made* you. You're mine. You don't get to disobey me-"

Cerberus bucked its body. The most Sorun had made was a surprised breath as he felt his body flip over, his hand still clamped around the chain collar as he fell towards he center head's mouth.

It bit him. Sorun couldn't even make a sound. It was going by so quickly and he was so confused he *couldn't* make a sound when its giant teeth pierced down through his torso. And then it tore him away from the collar and whipped its head towards the ground, letting go of and slamming Sorun right into the dirt.

And then it'd disappeared. The moment it threw Sorun at the ground no part of his body had been making contact with it, and it'd instantly disappeared and reformed back into the blue Chaos Emerald, which fell down on the ground behind him. Sorun couldn't find it in himself to care about that.

"Wh-why did...?" Sorun made a staggered, gasping noise on the grass where he lied, body trembling a bit from the sharp pain he felt radiating out through his body. Artificial blood had begun seeping through the large punctures in his torso, slowly straining the grass around him white. There were even a few electrical sparks that flew out from his wounds due to the artificial skeleton he had being damaged from the bite. *"Was it... t-too sapient to listen...?"*

Snively paused. He looked shocked and confused for the most part, having absolutely no comprehension of what he'd just witness. Even after Cerberus disappeared and Sorun was left bleeding on the ground he *still* didn't know what to make of it. And then he continued looking at Sorun, at the way he was lying on the ground and bleeding out. And then slowly all that shock and confusion began to give way to cautious smugness as he looked down at him.

"O-oh... oh ho *ho* . Well now... what was it you were saying earlier about the dangers of using 'untested abilities', Sorun? I'm not even going to pretend to understand what just happened but whatever it was seems to have blown back on you, hasn't it?" Snively asked, leaning over a bit in his floating chair. Resting his chin against his hand as he watched Sorun lie on the ground, bleeding out white as he struggled to regain his breath. "And my my my, that color and those sparks... I see that cane was far from show, was it? Dipped into the world of cybernetics for yourself, did you?"

"Oh, I can *feel* them in him," Regina sneered from besides Snively, looking down at Sorun's body. "Wires and electrodes, all crossing and surging across his body. I think he went and replaced his whole skeleton with metal!"

"You don't say..."

Most of the words Sorun were hearing went in one ear and out the other, none being processed and registered. He was mostly trying and failing to get up to his feet, repeatedly falling back down in the puddle of white blood. He was in enough pain that his body was

shuddering. Worse than that it was slowly dulling and fading, coinciding with the cold that was slowly seeping into his body.

"Ch-chao!" He saw movement in front of his vision. Virgil, hovering above Sorun's face. He didn't think he'd ever seen such a look of concern on the Chao's face. He was usually more stoic than this, more reserved. Now he looked like he was in full panic, focusing completely on Sorun and all his wounds. "Chao-chao! Chao-chao chao! Chao!"

"Virgil..." Sorun's right hand snapped upwards, grabbing at the Chao, making Virgil shout in surprise. Sorun blinked once - he hadn't done that. He hadn't made the conscious decision to move his arm, to grab at Virgil like that. And yet his arm was doing just that.

And then his already-cooling blood grew chilled when he looked over at Regina, seeing a small, green glow around her hand as she gestured towards Sorun. And he instantly knew, remembered what Dimitri had said about her being a technomancer who could control technology. And realized his damn *skeleton* was technology. Every single bone below his head an artificial piece of cybernetic technology he could nearly *feel* her get a grip on.

"H-hey..." He made a weak breath as he tried pulling against her control, but it was no good. The motors in all the joints of his cybernetic skeleton, the things that were supposed to help with his mobility, were fighting against him. A fight he was losing, because his muscles were just too weak and he felt too exhausted from the blood loss. He couldn't do anything as his body slowly began to stand up on its own, still gripping Virgil tightly.

"Oh, I remember this pet of yours *fondly* ," Snively continued in a mocking tone, face lighting up further and further in delight as he watched. "Station Square, I believe it was? You'll be happy to know, dear, that *this* little terror had been the one to tear apart the battle machine I had been in before Sorun practically beat my face black and blue."

"I'm not happy at all to hear that," Regina responded. She started waggling her fingers, her smile beginning to turn crueler. That green glow around her hand intensified and she'd began making more forceful gestures with her fingers. And, coinciding with that, Sorun's hand began squeezing down.

Sorun could *feel* it. Could feel Virgil's small bones began cracking underneath his grip, could feel the pain in his own hand from the pressure he was being forced to exert. He kept trying, trying as hard as he could to stop, but the damn motors in his hand's artificial skeleton were that much stronger than his muscles. He couldn't do anything.

"..." Sorun's breathing had begun picking up. Panic and dread, actual, true *dread* he hadn't felt in so long and had thought was behind him, began to sink into him as he saw his Chao getting crushed between his own fingers. He saw the pain spreading across his face and heard the small pained noises he made. "Just... just cut through my hand. Vi-Virgil, I can fix it, just... do something..."

He didn't. Virgil wasn't doing anything except staying there in Sorun's hand to be crushed. He couldn't even tell if it was because Virgil *couldn't* do anything due to not being able to move his limbs, or because he simply didn't want to hurt Sorun. Both were equally frustrating to him. Equally terrifying. He was *hurting* Virgil and the sight of it was getting Sorun's heart racing in a way that was making him break out in a cold sweat and making his skin itch.

"Hey... hey, you two, stop it," Sorun said, looking back towards Snively and Regina. It felt like a sword going through his chest, hearing his own voice sound so pleading to *them* of all people. People he hated more than anyone else in the world at this moment. Felt blazing anger at the sick, sadistic smiles they were wearing from watching the sight before them. Felt hopelessness at Sorun's ability to do absolutely nothing about this. A whirlwind of emotions that nearly made him lightheaded, and all the while he own hand was *crushing his companion to death* . "He doesn't have anything to do with this, just stop, don't-!"

"Don't...?" Regina echoed, sounding wholly amused as her fingers closed tighter. "For someone who should be begging at my dear Snively's feet for all the grief you've put my lovely man through you have quite the gall to be making *demands* here. Beg harder."

Sorun's hand tightened further in line with Regina's. It wasn't cracking anymore - he felt the bones beneath Virgil's flesh outright beginning to break now. "C-chao..."

His eyes widened further. Dying. He was dying. They were making him kill him. "I'll do anything, just... stop it..." he pleaded out, ignoring his pride screaming at him to keep his mouth shut, ignoring all he burning shame and humiliation it made him feel because he felt like Virgil was going to *die* if he didn't push these feelings down and do what they said.

But his fingers kept pressing down. Regina just laughed, continuing to close her hand and make Sorun's do the same, make him watch as Virgil's body was squeezed more and more.

"Mree-hee-hee!" Regina's cackling laughter practically sounded like glass scraping against his eardrums. It didn't even look like his begging was helping any. She never even so much as paused to consider the worth of his pleas. "Yes, yes that's right... keep going."

"Hey. Hey, I said I'd do anything!" Sorun shouted out, voice panicked and desperate as he looked up at Regina. She wasn't stopping, and that smile wasn't going away. She just kept closing her hand more and more. "I'm begging you, what do you want!? I'll do anything, just- PLEASE STOP-!"

CRACK!

He'd felt it before he'd seen it. Before he'd heard it, even, the subtle vibrations passing through Sorun's muscles and nerves before the sound registered with his brain. Felt it as Virgil's bones caved in completely and he felt the tiny Chao body in his hand go *squish!* right there in his grasp. Felt his tiny heartbeat rapidly slow into a complete

stop. Felt blood from Virgil's mouth and the puncture marks on his body where bone was poking through splash onto his hand.

Sorun just stared. Stared at the broken, lifeless body being held in his hand. So limp and inanimate, like some... broken marionette.

"Virgil...?" Sorun murmured out, looking at the broken thing in his hand. That couldn't be Virgil, could it? It... looked like him. The silver, cylindrical horns, the blades on the arms, the blue coloring and wings. It was all there but Virgil wasn't supposed to look like a crushed corpse. He was supposed to be a living and healthy Chao, because... because things were supposed to be fine now. Sorun did all those things and went through so much because life was supposed to be normal now. Normal life didn't have crushed-up bodies like this.

He'd noticed movement, somewhere in the back of his mind. Saw from the corner of his eyes all the other the other Freedom Fighters arrive and stop just short of them, all of them seemingly frozen in shock. Sorun couldn't find himself acknowledging them. He heard muffled sounds of Snively and Regina saying *something* in some gloating tone, but it was all drowned out by the sound of Sorun's own heartbeat he felt thrumming in his ears.

All of it ignored. All of it. All he could focus on was the corpse of the Chao that slipped from his fingers and fell onto the grass beneath him. And the blood left on his hand. It was... sparkling. Tiny, miniscule motes of green light scattered across the blood.

There'd been so much Chaos energy inside of Virgil's blood, Sorun realized. *Was* so much. Energy that was suffusing into his body through the contact of blood on his skin.

"You really... were special... weren't you, Virgil...?" Sorun thought. Staring down at his hand with a detached, vacant stare as he felt the hand heal in all the wrong ways. Saw the skin split apart as true, organic bone began growing alongside the artificial, metal carpal bones already in his hand. And there simply wasn't any room - both

the organic and artificial bones were tearing through the skin, ruining his hand from everything trying to fit in place. Turning the appendage into a mangled, unrecognizable mess of flesh and metal. He could see his own muscles squirming around it all like some mass of writhing tendrils as his body tried and failed to heal around all the metal in his hand. White blood flowing from the wound and slowly being replaced by red blood, mixing together into a pink substance dripping down and staining the grass.

The thought that this didn't hurt all that much didn't cross Sorun's mind, even though deep down he knew it *should* have been agonizing. But Virgil was right there, dead, with his blood on his hand, and it was all Sorun could think about. His body should be throbbing in pain from having been bitten by Cerberus, but Virgil was dead at his feet and his blood was all over Sorun. All his friends were screaming at Sorun and Snively and Regina were giving Sorun confused, disturbed looks because of his hand. But Virgil was dead and they made him kill him.

What *did* register with Sorun was that he could move a bit. For how much his hand was being ruined from the accidental regeneration that small boost of strength Virgil's blood gave him was letting him muscle through the servos in his skeleton.

"..." Sorun knelt down with more effort than he'd ever had to put into moving. Regina had pushed past the disgusted look on her face and made an intense frown, the glow around her hand intensifying. And he could hear the servos in his body straining, attempting to force him to move. And they were slowly gaining ground; whatever temporary strength that bit of blood afforded Sorun was *rapidly* fading. A few seconds more, at best.

He wanted to try and make it worth it. To get *something* out of the needless death. So Sorun reached down, placing his left hand on the gathering pool of blood growing around Virgil's corpse. Could feel all that power radiating out from the blood, all that Chaos energy that had been flowing inside of Virgil.

"... One more hit, buddy. I'll get one in for you," Sorun whispered out. For as much was there it wasn't *nearly* as much as what a Chaos Emerald provided. Surely not enough to make Yamato. Not one of his powers, likely. He needed something... weaker. Not as strong, not as powerful. Something that would last a couple seconds so he could get at least one single hit against the person who made him do this. He'd never felt a greater need to do anything in his entire life.

He made a decision. All that green light in Virgil's blood gathered around to a single point where Sorun's hand was resting above it. Forming a shape and solidifying into hard, cold steel. And Sorun pulled, tearing a claymore sword right out from that tiny puddle of blood, the screaming skull making up the hilt of the sword seemingly staring right at Regina who'd frozen in shock.

There hadn't been much thought put into Sorun's next action. It was less a thing he had to think about and more something he'd just done, almost automatically, on instinct. He'd used the last bit of strength his body had and reared his arm back, flipping the sword around in a reverse grip. And then he threw it - straight at Regina's face, with zero hesitation, with zero regard for the fact all his friends were watching.

The claymore sword sailed right past Regina's face. It hadn't been much power that constituted it, and it'd faded away before it even touched down on the ground, dissipating into motes of green light that quickly disappeared in the span of a second. But it'd done its job. Regina had screamed out, holding the left side of her face as blood poured between her fingers and down her hand. The edge of the sword had sliced right through her left eye and destroyed it completely.

"... Damn it..." It was the last thought Sorun managed to formulate as consciousness began to slip from him. He'd intended to take Regina's head off with that sword throw, maybe just skewer her face, but he'd only ended up taking an eye. The last thing he felt was nothing but bitter regret as he finally faded into unconsciousness.

Sorun didn't end up falling down. Regina still had a hold on his artificial skeleton; he passed out while standing up, upper torso limp and slumped over. It was a credit to her tenacity more than anything else, the woman pushing through the pain on sheer willpower to keep Sorun in her grasp.

"Regina!" This had been shouted out by Snively, who'd reached over to Regina in worry as she clutched her head in anguish. This had only caused Regina to lash out and hit Snively across the face, causing him to fall out of his chair and sprawl onto the grass.

"Don't touch me!" she screeched out, her hand going back to clutching at her face while the other one reached out towards Sorun. "That miserable vermin, he...! *GAH* !" Her one remaining eye looked at the Freedom Fighters all standing off to the side, some giving Sorun worried looks while others gave Regina and Snively furious looks. "And you all! Not one step or I'll have this wretch end himself!"

She flipped her hand around, causing Sorun's intact hand to fling up and grip around his own neck, threatening to snap it. It caused all the observing Mobians to flinch back, a few of which who'd been moving to step forwards freezing with hesitation and panic when they saw Sorun gripping his own throat. And then his unconscious body slowly started stumbling forwards, towards Regina and her floating chair.

"What the- stop it!" It was Sonic who'd been the first one to speak up in the group. He'd saw as Snively scrambled over to pick up the blue Emerald Sorun had dropped earlier. He'd wanted to move and stop him, but then he saw Sorun and how he was completely at Regina's mercy and stopped. The same reason nobody was stepping forward to help. "H-he's bleeding, look at him! He needs help! You can't just take him!" he shouted, pointing at the large gouge wounds on Sorun's torso.

"I most certainly can! And if you even *think* as to follow us you can guess what happens!" Regina shrieked at him, not even seeming to acknowledge Snively as he scampered back over to his own egg

chair. "You, you all... this isn't over, not even nearly! When I come back I'll... I'll...!"

She didn't even get to finish, so wracked in pain she'd trailed off into an anguished sort of growl. At a snap of Regina's hand Sorun's body jumped up to the back of her chair, standing on the rim of the egg-like pod while his intact hand held onto the upper portion of the rim. His head, meanwhile, was still dipped down. Still unconscious to what his body was doing as the two chairs floated up and flew away, with everyone watching helpless to do anything.

Present

Where did it go wrong?

"..."

He was here. Snively. The person who'd done the most unforgiveable thing anyone had ever done to Sorun. It was the very first sign that Sorun had even displayed since being locked in this cell: he looked up. Looked up and just blankly stared at Snively.

"Ah, you're actually awake? From what the guards in this place have been saying I'd have figured you for a comatose vegetable, but then again who can rely on the observations of good-for-nothing animals, hmm...?" Snively hummed out, leaning close to the bars of the cell. He looked pleased with himself, overly smug. Like somebody who knew they'd just won everything and were on top of the world.

"..." Sorun blinked once, tilting his head at Snively as he stared back. The hate he felt for him was seconded only by the hate he felt for that woman. Or perhaps it was a reversed order, since she had been the one to force him to do the deed. He wasn't too sure.

He was sure of what he remembered, though. He'd made him beg. *Him* . Sorun losing hadn't been enough, he'd had to grind his pride into the ground along with it. Sorun hated it so much. Hated being in

this position, hated his Chao was dead, hated everything Snively had done.

Was Snively where it went wrong? Was he just a product of the world outright refusing to finally give Sorun his peace? Was there even a distinction at this point? Or was it just because Sorun had pulled the stunt with the damn-

No. It wasn't his fault. Sorun had done nothing wrong. The world was wrong. Snively was wrong. Sorun wasn't.

"Er..." The smug look on Snively's face lowered somewhat when he saw Sorun just blankly staring at him in such a matter. Like he was being studied more than anything else. "In... any event, I'm sure you'll be *pleased* to know that my dear Regina and I have finished occupying New Mobotropolis and... have been..." He trailed off, slowly growing more and more perturbed by the staring.

He'd taken everything Sorun had fought for and earned. Him - solely him. Snively. Because Snively was just another piece of this world that seemed to despise Sorun so much that he couldn't have something as simple and basic as a life. But Snively... he'd chosen to do what he'd done to Sorun. He'd chosen to take his dream away from him.

He made him lose.

"I'm starting to wonder if the others' reports about your state wasn't overblown after all," Snively mumbled out under his breath as he stepped back from the cell. Sorun's eyes followed him. "Well, whatever the case, as soon as we've polished things up here we'll be moving back to Yurashia. I'm sure my beloved Regina is all but eager to repay you for the grievous wound you inflicted on her. Ah, so many tools... the people in Yurashia are nothing if not creative."

"..."

Any smugness on Snively's face dropped off entirely at Sorun's blank staring. Now he just looked uncomfortable. "... Oh, forget it. You're taking all of the fun out of it," he grumbled out as he turned around and began walking off. "Maybe after we've subjected all your friends and turned them into drooling slaves you'll begin singing a different tune. Farewell for now, Sorun. I'll be sure we catch up more later in Yurashia."

"..." Sorun silently stared at Snively as he left. Even as he left the small prison and closed the door behind him, leaving Sorun completely alone, he continued to stare after him.

A/N- In a weird way the story was in a really good spot when I took that large break, since this chapter was the turning point where the tone for the rest of the story completely shifts. So there's that much, at least.

Chapter 106

Recursion Error

Episode 106- We die a little every day

Something was thrown into Sorun's cell.

Sorun's eyes slowly flickered open. He wasn't sure how long he'd been chained up in here - a day, two at most, he wagered. In this dingy, dark cell in this holding area. Such were the conditions that the object that had been thrown into the cell at his feet was glaringly obvious to see: a large, blue gem that glowed with an intense, blue light. A Chaos Emerald. *His* Chaos Emerald.

"..." Sorun slowly tilted his head up. Beyond the bars of the cell there was only one single figure. A cybernetic echidna head, suspended in a clear, floating ball with multiple mechanical tentacles jutting from it. Dimitri was unmistakenly recognizable, but at the moment Sorun just felt so mind-numbingly *empty* at the moment that he didn't even know what to feel or how to react.

"... Well, I see the auto-coagulating effects of the artificial blood have proven to be effective, at the very least," Dimitri remarked, his gaze going down to the large puncture marks at Sorun's sides that still dully throbbed - they'd ceased bleeding long ago. His tone was clear and even, that mechanical twang still behind his voice as he spoke. "I was quite worried about that. The effects had never been tested on non-echidna bodies-"

"What is this?" Sorun interrupted. His voice sounded hollow, quiet and scratchy. Nearly broken from how quiet he spoke.

"The... Chaos Emerald that was brought along with you," Dimitri carefully answered, seemingly thinking Sorun had been referring to

that. "They had it under tight lock and key, but with my credentials-"

"I know what it is, you moron," Sorun breathed out, tired eyes still looking up at Dimitri. "Why are you *giving* it to me?" Because as far as he knew the Dark Legion echidna fell in with Snively and his Yurashia lot. And Dimitri was included in that.

"Ah." The expression on Dimitri's features lowered slightly. A slow, rattling sigh left him, his head bubble lowering a bit in elevation so he could look Sorun in the eyes. "Before I explain, let me speak plainly and inform you that I was *not* informed of the Iron Queen's ambitions of world domination before the Dark Legion was folded into the Iron Dominion's forces. It was my understanding operations would strictly be kept to Yurashia territory and no further outside of its boundaries. It was my *assumption* that the woman and Snively would be satisfied ruling over an entire continent." He made another sigh. "It seems... I was mistaken. On all accounts."

"..." Sorun paused to consider Dimitri's words. Due to the complete and utter lack of any other thoughts going through his head, Sorun managed to reach his conclusion to Dimitri's words after only a few short seconds. "I'd have believed that... if you hadn't said all that before I even mentioned anything on the matter."

Dimitri didn't visibly react. His expression, however, did fall further. "... I was directly in the center of the Republic of Acorn's capital city when we spoke of this, Sorun. I needed to say what I said for the sake of my people. For *your* sake, too, lest you forget."

"Your 'help' is the reason someone dear to me is dead and I'm in here," Sorun blankly replied, not even hesitating in speaking his mind as he looked down at his right hand. Still mangled and torn from the mix of real and artificial bone bursting out from the skin and muscles. All the exposed bits of meat were dark and cold, the edges of torn skin beginning to turn black. He was fairly certain it turned gangrene a while ago.

Dimitri looked down at Sorun's hand along with him, a pang of sympathy spreading over his face. "... I'm sorry," he stated simply, looking back at Sorun's face. And Sorun himself reacted by blinking once, because he could tell Dimitri was actually telling the truth. There was more emotion in that phrase than he'd ever heard from him every time he spoke. "The motors I installed within your skeleton were to assist with locomotive efforts, both in recovery and when you... began to deteriorate. I never imagined it would be used *against* you, Sorun, I... sincerely was trying to help."

"..." Sorun found himself believing him this time. And begrudgingly he would admit the cybernetics *had* been helping him immensely, right up until the end there. He could accept Dimitri genuinely did mean well.

There was still the matter of the Chaos Emerald sitting in his cell, though. Why Dimitri was giving it to him.

"Answer the question of why this is in here with me," Sorun said, patience rapidly wearing thin. "Is this really you flipping against Regina and the rest?"

"That would imply our interests were ever aligned to begin with," Dimitri muttered, expression morphing into a bitter one. "I'd told you the only reason I allowed the Dark Legion to be absorbed into the Iron Dominion was on the contingent that Regina use her abilities to remove the bombs that had been implanted in our cybernetics. But she *didn't* ." Some of the metallic tendrils extending from Dimitri's head ball flailed around a bit, as if especially aggravated. "She told me right to my face that the devices' construction was 'far too advanced' to be safely removed without detonation, as if she couldn't just deactivate them entirely with a wave of her hand. She and Snively offered us inhibitor chips to be implanted that would block an activation signal of the bombs' trigger, as if they just expected me to trust such things weren't sabotaged in some way. Or used as leverage against us."

"You're surprised?" It's the only thing Sorun could think to say in order to react to what he heard. There wasn't any surprise on his face, no shock, not so much as a single twitch of a micro expression on his face. After what Snively had done to Sorun, to him, such a thing sounded completely in line with him. Deep down he was almost even *irritated* at Dimitri for not having expected such a betrayal.

"... I shouldn't be," Dimitri sighed out, the tentacles growing limp and hanging down. "It was my ultimate desire above all else to help my people and they reneged on their promise. I don't feel obligated to display any more loyalty to them when they've shown me none in return."

He paused, red, mechanical eyes looking down at the blue Chaos Emerald sitting in Sorun's cage. "You never reneged when I asked for your aid," he mumbled out. "I realize neither of us is the other's most favorite person. I realize you had your own reasons and didn't do it out of the kindness of your heart. The fact remains after a lifetime of having to second guess every single ally and acquaintance of mine, having to have weathered betrayal after betrayal... well. To say it plain I just appreciated you 'playing it straight' with me, as it were."

"..." Sorun's eyes went down to the Chaos Emerald sitting at his feet. "So this is what? Gratitude? Revenge against Regina and Snively?"

"Perhaps both of those. Perhaps more. Truthfully, this is just something I felt like doing," Dimitri confessed to Sorun. "I heard what happened besides. I won't... pretend to understand you well enough to know what's going on through your head, what you might be thinking of doing. But if that second meeting of ours had any indication..." Dimitri paused, head swiveling off to a random direction. "... I'd rather not have my echidna brothers and sister be trapped under the yolk of the Iron Dominion."

"You are making a *lot* of assumptions," Sorun quietly said. He made a short breath. It was whatever in the end. Dimitri's motivations and reasons didn't matter much to Sorun when the key to his liberation,

to *everything* , was literally right there at his feet. And he'd rather take it while he could before something came along to rip this chance away.

He lifted his boot up and rested it on top of the Emerald, instantly feeling its connection. A blue, spectral blade appeared hovering in the air, shooting forwards and directly impacting the shackle holding Sorun's intact arm up. It flopped down to his side, feeling completely numb after having been forced to be held up for so long.

"E-egh..." Sorun did his best to ignore the numb, tingling sensation crawling up his left limb as he pulled the Emerald towards him with his leg. It skittered forward across the floor, landing in his hand where it shortly transmuted into the Yamato there after. And afterwards Sorun just *stared* at it.

There it was. Freedom. Freedom and... everything else, right there in his hand. So many possibilities all of a sudden that it was dizzying to Sorun. What did he even *do* now? Now that he had this? What were his options, the best course of action?

"... One thing at a time," Sorun thought to himself. He lifted the katana up, letting the blade rest in his lap as he stared down at it consideringly. "... Leave," he told Dimitri, not bothering to look up at him.

A surprised sound left Dimitri. "Pardon me?"

"The doorway. To the holding area," Sorun elaborated, still staring down at the blade. "Do me the favor of keeping a lookout, would you? I need some time for this next part." He paused, looking towards his defunct right hand. "And it won't be a pretty sight besides."

"I... see." Dimitri seemed like he wanted to argue, but upon hearing Sorun's tone - that eerily calm, commanding tone - he thought differently and hovered off. Sorun watched him until he'd disappeared beyond the doorway, and then sighed out once he left.

"Right... right." Sorun maintained a firmer grip on the sword's handle with his left hand as he looked down at his right arm. *So many things* were supposed to go right once he'd gotten this thing. An end to his sickness, a doorway to his new life. Now he couldn't help but think of this metal thing inside him with thoughts full of nothing but contempt and disdain. He couldn't stand it being inside of him. It was just a constant reminder of everything that had happened and he wanted it *gone* .

He couldn't heal his arm like this with it in the way besides. Or anything else that was wrong with him.

"..." No thoughts ran through Sorun's mind as he sluggishly removed all of the clothing on his torso, tossing it all haphazardly to the floor. There wasn't anything *to* think about the fact that everything was going so terribly wrong. That everything was ruined and he didn't even know what to *think* about it, let alone do. What does he do with the fact his entire world came crashing down? *Again* ?

He didn't even so much as flinch when he rose Yamato up to his right shoulder and used it to cleanly cut his entire arm off, eyes still staring blankly ahead with a thousand-yard stare.

It'd been about ten minutes that Dimitri had been standing behind the entrance to the holding area before he'd heard two distinct sounds behind him: slow, uneven footsteps, and the metallic scraping sound of something being dragged along the metal floor.

"Sorun?" Dimitri had turned around towards the source of the noise, floating back a bit further in. He'd only made it a few feet before something was tossed down onto the ground in front of Dimitri: a metallic skeleton, missing a few pieces and a limb as if it'd been removed in pieces at a time. Sparking at various points from where it was damaged and leaking white, artificial blood as it laid there on the ground.

Dimitri had just floated there, staring in shock at the sight. The unexpected nature of it and how he was just *confused* at just seeing it there. And then his eyes traveled up to Sorun, standing in front of him. He was lightly panting, as if just having gone through some tremendous effort. Mouth hanging open as he breathed heavily and looked at Dimitri, *physically* looking no worse for wear. Even his beyond-damaged right hand from earlier looked completely healed over.

"I tore out your garbage skeleton and grew my own back," Sorun panted out, shoulders moving up and down slightly as he stared at Dimitri. There was a massive pool of white blood and a severed arm behind him from the cell he'd come out from - the artificial blood he'd used Yamato to separate from his body so he could use the Chaos Emerald to regenerate his real blood.

It hadn't been an easy task to use Yamato to remove his whole skeleton. It'd been painful. Arduous. Somehow throughout it all Sorun couldn't bring himself to overly care all that much. His brain felt like it was in a constant flux now that he was moving around and doing things. If he wasn't thinking about anything he was just flashing back to prior events in New Mobotropolis, of how he'd felt that tiny body in his hand just die so suddenly, how his *own demon* had bitten down on him and crippled him, that *damn mocking laughter* he'd been forced to endure.

No. He hadn't been able to really think about the pain as he removed his skeleton and grew the real thing back.

"..." Dimitri seemed shocked by what Sorun said. There even seemed to be a few moments where he just floated there in place as if trying to figure out *how* Sorun had accomplished what he said. And yet, the proof was right there on the floor: the artificial skeleton. And Sorun standing there just fine as if possessing a skeleton already.

Eventually he just sighed in acceptance, looking back up at Sorun. "You're not long for life without that," he reminded him.

"I don't care anymore," Sorun mumbled out. There was a small part in the back of his mind that stirred in panic at hearing that, but he ignored it. He just couldn't bring himself to care about about something as inconsequential as his *life expectancy* of all things given everything that was immediately happening. "Besides," he murmured out, "can't have the crazy lady controlling me again," he added, as if an afterthought to quell the distressed parts of his mind.

"Be that as it may, you... agh. As you will," Dimitri mumbled out as he saw Sorun's breathing slowly come more and more under control. He paused at seeing the expression on Sorun's face. He looked thoroughly beaten, *lost* . Eyes vacant as if there were barely even any thoughts running through his head.

"... What are your intentions now?" Dimitri hesitantly asked.

"I don't know," he admitted. What even *did* he do now? What *was* there to do? He glanced down at his hand holding the Yamato - if he really wanted to there was nothing stopping him from just opening a portal and going back home right now. But what did he even say to anyone that saw him? And what-

Sorun blinked once. Invasion. He'd almost forgotten. "What's going in in New Mobotropolis?" he asked, looking back towards Dimitri.

"It isn't ideal, I'll tell you that upfront," Dimitri began. There was a grave sort of undertone to his voice that had Sorun on edge for some reason; the feeling made him uneasy. "The Iron Queen brought over significant numbers from each of the conquered Yurashia clans over here to Northamer. Half remain here in the Egg Dome, which they commandeered following Eggman's... psychotic break." Dimitri hummed, head bubble turning a bit to the side. "Speaking of which, from what I hear the addled fiend escaped his own confinement from here some time ago, directly underneath Snively's nose. I'm unsure of what came of him."

"..." Sorun inhaled a deep breath. "There's too much happening for me to think about that," he decided, expression growing even more

withered as he shook his head. "Just... tell me where everyone is."

"That, I couldn't give you a concise answer of," Dimitri confessed. "Half of the Iron Dominion's forces remained here in the Egg Dome to be held in reserve while the other half were moved to New Mobotropolis to aid in the invasion. Which by itself has been going... well for the Iron Dominion. Last I heard."

"... Well, huh?" Sorun murmured out, eyes drifting down towards the floor. The news *should* have been more impactful to Sorun. It should have, should have felt like a spike going through his chest, he *knew* it was supposed to feel terrible. But after everything that had happened hearing that his new home was being successfully subjugated just felt like a dull thud he could barely register.

"I believe I heard word of the Iron Queen and Snively planning on subjecting the populace to forced cybernetic augmentation. Mentions neural reconfiguration and lobotomies... it's echidna technology that Lien-Da and the other Dark Legion echidna stationed over in New Mobotropolis are assisting them with."

There was another dull throb that Sorun felt in his chest. It was worse than mere subjugation. It was a worse, more crude version of the roboticization that Eggman had subjected people to this world in the past. It sounded like a bad parody of things he'd seen in video games he'd played in the past. It didn't even sound real.

And yet he wasn't even surprised. Sorun wished he was surprised. Wished that hearing all these horrible things created more of a reaction out of him, that the images of all the friends of acquaintances he knew in New Mobotropolis flashing through his head, the images his brain was conjuring to make them half-metal cyborgs with vacant, thoughtless expressions, elicited more reaction out of him than the dull throbs he felt to his heart that he barely even felt. Like a body going numb from suffering so many punches to the point that he didn't even *feel* the punches anymore.

Numb. That's how Sorun felt hearing all these things, he realized. No horror, revulsion, outrage and fury, sadness and grief or worry over everyone he'd grown so close with. Just numb acceptance to it all, like it was routine, *to be expected* . Was the world really so bad he just expected things like this now? Was he just *used* to all the horror?

He didn't know what to do with that.

"The others doing anything about it?" Sorun mumbled out, eyes still on the floor. He couldn't believe *nothing* was being done about it. For all the bad constants of this world there was at least a few good constants as well.

Dimitri paused. "I... have no knowledge whatsoever of whatever it is the Freedom Fighters may or may not be planning," he admitted. He was speaking carefully now. *Overly* carefully, as if he were afraid of saying something that would upset Sorun. "Any attempts by the local populace of wresting back control of the city has proven to be unsuccessful due to Regina using her abilities to... leverage the city's security measures against the people," he said, sounding uncomfortable as he turned his head away from Sorun's gaze. "The AI system was unable to resist-"

"Just say her name. I got the meaning," Sorun interrupted, blinking once as he looked down at the floor. He meant Nicole. He meant to imply that Regina used the same tech-controlling powers she'd used on him on Nicole. And at her basest level Nicole *was* technology. The entire city that was made of nanites was technology. Like it should even be any wonder Regina managed to take it over so fast.

Sorun picked his head up. Hearing from Dimitri that Nicole had just been taken over by Regina felt different than all the other news he'd heard so far. It wasn't just another dull ache - that voice in his head that had been steering him on had suddenly gone eerily silent. He didn't like it. He didn't like this unfamiliar silence. He didn't like any of this news, of any of this happening, he didn't...

He hated all this so much...

"I've heard enough. Stop it." Sorun made a short breath, expression still set in an exhausted, morose appearance. "Regina and Snively. Would they be here... or New Mobotropolis?"

"They go back and forth between here and there to coordinate efforts between split forces, I can't say for *certain* their current... if it were here I would assume they'd be in the throne room they converted the Egg Dome's command center into, but I-" Dimitri cut himself off, continuing to look up at Sorun and the way he just looked do slumped forward and tired. "What are your intentions, Sorun?" he repeated.

"Who knows. I'm not sure myself." Sorun sighed out, looking down at the sword in his hand. Simply going home and waiting for the Freedom Fighters to do something so it all blew over... it didn't really seem like an option now with the city under siege. With everything just... going so wrong. What *could* he do?

The dim lights in the holding cell glimmered off the sheen of Yamato's blade. Were certainly options. A few, at least. Sorun just... didn't know what to do with them. But he had to do *something* . With what Dimitri just said it gave Sorun the impression he didn't have forever to deliberate, and somewhere deep in his heart there was a small sense of urgency to make a decision quickly before *more* people were irrevocably lost.

Before all that, though, Sorun realized he needed to decide what he'd do with Dimitri right over here.

"... I should kill you." The words came out as matter-of-fact as Sorun looked towards Dimitri, staring at him dispassionately. "But... twice now you've saved my life. So where do you want to go?"

"Eh...?" There'd been a brief moment where panic writ itself on Dimitri's mechanical features, the head bubble he was in floating

back. And then he paused at Sorun's words, seeming more confused than anything else as he heard his words. "Go... wh-what do you-?"

"Yamato. I can make portals with it," he reminded Dimitri, holding the sword up halfway. "You can't exactly stay here, having just busted me out and all. I don't imagine a lot of people had access to where they were storing the Chaos Emerald they took from me." He made a small sigh, looking towards the doorway to the holding area. "Then again... who knows if it matters. If I..."

He cut himself off, shaking his head. "Just pick somewhere. You can't stay here."

"I-I don't..." Dimitri stammered out, almost seeming like he was cut off by the question. As if he hadn't even stopped to consider what he'd do *after* he freed Sorun. "I'm not... entirely sure," he confessed. "I don't exactly have refuges set up in the event of something like this. I've nowhere to go."

"... Then go to my place. Hide under the bed or something, I don't know." Sorun made a single slice in the air, a small portal forming in front of the both of them. "Just don't touch any of my stuff." He paused. "... Take one of the books if you want. But put it back after."

"That's... generous." Dimitri seemed taken aback by the offer, genuine surprise showing on his face. He looked back and forth between the portal and Sorun, some of his mechanical tentacles twitching in an uncertain manner. "Sorun, regarding... whatever you decide doing, regarding the echidna who allied-"

"Do not. Just don't, Dimitri," Sorun said, shaking his head. "I'm not putting any thought towards them whatsoever, as far as I'm concerned they're all the same to me. Just leave already before I change my mind."

"... I understand." Dimitri made a resigned sound and turned around, floating through the portal. Sorun barely even waited a second after he disappeared before he slashed the sword again, closing the

portal and leaving Sorun alone. Completely alone in this holding area.

The first thing Sorun did was walk over towards the nearest wall. He pressed his back against it, slowly sliding down into a sitting position as a long, weary sigh left him.

"I feel like I'm falling apart," he whispered under his breath, holding his free hand up to his head. It all seemed too cruel to be real, as if it were just some fever-driven nightmare he was experiencing. How every facet of his life just seemed to be... unraveling right before his eyes. All so soon, all so suddenly. Without any warning whatsoever. It made Sorun's head spin, how unreasonably fast it all crumbled away.

What was he even supposed to do about all of it? *Could* he even do something? Should he? Sorun's own thoughts felt like such a mess of a whirlwind he could barely think, let alone reason with himself over what he was supposed to do.

He heard a small sniffle from besides him. Laconically, Sorun's head listed off to the side, where he saw himself sitting besides him against the wall. Legs pulled up to his chest with his face pressed up against his knees. Sorun didn't know what to make of the sight. It was unfamiliar, strange-looking. He wasn't used to seeing such a sight.

Eventually, the other Sorun rose his head up from his knees to look at Sorun. He was a miserable sight, both in the state he was in and how he was conveying himself with his expression. Sad and anguished beyond all belief, and past all that just *tired* . "I'm sorry," he whispered out to Sorun.

"..." Sorun blinked once. "What...?"

"I just... I tried so hard, you know?" he murmured out, shuffling a bit in place as he stared ahead. "I tried so hard to steer us onto what I thought was the *right* path. A normal life - just living in peace. I

thought it would be the perfect fix-all for everything. And *so many times* ..." He thumped his head back against the wall, making an invisible sound only Sorun could ever hear. "So many times I held you back from doing things because I thought it was the right thing to do. That this place, these people we'd come to befriend and ingratiate ourselves with... they all had a way of doing things. And if we followed those ways everything would be *fine* . Everyone was strong, they could take care of things, and until now it'd been working..."

He sounded so frustrated. Defeated. Like all the hope and belief had been ripped right out of him and all that was left was confusion and despair. It's exactly how Sorun felt.

"... But no. This world just... evidently *fucking sucks* . We could do every single little thing completely right and make no mistakes, but because this place is filled with megalomaniacs with god complexes or powers or whatever the hell else, it just... *it doesn't stop* !" A few tears ran down the other Sorun's face as he ran a hand through his hair. "How many times!? It's insanity! Over and over, one after another, no matter *how many times* we keep fighting and things keep settling down, it's just... it just keeps happening."

A slow, long-suffering sigh left him as his hand limply flopped down to his side. "Now people are dying," he murmured, visibly deflating from where he sat against the wall. "Virgil will never come back. He's just... gone forever. Other people, people we *know* , might be gone forever because of the borg bullshit Dimitri was talking about. I can't do it anymore."

"..." Sorun made a slow blink while looking at Sorun. "What are you-?"

"I was wrong. Alright? I was... I *thought* , that if we just kept to everyone else's standards and played along with the status quo that everything would work out again like it always did. That we could calm down and settle up all peacefully, so things would be fine and I

wouldn't have to worry about everything falling apart, but it isn't working, none of it's working, none of it *will* work. So I'm done. I'm..."

Sorun trailed off, making a few choked breaths. And then he turned towards Sorun, shuffling towards him until he was right in front of him. Leaning forwards and placing his hands on Sorun's shoulders. Sorun made a confused sound, staring right at Sorun with an unsure expression.

"It's gotten to the point where things are happening that can't be undone and I just don't have it in me to steer you straight anymore *and* keep us from falling apart," Sorun admitted in a sad, anguished voice. "I've been trying to do both at once for so long and it's been running everything so ragged, I can't, and... and at this point I'm not even sure this world will *let* me steer us to some peaceful resolution while appeasing everyone around us at the same time. And it's what I want. I want so, *so* badly for you to just be... *happy* . *All I've done* is try everything in my power to give us a life that'll give you that. But this world just won't let it happen.

"So I'm not gonna try anymore. I'm not gonna... have your mind crumble away trying over and over again trying to appease everyone else's standards of what's right and wrong when it's not even gonna fucking matter in the end. It just doesn't work and we *can't* anymore. I'm sorry. That's just... how it is."

"..." Sorun continued to stare at the other Sorun. He didn't react at all when his hands slid over his shoulders so that his arms could wrap around his neck and tightly hug him against him. A choked sort of sob leaving the other Sorun before he spoke again.

"S-so I'm... I'm gonna go. Okay? I'm gonna go. I'm gonna leave you alone so I can just focus on making sure everything in this head doesn't fall to pieces, alright?" Sorun mumbled out, stroking a hand over the back of Sorun's head and through his hair. "I'm not gonna try and tell you what to do anymore. That's on you now."

"H-hey-" Sorun began to protest. He stopped when the other Sorun moved his hands back to his shoulders, leaning his head forwards so that both of their foreheads were touching.

"Forget what other people think, alright?" he said. "Forget what our friends think, what the Freedom Fighters think, what *anyone else* thinks. You should just do whatever it is *you* think is the right thing to do. Because their way just doesn't work. Because the world doesn't care about us, so we shouldn't care what it thinks." Sorun leaned his head back, looking Sorun right in the eyes as he squeezed down on his shoulders. "I'm gonna take care of everything in here, alright?" He poked his forehead. "So you take care of everything out here. However you think is best. And if that means you wanna go and start killing... go for it, man. Just go for it."

"..." A slow breath slowly left Sorun as he looked up at himself. "I don't want you to leave," he said, voice quiet and hollow. Everything was so hard already. Too hard for Sorun to take it without having another voice to help him through it all. "I-I don't want to be alone."

"You'll be fine," Sorun assured Sorun, voice cracked and broken. "Whatever happens... you'll be you. Alright? Whatever decision you make, however you choose to go forwards from here on out, it'll be the *right* thing to do because you said it was. Don't listen to anyone else. We can't do that anymore," he said, breathing shaking as he released Sorun's shoulders. "Make your own right. It's all this world's gonna allow. And you..." His eyes drifted down towards the sword Sorun held, laying in his lap. "... You got the power to make all that happen. So do whatever you want."

"..." Sorun looked down at Yamato, his own reflection gleaming off the flat end of the katana. He made it sound so easy. It... *would* be easy. Whether it was something Sorun actually wanted or not was...

... He never even thought about it. To have a peaceful life without worries with all his friends - *that* was all he had wanted. To just... live and not worry. That was the one, sole thing Sorun wanted above all else. And he was right. He didn't even know if the world would let

him have something like that. At the very least, it was becoming more and more clear that his current way of doing things just wasn't cutting it. Something had to change.

Maybe it was just him that needed to change.

"..." Sorun looked back up. There was nobody there. Just him, alone. Sitting there with his back against the wall. Just him and his sword. Sorun tilted his head back to look at the ceiling, a slow breath leaving him. "It's quiet." A beat passed as he continued staring upwards. "... I don't like it."

He wasn't sure how long he sat there thinking. Maybe minutes, maybe an hour or two. Sorun just... sat there. Thinking, once in a while tapping at the sword resting in his lap. About what to do, and how to proceed forwards. Empty ideas bouncing around his completely empty head, because the more Sorun deliberated on it the more and more he realized there was really only one thing he wanted to do. He wanted to save his home so he could go back to living peacefully. And he didn't want to have to think about or worry about people hurting it anymore. He just wanted to fix things.

"Hey! Hey you!"

Sorun's eyes lazily drifted forwards. It was... one of them. One of those Yurashia Mobians who had been guarding him. A lynx-looking one dressed like a ninja. The bodysuit with bits of armor and weapons strapped to his body and everything. He saw Sorun was outside of his cell and was running towards him, drawing the single-edged straight sword that was strapped to his back.

"..." Sorun grasped Yamato and slashed it outwards. It cut through the lynx's legs with absolutely zero resistance, cleanly enough that the resulting blood spatter made a crescent shape in the floor behind him.

The lynx screamed out. Sword clattering onto the ground as he fell onto his back, face twisted in pain as his arms automatically grabbed

at one of the stumps of his leg. The screaming was cut off when Sorun's sword stabbed into the ground right next to his head, causing his eyes to snap open and fear overtake his expression when he saw Sorun kneeling above him, hand on the handle of the sword.

"W-wait, wait!" he pleaded out. Sorun twisted the sword stabbing into the ground, the blade's edge pointing towards the Mobian's neck now. "No no no, wait, please-!"

Sorun pushed the sword down on an angle, right onto the Mobian's neck. Like a paper cutter slicing through a sheaf of papers. Or a guillotine. His head was instantly severed from the rest of his body, a single whispery gasp leaving the lynx before he went completely still and silent. Dead.

"..." Sorun tilted his head down at the corpse in a curious manner. It was so easy. Just like that, just... just gone. He could keep doing that, no problem. With Yamato he could...

Yamato.

"..." He looked down at the sword in his hand. With *this* , sure. He could solve all of this no problem. But the issue was this was *all* Sorun had, and he'd never absorbed this Chaos Emerald in consideration of his own health, never permanently bound it to himself. And if he dropped it or one of these people somehow wrenched it from his grasp, that would be *it* . He'd be captured again and there would be no Dimitri to bail him out a second time. He needed more than this. He needed...

Sorun's eyes glanced down at the lynx's body. The blood seeping out from where he'd severed his head from his shoulders. For a brief moment he'd recalled the *last* time he'd been captured. That coyote, that not-Antoine whose blood accidentally got into Sorun's mouth. One single tiny drop of blood chock-full of Chaos energy because, from what he could see, every single Mobian in existence was a

walking reservoir of power. He hadn't wanted to indulge at the time because of how wrong it seemed. How inhuman.

Now he just didn't care anymore. He wanted to save his home. Forget everything else.

Sorun reached down and grasped the severed head sitting on the floor. He lifted it above his head, watching as the blood dripped from the severed part of his neck and towards the floor. There'd been zero hesitation on Sorun's part, not second-thoughts, nothing. Just utter *silence* in Sorun's own head as he opened his mouth and let the blood drip into Sorun's mouth-

His eyes widened, pupils blowing out slightly as the taste hit him.

He remembered one of his earliest birthdays where his mother gave him that one drink. He was... fairly certain it was just normal store-bought tea with an unreasonable amount of sugar put inside of it because he, as a picky child, hadn't liked how normal *tea tasted. Maybe it wasn't the best parenting, what his mother had done with that tea just so Sorun could stomach it. Or maybe she'd just made an exception that one time due to it being his birthday. Maybe it was still an irresponsible choice due to how young he'd been at he time.*

Sorun himself hadn't cared at the time. It was a time where he'd been absolutely immersed in love to the point that half of that celebration had just been his own mother holding him. The sheer warmth *of that time was a feeling he was never able to really replicate. But now he was so keenly reminded of that time he couldn't help but feel those emotions wash over him again.*

He remembered that diner he'd go to with his friends. That tiny, quaint, rinky-dink little diner with the shitty burgers that Dave just adored for whatever reason. But the fries had been the best in the city, at least as far as Sorun was concerned. And there was just something *about that in-house cola they sold that made it better than any other soda Sorun had ever drunken. He didn't know what the*

owner put in that stuff. An unreasonable amount of sugar, maybe. Sorun just remembered tasting it reminded him of all the times he and his friends would go there. Celebrating something, maybe Sorun winning a game tournament or whatever. A holiday, someone else's accomplishment. Just... hanging out. Really, they used every single little excuse they could all find to go to that place as much as possible.

And that soda. That damn soda would be there every time, because Sorun was practically addicted to it. And he'd never cared. Those days drinking that soda that was likely stripping years off his life was just a reminder of all the good times he'd had in that place, with those he cared about more than anything else. It tasted like home.

That Mobian blood tasted exactly like all of that. Like over-sugared tea that tasted of warmth and love. Of sugary soft drinks that tasted like home. It tasted like all that and more.

Laughing.

Sorun didn't even know *when* it was he'd stood up, running his hand through his black hair streaked with strands of white. He was fairly certain he'd been so overwhelmed with how mind-numbingly *good* that blood tasted he'd blacked out for a moment or two, because the next time he became aware of his surroundings he was standing up above the fresh corpse he'd made. Laughing and giggling, staring down at the body as feelings of absolute bliss coursed through him.

"Everything feels so great," Sorun thought to himself, looking down at his hands. The fingers on his right hand were... blackened, with dark scales and hide appearing in place of the skin on his fingers, and the nails elongating into sharp claws. And more than that he felt *good* . Strong and light. Not *quite* to the extent Devil's Body made him feel, but it was a similar sensation nonetheless, if less so. All from just a few mouthfuls of that blood.

And he was *laughing* , he realized. Quiet, breathy giggling that he couldn't help let out because of how strong he felt and that blissful taste lingering in his mouth. His home was being invaded and people were being hurt and he was here laughing, he realized. The absolute absurdity of it caused Sorun to run his clawed hand down his face from the absurdity of it all, deep lines being cut into his flesh that sealed shut and completely healed moments later.

"... Man." Sorun's hands dropped down to his side, a final breathy laugh terminating into a sigh as his head tilted up to the ceiling. A small, near-delirious smile on his face. "I think... yeah. I'm just gonna kill everyone."

It could work. He could do it, with power like this coursing through him and a sword that could cut through anything.

Green-glowing eyes flickered to the ground. He'd ended up dropping the sword at one point and now the Chaos Emerald was lying down on the ground, he'd reached for it, but then stopped when he saw his right hand reaching out towards the gem. "Left one," he decided, grabbing the Emerald with his left hand and transmuting it into the sword while leaving that clawed right hand open.

"..." He looked towards the open entranceway to the holding cell that lead off to the rest of this place. A last single laugh left Sorun as he ran towards it, clawed fingers scraping grooves into the metal wall as he ran past.

A/N- In which I'm gonna have to turn this story's rating from a T to an M after I upload the next chapter. Which honestly with some stuff that's happened earlier in story I probably should have already, but eh.

Chapter 107

Recursion Error

Episode 107- Taste the blood

"So, uh... from the Yagyu clan, huh?" Within the metal corridor were two Mobians, dressed in the traditional attire of their homeland in Yurashia. Tight-fitting outfits with light armoring, with the one being addressed by the other, a bat Mobian, wearing a face mask over his mouth. The other, a lynx, awkwardly rocked back and forth on his feet while speaking and looking towards the doorway they were guarding.

It was their assignment, after all. Stand in this corridor and guard this open doorway.

The bat Mobian made a slow blink and slowly looked towards the weasel speaking to him. "... Ah-huh," he answered.

"Ah. Er. Excellent." The lynx cleared his throat, still rocking back and forth on his feet as he tried his best to strike up conversation. "It, uh... it any good? In that clan? I hear it can be kind of rough there."

"Ah-huh."

"... Neat." The lynx clapped his hands together, breathing out awkwardly as he looked back at the doorway they were guarding. It lead to another corridor, currently enshrouded by darkness due to the lights in that section of the Egg Dome being out of commission "Any clue how long it is they're going to be having us guarding this spot?" he asked.

The bat made a small grunt. "No," he answered.

"Oh. Okay." The lynx clicked his tongue in acknowledgement. "I'm only asking because it's been a few hours and I really don't think this is the best use of our time-"

There was a scream in the darkened corridor they stood in front of. Both Mobians looked towards the source of the scream, and both stilled at the sound of it. It'd been blood-curdling, terror filled. And it'd cut off abruptly, so suddenly and without warning. Whatever it was, though, neither of the two were able to see. That corridor was still pitch-black.

"Uhm..." The lynx blinked nervously, looking back and forth between the bat and the black corridor. "So we should... that's something we should check, right?" he asked, as if attempting to confirm.

"We're to guard this entranceway to the joining corridor," the bat succinctly answered, tone calm and stoic. Though there was the slightest bit of hesitation to his tone, his eyes still locked onto the darkness ahead of them. "That section is currently being tended to by others. It is not our responsibility."

"Okay, but that scream sounded bad," the lynx pointed out. "And I feel like us guarding this specific spot entails investigating potential danger of said spot, which, by virtue of how bad that scream sounded, means we should go check out that sound."

"... Hm." The fabric of the bat's face mask rippled slightly as he pursed his lips, dipping his head down slightly in thought. He didn't actually voice whatever potential thoughts going through his head - only continued to hum and think.

"... Alright, well, how about you just stay while I go check it out," the lynx suggested as he leaned his head towards the darkened corridor. "That counts, right? As long as we stay in-"

There was a pair of eyes looking at them from within the darkness of that corridor, he realized. Irises glowing green and stretched to vertical slits, boring right at the two Mobians.

"E-er... Li?" A startled sort of gasp left the lynx as he stepped back a bit, nervously glancing between the eyes and the Mobian bat standing next to him. "That's... that's you, right, Li? Could you try saying something if-"

A clawed had reached out from the darkness, just a bit too fast for the lynx to properly register. There's been a quiet *squelch!* sound he'd heard besides him, making him momentarily freeze in fright from the sound before slowly turning towards the sound.

He'd seen what had made that sound the moment he turned and looked. A human hand with blackened fingers and claws reaching out from the darkness, grabbing his bat companion's head, claws digging into his face's flesh. There'd been no time to react before the hand *pulled* , a louder squelching, cracking sound following.

The frontal plate of the bat's skull hand been torn off entirely and pulled back into the darkness. He'd heard such *sounds* . Muscles and tendons snapping as the face was pulled away, bone cracking, blood splashing to the ground as the bat stumbled a bit. A choked sort of wheeze left his exposed throat, the innards of his head having been exposed from the removal of his face, eyes absent due to being pulled along with it. His heart had pumped, causing blood to spurt out from he exposed arteries and veins in his head before his brain slowly began to slide out from the massive hole in front of his skull cap. It'd ended up sliding out completely, hanging on by the brain steam as the bat's body fell over entirely, twitching on the ground as blood pooled around him.

For the lynx's part he'd been stunned at the sight, small, fearful whimpers leaving him as he looked down at the body. From the corner of his eyes there'd been movement. Green trails of light following the eyes as they moved out from the darkness, the owner's head staring right at the lynx as the eyes' owner moved in blurring speeds.

The Mobian had screamed out from the sight. He'd reached behind his back, attempting to grab at the sword strapped between his

shoulder blades. His fingers had only managed to barely brush against the sword handle before Sorun's own sword flashed out, disconnecting his head from his shoulders.

"Truly worthless." It's the only thing Sorun could think to say as he looked down at the two corpses. He ran the flat end of his sword along his tongue, licking up the blood sticking to the blade and briefly shuddering from the blissful taste that settled on his tongue. He took a fraction of a moment to get used to the burst of energy that spread throughout his body before he continued sprinting forwards.

Get to the throne room.

It was about the one, solitary goal Sorun had in mind. Get to the throne room because there was a good chance Snively and Regina were in there. Concerning the general layout of the Egg Dome, Sorun flat-out didn't know it. He'd only been once, when the entirety of Knothole had been kidnapped by Eggman and he had to be the one to go save everyone.

That'd been one room. The one with all the pods. This was a series of corridors and connecting rooms, nearly maze-like. Armories and bunk rooms and such. Random background Sorun didn't care enough to pay attention to.

Oh, but the Mobians, though. So many of those ninjas and such brought over from Yurashia, practically infesting the place. At *some* point Sorun assumed some general alert went out across the facility, because they stopped being surprised at seeing them. There were certainly a *lot* of emotions he saw flitting over all their faces before he cut them down, but surprise wasn't among them.

Fairly sure, at least. He wasn't stopping to pay attention. He wasn't stopping at all. Keep moving forwards - it was the one single, solitary goal Sorun had in mind.

"So many of you!" He'd rounded another hallway, sprinting all the while, digging his clawed hand into the metal floor to act as a pivot to turn his body so he could keep up momentum. More Mobians down that hallway, holding swords, spears. Some even had *bows* . He almost felt amused at how hard they were sticking to the ninja aesthetic. *Bows* . For *him* .

He swung his sword out, completely carving a Mobian in half, blood spraying out against the walls, Sorun's face, his clothes. He didn't skip a beat, didn't even stop to acknowledge it as he moved forwards to the next ones. Two Mobians.

Sorun's left hand holding the sword thrust outward, piercing the throat of one of the Mobians and dragging the sword through his neck to completely cut it open. His right, clawed hand shot out and grabbed the other one by the face. He'd slammed his head into the wall, enough for his head to become complete *pulp* as it smashed against the surface. He kept moving, ducking his head to the side slightly to duck under an arrow heading for one of his eyes.

Slow. It'd been... so slow to his own vision. He cut the leg off the Mobian who'd shot at him, making him scream out as he collapsed to a single knee. In the same motion Sorun reversed the motion of his sword and slashed up, right through the head of the Mobian to chop it in half.

He breathed out, looking further down the hall. Even more Mobians, dressed in that ridiculous ninja getup. He almost wondered how loyal it was they were to whatever these clans they belonged to they were. That they would all stand there, trembling slightly as they held their weapons and stared him down. Stand there they did, though. Some even *ran* at Sorun. Either out of blind loyalty or because they genuinely did believe there was *some* chance against him-

One of the ones who'd run at him made some... strange twisting maneuver with their sword against his when they approached. He'd felt a strange torque as a result, the force wrenching the handle from his grip and disarming him completely, causing his own sword to

drop down on the ground, reverting back into the Emerald the second he lost contact with it.

"Ah...?" He glanced up at the bat Mobian who disarmed him. They didn't have *nothing* going for them, it seemed. It wasn't wholly blind confidence - there was skill there. More sword skill than his, even. He'd still reached out and grabbed at his arm, pulling it right off. The bat had screamed as blood sprayed out against Sorun, some catching his mouth and causing his eyes to widen further when the taste hit him.

He grabbed the Mobian by the throat and beat him over the face with the severed arm. Did it until his saw his facial bones cave in, and then flipped the severed arm around. Stabbing the sharpened bones sticking out through the end of the arm through they eye of the Mobian, who made little more than a wheezing gasp as Sorun tossed his body against the floor hard enough for blood to splash over the metal.

"Blood was the right idea I guess." Sorun looked back ahead towards the Emerald *right* at the moment he caught the sight of steel slashing towards his face. He'd blinked out once when he felt a long groove be cut into his face by yet another Mobian's sword, another lynx, the sting lasting for barely a moment as the wound rapidly healed shut and disappeared. *"This feels so much better with a body that doesn't break down from a few hits..."*

Better . That word Sorun thought stuck with him for some reason. It was a thought that made him ponder as his clawed hand swiped at the Mobian's jaw and tore it off entirely. There'd been a wet, garbled scream of pain by him as the lynx stumbled back, blood flowing down from his mouth as his eyes bugged out in panic. Sorun's clawed hand swiped upwards this time, fingers piercing through the roof of his mouth and tearing through flesh and bone, exiting through the Mobian's eyes. He *yanked* , pulling the frontal plate of his skull right out of his head and causing him to collapse dead on the floor.

Nothing about this was supposed to be *better* . That was Sorun's one chief thought as he stepped over the body, licking at the blood on his hands and feeling another burst of that invigorating power flow through him. He'd kicked the Emerald back up to his hand to reform his katana, the other Mobians in front of him stepping back fearfully. It was supposed to be grisly, morbid work. A visceral loss of life that wasn't to be celebrated in any regard.

And yet...

His body surged forwards again, moving with unnatural speed. Sword flicked out, cutting another Mobian in half. That *feeling* again, what... what was that? He was feeling *something* . Relief that this was one less person that could hurt him and his? Vindication? Retribution for everything done to him? Everything done back home? None of that seemed right.

Satisfaction?

"..." Another Mobian swung towards Sorun. He met the blade with his own, power coursing through the Yamato's blade. It simply cut through the sword with zero resistance whatsoever and sliced the Mobian's head right off his shoulders. And Sorun's brows furrowed, just the tiniest bit. The feeling wasn't there that time.

He turned towards another Mobian taking a swing at him. He cut the power coursing through the sword off, and then swung up to meet it. There was a satisfying *clang!* that echoed in the hall, a few metal sparks flying from the contact, and *there* it was. That tiny, near-imperceptible feeling of excitement that shot through Sorun when he heard that sound. Blocking the sword, sidestepping the Mobian and piercing his chest with Yamato, dragging the sword through his body and out his side, barely even sticking around to watch his body drop as he continued sprinting down the hall.

Satisfaction.

Oh, it wasn't *optimal* in any stretch of the word. Sorun knew that. Optimal play would be to just... instantly cut through everything with Yamato. That would practically be child's play, it would. There was a point where he *did* do that, coming across a bridge across a wide, seemingly bottomless gap between two sections of the facility. A wide bridge with nearly a dozen more of those Yurashia Mobians at the end, more bats and lynxes, all holding bows. Archers. Aiming at Sorun. That arrows were easy enough to dodge, body weaving back and forth between the *dreadfully slow* projectiles. Power crackled along the Yamato's edge again as he slashed it forwards.

Dozens upon dozens of slashes assaulted the bodies of the Mobians despite the meters of distance between them and Sorun. Cut apart to pieces immediately before they had any notion of what was even happening, Sorun sprinting right by the parts and pieces of their corpses falling to the ground. That was something, but it didn't elicit those earlier feelings of satisfaction Sorun had felt.

He had to go fast. He knew that, knew that delaying possibly put others back in New Mobotropolis at risk. Dimitri's words were still ringing faintly in the back of his head. It was part of why he'd sprinted past all the minced corpses at such a rapid pace, blazed on down through the hallways while cutting down everything in his-

When Sorun had rounded a corner the edge of a sword had been swinging right towards him, as if somebody had been waiting behind the corner. His body dropped to the ground as he slid across the floor and under the blade. His clawed right hand tore at the ground to stop his momentum, metallic sparks getting kicked up from the action as he stopped, whirled around onto his feet, and stabbed his sword through the brain of the Mobian who'd attempted to blindside him.

Another ran up to him, some shrill cry leaving his mouth. Of determination or terror, Sorun couldn't tell which. Nor did he waste time attempting to discern it as he took a single step back to dodge the blade, eyes rapidly flicking back and forth between the Mobian and the blade that narrowly missed Sorun. He tried gripping his

katana with both hands and slashed upwards, right through the torso of the Mobian. And there was the feeling again. Dodging, countering, feeling the weight and resistance of a body being cut through without any powers making the cuts effortless.

... It couldn't be *that* much a difference. A matter of a couple minutes - that's all it was. It couldn't amount to much, Sorun reasoned. What was burning through a couple more minutes if Sorun chose to not do this as efficiently and optimally as possible? It wasn't a significant difference. Not one that mattered in any important capacity. He could afford to slow down just a little bit.

A new room he'd entered. A more circular with multiple doorways around that lead off into adjacent hallways. Sorun was less focused on that and more at the Mobians surrounding him, slowly circling in. They were clutching their weapons tightly enough he saw them shaking in their grasps. Some wearing fear-laden expressions in their eyes, others' faces set in grim determination, though it was hard to make out precisely due to the facemasks some wore. But all in his way regardless, which was as far as Sorun cared to see.

He gripped both hands around the handle of Yamato, curiously eyeing all the surrounding Mobians. To cut them all to pieces instantly with Yamato - that would be easy. But he found himself not... *wanting* to do that. He wanted to recapture that feeling. But they weren't advancing. They were just slowly circling, surrounding, getting into positions but not actually doing anything. Going so slow when he just wanted them to move and swing already!

Eventually Sorun got too impatient and burst forwards, sword whistling through the air as he decapitated one of the Mobians. The others surged forwards towards Sorun once he made that first move, and he found himself feeling *gleeful* of all things for the fact. Dodging a sword left, stepping right to avoid a stab. Batting blades away with the flat end of his own, watching the sparks fly through the air. Blood splashing onto his skin and clothing every time he saw an opening and slashed at one of them, cleaving their bodies apart.

He'd hated fighting all those times in the past. Sorun remembered it *vividly* : back when he was fighting with the Freedom Fighters, how *every single time* he went with the others to go fight those robots of Eggman's there'd been that underlying fear and panic of that being it, that there was a chance he'd die there. He hated all that conflict so much every time. Wanted it to just end. And when it came to the bigger fights, the Enerjak and King Shadow fights, there had been so much going on in Sorun's head that he hadn't had an opportunity to even think of his own feelings at those times.

Things felt much clearer here. These were wholly different feelings he was having right now. There was no fear; why would there be? With a body that healed wounds so rapidly, was so much stronger and faster than all these Mobians to the point that not a single one was landing a single blow on Sorun? And this was so much more engaging than fighting those robots! Gone were the predictable patterns, the familiar moves he'd memorized from those models, that inherent instinct of just *knowing* how they'd attack from the smallest movements.

No, this was different, fighting these Mobians. Different levels of strength and skill. Different moves, different reactions, some managed to even dodge and block some of Sorun's swings, even if blocking resulted in the bones in their arms shattering from the sheer strength Sorun's own swings brought. It was as if every single different Mobian Sorun fought forced him to intuit their intentions and attacks differently each time, making him adapt over and over and change things up, even if it was ever so slightly.

It was *thrilling* . Fun in a way that Sorun had never expected, not from *this* of all things. But it was. The simple fact of the matter was that he was having fun cutting and slicing through all these Mobians. The intensity of it, the satisfaction of solving every little bout by way of seeing a cut-apart body fall to his feet as he moved onto the next one, that sweet-tasting blood splashing around everywhere. Oh, how easy it was to get lost in it all. No, why would he *ever* use Yamato's

power of separation to end things so quickly when this felt so much better?

"I love this." As Sorun sliced upwards, having sliced a Mobian from groin to head in such a way their body was completely split down the middle, both halves falling to the sides and drenching him with blood, an absolutely euphoric expression had settled on his face. He licked some of the stray blood off his face, a few more of his strands of hair turning from black to white as he turned to the rest of the Yurashia Mobians with bliss clear in his eyes. *"It's so much fun...!"*

Oh. The two left were... running. He'd heard their swords clatter to the ground as the remaining two Mobians turned around and just began running away. Sorun had blinked once, a feeling of irritation flashing through him as he felt his mood suddenly spoiled.

"Gah, *quit it* ." Sorun had run up being one of the retreating Mobians. One hand grabbed at his head, wrenching it to the side and exposing his neck for Sorun to plunge his sword down into. It'd been a quick thrust - his sword plunging in and out too quickly for the Mobian to get so much as a garbled scream of pain out before he'd swung the sword forward, a large gash appearing on the metal floor in front of the other fleeing Mobian.

He'd stopped when he saw that gash, skidding to a halt as he whirled back around towards Sorun. The lower half of his face wasn't visible due to the black cloth mask over his mouth, but his eyes were wide. Fearful and shaking, heavy breaths leaving him as he watched Sorun toss the dead body over his shoulder.

"..." Soru blinked once at the Mobian, and then looked to the side. At one of the swords that had been dropped by them. He walked over towards them and kicked one of the swords out towards the lynx, the blade skittering across the ground before coming to rest at the Mobian's feet. He just breathed out heavier, looking up and down between Sorun and the sword without even motioning to get it.

"... Don't wanna try?" Sorun asked. There was a hopeful edge to his tone as he cocked his head at him, though it was mainly filled with disappointment. He didn't want victims who just ran away and left themselves wide open. He wanted *fights* . He just wanted him to take a swing and actually try.

But he wasn't picking the sword up. He wasn't doing anything, actually. Wasn't running, wasn't fighting, wasn't dropping to his knees and begging Sorun. Just... standing there, shaking. Making small, unintelligible and high-pitched, frightened whimpers that were intermingled with his breath as he just stood there shaking and looking at Sorun. Completely frozen with terror to the spot without moving.

And then the frightened whimpers turned to choked gags when Sorun strolled past him, dragging Yamato across his throat without ever breaking stride. Not even bothering to glance behind him as blood sprayed out from his wound to splatter against the wall as the body fell behind him. The only thing that *did* serve to improve his mood even the smallest bit was when he licked the blood off his sword, feeling rejuvenated by another burst of energy surging through him.

"No, no, no. None of that."

Oh, they were locking the doors now. Large, metal bulkhead doors that would slid down from the corridor walls that were multiple inches thick with steel.

It didn't actually *matter* . He just kept cutting through the doors with Yamato and running through them. And there were always just *more* of those Mobians from Yurashia on the other side waiting for him, dressed in all that ridiculous ninja garb. Bats and lynxes of all colors that all just started to... *blur* together the further Sorun went and the more of them he fought. He wasn't really even paying attention to *what* they were specifically nor did he care enough to try and realize

it. Yurashia Mobians. Ninjas. That's all he was focusing on. Killing anything that looked like that.

Furry blood bags standing between him and his goal that he was having fun cutting through. That was all they were, as far as Sorun was concerned. None of them were even *lasting* longer than a couple of seconds - *much* too short to commit any to memory. Which was primarily the reason he couldn't recall how many he'd killed by this point.

Hell, he didn't even know how long he'd been doing this. He didn't even feel tired. All the Chaos energy he kept consuming along with all this blood was likely ravaging his body, but hell if it wasn't boosting him so much in the short term. He just felt more and more and more awake the further he went along with this.

It was actually starting to become a problem.

"No no no no..." Everything was going too *slow* for Sorun. Like that sword currently being swung at his face. With how cranked up Sorun's reflexes were it was just... so laughably easy to sidestep it, slice to the side with Yamato and sever the Mobian's arms. Pull his elbows back to aim the sword at Sorun's side as the armless Mobian stumbled back screaming, pierce forwards and stab completely through his side. Dodge left to avoid another attack, swing his arm back to cut the other Mobian's head cleanly in half without looking back.

The damn arrows some at the other end of the hallway he was in were firing at him. Even those weren't cutting it. He... *saw* them flying towards him in midair, was child's play to either bat them away with Yamato or just sidestep them.

"Too easy." He'd vaulted over a Mobian who swung at him in a wide, horizontal swing. Arcing right over his body, clawed hand scraping against the ceiling and sending metal sparks raining down as he landed behind him. Spinning around to literally cut his legs off from beneath him, with Sorun catching him by the head before he

dropped to the ground. *"Everything's too slow. Or I'm too fast. Is it me?"* Sorun wondered as he tossed the legless Mobian into the arms of another. In a pure gut-reaction move the Mobian had dropped his sword and caught the legless one, only for Sorun to then skewer both of them at the end of his sword. *"I need... I need..."*

He looked down at Yamato as he tore it from from Mobians' bodies. The problem was *this* , he realized. The sword. Even without using its actual power it was too light, too nimble. He was too experience in using it and was too comfortable with it. It was making things too easy.

"I need a worse sword. I need that *sword."*

In a flash of blue sparks and whirling blue particles the sword changed. Where once Sorun had been holding a long, slender katana, now it was a claymore sword with a longer, straighter, and *much* wider blade. And so much *heavier* , too. Sorun had actually felt himself tip over a bit and nearly dropped Rebellion all together when the sheer weight of this sword he wasn't used to holding threatened to slip from his grip.

"Oh, huh." Sorun blinked once in surprise. It certainly was a different feeling. He decided to try it out a bit, swinging the large blade at the Mobian nearest to him and- Oh! He'd actually dodged it! The blade was moving so much slower than when Sorun was swinging Yamato due to its weight and his inexperience that the Mobian actually managed to duck under it!

A wide, gleeful grin spread across Sorun's face as the excitement began rushing back. As he made a second swing and managed to chop Rebellion down onto the Mobian's shoulder he realized even *that* felt different than using Yamato. That sword sliced cleanly through things, but this, this cleaved and tore. Completely rent flesh apart through sheer force rather than precision, and he could *feel* all that running up the blade and through his arms.

He lifted Rebellion up out of the Mobian's shoulder. Brought it down, cleaving through half his torso, and then pushed upwards at a diagonal angle. The sword tore right through his torso once more, passing through an arm and right up through his other shoulder. The sheer force that went behind the swing practically made the body parts fly apart, a crescent trail of blood briefly being traced up through the air behind the blade as more blood splashed against Sorun.

When Sorun ran forwards right through all the viscera and towards the next nearest Mobian he'd actually panicked and tried to block with his weapon. Sorun had aimed Rebellion forwards and pierced through, watching as the tip of the sword *smashed* through the Mobian's sword and sent shards spilling everywhere as he impaled the Mobian's torso. And the weight behind the sword had carried him forward, actually making Sorun stumble a few couple of steps from the unexpected tug.

"This thing is so unwieldly. So heavy and awkward to swing around." He lifted the Mobian's body up while it was impaled by the sword, opening his mouth to catch the blood dripping down from his wound and onto Sorun's face. He'd only kept the act up for a few seconds before swinging his arm to the side, the body flying off and impacting the wall with a wet *crunch!* noise. When the next Mobian tried swinging his own blade at Sorun and he'd responded in kind by meeting it with Rebellion, he'd ended up knocking the sword out of the Mobian's hand entirely. And evidently broke his hands in the process if his fingers bending in wrong directions said anything. And when he'd tried swinging down the last Mobian in the room besides him, the one that had been using the bow, dove to push him out of the way and actually managed it, Sorun swinging so slowly he'd missed both of them. *"Gah, this thing sucks to use. I love it."*

He'd still ended up readjusting his aim and stabbing downwards. Impaling them both through their abdomens, the both of them screaming as Sorun walked forwards while dragging them along, bodies skewered onto Rebellion's blade. He'd lazily swung forwards,

dislodging their bodies and watching them roll across the bloodied flooring before coming to a halt.

Sorun stepped between the two of them. One of them, the one with the broken fingers, was already dead. Bled out right there. The other one was still clinging to life, small whimpering gasps leaving leaving him as he weakly tried to crawl forwards, leaving a trail of blood underneath him from all the blood leaking from his pierced stomach.

"How many of you *are* there?" Sorun wondered aloud to him, using his foot to push him over onto his back. The Mobian wasn't even looking at Sorun. There were quick, rapid gasps leaving his body as he looked up at the ceiling, the rest of his body unmoving as he just... laid there. Breathing. "I mean, I've gone through I don't even know how many of you. It's actually impressive you guys went so far to bat for Regina, that's... hell. You people are built different over in Yurashia, loyalty like that."

Sorun wasn't even joking around with that; he couldn't believe they kept trying no matter how many he'd cut through. He barely even understood why, but maybe that was just ignorance on his part for how all these... "clans" that monkey guy in New Mobotropolis mentioned worked. He knew next to nothing on Yurashia culture, so he couldn't understand what kept driving them on. If it was some sense of loyalty or blind honor or something along those lines.

"Ah, well, doesn't matter too much... eh?" Sorun stopped when he noticed the panting Mobian beneath him had suddenly gone still, not moving as glassy eyes vacantly stared up at the ceiling. He'd knelt down on a single knee, grabbing one of his arms and lifting it up. "Ah. You done?" Sorun asked, letting go and watching the arm limply fall down on the corpse's chest. "Yeah, you're done. Hm?"

His right arm certainly didn't look like how it was supposed to. Didn't look human, not like the rest of his body. Where once there was pale skin on the palm of his hand and underside of his arm there were shimmering, dark blue scales. Where there was skin on he upper

portion of his hand and arm there was now thick, blackened hide. The arm as a whole looked... different. Inhuman. *Familiar* .

The sight made Sorun pause as he stared, an almost forlorn expression crossing his features. He knew instantly what it was, what it meant. And to think it'd progressed this quickly from him consuming all that blood... it made him wonder just how many months of his life he'd burned through doing everything he'd just done. Or years, even.

"Can't have something for nothing, I guess..."

And then he heard the whistling sound rapidly approaching from behind him. Sorun whirled around, blinking once in surprise when he saw the sharpened piece of metal flying directly towards his face. Looking closer it was some... circular piece of metal with four sharpened points, spinning through the air and heading straight for his eyes. And then he blinked again when he realized it was a shuriken. A *shuriken* of all things.

It's been too slow, of course. Sorun simple rose his index finger up to catch the shuriken by threading his finger through the hole in the center of the shuriken, spinning it around as his looked at the weapon in something bordering on disbelief. "... You all really take this ninja thing seriously, huh?" he asked, almost sounding surprised. "Well, if nothing else I can respect a bunch of powerless Mobians choosing the blade in an age of guns. 'Cause *hey* . If that's how you wanna roll..."

He stood up to his feet fully while tossing the shuriken aside with such force it'd shattered to pieces when it impacted with the wall. He tiled his head when he saw a strange sight down the hallway: shimmering shapes. And then a small "ahh" noise left his mouth when he saw those shimmering shapes gain colors, definition. The sight of Mobians just appearing from thin air, standing in the hall or clinging to the walls. Mobians that were all different from the ones previous. Chameleons with various colors of scales, blues, greens,

some purples. Five in total. Wearing very different ninja garb from the rest. Shoes and gloves styled in a way that he recognized.

"There's a familiar sight," Sorun found himself murmuring out. As far as he could tell they were all just different-colored Espios. They even *dressed* the same as him. It made all sorts of questions pop up in-

Every single one of those questions instantly vanished when Sorun felt the kunai stab through the back of his neck and stab through the front. There'd been a sixth one, still invisible that had snuck up behind him to stab him in the neck. And for Sorun's part, he just... looked down at the blade piercing through his neck. And stared. Almost in disbelief at the audaciousness of it all.

And then he rolled his eyes, reaching behind him to grab the chameleon Mobian by the head and slam him into the wall hard enough that his head collapsed and splattered against it, and then reached up to tear the kunai out from his throat.

On little more than a fanciful whim, Sorun tried throwing it. It was... phenomenally harder throwing a kunai than he'd anticipated. Instead of going straight the weapon ended up just spinning through the air and curving into a wall without even coming close to hitting one of the other five chameleons. He rolled his eyes at the sight and darted forwards, Rebellion skittering across the ground as he dragged the claymore behind him.

With the closest chameleon Sorun had raised his sword up. And then was paused when he'd raised the sword *too* high, causing its edge and tip to catch along the wall besides him. The chameleon saw it as an opportunity to charge forwards with a small knife; Sorun had just torn the sword through the wall, leaving behind a massive gash as he cleaved the sword through the chameleon and cut him in half. The same for the others: swinging the sword in a wide arc, catching two across the chest to tear through their ribs and organs. The fourth was cut down in much the same way.

The fifth, he'd tried sneaking up behind Sorun. They seemed to do that a lot - sneaking. He straightened his left arm out behind him, piercing in his direction with Rebellion and feeling the blade stab right through the chameleon's torso. He'd made a wheezing, garbled sort of gasp, shakily looking down at the sword piercing him before Sorun tore it out and batted him over the face with the flat end of the sword. Hard enough the bones in the chameleon's face shattered and flattened on impact and sent him sprawling onto the ground, body unmoving.

"... Well, you look the part, at least. Not sure what your relationship to Espio is, if any, but you certainly didn't share his talent," Sorun murmured out under his breath as he looked between all the chameleons' corpses, taking in the sight of them all. For all he said, though, he couldn't deny that there were a *startlingly* large amount of similarities between these chameleons and Espio to be chalked up to coincidence. The clothing, the fighting styles. Sonic saying Espio had been *seen* here with the other Mobians from Yurashia.

"..." Sighing out, Sorun shook his head and continued moving back down the hallway. It was whatever. Espio and *whatever* was going on with him was about the last possible thing Sorun was concerned with at the moment. He was more focused on getting to the throne room than anything else.

Jian would *easily* go as far to say she genuinely hated all the clans in Yurashia.

Would be that life there was easy. It *could* have been easy, too, which hurt the most for her. She could clearly envision living a calm, easy life in her home village could be easy.

But then there were the gods-forsaken clans who just... seemed to make it their life's missions to make the lives of others in Yurashia and the Dragon Kingdom much, much more difficult than it needed to be. Between the Yagyu Clan who would ransack helpless villages for selfish gain, or the Raiju Clan who seemed to do whatever they

please at their own whim. The other two clans who, as far as Jian was concerned, did little to nothing to actually help with matters.

There had been that one monkey. Khan. He'd... definitely tried to help things. Him and some others, and Jian could at least appreciate the effort. Even if all those efforts came up too short to matter.

But as it was, the entire world seemed to have it out for Jian, and she had a little sister to take care of above everything else. She wouldn't be ashamed of selling herself as a sellsword as a result. She was strong - stronger than most. At least, she liked to think so. She made sure that *every* clan knew so whenever one of them hired her for some such thing or another. Less to create chaos for all of them out of sheer spite and more to just support herself and her sister. And it got eyes off their village.

When that Regina Overlander person had overtaken all the clans to put them under a single banner of the Iron Dominion, Jian couldn't have cared less. If anything, she'd gotten a derisive chuckle out of it, knowing it must have hurt the clans' pride at least somewhat, being subordinate under her. And when she'd been offered to job to offer the Iron Dominion's assistance in the invasion of Northamer, she hadn't put too much thought into it. The money was good. Money her sister needed.

She was quickly realizing she *never* should have taken this job.

Jian genuinely didn't know what to think. At first she'd been confused as to why all these clansmen had been running past her towards the empty throne room she'd been guarding the outside of. Standing inside it and looking around, though, now she was just flummoxed. Bats from the Yagyu Can and lynxes from the Raiju Clan all huddling around, looking frightened and out of their minds and mumbling fearfully among themselves. All because of some "monster" they kept blabbering about. Some man-eating demon that was tearing through the entire complex.

She knew *who* they were talking of. That one that had been in the holding cells - she'd heard the name "Sorun" tossed around and assumed it'd been his name, the one with the ruined hand chained in that cell. The one who definitely looked like an Overlander, but nobody could seem to get a clear answer of what he truly was.

And now... now he had every single clan member in this place cowering and hiding in this throne room. She'd never seen a more pathetic sight - half of them had even dropped their weapons while fleeing to this place. At any other time Jian would have taken a personal note of gratification at seeing them all in such a state, but at this point in time, with this context, knowing she was in the same boat as them... she couldn't help but feel disconcerted.

And then there was an *odd* sight of the two chameleons over in the corner of the room. As far as Jian had been aware the Iron Queen hadn't even brought anyone from *that* clan over to this continent, though she might have been incorrect in that statement. It's not like anyone told her these things. She'd been relegated to *guard duty* before all this.

"I didn't realize anyone from the Shinobi Clan were here with all the others," Jian mumbled out to the pair of them after wandering over, glancing at them out of the corner of her eyes.

The pair of chameleons shared a glance with one another before looking at Jian. "You're the mercenary hired to help bolster the Iron Queen's forces?" the teal-colored chameleon asked, before making a derisive scoff. "The son of the Bride of Constant Vigil has been going around Yurashia petitioning the clans to abandon the Iron Queen."

Jian made a slow, uninterested blink. "On the grounds of...?"

"None of the clan heads are particularly *fond* of the idea of being under the yolk of the Iron Queen. And besides that, the *blue one* is with him. You know the one," said the other chameleon, a yellow one. "Him and an official of the Republic in Northamer being

invaded, that princess. They're pledging to defeat the Iron Queen should the clansmen with her lay down their-"

"None of this is relevant to the current situation. I don't *care* ," Jian interrupted, a harsh scoff leaving her. Of all the thing on her mind, *clan politics* certainly were not among them. "Why are you here specifically?"

"... Part of the request laid out by the son of the Bride of Constant Vigil was for members of the Shinobi Clan to come liberate a friend of his being held here - one by the name of Sorun. From what little I know he's supposed to be coming here to aid in what was *supposed* to be an escape," the teal chameleon said. And then he breathed out, looking ahead. "That was before we discovered Sorun was a blood-drunk monster killing and eating his way through everything that breaths. He was *smiling* through it."

Jian found herself quirking an eye ridge. "He even attempted to kill his would-be liberators?" she asked, sounding a bit skeptical.

The yellow chameleon shook his head. "He didn't seem to particularly care who we were. And we couldn't get a word in edgewise regardless; one of ours... panicked. Or perhaps he was so disgusted with what he saw he decided to just ignore orders. Whatever the case..." He huffed out a loud sigh, voice going quieter. Subdued, as if the wind had been taken out of him. "Whatever the case behind his reasoning, he stabbed that monster through the throat and it did absolutely nothing to stop him. That monster slaughtered him and our fellow clan brothers. The two of us only survived by remaining hidden and running away."

"Not that it will do us much good," the teal one added. "He was standing in the only pathway out from this place. Still is - it's why everyone hiding here seem so on edge." He glanced out to the rest of the room, at all the lynxes and bats shuffling around nervously. Some sitting on the ground with hopeless, vacant looks in their eyes. A couple were even sobbing or rocking back and forth in place, clutching their weapons. Only a few seemed concerned with

guarding the one doorway in here, as if no one else even saw the point.

Truly had Jian never seen a more pathetic display. Which was mainly what had *her* so nervous. There had to be more than enough valid reasons for so many people to be acting this way and it all bode ill for her.

"He's coming here?" Jian asked, looking out towards the doorway.

"There's nothing else in this direction," the yellow one responded, voice sounding resigned. "Perhaps he's coming here hoping to slay the Iron Queen, not knowing she's currently overseeing the invasion in New Mobotropolis. Or maybe the monster just wants to kill us all. Both, perhaps. What does it matter when we're all dead."

Jian's eyes widened the smallest fraction. They really *had* all given up. Completely consigned themselves to their fate, practically waiting to die. It made her wonder just what everyone here had seen to have them in this state.

"Tch. Speak for yourselves," she ended up saying, shaking her head as she turned fully towards the doors. If everyone here wanted to cower and die that was their business, but she didn't have that luxury. Not with a little sister depending on her. "I'm leaving this place. My contract can be voided for all I care. No money is worth this."

"..." The teal chameleon's eyes flicked towards her. "There is but one pathway out from here and that monster stands in the direct path," he said. "And to face that *thing* is certain death from all I've seen. There's no way out."

"But you're certainly welcome to go try," the yellow added. "For whatever good it'll do you, mercenary."

She ignored the words for the most part from the chameleons. The dismissive scoffs made by others she passed, the sympathetic or

vapid looks cast her way from the others had passed. She never received respect to begin with given her position and profession, but somehow this felt even worse than the usual snide looks or passing insults. It felt like they already writ her off as a dead woman walking. Like everyone here was already dead and she was just walking ahead to the front of the line.

Her right hand reached up to pull the straight sword from her back, hearing her leather glove tighten as she gripped it. She wouldn't die. *Couldn't* die.

Nobody protested when she opened the throne room doors and walked through. Jian doubted anyone even cared, though they did close the doors behind her uncomfortably quick. She rolled her eyes; it didn't matter too much since she'd never be returning to that place. She'd just breathed out heavily, turning forwards to the wide, darkened metal corridor in front of her.

And then the body came flying in, some lynx who hadn't made it to the throne room fast enough. Gored and mutilated beyond recognition. It'd slammed into the wall behind Jian, splattering apart to pieces from the impact before collapsing down to the floor. She'd heard the gore splatter from behind her, felt a few drops land on her fur which made it stand up on end.

More deep breaths. In and out, doing her best to focus herself and remain calm as she heard the slow footsteps approaching. She'd live. She'd live and make it back home.

Jian saw the eyes before anything else. Green-glowing, reptilian eyes in the dark, trails of green light following after them. And then she'd heard the chewing noises. Clear to see what it was when the monster - Sorun - stepped close enough that the dim overhead lights illuminated him clearly. He was drenched in so much blood all of his clothes were practically dyed red. Large sword bouncing lazily on his shoulder as his other hand held... a severed hand. One he was taking bites out of with his head tilted back, eyes looking down his nose and at Jian.

He looked *wrong* . All the blood, that strange hand of his. The eyes, the half-white hair, that look in his eyes that didn't even seem to acknowledge all this horror and carnage he'd been wreaking. He only looked like he was curious, as if Jian was an interesting sight to see. And it was here Jian was finally beginning to understand why it was everyone had wrote Sorun off as a monster.

He *was* a monster. Through and through.

And he was in her way.

There weren't exactly any *signs* in this damn place that pointed out where everything was, much to Sorun's consternation. But he'd been running around all over looking for the throne room, and of course the correct way to go had been literally the last single pathway to go down. Never failed. Helped that everyone who hadn't stuck around to fight him fled to this spot, so all he'd had to do was follow the panicked yells and shouts.

The doors leading to the throne room weren't even that overly impressive. The same goddamn set of metal, pneumatic doors that were around everywhere else here, but Sorun would acknowledge the facility used to be *Eggman's* old digs, and that man's taste in decor seemed to oscillate between overly ostentatious to coldly pragmatic depending on his mood.

Still. If nothing else, he found the damn room. Idly munching on a hand to keep the power coursing in him topped off as he approached. To say he was shocked to actually see someone there would be an understatement; eventually it got to a point everyone just started running. And she wasn't a lynx or bat, either. Not even those chameleons he'd seen. Badger Mobian, maybe? The black and white fur pattern said enough.

He *vaguely* recalled someone of that description. Maybe when he was back in that cell - Sorun wasn't too sure. Those times were foggy for the most part.

The badger looked confident, though, that was the thing. Or at least motivated. There was a sort of grim determination set in those blue eyes staring Sorun down, a straight sword gripped firmly in her hands and held right in front of her. Not shaking, form and breathing steady. He hadn't seen *that* yet.

And that *smell* ... Sorun had to pause as he looked at her, nose deeply inhaling as he breathed in the air. She absolutely *reeked* of Chaos energy. Every other Mobian here he'd cut through he could detect hints of, but her, that sour, energetic smell was so prominent it was impossible to miss.

"Oh, you look like you got some chops on you." Sorun tossed the severed lynx hand he'd been munching on over his shoulder. Fur made the texture taste awful, anyway. "You the final bastion or whatever?"

The badger made a loud scoff. "Hardly," she said. "I couldn't care less about what happens to those behind me. I simply want out. You're in my way."

"That I am." Sorun looked over his shoulder at the empty corridor behind him. He looked back ahead at the badger. "It matter in any way?"

Her eyes narrowed a bit at Sorun. "All of this? Everything the Iron Dominion and the subservient clans have done in the name of the Iron Queen? It absolutely has nothing to do with me," she told Sorun. "I'm a simple sword arm for hire, that's all. I don't seek quarrel with you, so just let me pass and return home."

"Unfortunate. I don't care," Sorun instantly responded. He rose the Rebellion off his shoulder, slowly bringing it down to point its edge at Jian. "All this useless shit I've been cutting through was fun for a time, but now everything's too slow, too boring. *You* , though... you feel different." He made a small grin, cocking his head to the side as the claymore dissolved in a cloud of blue particles, only for those particles to instantly gather around and reform into a katana. "More

than that I'm trying to maximize my chances of eviscerating every single person who woke up and decided this was the week to piss me off so severely, and I *really* want a taste of you."

There was a moment where Jian paused, an expression that was a mix of frustration and resignation on her face. She'd squared her hips, feet more securely planted to the ground as she tightened her grip on her sword. Expression morphing into one of grim determination as she stared right at Sorun. The only sound she offered by way of response was a slow, steady breath as she stared him down.

Sorun's grin widened. *That's* what he wanted to see so bad. No backing down, no running away like everyone else eventually did. "If you wanna pass, beat me. Not that hard, right?" Sorun asked, grabbing onto Yamato's handle with both hands as he brought the sword down to his side.

Not another word was said between the two of them. Just constant staring, Jian giving him that hardened glare while Sorun just looked on in amused anticipation. No sounds except for quiet breathing - not even a single creak of bone as they both faced each other motionlessly.

And then they'd *moved* . As if an invisible, soundless bell only they could hear had gone off. Their bodies blurred, crossing the length of the room in a blink and ending with them standing on complete opposite sides. Backs turned to each other with their swords held upwards.

Even as Sorun felt a giant gash be carved directly in the center of his face, he only grinned out more. Nearly as fast and strong as him. Absolutely *nothing* like everyone else here. Where the hell had she been this entire time? They were absolutely wasting her talents sticking her here.

"Ah, you do have a li'l somethin'-somethin' after all," Sorun said, sword dropping back to his side as he looked at Jian over his

shoulder. Facial wound completely healed, only a bloody line left in place. "Ain't enough, though," he added, pointing over his shoulder and at her. "See?"

Jian had maintained that same pose after they'd moved and struck at each other in the blink of an eye. And then a thin, red line appeared where her arm met her shoulder. A sound that nearly sounded like a wet cracking noise was heard as the freshly-severed arm fell off from Jian's shoulder and collapsed onto the ground, blood spurting out from the shoulder wound.

To the badger's credit, she hadn't even cried out in pain, didn't even drop her sword to clutch at the wound. The most she offered was a single grunt of pain through clenched teeth as she whirled right back around to Sorun. Feet tapping against the floor as she ran right back towards him, readying her sword for another strike.

"Oh, right back into it!?" Sorun excitedly thought. Girl either had a high pain tolerance or *really* wanted to get out of here. A thought that kept lingering in the back of Sorun's mind as he swung Yamato, the two blades clashing off each other and causing sparks to fly between them. More strikes, over and over. Swing after swing, sometimes connecting, sometimes one or the other dodging. Pulling their body to the side to narrow avoid a swing only to retaliate with a hit of their own. Neither never really landing another blow.

And Sorun was *thrilled* by it all. The badger Mobian wasn't; she was looking more and more exhausted and fearful by the second, noticeably slowing down from the blood loss of a lost arm. It made Sorun deeply regret cutting her arm off with that first swing, because she was growing worn to the point that he didn't see this fight going further than a minute or two. Oh, but how *good* she was at this. For all her waning strength and how Sorun's physical prowess was steadily beginning to completely outclass her, she was keeping up. Blocking and deflecting all of Sorun's swings, deftly twirling around his stabs. He didn't dare use any of the Yamato's abilities for fear of making it too easy.

Not that she was making any headway against Sorun, either, who either sidestepped her swings or just completely batted her strikes away with his own sword. It was a fun back and forth, though, because he actually was trying to slash and stab at her throughout this whole exchange. Was putting in legitimate effort. But nothing landed, nothing connected, no matter how hard he tried. He liked it.

Even when it'd gotten to the point where Jian was forced down to a kneeling position, she didn't give up. Down and down again Sorun brought the katana blade down at different angles, and even with a dead-tired face that was heavily panting out Jian deflected it all with mad swings of her arm, all the way up until the blade on her sword *broke* . It'd cracked down half the length of the blade with one last block, the force behind it caused the severed end of the sword to be tossed up into the air behind her, spinning down and down until it'd impaled the metal floor behind her.

There was a small clatter heard as Jian, utterly exhausted, dropped her broken sword, last arm flopping down to her side. Even breathing out so heavily and defeated, she gave Sorun nothing but a defiant glare as he held Yamato up, pressing the tip of it right against her throat.

He pushed down, intent on piercing her throat entirely. To Sorun's surprise he'd *missed* - ended up just stabbing through the floor when she lurched her body away to the side right as he'd begun to make the movement to stab down. Her remaining arm scooping the broken blade up off the floor and holding it in a backwards grip as if the jagged thing were a knife.

"Still more!?" The corners of Sorun's mouth twitched upwards into a more delighted expression. She really *was* different from every other person in this place. Not just from looking different or wearing simple clothing when everyone else had armor or some sort of ridiculous-looking ninja getup. Oh, no, she was a *special* one. Just kept going and going.

Pulling the sword out from the ground, Sorun swung again. Jian had misjudged something - perhaps hadn't been able to adapt to the new length of her weapon fast enough due to her exhausted sake. Whatever the case she'd tried to block the swing, but ultimately failed, Yamato's blade cleaving right through her forearm, cutting through to the bone and making it so only a few strings of tendon and some skin connected her arm to the rest of her body.

And yet, despite all these grievous injuries, she'd *growled* out at Sorun. Using the last of the feeling she had in her hand to flick the half-sword up in the air, catching it in her teeth. Eyes wide and near-frantic, doing everything she could to power through all that pain and blood loss as she sprinted right at Sorun. Swinging her head around wildly in an vain, desperate attempt to just catch him even *once* with the blade being held in her mouth.

Schwing!

Sorun was having none of it. He'd sidestepped her entirely and swung out with Yamato, ending with his arm being fully extended to his side with the sword tightly gripped in his hand. Jian had stagged a bit before coming to a full stop. The half-sword slowly slipping from her mouth before clattering to the floor at her feet. A strangled, gasping sort of noise left her as her feet stumbled, slowly turning towards Sorun.

"Y-you..." She tried to say, voice coming out as labored with a slight gurgle to it. The black and white fur on her neck began to become stained in red from the blood flowing from the red line slowly becoming more and more prominent on her throat. "You... monster..."

She fell down to her knees, body growing still. Her head dropped down seconds later, bouncing off the ground a few times before rolling away, gouts of blood spurting up from the open neck sitting before Sorun.

"You were a real one. Right up to the end." The breathing coming out of Sorun was slightly heightened. Not from exhaustion; he barely felt

the smallest-bit winded, at least so far with all this energy coursing through him. No, this had been brought on from excitement. Thrill. She'd been fun, more so than anyone else in this place. That feeling of blood rushing and his head being completely focused in on that fight had felt near-euphoric to him. "I regret never asking your name. I'll remember you for a long time yet."

Sighing out, he lowered his arm back to the side, expression dimming somewhat as he stared at the kneeling, headless, and armless corpse. He was almost sad to see her gone, if only because it meant he'd never fight her again. But he pushed those feelings away, wanting to focus on the task at hand. That throne room was still back there. He still had to check if Snively and Regina were in there and murder everything in there that was breathing.

"..." Sorun hummed out, tilting his head a bit downwards when he saw Jian's severed arm lying on the ground. He walked towards it, bending down to pick it up. Without hesitation he held it above his head, letting the blood inside drip into his open mouth. He nearly shuddered from the sharp *jolt* he felt go through his whole body - felt so much energy seeping into him that he felt more awake now than he ever had in his life. Feeling the dark hide and scales on his arm spread up, past his elbow and shoulder and halfway across his right pectoral.

Yeah. This was enough. He could win handedly with this, easy.

"That's it..." He tossed the arm over his shoulder, completely discarding it. Turning towards the doors leading to the throne room, expression falling flat. Still all this to go through, and he doubted *any* of the ones going forward would be like the one back there. Never seemed to *end* , any of this...

Zero time was wasted as Sorun swung the sword out in front of him. Dozens of slashes appearing on the doorway, cutting right through to the other side. Without further delay he walked up to it, kicking his foot out to break down that ruined doorway. Skulking into the throne room beyond, sword scraping along the ground behind him.

There were dozens of voices screaming and crying out seconds later. Followed by the sound of wet cutting noises and splashes of blood flying out from the entranceway Sorun had cut open.

A/N- So yeah, there's a lot of terms and concepts relating to things in Yurashia that'll probably be lost on people who never read the comics. To that I say that Sorun's in the exact same boat as you are and at this point he's never going to go out of his way to learn what any of this even means since he's beyond caring at this point, so I try to justify it saying it's just framing the story primarily through Sorun's point of view.

More than that all the Yurashia stuff is such an infinitesimally small part of this story that I don't really feely like going out of my way to spend a lot of time extrapolating those particular details. We'll get broad strokes and not much else because it just really doesn't matter all that much.

Chapter 108

A/N- ***Me reading the reviews for the last chapter and seeing someone mention Jian was a comic character.***

"She was?" Pause. "OH SHE WAS."

Alright so listen, for those not in the know Jian was a post-Genesis Wave character (and if you have no clue what that means don't- don't worry about it) in the comics who was a white tiger. I completely forgot about her existence because as far as I recall she never really did anything memorable. But I guess somewhere in my subconscious I remembered her 'cause when I needed a throwaway OC I pretty much used her by accident. And made her a badger. Big whoops on my part.

I mean, it's whatever, she's dead anyways and never coming back. If you want just pretend she was a pre-Genesis Wave version. Go even further and think that she actually *was* a tiger and Sorun just mistook her as a badger since he has a history of not correctly identifying Mobian species.

Recursion Error

Episode 108- One's right of way

It was *not* supposed to be like this.

Nothing was supposed to be like this.

People weren't supposed to be dead .

It was thoughts like these that were rushing through Espio's head as he dashed through the metal halls of the occupied Egg Dome. Or maybe it was now known as the formerly-known Egg Dome. The

correct wording over the subject truly was the last thing on his mind, however, as he was more focused on the fact it was full of *bodies* . Bodies he recognized as belonging to those of Yagyu and Raiju clans. Torn apart, cut apart, rent asunder, bludgeoned, stabbed, crushed, dismembered. Killed in seemingly every gruesome fashion imaginable.

It was a carnival of carnage and bloodshed the likes of which Espio had never bore witness to, nor could have ever conceivably even imagine. Nothing could have possible even prepared him. Not the years of training in his youth, nor the years spent building up his mental focus and faculties, nor the standard horrors he'd encountered fighting Dr. Eggman with the others. None of this came remotely close to preparing him for any of this, and though he'd never openly admit it to any of the others, he'd voided his stomach contents near the beginning of seeing all this.

What could have even happened? What caused all this? A question that kept plaguing his mind as he continued sprinting through these halls. He knew absolutely nothing that was capable of wreaking such carnage. Not in such a bloody fashion. Not even Eggman's machines had-

"O-oh..."

The new set of bodies he came across when rounding a hall's corner were infinitely more familiar to Espio. Chameleon corpses, in much the same state as all the others. Those of the Shinobi Clan. And some, he... had known by name. Some he'd trained with in their youth. Now they were nothing but dead pieces of vicsera staining the metal floor, the walls, even the *ceiling* . As if some rabid monster had its way with them all.

It took everything he had to keep going. Every ounce of discipline, every drop of focus he could summon, every iota of willpower. They were gone; he couldn't help them. He *could* still help the living. Sorun. He was considering it a small miracle he didn't find his corpse among all the carrion, but at the same time Espio was growing

increasingly concerned because he hadn't found him in the detection center. He *did* , however, find the severed arm. The pools of white blood, that... metal skeleton lying there on the floor.

He was fearing the worst, and quite frankly, he didn't have much hope for the best. But he'd promised Sonic and Sally and all the others that he'd come here and rescue Sorun while they all dealt with the Iron Queen. Even if it meant finding his friend's corpse, rent and rived, rendered completely unrecognizable from whatever had done all this. He owed him that much. He... owed everyone the effort spent on accomplishing at least this much.

So he pushed down the fear he felt for his own life, fear that whatever it was that did this was around, and pressed onwards. Towards the throne room - the last possible place to look. Passing the white and black furred, mutilated and decapitated corpse kneeling on the floor as he entered. And then he abruptly paused in horror when he saw it all.

The survivors of this massacre must have all taken refuge in the throne room for a lack of anywhere better to go. Not that it served them; it was much the same sight in here as it was outside, but on a much wider scale. Dozens of cut apart bodies littering the floor, with so much blood pooling around half the metal flooring wasn't even visible beneath it. A picture that truly, honestly made Espio sick to his stomach and dizzy at the sight.

That's not what gave him pause, though. What gave him pause was the person standing in the center of all that mayhem. Wearing clothes completely dyed red with blood, holding a familiar, bloodied katana. Hair a mix of black and white, with red staining large portions of it even further. A right hand that looked unnatural, but quite honestly it was the last thing Espio was focusing on compared to everything else.

Because that was Sorun. Standing there. Looking almost... *calm* . And when he'd heard Espio make a sharp gasp, he'd turned his

head towards him. Green-glowing, reptilian eyes staring right at Epsio. An unreadable expression on his face.

"Oh, look. It's you."

So Regina and Snively weren't here.

It figured. This world wasn't too keen on giving Sorun freebies, he'd long since learned that. Maybe it was like that for everyone, or maybe it just had it out for Sorun since he wasn't local. He was far beyond caring at this point, hence why he was no longer playing by its rules. Hence the bodies. And his mounting frustration at the fact there weren't two very specific bodies joining all the piles he was making.

Fine, then. Back to New Mobotropolis it was. Everyone was dead here anyways, so no point in screwing around here any longer-

His head perked up when he'd heard footsteps in the blood. A sharp gasp, the faint scent of blood containing a *strong* link to the Chaos Force. Just like badger lady back there. Another special one.

Sorun's head snapped towards the source, but then paused. Another chameleon. A... purple chameleon. Yellow eyes, yellow horns. Familiar getup. Espio.

For the first time since leaving that prison area, Sorun was finding himself pausing. So many thought and mixed feelings were swirling through him now... what else was he to do but talk as he sorted through it all.

"Oh, look. It's you." Sorun turned his body fully towards Espio, keeping his expression even as he regarded him. "Hey, Espio. I escaped prison. Ain't that wacky?" he asked, releasing a deep breath as he spoke. "Hey. Espio. I got my old skeleton back. Ain't that just *thriller* ?"

He noticed Espio's body tense. For a moment horror had flickered across the chameleon's face, though he'd steeled his expression rather quickly. Body tense as he stood across the room from Sorun.

"You know, I remember something," Sorun continued. "I remember a conversation we had about katanas. I'd asked how you even knew of them, since you claimed to grow up on Angel Island. You... gave me some half-excuse about it just being part of your culture up there, and at the time I *did* think it a bit odd. 'Cause geologically that just... didn't add up; that kind of culture never existed where Angel Island originated from. But you were a friend, and I trusted you. So I put it out of my mind."

And then Sorun flicked Yamato upwards. Catching another katana, a normal one wielded by one of the ones here, that was lying on the ground and sending it spinning through the air until it fell down and impaled its blade in the floor next to Espio, causing him to flinch.

"But now I'm starting to get the impression that was just a lie. I don't like being lied to. So would you like to try again?" Sorun asked. "Would you like to tell me how you know what a katana is?"

Espio didn't respond at first. He looked around at all the bodies and blood surrounding them, a shuddering breath leaving him before he focused back on Sorun. "Sorun, what did you *do* ?" he asked. Voice tinged in a myriad of emotions. Shock, surprise, sadness and anger and revulsion. A blend of emotions that truly made it impossible for Sorun to try and read what was going on through Espio's head.

Not that he cared to. If anything, he was just irritated at the stalling. "What do you mean? I killed everyone. It's not some grand mystery to be solved, Espio," Sorun snapped in an impatient manner. "And anyways, we're not talking about me. We're talking about *you* ."

"Don't try to play this off!" Epsio yelled out, going as far as to throw a hand to the side. "Look at this! Look at all this! All these bodies, all this death, you... you...!"

He didn't even seem to have the *words* . So disgusted, so distraught with all the death surrounding them was he that he was utterly failing to articulate his thoughts into words. It honestly looked like talking about himself was among the *last* thing Espio wanted to talk about. Which Sorun found irritating. He couldn't care less about the corpses surrounding them.

"Espio. You should really be less concerned about the departed you can't do a thing for, and more about yourself. Who is currently dressed the exact same way as a couple of the corpses," Sorun pointed out, pointing his sword at a pair of chameleon corpses lying dead nearby. "And move the same as them. Use the same weapons as them. It's not a good look..."

Espio stiffened at the sight of the chameleon bodies. He made a choked sound before biting his own tongue, turning his head to the side as he made a bitter sort of remorseful sound. "How could you...?" he asked, tone low before he head snapped back to Sorun. "They came here to *help* you, you fool! We came here to free you of this place!"

"Move faster next time, then." Sorun's eyes flicked down to the bodies. "And as it stands, they didn't seem too interested in rescuing. One stabbed me, you know."

"You have to wonder why!? I don't want to know what they saw you doing. What you..." Espio stumbled back a step. Eyes rapidly flicking around at the bodies, breathing quickening the smallest amount as he took in all the carnage, the dead *meat* surrounding them. He'd nearly retched again from the scent of it all alone, though he managed to keep himself composed as he looked back towards Sorun.

"You had absolutely no right to-!"

Sorun's left arm flung out, light glinting off Yamato's blade. A small slash was carved into the metal wall behind Espio and near his

head, making the purple chameleon flinch a bit and causing him to fall silent.

"Espio. I won't ask again," Sorun intoned, shooting him an impatient look. He was getting *tired* of Espio and his complaints about the bodies, Sorun just didn't *care* . He cared about his answers and wanted to get back to New Mobotropolis already to end this. But *this* , Espio right here, right now. He needed answers from him. Felt a sudden and burning need to have all these questions swirling in his head answered. "Why are you like them? Why'd I see you go off with one of the ninja lynxes, on the day of the concert? It's not coincidence; can't be. It's all just too much. *Especially* ... when Sonic and that monkey guy said he saw you here. On their side."

"..." Espio's eyes widened at Sorun. Mostly in outrage, in utter disbelief. At seeing how serious he was, though, he took a deep breath to steady himself before responding. "... It's true that my origins were a fabrication. On that front, your suspicions were correct. I was born within the Shinobi Clan within Yurashia. Tasked with overseeing the Master Emerald set inside of Angel Island and the echidna Guardian who watches over it-"

"I didn't ask for your life story. I genuinely don't care. I care even *less* knowing it involved echidna," Sorun interrupted in a blunt tone, shaking his head at Espio. "Fine, whatever, you were born in a ninja clan and got close to Knuckles for shady reasons. *Whatever* . I don't need details beyond that. And I really can't be bothered to learn all the details about your little Yurashia clans that can't seem to decide whether they're apeing Chinese or Japanese culture, *not that you'd even know what I'm talking about* ."

He began to pace back and forth. He *said* that, at least. And it should have been true - he shouldn't care. He didn't live up on that island with all the rest of them. And yet... yet he did. There were still those moments, back when he and the rest of the Chaotix lived with the rest of the Freedom Fighters. And Sorun had fought alongside them, alongside *Espio* . The moments of camaraderie, friendship, even. He *made* Sorun care.

And the fact Sorun had been deceived, the others deceived... it just wasn't sitting right with him. Regardless of the reasons.

And what Sonic said, *what Sonic said* . Espio went here during the concert. *Here* . Used some means to travel halfway across the continent to join everyone here. *Before* Snively and Regina showed up in New Mobtropolis.

Before... before...

"Alright... liar." Sorun stopped pacing to affix Espio with a cold look. "You did all that. Why? Why did you leave and come here?"

"Because the Shinobi Clan falls under the umbrella of all the clans who were taken in under the Iron Queen's banner," Espio answered, looking down as he said the words through clenched teeth. "I was called upon - it was my duty as a shinobi to go, Sorun."

"I want you to try that again." Sorun's grip on Yamato tightened when he heard that. *Oh* , he didn't like that. He didn't like hearing that collection of little words coming out of Espio's mouth. "I want you to rephrase that in a way that implies you could have just ignored it if you wanted to."

Espio looked back up at Sorun with an angered look. "You wouldn't understand, Sorun. Just as I would never try and understand your life. What drove you to... *this* ." He gestured his arm out to the corpses surrounding them. "I don't *want* to understand a thing like that."

He took a deep breath. "The leader of each clan is an individual labeled as a Bride, and in my case I'm sworn to follow the directives given to me by my clan's Bride. And I had trust that she, Bride of Constant Vigil, knew what she was doing. That she wouldn't simply kowtow to the Iron Queen and working of... of finding some way. To indirectly help the others while being underneath the Iron Queen. It's the shinobi way, to act indirectly. And if not then maybe at the very least I could help in the position I found myself in." His yellow eyes

slowly drifted away from Sorun's glowing green eyes. "And it took my explaining all my reasoning to the others for me to see the right of way, and even now I don't know if I'll ever be able to mend the trust destroyed."

Espio's eyes snapped back up to Sorun's. "But the Shinobi Clan is working *against* the Iron Queen, Sorun!" he continued. "Soon they all will be thanks to the efforts of Sonic and the others! And once her power base has fallen beneath her we can-!"

"Did you know?"

Sorun interrupted Epsio with such a straightforward question, asking in a calm and even tone. Three little words that held so much weight to them as Espio blinked once in confusion, finding it suddenly very hard to meet Sorun's eyes. Sorun, who currently looked like he was attempting to burn a hole through Espio's face.

"Snively and Regina going to New Mobotropolis. Did you know ahead of time that was gonna happen?" Sorun clarified. "Did you know they were gonna do that? 'Cause you were here at the time. So did. You. Know?"

Espio breathed out as he heard the question. "Sonic and Sally. They... told me. What became of your pet," Espio acknowledged. And Sorun visibly bristled at that tinge of *regret* to his tone, and at labeling Virgil as a simple *pet* of all things. "You have to understand, I couldn't just go out of my way to give forewarning-"

"You *did* know."

It was said with such a simple tone, mainly due to the fact Sorun felt shocked as he said it. As the information soaked into his brain once Espio said all that, and the realization set in. He'd known. He'd known Regina and Snively would go there, and Espio... did nothing. Not a single thing to warn anyone of anything. Hadn't made it so *some* defense could have been prepared beforehand. That maybe

they could have been *captured* while visiting. A message through a computer network, a messenger, transmission. *Something* .

But no. Nothing. He'd chosen to be completely silent. And because of that things played out the way they had. And if he hadn't, if Espio had just *done something* , maybe things would be different. Maybe he wouldn't have...

Sorun laughed at the realization hit him. A small, quiet laugh that was more a breathy chuckle. He palmed his face, running his fingers through his hair as it bloomed into full-on laughter, and then soon turned into giggling shrieks as his body tilted back and shuddered on the spot. *Espio* . Of all people, it was Espio that had done something like this. Sorun would have never guessed, never suspected, because he trusted him. And now Virgil was dead. Sorun had been captured and taken here, and at this moment his body was being ravaged by the Chaos energy empowering him. And there he was, that traitor. Standing there all... *alive* and such.

"Hah..." The amusement rapidly faded from Sorun as he straightened himself as mind-number anger and grief coursed through him. Hand still on his face as he felt his blood surge, his green eyes briefly flaring out and shining with power as he stared right at the purple chameleon. "Espio... I'll ki **ll you."**

There was a moment that, as Sorun's emotions ran high, blue sparks of power briefly flickered over his form. His voice, just for a moment, taking on a dual-toned, metallic flange behind his words, his breath coming out as an inhuman rattle. And then he gripped his katana in both hands, crossing the distance of a few meters in just a few short strides before swiping upwards, his strike pulling the blood pooled to the ground with the blade in a rising arc.

He dared to *dodge* , the quick bastard. Juking to the side, a surprised and panicked look on his face. And to Sorun's consternation he could smell it - smell all that power running through Espio. He reeked even more of Chaos energy than the lady he'd decapitated back there.

"Sorun!" Espio shouted, backpedaling a few steps while holding a kunai up in a reversed grip. "Wait, just wait for a minute-!"

"Virgil's dead 'cause of you, you turncoat fuck!" He slashed out with his sword, feeling Espio catch the blade against the kunai and actually hold his own against Sorun's strength. Though there was definitely surprise in Espio's face, his knees nearly struggled from the sheer weight brought down on him, enough so that his kunai cracked. "You did dick to help and he's gone!"

"That's *not* what happened!" Espio argued. He leapt back a good few meters, throwing his kunai. Sorun saw it coming, growling out and grabbing it out of midair before throwing it hard enough against the bloodied floor to shatter it. "I risked compromising myself committing an action such as that! And a direct betrayal against the Iron Queen would have been a direct betrayal of my clan, besides! I couldn't-!"

"Fuck your code, fuck your honor, people are dead!" As Sorun sprinted towards Espio once more, slashing out madly with his katana, Espio pulled another kunai, just *barely* managing to deflect each and every strike. "Do you know *know* what they're planning to do to people in New Mobotropolis!? That lobotomy shit!? You thought your place in some clan was more important than all that!?"

"Of course I don't! Stop it!" He'd leapt back, throwing the kunai. Sorun had *growled* out as he caught it from the air, so angered was he that he'd crushed the metal tool in his grip. He released it, the once-kunai now a twisted hunk of metal that rattled against the floor. "You're missing vital context for all of this!"

"I don't want your context! I don't need context past he's dead!"

None of it *mattered* . Sorun couldn't care beyond the fact everything was being ruined. Again. Over and over again his life kept being ruined, Virgil was dead and Espio just... just sat there, and did nothing when he could have done *something* , anything, and it might have helped. And he didn't! For what!?

It infuriated Sorun, enraged him so much so that he felt his thoughts swimming. Even just seeing Espio standing there was sending him in a rage, making him swing over and over, but of course the nimble bastard just kept hopping around. Ducking left, right, dodging under his sword strike, hopping over Sorun's shoulder. He hissed out once more, whirling himself around and flashing Yamato outward.

"Forget the thrill of the fight, not against this bastard! I just want him dead! Die! I'm using everything!"

At first it'd been a small distortion in the air. A small bubble of discolored, warped space, one that Espio had keenly managed to spot with his eyes. It was a familiar sight to him - one that, back when Sorun had fought alongside the Freedom Fighters, he'd seen often. So when he saw that distortion of space his face had screwed in absolute *panic* , and the chameleon had leapt back once more.

It was just in time, too, before he'd been caught in the maelstrom of slashes that distorted the very light they touched, causing a chromatic aberration of colors to be seen around all those slashes. A *deep* frown had settled over Sorun's face at seeing Espio dodge the Judgement Cut, making him slowly turn his head over towards the Mobian with absolute contempt in his eyes.

"S-Sorun...!" Espio gasped out. The floor from where that attack had landed was absolutely riddled in cuts and slashes marring the floor, nearly enough so that it was halfway to being a hole. Espio breathed out heavily at the sight, and then looked back to Sorun. "Are you seriously attempting to kill me-!?"

Another swing of Sorun's sword. Another bubble of distorted space, only for Espio to dodge back once more. That panicked look on Espio's face remained, looking more and more fearful by the second as that cool, calm composure he'd always wore on his face began to slip. "Don't you dare- oh, you fucking suck," Sorun muttered out when he saw Espio's form shimmer, and then completely disappear altogether. It made him breath out a heavy huff, and in the next instant Sorun slammed Yamato's blade down on his own palm.

He'd barely even thought about it. It'd been more an reflex, really, an instinctual call Sorun's brain had made the moment he saw Espio turn invisible. He dragged the blade's edge along his palm, not even registering the quickly-fading pain as the bleeding wound sealed shut.

"Quit it with the hide-and-seek, we're not playing that game right now," he called out, throwing his hand out in front of him. The blood was tossed out as a result, with some of it splashing against the floor, while the rest of it seemed to spatter against something unseen. For a brief moment it looked like that blood was just hovering in the air before there was a shimmer, and Espio re-appeared. Raising a hand up to wipe the blood that'd been splashed on his face off.

To his credit he hadn't stopped to stare down at the blood in shock. Good for him that he hadn't, either, because then he would have been skewered when Sorun tried stabbing at him again. But to Sorun's mounting frustration that ninja title he loved to tote around wasn't at all one for show. That slipping composure of his was slowly starting to come back, getting *used* to the tempo of things. He made a few more long strides backwards, disappearing once more.

Again Sorun tried tossing his own blood in the air. Again he saw it splash against something invisible, hovering in the air, but this time Espio didn't reappear. He saw that blood move away as he rapidly circled around Sorun before it, too, shimmered away.

"Adapted." And annoyed *tch* sound left Sorun as he slowly turned around, eyes flicking about. Were Sorun in a different frame of mind than the one he was in at the moment he'd have called it impressive; as it stood his desire to jam this katana blade into Espio's face was so deep he couldn't be bothered to be impressed by it.

"..." He breathed out, eyes slowly scanning the blood-soaked throne room, but no Espio in sight. His head perked up when he heard it - a quiet whistling sound from something being thrown towards his leg. He'd growled out, flicking his sword sideways to bat the kunai that'd

nearly plunged into his leg away. A few more whistling sounds were heard, and a few more times he batted the weapons away. A few times he'd even slashed towards the source of where the kunai were coming from, but never once did he hit anything.

His frustration grew to the point that the sound of his fingers tightening around the sword's hilt were audible. Fine. If *Espio* could adapt to things so quickly, then surely he could, too.

Breathing out slowly, Sorun slowly lowered the sword down to his side, grasping it with both hands. He thought back to the last hour, images flashing through his mind. Every single hallway he'd traversed, every single corpse he'd left in his wake, every body, every severed limb and decapitated head. There was a near-inaudible thrum from the sword, a slight blue glow appearing around the blade.

He'd slashed upwards, Yamato's blade arcing through the air. And after doing so they'd appeared: blue tears in space hovering just below the ceiling, dozens and dozens. The rifts expanded into portals hovering far above them. And all throughout the facility those same portals appeared under all the bodies and pools of blood Sorun had left behind. Portals upon portals all throughout the Egg Dome, enough so that even the smallest bits and pieces of gore had fallen through.

All of which resulted in those bodies and all that blood raining down from the portals up near the ceiling. The bodies and parts had hit the floor first, littering the throne room in even more corpses, though with those Sorun didn't pay them any mind. He was more focused on the *blood* . So, *so* much blood pouring in streams, covering nearly everything in red. Enough blood that the entire throne room floor was completely covered in red, a small pool forming as the room was completely flooded.

He saw it soon after. A disturbance in the blood - the ripple of a single footstep. "There you are," Sorun hissed out under his breath, slashing in the air above where he'd seen that footstep in the blood.

While he didn't hit anything, what he *did* see was Espio reappear as he stumbled back, eyes wildly glancing around at all the gore around them. He looked *sick* from the sight, sick from all the blood staining the bottom of his shoes and some of the falling blood getting on him, sick from the sight of all the corpses and the thick, metallic smell permeating the room now from all the blood.

"Y-you..." Espio stumbled back, the sounds of his footsteps splashing through the blood echoing out as he looked back to Sorun once the last of the blood fell through the portals. He'd look horrified before, but now he looked outraged. He'd seen the bodies before, but now it seemed that seeing them all together like this just made Sorun's actions all the more clear to the chameleon. "All this death, and for what!? For what, Sorun!? What did this accomplish!?"

"A bunch of maniacs invaded from a different continent with the intent of lobotomizing and enslaving the populace of a peaceful town. I killed them. This shouldn't be controversial," Sorun told Espio in a blunt tone.

"They didn't have a *choice* !" Espio yelled out, throwing one of his hands to the side. "The leader of every clan in Yurashia, the Brides, are subservient to the Iron Queen, whether the Brides like it or not! And any clan member who would go against their word would be excommunicated from the clans at best! Executed at worst!" He slowly lowered his hand to he side, his breathing becoming noticeably heavier as his eyes narrowed at Sorun in anger. "And for most in the clans there is *nothing* beyond it. No life, no future. Most of them didn't *want* to come here."

"They didn't seem particularly sympathetic, either." Sorun made a small hum, lifting Yamato up to tap its blunt side against his shoulder. There was an expression of mock-thought on his face, as if he were pretending to parse through Espio's words. "... And you know, Espio, after giving your words a good think I've come to the conclusion that I just can't seem to get past the whole 'lobotomizing my town' part."

"It's not nearly that simple-"

"I'm *making it* that simple," Sorun interrupted, a scowl on his face. "I'm not debating this. I've made up my mind on what's right and wrong here. If you disagree... then shut up and do something about it. Otherwise do me one last favor and just stand still while I run you through."

It was clear by that point that neither were interested in sharing any more words. Not Sorun, who'd slid Yamato off his shoulders and gripped its handle with both hands, breathing out lowly as he stared towards Espio. And not Espio, who'd opened and closed his mouth a few times before making a resigned sigh, shaking his head as he held up a kunai grasped in his hand. Eyes narrowing at Sorun in focused, determined expression.

As far as Sorun was concerned that was as good a starting bell as any other. He'd made a horizontal slash, though clicked his tongue in annoyance when Espio dropped down to the floor, sliding forwards through the blood as a giant slash appeared in the wall behind him. The blood pooling the floor was kicked up as he slid forwards and shot back up to his feet, stabbing forwards with the kunai-

Slice!

Sorun's own blade met Espio's. They hadn't boucned away, hadn't blocked each other or deflected in any capacity. Yamato's blade simply and effortlessly glided through the kunai with zero effort whatsoever, its power running along the length of the katana. The top half of the kunai that was cut away spun through the air, splashing into the blood surrounding them once it fell.

Ever quick on his feet, Espio jumped back. His eyes widened slightly, but he reflexively dropped the ruined weapon and grabbed at a new kunai from the bracers behind his gloves, quickly shifting back into another readying stance. When Sorun was upon him once more, he didn't try clashing blades a second time. He was dodging, spinning and weaving around all of Sorun's strikes and thrusts, doing his absolute best to not get hit. To Sorun's mounting frustration he'd tried upping the speed of all his slashing, cutting away as fast as his arms

would allow, but Espio was just responding in turn, matching his speed in an aggravating show of dexterity.

"Quick one. He just had to smell special like that woman back there," Sorun thought to himself, feeling his anger grow more and more as the two of them kept moving, his ears filled with the sound of his sword whistling through the air and the blood splashing beneath their feet. A sound which, in his emotional state, caused Sorun's eyes to flick down at their feet.

Espio's feet.

He didn't let go of the sword long. For less than tenth of a second - just long enough that Sorun was able to shift his grip on Yamato and hold it in a reverse grip of his changed right arm. "Mobians and their big FUCKIN' FEET!" he snarled out, stabbing downwards with as much force as the arm could muster. It'd moved *much* faster on its own without the other arm holding it back. Faster than Espio anticipated, at least, leading to the blade plunging right through Espio's foot and into the floor.

There'd been a gasp from Espio. A sharp exhale of breath mixed with a pained grunt, his grip on the kunai wavering, though he'd never dropped it. Before he could do anything, though, Sorun had wrenched the sword upwards, the end of the sword's handle striking Espio right in the chin and snapping his head back. The strike seemed to daze him for just a moment, after which Sorun, still holding the sword in a reversed grip, slashed outwards and at Espio.

The purple chameleon had jumped back as a result of the slash, though too late to avoid being completely unscathed. He'd stumbled a bit at the landing, making a pained sound as he looked down and saw the thin line of red that had been cut across his chest, staining over his scales. He didn't have much time to think of the wound, though, as Sorun was rushing back in, switching the katana to his left hand for a better angle and holding it up with the intent of stabbing it down once more to pin Espio's in place so he'd stop dodging around.

To Sorun's confusion, though... Espio didn't even attempt to move. His eyes narrowed somewhat, but otherwise the ninja held his ground, didn't even try to move when Sorun brough the sword down and pierced through his *other* foot. And for a moment Sorun was puzzled at to why he didn't dodge, even thought for a moment that maybe Espio was just getting too exhausted to fight effectively.

But then Espio had moved, and Sorun saw why he'd done what he done: Espio may have been pinned, but with Sorun's sword stuck through his foot and into the floor, the sword itself was pinned, too. And Sorun couldn't let go of the sword without it disappearing. Which seemed to be Espio's thoughts exactly, because the *moment* the sword pierced through Espio stabbed forwards with a kunai and stabbed it right through Sorun's forearm.

An affronted growl left Sorun the moment he saw the tip of the kunai emerge from the other side of his arm and through his coat sleeve, feeling dulled pain lance up through his arm. It hadn't been just a random stab from Espio, but one made with purpose. The stab was position in such a way that the blade was piercing right in the gap between his radius and ulna bone, could even feel its edge scraping against them. And from there Espio had *twisted* , maneuvering the kunai and leveraging it against Sorun's bones in a way that his wrist and hand were forced to rotate.

Sorun had tried to hold on, truly, but due to a combination of that growing white-hot pain and his decreasing grip from the twisting, Sorun's fingers eventually slipped off from the blade's handle. For just a single moment Sorun had paused, staring in surprise, and then had attempted to reach out with his demonic hand to grab at the sword handle.

Too late. From just his grip being off of Yamato for a second there'd been a flash of light as the sword transmuted back into the Chaos Emerald, hovering in the air briefly before dropping down. And Espio, with his foot now free and un-pinned from a sword, kicked out and sent it flying to the other side of the room.

Hissing out, Sorun tried grabbing at it with his demonic hand, but he wasn't even able to do so much as scratch at the Emerald with his claws before it flew away. And evidently taking his eyes off from Espio for even that one, brief moment had been a mistake, because afterwards Espio *moved* . Strike upon strike landed on Sorun, on his knees and other such joints, making him feel oddly weightless for a moment as he swayed a bit.

And then Espio had put him in some hold, roughly shoving Sorun down onto his back. In that same motion he'd torn the kunai out from Sorun's arm, only to then stab it down on his hand and through his palm, pinning the hand down to the floor. Making sure his body was positioned to one side of Sorun's body in a way his demonic hand couldn't reach towards him.

"Listen to me!" Espio shouted out, grabbing at Sorun's chin and forcing him to look up at him. "You are blowing so much out of proportion-!"

There was a wet, tearing sound when Sorun yanked his arm forwards. The blade tore its way up his palm, all the way up through the gap between his middle and ring fingers, effectively splitting the hand in two. Espio had been momentarily stunned by the gruesome sight, which had been all the time Sorun had needed to grab at Espio's throat.

If he had it his way Sorun would have squeezed down and snapped Espio's neck right there. In fact he'd *tried* , but his split hand wasn't functioning properly. The tendons and meat in the palm were slowly reconnecting and healing the hand back together, but the regeneration just wasn't fast enough to instantly mend it and make it work. So he'd growled out, tossing Espio back to the other end of the throne room and causing his body to tumble and splash through all the blood on the floor.

In a show of deft finesse Espio had sprung up from his palms and landed on his wounded feet, wincing the smallest bit. In that same moment Sorun had reached for the kunai that'd been stabbed into

his hand, grasping it with the uninjured, demonic hand and tearing it right out from the floor. Without skipping a beat he'd flipped the kunai around, gripping it by the tip of its blade before throwing it right at Espio.

Instantly Sorun regretted it due to the fact that his throw caused the kunai to spin wildly through the air, sailing right by Espio without even coming *close* to hitting him, and then bounced off the wall behind him before landing on the blood soaked floor. It was enough that Espio had paused, looking down where the kunai fell, blinked a few times, and then looked up at Sorun with an incredulous look, mouth slightly hung open in absolute disbelief.

"..." Not wanting to dignify the attempted throw with even as much as acknowledgement, Sorun looked away from the chameleon. Which was where he'd seen the shining Chaos Emerald laying at the end of the room opposite of where Espio was, his eyes locking right onto it. Instantly he bolted towards it, kicking up large sprays of blood behind him due to the speed at which he moved.

Speed which Espio couldn't hope to match; he'd seen and calculated that in an instant. And even if he could Sorun was just closer to the Emerald and would inevitably reach it first. So when Sorun's clawed, demonic hand reached out towards the Emerald he'd immediately whipped a throwing star towards the hand, intent on disabling it so Sorun couldn't grasp the Emerald.

Tink!

It'd bounced. The moment the throwing star hit the dark scales on Sorun's right hand there'd been a small shower of sparks, with the ninja start harmlessly bouncing off the hand without leaving so much as a scratch. On Sorun's part he hadn't even felt the star impact his hand, making the smallest of smirks tug at his lips as he picked the Emerald up.

"I'm gettin' real sick of your ninja shit, Espio," Sorun said as the Emerald transmuted into the Yamato. He flipped the sword around,

holding it in a reverse grip as he turned to Espio. "Take a knee."

He stabbed the sword backwards behind him. Upon doing this, the front half of the blade disappeared, stabbing into a small blue rift in space. And at that same moment Espio had shouted out in pain; a similar tiny portal had appeared behind his leg, with the upper half of the Yamato's blade poking through and piercing right through his shin.

"You're better'n most. Admittedly. I'll give you that much," Sorun said as he pulled the sword back out. Espio had breathed out in pain as a result, kneeling down on a single knee due to the wound. Small, quiet splashes were heard as Sorun slowly approached, casually tapping the katana on his shoulder. "But," he continued, stopping right in front of Espio, "don't matter how much of that ninjutsu nonsense you pull outta your sleeve. Now I need to hear it from your mouth directly. I need to know just what exactly was going through your head when you did nothing- *oh come on* -!"

Right when Sorun had approached, Espio snapped his wrist forward, another kunai flying into his grasp from the bracer. He'd thrust it forwards, stabbing the blade right into Sorun's knee. Slipping it just underneath the patella bone and severing the ligaments and tendons joining it to the leg muscles.

As a result Sorun was forced to kneel down in much the same way Espio was. Without skipping a beat Espio pulled the kunai out, and then stabbed it into Sorun's left shoulder. His arm dropped uselessly as a result, more muscles severed from the precise strike, and with Sorun being unwilling to let go of the sword with in his right hand he was unable to do anything as Espio used the kunai stabbed into him as a point of leverage to slide right behind him. Immediately Espio's arms had wrapped around Sorun's neck in a chokehold once he was in position.

A choked noise left Sorun from the sensation, along with the fact that he suddenly found that he couldn't breath due to his oxygen flow being cut off. He'd tried to struggle out from Espio's grasp, but that

just caused his arms to tighten further around his neck. He'd tried raising his left arm up but it wouldn't respond to him, that kunai still stabbed deep into his shoulder.

"You listen and you listen *well* ," Espio hissed out into Sorun's ear. "I should have told all the rest of them, Knuckles and the rest of my friends, the truth *much* sooner than I did, I'll freely admit that. And I will also admit that my indecisiveness on how best to proceed forwards has cost me a *substantial* amount of trust I've built among those I truly care for. But I did *not* , nor will I *ever* , betray my dear friends."

An indignant, choked noise left Sorun as he thrashed a bit more in the chameleon's grip. Even though his vision was slowly darkening from the chokehold every single word Espio said just made that rage churning in Sorun burn all the stronger, as though sheer anger itself was keeping him conscious despite the lack of oxygen. He couldn't even be bothered to care for that burning sensation he felt in his chest, or the lightheadedness, none of that. He wanted Espio to stop talking more than he wanted to breath.

"And I am *sorry* ," Espio continued, voice tight as he spoke. "I am truly sorry this travesty claimed the life of your pet, but that is *not my fault* . That lies in the hand of the ones truly responsible for this catastrophe, one I and many others are trying to resolve as quickly as possible! Right now as we speak Sonic, Sally, and Tails are in Yurashia gathering support from the Brides to break away from the Iron Queen, and once her forces abandon her and Snively this can all be over! And that - *that* , Sorun - would only have been possible through the painstaking efforts I went through to maintain my cover! I could have warned ahead of time that the Iron Queen and Snively were coming to New Mobotropolis, yes, but then what!? What do you think would have happened after-!?"

As Sorun's consciousness began to fade, the sword clutched in his clawed hand shifted, turning back into the blue Chaos Emerald. In that same instant a blue-glowing, spectral winged hand appeared from one of Sorun's shoulders, the hand reaching down and gripping

Espio by the torso. It ripped him away from Sorun, who took a massive deep breath as his vision sharpened and his mind cleared.

And then the Bringer Claw slammed Espio down onto his back, causing all the blood on the floor around him to rise up before briefly splashing back down. He coughed out, groaning out as he tried to move, but then Sorun had grabbed at his curled tail and pulled him closer after the Bringer Claw tore the kunai out from his shoulder, hand moving to grab at Espio's throat after as the Emerald turned back into the katana.

"You... you...!" He wanted to stab down so much. So, so much... but even with that cloud of rage tangling through all of Sorun's thoughts, muddling everything together, Espio's words were ringing in his head. Words that... made sense. Were logical in such an frustrating, sensible way, and he *hated it* . Hated that he couldn't just outright dismiss Espio's reasoning, hated they were making him have second thoughts.

And there was that *look* Espio was giving him. There was an almost pleading look in his eyes as he stared up at Sorun, gasping out as he uselessly grabbed at the hand squeezing down on his throat. Those same yellow eyes Sorun had seen on all those missions together, way back when during those times. Those same eyes that had regarded him every time they'd talked, the same eyes during the day at that beach-

There was a screech of metal when Sorun stabbed Yamato's blade down towards Espio. It didn't stab through his head, but it'd come close. Piercing through the metal floor just *millimeters* from his head. Sorun breathed out heavily as he knelt above Espio, his mind and heart feeling like a confusing whirlwind as he slowly released his throat.

... It was all just such a confusing *mess* and Sorun wanted it to be over with. He felt tired.

"You're right about one thing. There're people more responsible for this than you," Sorun murmured out, fingers sliding off from the purple Mobian's throat as he slowly stood up, katana loosely held in his grip after pulling it from the floor. "And I don't wanna waste more time on this. Just... just go," he continued, turning around to shuffle away. "Crawl your way out of here and into a hole for all I care. I never wanna see you again."

"And just where are you going...?" Espio asked, coughing out as he sat up. Rubbing a hand at his sore throat as he watched Sorun pause mid-step, shoulders slumping in exhaustion as he turned the sword in his hands around.

"To New Mobotropolis, to eviscerate every single invader from Yurashia who came here," he said in a plain, exhausted tone. Of all things, *that* hadn't changed in Sorun's mind over what to do. "What else?"

Espio grimaced a bit. He attempted to rise up to his feet, only to end up sitting back down due to his wounds. "Nobody else has to die over this, Sorun," he said in a defeated, pleading tone, still looking towards him. "I already told you Sonic-"

"And how long is that gonna take, huh?" Sorun asked. His voice adopted a clipped tone, some of that earlier exhaustion fading as he regarded his words. "You would have me wait around, twiddling my thumbs and dreaming of a better tomorrow while Sonic *once again* rides to the rescue and saves the day. By goin' around playing politics in some other continent so, what? The people responsible for all this just pack up and go home?"

Sorun practically *ripped* the katana down in a straight line, causing a blue rip in space to appear hovering right in front of him. The very *idea* of doing such a thing sounded appalling to Sorun. Filled him with such an indignant feeling of frustration and anger it nearly sent his vision spinning again after he'd just barely begun to calm down. *No* . He would *not* be doing such a thing. Of all the people in the

world, Sonic was the last possible person Sorun would ever rely on to save everything.

He refused to be saved by someone who was so wrong and always, *always* so smug about thinking he was in the right.

"How many people are going to be thrown into those pods to have their brains scrambled while that's going on, Espio?" Sorun asked. He turned his head enough so that his gaze met Espio's gaze, green-glowing eye boring into his yellow ones. "I don't think people deserve to be hurt just so the invaders get to leave unharmed." His eye flicked down to the floor. "... This is faster and easier. I won't let others suffer for their sake. It isn't right."

" *Killing* isn't right!" Espio practically snarled out. He balled his fist up and slammed it down on the floor, splashing against the layer of blood sitting over the metal surface. "There's a path where everything can be settled peacefully, and you're just... throwing it away! For no reason!"

"I don't *want* a peaceful solution. I just want them dead. I don't want to think about them anymore."

The words came out in a blunt manner. And for as dispassionate Sorun tried to make it sound, the words leaving his mouth just ended up... tired. It was a strange, strange feeling. That excitement running through his body earlier, all that adrenaline running through his veins like pure lightning when he'd been cutting those Mobians apart, by now it'd ebbed significantly but it was still *there* . Keeping him wide awake and alert, making him want to move again.

But his *mind* , after having to fight Espio of all people, and the content of this conversation making it all catch up to Sorun, everything he had done and was about to do was making him feel tired, and for the life of him he didn't know why. It wasn't like there was a weight bearing down on him; of all this death, he genuinely couldn't find it in himself to care about any of the lives he'd taken. Maybe it was that *look* Espio was casting towards him. The feeling of

a former friend who used to look at him so warmly now looking at him in abject disgust. Revulsion. Horror and... disappointment.

Maybe the exhaustion was coming from the fact Sorun was beginning to picture that same expression on everyone else's face, now that he was pausing to stop and think.

"..." He looked down at the demonic right hand grasping the katana. And yet... he didn't feel a need to stop. There was still a feeling that what he was doing was the right thing, and that he shouldn't stop. And that one fact alone outweighed everything else he felt.

"I already told you I've decided this is the right thing to do," Sorun said, slicing the blade horizontally and through the rip. The cross hanging in the air folding in on itself, turning into a dark, gaping hole in space. "You had a chance to prove me wrong. You lost. Live with it."

And that was Sorun all had to say on the matter. He didn't have an interest in arguing his point, didn't want to debate the matter. What use was there in arguing over the objective fact that he was right? So he'd simply walked through the portal, which shortly closed thereafter once Sorun crossed into it. Leaving Espio all alone, beaten and wounded amidst the unfathomable amount of viscera scattered all around him.

A/N- Alright, so here's where the comics got a bit weird with it. Regarding the pods the Iron Dominion wanted to toss people in to turn them into borg slaves, they called it being Legionized in the comics, we never actually *see* it happen. The closest we get is seeing Rotor dragged off to one and about to be thrown in before it's stopped, and you kinda assume that's that right after.

A few comics later, though, Sally and Mina are having a argument and there's a few pieces of dialogue that directly imply a few people *were* , in fact, thrown in those things offscreen. And it's never brought up again, nor do we ever

actually get to see any of the victims which seems... you know, like a fairly significant plot point to just kind of ignore. I dunno, maybe they would have revealed they got fixed the same way they were building towards changing Sally back to normal after getting turned into a robot in the comics, but that plot thread's forever in the ground, so *pfft* ...

Maybe I'm not one to talk since I'm not showing what Sonic in the gang are doing in Yurashia, but in my defense they're canon events already told in the comic and I'm mainly sticking to Sorun's point of view here.

Also, thanks to a couple reviews informing me we got a single piece of fanart. By an artist named Velleity_Art. We did it, boys and girls, the one single desire any fanfic writer has. We reached the peak. Doesn't get better from here. I do think the artist made him look too cool, though. Sorun's a petty dick in this story's canon. I haven't been hiding this.